



# 29 Not Too Long Short Stories

Tales and Tattles  
From Oak Park, Illinois

By Mark Stevens

This book is dedicated to my parents,  
Victor and Virginia,  
and to my sisters,  
Ellen and Virginia.

Mark Stevens was born June 1, 1955 at West Suburban Hospital in Oak Park, IL. He attended Longfellow Elementary School and Oak Park River Forest High School. He is a jazz pianist and singer, song lyricist and composer, and author. His previous published works include *Painting by Lyrics* which he co-authored with Sumiyo Toribe. Mark moved to California in 2004 and makes his home on the central coast.

Throughout this book I've referred to myself as Mark Willett which is my birth name and the name people would remember from when these events took place.

With the exception of celebrities and professional athletes, my parents and grandmother, Danny Hanrahan, Margaret Mary Keane, and Sue the waitress, the names have been changed and any resemblance to any other person, dead or alive, is purely coincidental.

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### Tony C.

It was a sweltering and sticky Chicago summer evening, the kind that made one ask themselves why they remained living in the great city. School was out for the summer and my dad took me to Comiskey Park, home of the Chicago White Sox, for a game with the Boston Red Sox. The 1967 American League pennant race was one of the greatest with the Red Sox clinching the flag on the final day of the season.

Where else was there a yard like Comiskey Park? Built in 1909, it resembled a Roman colosseum. The park was a pitcher's paradise with spacious dimensions and reflected the White Sox style of play with good pitching, solid defense, and short hits. Old men in straw hats, steel workers in flat caps, and dads like mine with their kids in tow made their way inside. Beer vendors stepped lively to keep up with the thirsty crowd. The delicious aroma of Polish sausage with fried onions permeated the air,

Good Humor ice cream bars and Mighty Malt sundaes melted in children's fingers.

Our seats were in the front row down the right field line. The Red Sox players were warming up and throwing a ball back and forth. One got away and rolled to the wall in front of our seats. Tony Conigliaro, the Red Sox outfielder and one of the most feared hitters in the American League, trotted over to retrieve it. He leaned over to pick up the ball, straightened up, and I snapped his picture with my Kodak Brownie camera. He stood there for a moment drinking me in.

"Here you go, kid!"

He tossed me the ball and trotted away.

My dad beamed with delight.

"How about that Tony! What a great guy he is!"

I'm not a kid anymore and Tony C. is no longer with us to toss stray baseballs to desiring youngsters. He was injured later that season and sat out the remainder of the year. The Red Sox went on to the World Series, but lost to the St. Louis Cardinals, 4 games to 3 and I've often wondered whether he would have made the difference. I miss him and what he stood for, a big man showing kindness to a kid and does a man ever stand taller? The stuff dreams are made of. Come to think of it, I never thanked him for the ball. Until now.

Author's note: Tony Conigliaro was struck by a Jack Hamilton fastball on August 18, 1967.



### Life Lessons At The YMCA

The big draw at the YMCA was the swimming pool. Me and my buddies took swimming lessons and the instructor gathered us to the side of the pool.

"Alright, you guys. Today, you're going to learn the side stroke." I didn't like the sound of it and the instructor noticed my reluctance.

"Hey, wise guy! If you're ever in deep water with no land in sight, you'll bless the day you learned the side stroke. It might save your life and you're not getting out of the pool until you show me you can do it."

I was honeymooning in Hawaii on the island of Kauai and spent an afternoon snorkeling on a coral reef. There were myriads of colorful fish and the water was soothingly warm. I paddled about aimlessly for an hour and noticed the water turning colder. Surfacing, I scanned the horizon and the beach was far away. I had somehow swam through the reef and the current was



carrying me out to sea. I'm not a strong swimmer and felt a twinge of panic, but a voice echoed through time in my ears. "If you're ever in open water with no land in sight, you'll bless the day you learned the side stroke."

It was sink or swim and I began the side stroke. After what seemed an eternity, I found myself at the coral reef. Coral is sharp and I twisted and turned my way through it until I made it to dry land. I was cut to ribbons and staggered to where I rented the diving gear. The guy in the shack greeted me.

"Shark attack?"

I found my bride of a week sitting on the white sand beach, blissfully unaware of my ordeal.

"Mark, you're all cut up and where have you been all this time?" I never told her how she almost became a widow on her honeymoon.

## Camp Sherman

The YMCA offered many activities for boys to participate in...swimming, archery, bumper pool, boxing, and painting on canvas were just a few. I was on the archery range and the targets were suspended from a heavy rug hanging from the ceiling. A kid was behind the rug and I didn't know he was there. He stuck his head out just as I released the arrow and it narrowly missed his left eye. Unfazed, he surveyed the target.

"Not even close!"

My dad dropped me off at the Y and came inside with me. I saw him talking with a guy in an office and he came back wearing a grin.

"I just signed you up for Camp Sherman."

"What's that?"

"It's a summer camp and you'll be gone for two weeks. You stay in a cabin and sleep in a sleeping bag, swim in a lake, roast hot dogs on a campfire, lotta fun.'

"Are you and mom coming with me?"

"No, you're on your own, buddy."

"Dad, I don't wanna go."

"You don't wanna go? Buddy, I already put up ten bucks for candy, pop, chips, and ice cream."

"Ten bucks! Dad, I can't wait to go!"

A week later we boarded a bus and the camp director greeted us.

"Grab some lunch in the mess hall."

None of us knew what a mess hall was and no one moved.

"Are you guys blind? Over there."

He pointed to a ramshackle building looking like it would fall down at any moment. We had hot dogs, beans, and potato chips.

Wash it all down with a Coke and we were ready to run. The camp director called roll and introduced us to our counselors.

Mine was a seventeen year old stud named Mike and the camp lifeguard. I asked if he ever saved anyone from drowning.

"Not yet and I hope I never have to. I became a lifeguard to meet girls and not save little twerps like you from drowning."

We ran and whooped our way through camp. One day after lunch, the camp director addressed us.

"Men, listen up! You're going on a snipe hunt. There's twenty-four of you and split up into four groups of six. Each group pick a direction and walk until you hit the perimeter fence. Stay close to your counselor and come back the way you came. Keep your eyes open for a snipe and they're everywhere. On your way!"

Off we went on our quest, through the woods and trudging valiantly across shallow streams and ponds. A couple of us

climbed trees for a vantage point. Several hours passed and enthusiasm was waning.

"What's a snipe look like?"

"It's a bird with a long beak."

"It's a lizard."

We looked at each other and it was evident none of us knew what a snipe was.

"Mike, what's a snipe look like?"

"Keep your eyes open and you'll know one when you see it."

We came to the perimeter fence and turned back, returning to camp about the same time as the other kids. It was a long hike and a long day. The camp director addressed us.

"Men, who caught a snipe?"

The counselors wore big smirks and we knew we'd been had.

"You tricked us and there's no such thing as a snipe."

"Men, would I do that to you? Of course there is such a thing as a snipe and we'll try again tomorrow."

I had a problem with hygiene and my mom practically had to wrestle me into the bathtub until my dad yelled from downstairs.

"Get in that tub and don't make me come up there!"

Now I was away from home without my mom watching me and I avoided soap and water. I wore the same underwear, socks, shirt, and pants for two weeks.

It was the last day of camp and my mom came to take me home. She took one look at me and was horrified.

"You're filthy!"

"I am?"

"Where is your cabin?"

"Over there."

She marched me inside and tore the clothing off me. My socks disintegrated in her hands and my feet were black. So was my underwear and they almost stood up by themselves. My hair was plastered with grease and food was glued between my teeth.

"Have you bathed at all since you've been here? Have you brushed your teeth a single time?"

"Mom, I couldn't find a wash cloth and toothbrush."

She told me to wait and returned with the camp director.

"How could you let my son come to such a state? His feet are black and fungus is growing between his toes!"

"Mrs. Willett, I had no idea..."

She went to the car and returned with a house dress. Instructing the camp director not to let anyone inside, she put the dress on, threw me in the shower, and scrubbed me violently from head to toe.

"Mom, take it easy!"

"Never mind, take it easy. I need Brillo pads to get the filth off you."

She washed my hair three times before she was satisfied. She brushed my teeth and combed my hair. My toe and fingernails were like can openers and she cut them. She put clean clothes on me for the first time in two weeks and we hit the road.

The camp director hurried after us.

"Mrs. Willett, I'm sorry."

"Neglecting a little boy like that! You should be horsewhipped!"



## Church

My church was a congregation of deep spiritual conviction with a community outreach. The ladies auxiliary cooked a mountain of food every Tuesday and everyone sat down to a hearty meal before the adults went on visitation calls, while the kids stayed behind for Boys Brigade and Campfire Girls.

One Tuesday evening, the Campfire Girls were using the gym. A partition went from ceiling to floor and divided it in two parts, but it came off the track and fell to the floor, striking one of the girls on her head. The girl was unconscious and bled to death before help could arrive. Her parents arrived just in time to witness their daughter's body being hauled away by the coroner and they were sobbing uncontrollably.

At church next Sunday morning the pastor prayed.

"Lord God, our heavenly father. We commend the spirit of our fallen sister into your loving hands. We see no rhyme or reason to this tragedy, but your eye is on the sparrow. Please bless these grief-stricken parents and help us as a congregation to stand ready to assist them in their hour of trial. Have mercy on us, Lord Jesus, and forgive us of our sins. In your holy name we pray, Amen."

The congregation was in a state of sorrow and disbelief. The deacons met with the girl's parents to ask if the church could pay for the funeral. They said it wasn't necessary and had the means. The love and grace of God sustained us and we blessed the name of the Lord.



## Church Camp

I almost didn't make it to church camp, as Camp Sherman was fresh in my mom's memory.

"Bud, have you forgotten the state he was in after that horrible Camp Sherman?"

"Jen, it'll be different this time, you'll see. It's run by our church and they'll see he's alright."

The pastor paid us a visit.

"Virginia, I understand you have concerns, but let me assure you Mark will be looked after and we won't let anything happen to him."

"Pastor, the last time he went to camp, which by the way was six weeks ago, he didn't change his clothes or bathe. He was filthy, his feet were black, and he smelled like a barnyard animal."

"Virginia, I'll personally instruct the camp director to make sure Mark puts on clean clothes and bathes every day."

We piled into a bus and arrived at camp. We played and ran like wild mustangs, but never out of sight of our counselors and they kept a close watch on us. We had daily Bible lessons and memorized verses of scripture. There were campfires every night and we roasted marshmallows. A guy had a guitar and we sat around the fire singing.

Safe am I, in the hollow of his hand  
Sheltered o'er, by his love forevermore  
No ill can harm me, no foe alarm me,  
Jesus keeps both day and night  
Safe am I, in the hollow of his hand

Camp was fun, but something happened that changed me forever. Me and a few of my pals were teasing the girls and I made some off-color remark. My counselor overheard and marched me to my cabin.

"Mark, that wasn't a nice thing to say and there are consequences to everything we say and do. We have a loving heavenly father who corrects us. He does that because he loves us so very much and has given us his son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Do you believe in Jesus?"

"Yes."

"Would you like to invite him into your heart?"

"Yes."

"Dear Lord Jesus, Mark wants to ask you into his heart and I ask that you bless this boy and shine your heavenly light upon him. Fill him with your holy spirit and help him to walk within your saving grace all the days of his life. In your holy name I pray, Amen."

And I said the sinner's prayer.



### Slam Dunk

After receiving salvation, the next step in my walk of faith was baptism. However, I first had to stand before the deacons and profess my faith. The day arrived for my examination and the deacons gathered together. My dad was a deacon and he sat there beaming at me. He was bald and sometimes the light shown on his head a certain way and he looked like Mr. Clean. The thought of seeing him dressed in white and wearing an earring always amused me and, today of all days, he looked like Mr. Clean. I never could keep a straight face and sat there grinning which the deacons noticed.

"Is something amusing?"

"No, sir."

"Very well, then. Mark, tell us how you came to be here this evening."

"I accepted Jesus as my savior at camp in '63."

"That would be, what, three weeks ago?"

"Yes, sir."

I hadn't much time to ponder my salvation, but I proceeded to tell the deacons how much I loved Jesus and knew my Bible verses by heart.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him, should not perish but have everlasting life. John 3:16

My testimony was satisfactory and I was granted baptism.

The appointed day arrived. Fourteen kids were being baptized that evening and the congregation was buzzing with anticipation. I wondered why so many kids were baptized at once and perhaps there was strength in numbers. Girls and boys were ushered into separate rooms and given a baptismal robe with instructions to strip to our undergarments. The other boys wore standard white briefs, whereas I wore boxer shorts with bold patterns and designs. This particular pair had what appeared to be a medieval coat of arms emblazoned into the fabric in an array of colors...deep shades of blue, red, green, gold, purple, and orange. The other boys howled with glee and asked if I had a matching T-shirt. Finally, it was my turn to go and I stepped downward into the baptistry, but my foot slipped and I dove face first into the water. The pastor pulled me from the depths and faced the congregation.

"The Lord works in mysterious ways."

He firmly grasped me and wrapped an arm around my shoulders, covered my mouth and nose with his other hand, and immersed me.

"I baptize this boy in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen."

He lifted me from the water and I turned to exit the tub, but my feet went out from under me again, only this time I fell backwards into the water. Like a surfacing whale, I emerged and splashed a cascade of water over the rail and onto the Steinway grand piano. I wondered if anything like this ever happened to John The Baptist. The pastor's strong arms seized me in a vice-like grip and lifted me away before I could wreak further carnage. I quickly dried off, got dressed, and made a fast exit. My parents were hovering anxiously in the corridor and I ran to my mom.

"My poor baby."

My dad was grinning.

"That was quite the performance and maybe we can get you on the Ed Sullivan Show."



### Danny Hanrahan

Every kid went home for lunch and school resumed at 12:40. The boys gathered on the playground at 12:25 to play kickball and I leaned against the fence waiting my turn. At that moment Danny Hanrahan swaggered by. He stopped on the sidewalk to light a cigarette. It was a windy day and the match kept blowing out. Cupping his hands, he tried again but the match blew out once more. He glanced sideways, saw me watching him and snarled.

"What are you lookin' at, kid?"

"Nothing."

"You better not be!"

"You're Danny Hanrahan."

"I know that. You wanna make somethin' of it?"

"No."

"You better not!"

"I'm friends with your brother."

"Oh yeah! Which one?"

"Chris."

"Chris doesn't have any friends!"

A change of tactics was in order.

"Are you on your way back to school?"

"I'm ditchin'. You better not tell anybody!"

One of my kickball teammates yelled.

"Willett, you're up!"

"That's your name, Willett?"

"Yeah."

"What's your last name?"

"That is my last name."

"You got a first name?"

Yeah."

"Well, stupid, what is it?"

"Mark."

"Mark Willett. Stay out of my way next time you see me, squirt!"

Author's note: Such was my first encounter with Danny Hanrahan and we've been friends for over fifty years. I live on the west coast while Danny's remained in Chicago, so I don't see him that often. But when we get together we tell the same stories we've told for fifty years and laugh like fools.

## Broadway Joe

I began hanging around a pool hall on Friday and Saturday night and the shooters began sending me on errands.

"Hey kid, get me a sandwich!"

They tipped me a buck and by the end of the night I had \$50 in my pocket.

Friday night and there was a stir at the front door. A regal character wearing a fedora cocked over his left eye entered our midst.

"Broadway Joe, good to see you!"

He swaggered through the pool hall as if he owned the joint and the crowd opened before him as though he were Moses parting the Red Sea. He saw me looking at him.

"Hey, kid. Come here."

I hurried over and he extended his hand.

"I'm Joe."

"I'm Mark. How do you do, sir?"

"You're polite."

"Thank you."

He drank me in for a moment.

"What do you do here?"

"Mostly I run errands for the shooters."

"How old are you?"

"I just turned fifteen."



"Fifteen, huh? That's about how old I was when I first picked up a cue stick. I'm gonna need a few things as the night goes along and can you help me out?"

"Whatever you need, sir."

"We're pals and call me Joe."

"Broadway Joe?"

"It's Joe."

The original Broadway Joe was Joe Namath, the quarterback for the New York Jets. He had enormous charisma and was the center of attention wherever he went. He partnered in a New York nightclub called Bachelors 3 and reveled his way through an evening with the most celebrated and beautiful women in the world on his arm. He had a penthouse apartment on Broadway, drove a Rolls Royce, wore a mink coat, was on the cover of every major magazine, and made enormous sums of money. Every All-American kid wanted to be him and I was no exception. Now I had my own Broadway Joe to attend to and I was up for the job.

You didn't walk into a pool hall and shoot with Joe, it didn't work that way. It was by invitation only and for the next six weekends he shot pool.

"Here you go, kid."

"What's this?"

"A hundred bucks."

"A hundred bucks! What for?"

"A token of my appreciation."

"I didn't do anything."

"You did plenty."

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

"How much cash do you carry?"

"Five grand at all times. I have twelve grand on me right now."

You won seven grand?

"Not a bad payday, huh?"

"I didn't see any money on the table."

"It was there all the time."

"Where?"

He nodded his head toward the guy he had just ran the table with.

"In that sucker's wallet."

He spent time giving me instruction.

"Use right hand English for that shot. Hit low and center and the cue ball will roll back to you. Never leave the other guy a shot and that's the name of the game."

Joe shot pool until there was no one left to play and he had beaten them all. Finally, he called it a night.

"I got a train to catch and there's a taxi outside."

"You're leaving?"

"Yeah, it's time to go."

"How do you know when it's time to go?"

"You just know."

"Where are you going?"

"St. Louis. There's a few guys there who think they shoot a good stick and can handle my game"

"Gonna miss you, Joe."

"Come on, you knew I wouldn't be here forever. We had a few laughs and that's as good as it gets."

"Really? That's as good as it gets?"

"Kid, I'm not much for handing out advice and God knows I've made my share of mistakes, but listen to me and this is no life for you. It looks glamorous but it's not."

"Then why do you do it?"

"Because it's all I know. I spend my life smiling from across a pool table at clowns who think they can handle my game, but the truth is they can't wait to give me their money and I'm happy to take it from them."

"That's funny."

"It's tragic. There's no future and forget about pool halls. Stay in school and make something of yourself."

"I don't like school."

"I know, but try. You'll thank me someday."

The cab driver stuck his head in.

"You coming?"

"Gimme a minute."

Joe straightened my collar.

"So long, kid. Don't get caught behind the eight-ball."

He walked to the door, turned to me and tipped his fedora, and I never saw him again.

## Advanced Curriculum

Readin', ritin', 'rithmetic was easy. I read at college level, wrote clearly with eloquence, and did arithmetic in my head. On a practical note and at the close of sixth grade, I knew what I needed to make it in the world and there was no further point in attending school. Junior high was intolerable and high school even less engaging. I was selected for Honors English but there was nothing honorable to it.

"Today you'll learn how to write a circular essay."

I raised my hand.

"Willett?"

"Sir, I learned how to write a circular essay in sixth grade."

"Perhaps you'd like to teach the class."

"No, sir."

"Alright then. You'll find it a bit more challenging this time around, I'm certain."

"Yes, sir."

He was wrong.

It was the same.

I had a hard time getting out of bed in the morning. Since kindergarten, I was accustomed to walking across the street to school and falling into my seat, but Oak Park High was on the other side of town.

I talked it over with my dad.

"Dad, I don't like school."

"I know."

"How do you know?"

"Because I didn't like school."

"You didn't?"

"Yep."

"You quit, right?"

"That's right."

"I want to quit, too."

"You're going."

"You didn't. Why do I have to?"

"I quit because my father drank his paycheck and we were broke. Then a depression pulled the rug out from everyone and no one had any money. I sold newspapers and shined shoes and I gave every penny to my mother, and I do mean every penny."

"Dad, you never told me that."

"It's not a topic for polite conversation. Nevertheless, you're going to school and I don't want to hear another word."

I went to school for a few weeks, but one day I decided to go home and never went back. Two weeks into summer, my mom had a word with me.

"You've missed countless days of school and failed all your classes."

"How do you know that, Mom?"

"I got a letter from your dean. Well?"

"Well what, Mom?"

"I work my fingers to the bone for you and this is the thanks I get? I've given you every opportunity which you clearly don't appreciate and you clearly cannot be trusted. But you've gone too far and life as you know it is over. You are not to leave this house, do you understand? Answer me!"

"I understand, Mom. I'm sorry."

"You're not sorry, but you will be when I'm finished with you."

"Mom, what are you going to do?"

She didn't answer.

A week later my mom shipped me off to an out-of-state all boys Catholic boarding school. She had spoken with the principal and he assured her I would be looked after, my activities closely monitored, and receive discipline. It was like being locked down at Cook County Jail and I couldn't go anywhere or do anything. If I didn't do my homework or cut class, the Franciscan fathers beat me with a stick. They never went so far as to injure me, but they made certain I felt the lash of that stick and it was made of solid ash. Not wanting to get beaten every day and having no alternative, I became an A student and made the honor roll, played piano in the school band, was a pitcher on the baseball team, and graduated from high school in three years.

## Tough Tommy O'Reilly

Tommy O'Reilly was the scourge of the neighborhood and a malevolent bully. Everyone fled at the sight of him and he unmercifully picked on every kid who crossed his path. The worst time was before school began when he waited by the door for everyone to pass by. He'd pick out certain kids and tap one on the side of the head, put another in a headlock, knock another's books to the ground...that sort of thing. I only hoped I could get away each day without him killing me and breathed a sigh of relief every time I finally made it inside the school.

I was walking down the street, but stopped abruptly at the corner house. There was a hedge surrounding it, so thick it was impenetrable. I bent low to the ground and gingerly stuck my head out, barely breaking cover. Tommy was standing ten feet away in front of the hedge. I ducked for cover, but it was too late.

"Come 'ere!"

"Hi Tommy. How ya doin'?"

"Don't give me that how ya doin' stuff. Whaddya doin' hidin' in the bushes?"

"I don't know."

"Yeah, you thought I'd see ya."

He brandished a baseball bat.

"See this?"

"Yeah."



"You know what I do with it?"

"Play baseball?"

"I bust guy's heads open with it."

"Don't bust my head open."

"Why not?"

He grabbed my shoulder and I ducked.

"Whaddya duckin' for?"

"I thought you were gonna crack me with the bat."

"If I crack you, you'll know it."

He jutted his jaw.

"My sister likes you."

"What?"

"Are you deaf? She likes you."

"She said that?"

"Yeah, she told everybody. You better be nice to her or I'll bust your head open. And don't let me catch ya hidin' in the bushes again."

Author's note: I never saw Tommy O'Reilly after that day, not sure what happened and why our paths no longer crossed, but I was relieved all the same. I resented him for a long time, but I came to realize he was a troubled soul and felt sorry for him.

## Bloody Katie O'Reilly

Katie O'Reilly was a fearsome character, every bit as tough as her brother, the infamous Tough Tommy O'Reilly. The first time I laid eyes on her she was duking it out with Donny O'Neil, a kid down the block from me. She hammered him with a right cross to the solar plexus, knocking the wind out of him, and followed with a vicious left hook to the side of his head. He went down like a sack of potatoes and she pounced on him, pushing his face into the sidewalk.

"Say uncle!"

"No!"

"Say it or I'll rip your face off!"

"No!"

"Say uncle!"

She ground his face further into the sidewalk.

"Uncle, uncle!"

She got off him and straightened her disheveled clothing.

Spitting a mouthful of blood she kicked him in the ribs.

"Next time I'll send you to the hospital!"

She kicked him once more for good measure.

I saw her on the school playground.

"Hi Katie."

"How do you know my name?"

"Everybody knows your name. You're one of the..."

"I'm one of the what?"

I was going to say one of the toughest girls around, but she was looking hard at me and I thought better of it.

"Uhhhh...one of the prettiest girls around."

She melted.

"You really think so?"

"Yeah, you're a knockout (remembering her left hook)."

"I like you."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Do you like me?"

"I guess so."

"Kiss me."

"I don't feel like it."

"You're chicken."

She smiled coquettishly.

"Whisper in my ear and tell me you like me."

"No."

"It won't kill you, but I will if you don't."

She moved in close and bent her ear toward me. I leaned in for a whisper, but she quickly turned her head and kissed me on the lips.

"That wasn't so bad."

"Katie, that was awful."

She shook her fist in my face.

"I'll kiss you and you'll like it."

She went off to high school and I didn't see her anymore. I heard she had a boyfriend, some thug named Marty.

My dad came home from work.

"You're going to work tomorrow."

"Dad, I don't want to go to work."

"You're going and ask for Mr. Svoboda."

"What will I be doing?"

"He'll tell you when you get there. He's expecting you at 4:00 and don't be late."

I got there at 4:15 and a mean looking guy in a leather apron stood there. Two young men looking hard at me stood there with him.

"Are you Willett?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm Mr. Svoboda and these are my sons Rick and Mike. You're late."

"I'm sorry, sir."

"I need you here at 4:00 and move your ass."

"Yes, sir. Mr. Svoboda, what do you do here?"

"Didn't your old man tell you? It's a deli and people come for my seafood. In forty-five minutes the Western Electric plant changes shifts and we're gonna be swamped with people coming for carryout. My sons and I will handle the customers. I'll show you your job."

He led me to a sink and steel counter heaped with raw fish. I hated seafood and it smelled awful. He grabbed a fish and rinsed it in cold water over the sink, cut the head off, sliced its belly from gills to tail, scooped the guts and threw them in the trap. "That's all there is to it and place the fish on these sheets of white paper. Then pull the traps from the sink and dump them in the bin in the alley. Get to work."

The worst part of cleaning fish was the cold eyeball staring sightlessly at me as I cut off its head and I wretched and gagged the entire time. I shuddered when I scooped the guts and felt them squishing between my fingers and getting under my nails. I emptied the traps into a bin of decomposing ooze and almost puked. I reeled out of the place at 8:00 PM and Mr. Svoboda yelled at me.

"Don't be late tomorrow!"

There was no way I was going back to that job. I didn't show up for work the next day and didn't call to say I wasn't coming in. I went to Longfellow Park and some kids from the neighborhood were there, Katie O'Reilly among them. Oddly enough, I was glad to see her.

I saw two guys walking across the park and I recognized Rick and Mike from the deli. My heart skipped a beat and I knew I was in trouble.

"Why didn't you show up for work? We had to clean the fish, but we saved the traps for you. You're gonna dump all that shit and let's go, right now."

"I'm not going."

"You're going or we're gonna beat the shit out of you."

Katie got up from the park bench and stood between us. She stared them down and the two bad asses suddenly weren't so confident.

"Just touch him and see what happens."

And she put up her dukes.

"Go ahead asshole, lay one finger on him, I dare you."

They were shocked and walked away shuffling their feet, eyes on the ground, tails tucked in.

Katie stared after them.

"Come back and I'll put my foot up your ass!"

After they were gone, Katie put her arms around my neck.

"Mark, I won't ever let anything happen to you and you've got nothing to worry about as long as I'm around. Now kiss me!"

Author's note: Word got around that you better not mess with Mark Willett or Katie O'Reilly will kick your ass.

## A Shot, A Beer, and What's For Dinner?

Jim White was born in 1910 and married my dad's sister, Tildy, just as World War II ended. He did something in an office for the Illinois Central Railroad and worked there forty-seven years. He was a shot 'n beer guy and began the day with an ice cold Pabst Blue Ribbon. You could set your watch by his schedule and at 5:30 PM he stepped off the bus and walked to a tavern staggering distance from his house. He was deeply respected in the establishment and Paddy Flynn, the proprietor, raised a glass in solemn toast.

"Jim White, may the good Lord bless ya and may ya be in heaven a half hour before the devil knows you're dead!"

He once took me to the tavern.

"Paddy, meet my nephew."

"What's your name, lad?"

"Mark, sir."

"Mark, is it? Well, on your mark and I'll stand ya to a short one."

"Paddy, not for the lad."

"Bollocks, one snort won't hurt 'im!"

"His father is a Protestant and doesn't drink, not a drop, and would have my hide."

"A Protestant, ya say? What a shame."

My Aunt Tildy served Sunday dinner after church promptly at 1:00. Uncle Jim spent Sundays at the tavern and one Lord's Day it was too much for her.

"White, your old lady's comin' down the street."

He dived behind the bar in an effort to hide, but his thirst got the better of him and he reached on the bar groping for his glass. At that moment, Aunt Tildy walked in and saw his hand on the bar.

"James Michael White, come out from behind that bar right now or there'll be a fine wake at our house tonight!"

On another Sunday my parents and I gathered around their table and Aunt Tildy asked my dad to say grace. He was known far and wide for long prayers and Uncle Jim spoke from the head of the table.

"Bud, we'd like to eat sometime today and can you dispense with the Baptist prayer?"

The prayer was said quickly and everyone dug in...everyone but Uncle Jim and he sat there with a glass of beer in his hand.

The table was cleared and my parents went to the kitchen with my aunt, but Uncle Jim remained at the table and glanced furtively into the kitchen.

"Sit down, lad."

He patted me on the back.

"Ah, 'tis a fine strong boy ya are and the shoulders on ya! I saw ya lookin' and how I don't eat with everyone else."

"Uncle Jim, I've never seen you eat anything."



"I know ya haven't and why do you suppose that is?"

"I don't know, why?"

"Because food is a shock to the system."

"It is?"

"'Tis. Now listen carefully, lad, for I have a valuable piece of advice for ya and not a word to your father for he doesn't understand these matters. Are ya ready, boyo?"

"I'm ready."

"Avoid food, drink whiskey. It kills the parasites and you'll live a long healthy life."

"Don't worry, Uncle Jim. I'll drink whiskey."

"Good lad and off with ya! Remember, not a word to your da."

Author's note: James Michael White smoked three packs of Lucky Strikes a day, lived on hard boiled eggs, and drank shots and beers from morning till night. He was never intoxicated, never ill, never missed a day of work, and died in his sleep at the age of 95. I once made an attempt to apply his valuable advice, but never acquired a taste for whiskey.



### Lesson Learned

Jeopardy was on from 11:00 - 11:30 every weekday. I had no way to watch it as I was in school when it was on, but I had an idea. I lived across the street from school and had a library period when Jeopardy was on. Mrs. Costello, the librarian, became flustered when under pressure and I made it a point to show up first the next day.

"I'm here, Mrs. Costello."

She beamed at me, but then thirty kids poured in and rushed past her.

"Wait, wait, I have to take your name!"

I turned on my heel and dashed down the staircase to the first floor. The gym was there and I ran across the floor to a side door which opened onto the street. I dashed across the street to my house and let myself in through the side door. All of this took 45 seconds and I was in time to see Art Fleming, the show's host, announce the Jeopardy categories. When it was over I sneaked back into school in case Mrs. Costello was looking for me.

Rather than reversing my steps, I came in through the front door. No one heard me or stopped me to ask why I wasn't in class, except one time when the janitor was pushing a dust mop down the corridor and glared at me suspiciously.

"Hi, Mr. Schmidt, just comin' back from the boys room."

"When you gotta go, you gotta go."

I got back to the library and took a quick glance. Mrs. Costello was busy doing library things and didn't notice my return. The bell rang and everyone went home for lunch. Upon leaving, I wished Mrs. Costello a nice afternoon and that I'd see her tomorrow.

"You're a good boy."

"Yes, ma'am."

Such was my daily routine until the principal intercepted me coming through the front door.

"You're supposed to come in through the playground and who do you think you are using the front door?"

Then it hit him.

"Wait a minute. What are you doing out of class?"

I could only grin and that really made him sore, but I never could keep a straight face when someone put me on the spot.

"In my office."

The bell rang for lunch and I bolted through the door.

"Come back here!"

But I was home before he got the words out. I knew he'd be waiting by the playground door when I returned to school, so I came in through the front door. He appeared at my first afternoon class and glared at me.

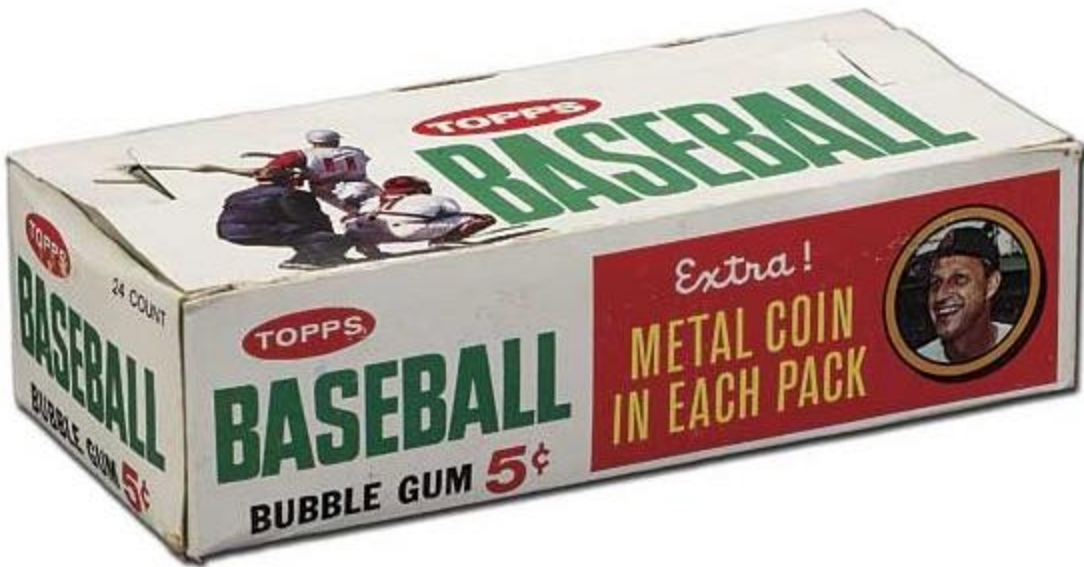
"In my office!"

My classmates were delighted.

"Mark's in trouble, ha ha!"

But he didn't take me to his office, he sent me home...through the front door. I spent the afternoon watching Password and The Match Game. He called my parents and my dad was furious. He took off his belt to whip me, but my mom said I was too big for that. In frustration he turned on me.

"You're grounded until you're forty-five years old!"



### Nickel A Pack

Faye's Grocerette was five doors up the street from our house. My mom sent me for cigarettes and I noticed something on the counter.

"What are those?"

"Baseball cards."

"How much?"

"Nickel a pack."

Unlike today's kids walking around with cash and credit cards, a nine year old boy in 1964 didn't have any money in his pocket and that nickel might as well have been a million bucks.

"Do you want a pack or not?"

"I don't have a nickel."

Faye sighed.

"Tell you what, paizan. I'll spot you a pack."

I thanked her and rushed home with a pack of Pall Malls and a pack of baseball cards.

"What do you have there?"

"Baseball cards."

"Where did you get them?"

"Faye's."

"How did you pay for them?"

"I didn't pay for them."

"What? You stole them?"

"No, Mom. Faye gave them to me."

"How much do they cost?"

"Five cents."

"You march back there and give her this nickel."

"She said I could have them."

"We don't accept things without paying for them."

I trudged back to Faye's.

"Forget something?"

"My mom said I had to pay. Here's a nickel."

"Your mom's smart. Did you learn anything?"

"Yeah, don't tell her when you give me baseball cards."

Author's note: Over the summer, I acquired two full sets of the 1964 edition of Topps Baseball Cards. I kept them in the attic until I was fifteen and went away to school. I don't know what became of them, probably they were thrown out when the house

was sold in the mid-1970s. Today a complete set of 1964 Topps Baseball Cards commands \$100,000 and who would think something costing a nickel could be worth that much money?

## Let's Play Two!

My dad took me to my first major league baseball game, the Chicago Cubs vs. the Houston Colt 45's, and we sat behind the Cubs dugout. Ron Santo hit a home run and the Cubs won 2-1. We went to another game against the Cincinnati Reds and once again sat behind the Cubs dugout. I hoped Santo would hit another homer, but it was not to be. The game was a pitcher's duel and the Cubs hurler, Larry Jackson, threw shutout baseball. The Cubs won the game 1-0 and Jackson had a no hitter going until the 7th inning when Pete Rose broke it up with a single to center field. The Reds pitcher, Joey Jay, fared almost as well and threw a two-hitter. Both pitchers went the distance and the Cubs sole run was scored in nondescript fashion...a walk, a sacrifice bunt moving the runner to second, then a single to score the runner. The big bats of Ernie Banks, Billy Williams, and Ron Santo were silent that day. I was indignant that no one hit a homer and my dad counseled me.

"Son, that was good baseball."

A few weeks later he came home from work with a glint of wickedness in his eyes.

"We're going to see the Yankees play the White Sox tomorrow and be ready to go."

The game didn't start until 1:00 but I was dressed and ready to go by 8:00. My mom couldn't get me out of bed for school in



the morning but I had no problem getting up for a baseball game. Traffic was heavy and I didn't think we'd ever get there.

"Come on, Dad! Let's go!"

When he finally parked the car, I leaped out and sprinted to the main gate.

"Be careful crossing that busy street!"

I took my first look at Comiskey Park and scanned the yard for Mickey Mantle. He was my hero and I spotted him throwing a ball back and forth with Roger Maris and Tom Tresh. Whitey Ford pitched that day and proved too much for the White Sox hitters. The Sox lost the game 1-0 in eleven innings, but no matter, I saw The Mick and everything was right with the world.

Author's note: I saw Mickey Mantle play only one other time and that was game 3 of the 1964 World Series. Dashing home from my piano lesson, I turned the TV on just in time to see him lead off the bottom of the ninth inning and hit a walk-off home run on the first pitch into the upper right field deck of Yankee Stadium, winning the game for the Yankees over the St. Louis Cardinals, 2-1. The 1964 World Series was Mantle's final appearance and he hit two more home runs giving him eighteen lifetime, a record that still stands.

## Little Ireland

There was a large Irish contingency in Oak Park and my neighborhood was its epicenter...Hanrahan, White, Powell, Cox, Kelleher, Donahue, Mulcahy, Burns, Mullen, O'Donnell, Duffy, Mooney, Lavery, Mulryan, O'Brien, Hanley, Wrigley, Moroney, Neal, Harrigan, Lahey, Fahey, Hogan, Logan, McGee, McVeigh, McGrath, McCarthy, McAllister, McDonald, McNeely, Torney, Donlin, Crosley, Quinlan, Moinahan, Farrell, Cullen, Kennedy, Shanahan, Kearins, Ryan, Sullivan, Riley, and Molloy to name a few. Mike Flanagan was my buddy and last in a family of ten boys. Kids occasionally ate lunch at another kid's house and parents took turns, but Mrs. Flanagan had given strict orders not to bring any kids to her house and no one ever ate lunch at the Flanagan's. Mike came to my house and my mom wasn't home to feed us. Taking matters into our own hands, we scanned the fridge and saw a big bowl of Chili Mac, Hormel Chili and Creamettes elbow macaroni.

"Chili Mac! Let's eat!"

Out came a pot and we heated it up in no time.

"Shouldn't we say grace?"

"You're right. Into the mouth and over the gums, look out stomach, here it comes. Blessed is he who gets the most, in the name of the father, son, and holy ghost, Amen."

"I never heard that prayer before."

"My dad says it."

"Oh."

We dug in and devoured a cauldron of Chili Mac as if a swarm of locusts had descended on a Mormon wheat field.

My mom was setting the table and I was sitting there. My dad came home from work and went to the fridge. He looked suspiciously at me.

"Where's the Chili Mac?"

"Gone, Dad."

"Gone?"

"We ate it."

"Who ate it?"

"Me and Mike Flanagan."

"The two of you ate all of it?"

"We were hungry, Dad."

He turned to my mom.

"Jen, does that kid ever eat at his own house?"

"Bud, he doesn't get enough to eat. There are ten boys and he's at the end of the line."

"So I gotta feed him?"

"Bud, he's a little boy."

"Yeah, a little boy and he eats all my Chili Mac. He probably licked the bowl! I don't want that kid over here anymore and let him clean out someone else's refrigerator."

Author's note: Mike Flanagan never had lunch at my house after that. Not because of my father's forbiddance, but because Mrs. Flanagan ordered him to stop panhandling and sent him to school with a note pinned to his shirt pocket.

**DON'T GIVE MICHAEL FOOD!**

## Switch Hitter

Kids came in droves to Longfellow Park. There were tennis courts and a playground with a merry-go-round, a slide, monkey bars, and a sandbox, but the draw for me was the baseball diamond. I stood on the pitcher's mound imagining I was at Wrigley Field staring down Willie Mays, Roberto Clemente, and Hank Aaron and I struck them out on three pitches. I had a pal named Slats and we took turns batting and pitching.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm batting left-handed."

"You can't hit right-handed."

"Throw one and I'll show ya!"

He tossed the ball and I missed by three feet. He threw another and I missed again. Then another and I tapped it weakly about twelve feet up the line.

"You really knocked the crap out of that one! I'm going home. See ya later, slugger!"

Slats was right and who was I kidding? I couldn't bat left-handed. But Mickey Mantle was my hero and he was a switch hitter. I read somewhere he struggled when first learning to bat left-handed and it didn't come easy for him. Now he was the most feared hitter in major league baseball. If it was good enough for The Mick then it was good enough for me and I persevered.

Longfellow School sat opposite Longfellow Park and an asphalt playground stretched 250 feet from the wall to the fence. Kids played “fast pitch” and there were boxes drawn with chalk on the wall which served as the strike zone. The pitcher set up sixty feet out and fired a rubber ball the size and design of a major league baseball. The ball cost a quarter and the only place you could get one was McCann’s Drug Store. It didn’t last long and we needed four of them to get through a game. Harry McCann, the druggist, kept boxes of them in his back room and probably sold as many rubber baseballs as he filled prescriptions.

My team was engaged in a fierce contest. There was no score and the bases were loaded with two outs in the bottom of the ninth inning. The pitcher was a righty and I stepped up to the plate batting lefty. I worked the count to 3-2 and I hit a line drive over the fence and into the backyard of the house across the street, a walk off grand slam home run! My teammates cheered and clapped me on the back. Even the kids on the other team were cheering, everyone except Slats whose head I swatted the ball over.

"So I can't hit left-handed, huh!"

He walked over to me and grinned.

"You really knocked the crap out of that one!"

We shook hands and walked over to McCann’s for a vanilla Coke.



### Public Servant

I got a job reading the water meters for the Village of Oak Park. A buddy of mine had it, but he had a habit of taking days off. The day arrived when he took one too many and they fired him. I ran into him on the street and he told me what happened. Told him I was sorry and we went our separate ways. As soon as he was out of sight, I walked to Village Hall where the water department was and asked to speak with the head guy. It didn't require an act of Congress to see someone and I was shown into an office. The guy in charge was Dick Lary and I liked him right away.

"What do you want?"

"I heard you fired the water meter reader."

"I fired him an hour ago and how do you know about that?"

"He's my buddy and told me what happened."

"So what do you want?"

"His job."

"He's your buddy and you want his job? Kid, you crack me up."

"Someone has to do it and might as well be me."

"Do you think you can make something of yourself?"

"I think I can make something of myself."

"Alright, I'll give you a shot. Be here Monday morning at 9:00."

I didn't have a car and walked to work. It snowed and my socks and shoes were soaking wet by the time I got there.

"Don't you have a pair of boots?"

"No."

"Do you have any money?"

"No."

"You can't walk around in the snow without boots or your feet will freeze. I'll get you a pair and you can pay me back."

He took me to Sears and bought a pair of five buckle boots with two pairs of wool socks.

"Now your feet will stay dry. Are you ready to go to work?"

"I'm ready."

"This book has the addresses of one hundred-twenty houses. Walk up to each house and yell "water man" so people know you're out there and watch out for dogs. Go into the basement and read the number on the water meter. Write it down in the book along with today's date. The water meter is in a corner of the basement and here's a flashlight so you can see what you're doing. It should take about six hours to read the meters and I'll pick you up here. Go get 'em!"



And so began my tenure as the water meter reader for the Village of Oak Park. I read one meter at a sprawling structure with a gaping hole in the roof and the floor was flooded.

"Looks like your place needs a little work."

"I can't keep up with it and it's for sale."

"How much do you want?"

"Thirty-five grand."

"That's a lot of bread."

"It's a lot of house."

"Good luck and I hope you sell the place."

Author's note: Not long after I read the water meter, the house was purchased and meticulously restored. Today the Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio is priceless and I could have bought it for \$35K!



## Rosangela's Pizza

There was a pizza parlor called Home Run Inn and if you brought a White Sox ticket stub after a game they gave you a dollar off a large pizza. Every time we went to a Sox game I reminded my dad to hang on to the ticket stub.

"Do you think we're gonna go to Home Run Inn after every Sox game?"

I saw no reason we couldn't and wondered why we didn't eat pizza every day.

"Aren't we?"

I stopped going to ball games with my dad and Home Run Inn disappeared in the rear view mirror. I now went to games with Margaret Mary Keane and she loved baseball, too, but for reasons different than mine. Whereas I was a student of the game, she ate and drank her way through nine innings.

"Can you get me a hot dog and roasted pretzel, please? And something to wash it down with, a Budweiser."

"We're at Sox Park, no Budweiser here. Old Style alright?"

"That's fine."

"Coming right up, honey."

"Thanks, sweetie."

She had little insight into the game, but was a good sport and tried to get into baseball with me.

"What's a bunt?"

I explained it and she nodded her head, but I could tell she didn't have a clue.

Dave Winfield, the Yankees outfielder, made the greatest throw I've ever seen and I leaped out of my seat.

"Did you see that?!"

"What?"

"Dave Winfield! The throw he made from right field to third base and he threw out the runner!"

"Where is right field?"

Another time Larry Sheets of the Baltimore Orioles hit a roof shot, a 500 foot blast, and I catapulted from my seat.

"Did you see that?!"

She was nibbling on a chocolate covered strawberry, her eyes closed in culinary ecstasy. It was hopeless and I hung my head. She finished the strawberry and opened her eyes. She saw me looking at her and smiled.

"Did I miss something?"

"No honey, you didn't miss anything."

Fox's was her favorite pizza joint. It was in the Beverly neighborhood on Western Avenue, a stone's throw from her house. We went there one evening and she asked for a side dish of pepperoncini.

"What do you do with those?"

"I break them open and let the juice drip onto the pizza."

I was aghast.

"You'll never know if you don't try it."

I cracked a pepperoncini over a slice and damn if it wasn't good. The pizza was good on its own merits, but the pepperoncini added something extra.

Rosangela's was my favorite pizza joint. It was a tiny storefront with two booths, four chairs, and four tables. A guy in white scrubs occasionally came out from the back with dough and mozzarella. He was as white as his ingredients and looked like a ghost crossing the floor. Tony manned the oven and shoveled pizza dough in and out.

"Rocco!"

A skinny little guy with black hair oiled in Vitalis grabbed the pizza, leaped into a car and sped away. The business was mostly carry-out and delivery as it wasn't the most comfortable joint to sit in, especially in the summer with the oven cranked. For those able to withstand the heat, there was a tiny black and white TV

with a coat hanger for an antenna. A piece of paper taped on to the set served as a public service announcement.

White Sox games only, no Cubs.

Rosangela's was across the street from Little Company of Mary Hospital with the emergency room in front. Suddenly, an ambulance flipped its bubble gum and switched on the siren, did a U-Turn across four lanes of traffic, and pulled up in front of the pizza parlor. A guy in scrubs leaped out and burst inside.

"Tony, you got my pizza?!"

"I got it!"

In one fluid motion he slid the pizza box into the guy's hands, like Jim McMahon handing off to Walter Payton.

"Thanks, Tony. We got a call and I'll settle up with you later."

The guy dove through the open door of the ambulance and they took off, siren blaring, bubble gum churning.

"Can you believe that?"

"What?"

"The ambulance attendant."

"What about him?"

"He stopped to pick up a pizza."

"He was hungry."

"Mark, that's not funny. He had a call and yet he had time to stop for a pizza."

"Peg, they ordered the pizza beforehand and right about the time it's ready, some poor slob had a heart attack and they got the call. They were quick about it and Tony was right there with the pizza."

"But stopping to pick up a pizza in an ambulance?"

"I'd have done the same thing."

Author's note: I live in California where they serve the worst pizza on the planet and the first thing I do when I visit Chicago is go to Rosangela's. Sue, my waitress of forty years, greets me as if she saw me yesterday.

"Hi, Mark. Large thin crust, sausage and cheese, bottle of Bud?"

Rosangela's is at 95th and California and tell Sue I sent you.

## Jane Allen

I was a courier and made pickups and deliveries to a financial services company in Oak Brook, Illinois. My point of contact was a woman named Jane Allen, although I had not met her. One day she was there to greet me and my heart skipped a beat. She was beautiful with long blonde hair. I stood there gaping at her and realized she was speaking to me.

"What were you saying? I was distracted for a moment."

"Yes, I noticed."

"Are you the same Jane Allen who attended MAC University?"

"How do you know that?"

"I used to work there."

"Yes, that's me."

"You live in Oak Park as I recall."

"Yes, I do."

"So do I."

"Are you spoken for?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you have a wife or girlfriend?"

"I'm a free agent. Why"

"I like to see a movie at the Lake Theater and then go to Poor Phil's afterward for a cocktail. Would you care to go with me sometime?"

"You're asking me on a date?"

"I guess I am."

"Sure. When and where?"

"There's a movie I want to see. The Lake Theater, Wednesday at 7:00."

"I'll meet you there."

Wednesday and my phone rang.

"Mark, I'm sorry, but I have another engagement I completely forgot about and which I can't break. Can I get a rain check?"

"Jane, if you changed your mind, just say so."

"No, I really want to go out with you."

"Yeah, sure."

"Please don't be that way. I really want to see you, I just can't make it tonight."

"OK."

"Lake Theater, Friday at 7:00?"

"Sure."

She was waiting for me in front of the theater and I noticed how tastefully she was dressed, particularly the beret she wore with her beautiful hair cascading from it. The movie she wanted to see was no longer playing and its replacement was beyond stupid. We left early and strolled over to Poor Phil's. We sat at the bar and the bartender took our order.

"Lady, what can I get for you?"

"Maker's Mark on the rocks."

"What's yours?"



"Budweiser."

"Draft?"

"Bottle."

"Solid."

She sipped her drink.

"So you're a Bud man?"

"Beef fed, Budweiser bred."

"That's funny."

"Nothing like a cold Bud at Wrigley Field."

"That's where the Cubs play, right?"

"That's right."

"How many times have you been there?"

"More than I can remember."

"I like baseball."

"What else do you like?"

"Jazz."

"Who do you listen to?"

"Bill Evans."

"Great pianist."

"Yes, he is."

"I play jazz piano."

She leaned in and a delicate scent of perfume drifted over me.

"What's your favorite song?"

"My Foolish Heart."

"Maybe you'll play it for me sometime."

"Maybe. There are three things a woman could say and make a guy like me fall in love."

"What kind of guy are you?"

"One who knows what he likes and you said two of the three things, baseball and jazz."

"What's the third?"

"It's a guy thing."

"Try me."

"The Three Stooges."

"I love The Three Stooges!"

And she sat there laughing.

"Are you in love?"

"What?"

You said there are three things that could make a guy like you fall in love...baseball, jazz, and The Three Stooges. I just said all three."

She was clearly amused.

"Well?"

"Jane, I'm moving to Los Angeles in two weeks and I can't start up with you."

"Los Angeles. What are you going to do there?"

I wrote a TV sitcom pilot and I'm gonna pitch it to the networks.

"What if it doesn't work out?"

"I guess I'll have to find a job."

"I'm sad you're leaving, but I understand chasing a dream."

She sighed and her eyes were misty. She kissed me and I lost my center, feeling like I was in a downward spiral.

"Good night, Mark."

"Good night, Jane."

I called her the next day.

"Do you like pizza?"

"I love pizza. In fact, I used to be a pizza chef and owned a pizza parlor."

"I know where the best pizza parlor in Chicago is and I'd like to take you."

"Sure, when?"

"Now."

"You mean right now?"

"Yes."

"What if I have previous plans?"

"Do you?"

"No. I was hoping you'd call and I'll be waiting downstairs."

I picked her up and we laughed and joked and sang our way to the south side of Chicago. The pizza was good and I asked if it met her standards. She said it was the best pizza she ever had, even better than hers, and we finished up. On the drive home she kissed me at a red light. We arrived at her house and said good night.

I couldn't sleep and lay in bed talking to the ceiling at 4:00 AM. On Sunday morning after church, I walked to the news stand for the Chicago Tribune. I came home, made breakfast, and sat down to read the paper. I couldn't concentrate and realized I was reading it upside down.

I called her.

"I need to talk with you."

"Is everything alright?"

"No, everything is not alright and please come over here."

"I'll be right there."

She arrived at my door five minutes later with a concerned look on her face.

"What's going on?"

"I can't sleep and I'm reading the paper upside down."

She chuckled.

"What does that have to do with me?"

"It has everything to do with you. I can't think of anything but you."

"But you're moving to LA."

"I'm not going."

"What about your dream?"

"You're my dream."

"Oh, Mark."

"Jane, I love you. Will you marry me?"

"Mark, I love you and, yes, I'll marry you. Your place or mine?"

Author's note: Jane and I had a courtship of three days and we were married fifteen years. She's gone now, but not a day goes by when I don't think of her and how I loved her.

## The Walsh Brothers

The Walsh brothers lived next door with their mother. Mrs. Walsh was wheelchair bound and sat in a window overlooking the patch of lawn separating our two houses. Occasionally, me and my buddies roughhoused there and one day we heard an angry voice.

"Away with ya! Youse are makin' enough noise to wake the dead! Go, and the devil go with ya!"

We were frozen to the spot. Who was that? We looked up and Mrs. Walsh glowered down at us from the second floor window. A pipe was perched at the corner of her mouth, smoke pluming from it.

"Dinnya hear me? Off with ya, I say!"

"Is she smoking a pipe?"

"What did ya say, ya little golliwog? I'll show ya!"

Like a Howitzer, she took aim and spit a long stream of tobacco juice which splattered all over the front of Jimmy O'Connor's T-shirt. He stood there in shock.

"Take that, ya little hoodlum!"

She was deadly accurate and let fly with another sodden stream, but I saw it coming and ducked in the nick of time.

"Torment an old woman, will ya? I'll put a curse on all of ya!"

My mother heard the commotion and came out to the front porch just in time to see Mrs. Walsh launch another jet of tobacco juice. She was horrified.

"What do you think you are doing spitting on my little boy?"

"Your little boy is the devil himself. If he were mine I'd lash 'im with a cat o' nine tails and beat the sin right out of 'im!"

"He's not yours and don't spit that horrible stuff on my lawn."

"Oh, hoity-toity, and the lip on ya! Come up here, dearie, and I'll teach ya! We'll see how smart ya are then."

My mom gathered all of us into the house. She gave Jimmy O'Connor a clean T-shirt, told us to wash our hands, and served milk and Oreos.

"Mrs. Willett, we were just goofing around."

"Boys, there's no rhyme or reason with some people and don't play under her window anymore. Go to the park or the playground."

My dad came home from work and my mom told him what happened.

"She's mad at the world. No wonder, look at her kids."

The Walsh brothers were somewhere between ne'er-do-well and the bread line. They were different as night and day, but had one thing in common and that was doting on their mother. When she called they jumped and she criticized them relentlessly.

"What sons I've raised! None of ya worth a spit and curse your father. He was spry enough when he was stickin' it to me on a Saturday night, but God help us when it was time to go to work. Couldn't get his arse outta bed, but he was never late for the pub! And now look at ya, eatin' me out of house and home! And me, a poor widow on a pension. Shame on all of ya!"

There was Liam, Seamus, and Quinn. None of them liked school and the truant officer was a regular visitor to the Walsh home. Liam missed an entire year and was sent to St. Charles reformatory. He returned two years later and began stealing cars. A long series of Cadillacs, Chryslers, and Buicks began appearing in the Walsh garage. Liam told his mother he was a car dealer and this was his inventory. He was nineteen when he was arrested by the Oak Park Police and hauled off to jail. He was tried by a jury of his peers and convicted, then sent to Joliet State Penitentiary and not heard from until his release nine years later when he moved back into the family home.

Seamus Walsh was a pleasant man and greeted everyone with a cheerful smile. He briefly served in the army, but was injured when an artillery shell exploded and blew the toes off his left foot. He wore a special shoe and limped like Chester in the TV series Gunsmoke. He occupied his time drinking, becoming so



inebriated that he'd stagger. Once he passed by as my mom was watering the grass.

"Mr. Walsh, you're such a nice man. Why do you drink so much?"

"To ease my pain, lass."

"The pain in your foot?"

"No lass, in my heart."

Quinn Walsh was the proprietor of a tavern on the west side of Chicago. Oak Park was a dry town and the thirsty lads of Little Ireland flocked to Quinn's Public House where many a glass was raised and many a man puked up a day's wages. The venture was not profitable, however, as Quinn was his own best customer and drank for free from morning till night.

And then there was Ignatius Walsh, the youngest sibling and as different from his older brothers as night and day. He was a studious and sensitive boy and his mother was determined he would live a life of service to the Roman Catholic Church. She named him after Ignatius Loyola and, as he was being baptized, looked down upon her infant son.

"He has a bit o' the Jesuit about him."

He was enrolled at Ascension Catholic Elementary School under the watchful eyes of the nuns. He stood out as a keen student of church history, discoursing at length over the Bible and doctrine. He was tutored in Latin and spoke the language like a Roman senator. He showed musical talent and was given organ lessons, becoming proficient to play the pipe organ in the church sanctuary. He continued his education at Fenwick High School where he was a star basketball player. He received a scholarship to Marquette University and appeared to have a brilliant career path before him, but fate stepped in and decreed otherwise. A war was raging and he was inducted into the army. He was sent to basic training and jump school at Fort Benning, Georgia, and then to Fort Bragg, North Carolina where he became a Green Beret. He was then sent to officer candidate school and, finally, to Viet Nam where he served until he was picked off by a sniper's bullet at the Battle of Khe Sanh. He was twenty-one years old. Mrs. Walsh didn't recover from the shock of her son's death and died several months later. Her surviving sons kept her ashes on the fireplace mantle next to a portrait of their fallen brother.

Author's note: Lieutenant Ignatius Padraig Walsh was laid to rest at Arlington National Cemetery. General Omar Bradley presented his mother with the American Flag.



### Romance At Circle Lanes

My buddy down the street came over.

"What do you do on Monday night?"

"Watch Monday Night Football."

"I bowl with the Triton College league at Circle Lanes."

"So what?"

"So come with me."

"I don't like bowling."

"You don't have to bowl. Come on, no one takes it seriously. We just go there to goof off and you'll have fun."

"I don't know."

"There's a lot of girls there."

"Do they bowl?"

"Mostly they sit in the bar."

"I'm in."

I showed up and spotted a gang of Oak Park kids.

"Mark, haven't seen you around, where ya been?"

"Cosmo, how ya doin'? I went away to school, but I'm back."

"Hey, look down there, remember that guy?"

He gestured toward an awkward looking guy with long arms almost reaching to his knees and a head like a melon.

"Is that the kid we used to call Mr. Potato Head?"

"Yeah, that's him. The only guy I ever knew walked on his knuckles."

I went to the bar, but there were no girls.

"What'll you have?"

"Budweiser in a bottle."

"You old enough?"

"I'm old enough."

"Let's see some ID."

"OK, I'm not old enough."

"How old are you?"

"Eighteen."

"Come back in three years and I'll serve you."

There was a White Sox game on the TV.

"You like the Sox?"

"Yeah."

"Do you ever go to a game?"

"Whenever I can."

"I have a buddy with golden box seats. Maybe I can get you a ticket."

"And why would you do that?"

"So you'll let me come in here and have a beer."

"What are you doing here?"

"I came here to meet girls."

"Well kid, I still can't serve you."

"Sure you can. I know how to handle myself and you won't even know I'm here."

"I'll think about it."

"I'll be here next Monday."

"Hey, kid."

"Yeah?"

"Can you get me two tickets so I can take my girlfriend?"

"Maybe."

The following week I showed up with four tickets.

"Four seats? How'd you manage that?"

"My buddy has a block of four and he wasn't using them."

"How much?"

"It's taken care of."

"What's your name?"

"Mark."

"I'm Jack. What'll you have?"

"Budweiser in a bottle."

"Comin' up."

And so began a friendship with Jack. I told him I worked at the pool hall when I was in high school.

"Pool hall, huh? Not a good place for a kid."

"A few guys looked out for me and I made my way."

"Do you shoot pool?"

"Yeah."

"How's your stick?"

"Decent. Broadway Joe taught me a few things."

"Broadway Joe, the pool shark? You know him?"

"I was his protégé."

"I'll be damned. You must shoot a good stick."

"I'm not bad."

We talked baseball and he liked posing questions.

"Who would your all time right fielder be?"

"That's a tough one. How do you pick between Hank Aaron, Rocky Colavito, Al Kaline, Frank Robinson, Tony Oliva, Roger Maris, Roberto Clemente, and Eddie Mathews to name a few?"

"Eddie Mathews was a 3rd baseman."

"Did I say Eddie Mathews?"

"Yeah, you did."

He stood there gloating silently. I picked up the conversation again.

"Anyway, how do you pick from those great players?"

"You forgot Babe Ruth."

"See what I mean?"

"Just pick one."

"Kaline."

"Why?"

"He played for Detroit and I like tigers."

One night Jack saw me coming and put a cold Bud on the bar for me.

"You came here to meet girls, right?"

He gestured toward the wall. Two pool tables were occupied by four young women and four more were sitting on chairs. They were trying to shoot pool but I quickly saw they didn't know what they were doing, didn't even know how to hold a cue stick properly.

Jack winked.

"Looks like they could use a little help."

I walked over to watch them play. They saw me looking at them and the one closest spoke up.

"Hi. What are you doing?"

"Watching you ladies shoot pool."

"We're not very good."

"You only need to be good when you're shooting for money, otherwise just enjoy the game and have fun."

"Do you know how to play pool?"

"Honey, I don't play pool, I shoot pool."

"Are you good?"

"Yes."

"Will you play me?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Only a cheap hustler would shoot pool with you and then take your money. I'm a gentleman and I wouldn't dream of doing that."

She swooned.

"I'm Mark."

"I'm Cindy."

"Let me buy you a drink at the bar."

"What about my girlfriends?"

"They'll be alright. Ladies, excuse us."

I extended my hand and walked her to the bar.

"I'm not old enough to drink."

"How old are you?"

"Nineteen."

"You're older than I am."

"How old are you?"

"Eighteen."

"How do you get to drink at the bar?"

"Jack trusts me and I do little favors for him."

"Like what?"

"Getting him White Sox tickets."

"I love the White Sox."

"Really?"

She leaned in.

"You don't have to get me drunk to have your way with me."

"What! I'm not trying to have my way with you."

She laughed and touched my cheek.



"You have a baby face."

"I know."

She leaned in closer.

"I'm enjoying your company."

"I'm enjoying yours."

"Do you bowl?"

"No."

"Then why do you come here?"

"To meet girls."

"You're funny."

"I'm serious."

"Have you met anyone?"

"Yes."

"Why aren't you with her?"

"I'm with her right now."

She smiled coquettishly.

"I don't have a boyfriend."

"I don't have a girlfriend."

She tapped her nails on the bar and smiled.

"Mark?"

"Cindy?"

"Will you order me something to drink, please?"

"Sure, honey."

I beckoned to Jack.

"A ginger ale for the lady, please."

"I can do that. Another Bud for you?"

"No, same as hers."

Author's note: Cindy was raised in a Lutheran family and attended Concordia Teachers College. We had long conversations about the White Sox and major league baseball, the Lord Jesus Christ, salvation, heaven, and hell. We listened to music, drank hot chocolate at the Watch Clock café, and studied the Bible. I once played the pipe organ at the Concordia chapel for her and she said I reminded her of Lon Chaney in Phantom Of The Opera. We took drives to Vermillion County in the fall with the leaves turning crimson and rust. She encouraged me to attend college and study music, but going to school was never my thing. We dated for three years and I had a vague notion we would be married one day, but upon graduating from Concordia, she said goodbye and left for South America to serve as a missionary. I never saw her again.

## Redemption

My dad's youngest brother was a studious boy and showed a talent for fine arts, particularly drawing and painting, and also wrote prose in an elegant hand. His teachers noticed these things and recommended him as a student to the School of The Art Institute in Chicago. He was accepted and began attending classes in the fall of 1943. He did well in whatever art form he put his hand to, but it was painting where he excelled. The Chicago Daily News ran a feature story on the Art Institute and singled him out as an emerging artist. After reading the newspaper article, a North Shore patron of the arts underwrote a full scholarship for him with the condition that his premier showing be held at her gallery and he devoted himself entirely to painting.

World War II was raging and young men were being inducted into the armed forces. His number came up and he was sent to basic training and then assigned to an infantry company. In 1944 he was deployed to France where he fought in the Battle of The Bulge, the last major German offensive campaign on the Western Front during WWII. The fighting was fierce and he was severely injured in hand-to-hand combat with a German soldier. He survived and was sent to a hospital for convalescence. When he was pronounced fit for active duty, he was sent to another base in France to await further deployment, however, he saw no further action as the war had taken a new turn and the defeat of

Germany was imminent. He was given an honorable discharge and returned to the states. My older family members told me he wasn't the same guy after returning from the war and the light had gone out in his eyes, but these events took place long before I was born and I didn't know him back in the day and how he used to be. Quiet by nature, he became reticent and withdrawn, drinking heavily and struggling to carry on. He managed to support himself as a truck driver, but he no longer cared about painting and never cast his shadow upon an easel again.

A classmate and I did our homework together at her house because my mom worked and her mom was home after school. Her mom had a sister who was an artist and owned a gallery. In addition to the gallery, she taught fine arts at a Chicago public school. She was a cultured woman and spoke fluent French, but was unlucky in matters of the heart and remained a single lady. She told her sister she couldn't seem to meet a decent fellow and resigned herself to being alone.

My mom had a conversation with my friend's mom and thanked her for letting me do my homework and keeping an eye on me. She said I was no trouble and don't mention it. The conversation continued.

"Mark thinks he'd like to be a school teacher, although we're hoping he'll become a doctor."

"My sister's a school teacher."

"What does she teach?"

"Fine arts, but her expertise is in painting. She paints beautifully and owns an art gallery."

"My brother-in-law paints quite well. Used to, I should say."

"He doesn't paint anymore?"

"No, he served in the war and he's not painted since. He was quite an artist and it's a shame."

"What's he doing now?"

"He works and keeps his own company. He's rather withdrawn and lives alone."

"My sister lives alone and is withdrawn, too."

"I worry about my brother-in-law and he should have someone to care for him."

"I worry about my sister and it would be nice if she had a man in her life."

"Do you suppose..."

"I was thinking..."

"Could we possibly..."

"I believe we could."

And they got busy.

"He used to paint."

"She's an artist."

"He keeps to himself."

"She's lonely."

"He's off on weekends."

"You could see her on Saturday."

They both resisted initially, but the two moms proved too much for them. It was arranged and they met for afternoon tea.

"Do you enjoy being a truck driver?"

"No."

"Then why do it?"

"I don't know how to do anything else."

"I understand you paint."

"Used to paint."

"Why did you stop?"

"I was interrupted by a war."

"You went overseas?"

"Yes, I had to leave school."

"Where were you going to school?"

"The Art Institute."

"I went to The Art Institute."

"No kidding?"

"Yes, from 1944-1948,"

"I was there from 1943 until I was drafted in 1944."

"Do you still paint?"

"No, I've given up on it."

And his eyes turned misty.

"I'm sorry."

She reached for his hand and he took hers. They were married in 1967 and remained together until her death in 1987. She encouraged him to paint, but a brush never found its way into his hand again.

## Transportation Fishermen's Club

A caricature of a Mediterranean looking guy holding a soup spoon stood on the roof of Tony's Greek Eatery and Tony looked just like him.

"Tony, you look just like the guy on the roof."

"I know, only I'm better looking."

A patron might expect moussaka, spanakopita, dolmades, pastitsio, and other Greek dishes on the menu. But that's not how it was at Tony's. He served one thing and one thing only, a bowl of chili with a grilled cheese sandwich. Choice of beverages were coffee, Orange Crush, Grape Crush.

Casual diners were shocked.

"Is this all you serve?"

"That's it. You want coffee or Crush with your chili?"

They often left in bewilderment, but he didn't care. Tony made the best chili in Chicago and people came in droves for a piping hot bowl of his chili with a grilled cheese sandwich that melted in your mouth. The two complemented each other perfectly and he was generous with his portions. A single bowl of chili satisfied the heartiest appetite and the sandwich itself was perfection, browned in butter with American cheese and dill chips, cut in half and the melted cheese running off the bread. There were three employees...Tony, a waitress, a grillman. The operation ran like a Swiss watch and Tony prospered.



Tony's was a mecca for truck drivers and my dad often took his lunch break there.

"Victor, I'm going to start a ministry in my restaurant and you know what the Bible says about two or more gathered in the name of Jesus."

And that's what Tony did. He told everyone he knew to come to his restaurant for a bowl of chili and a side dish of Christian fellowship. The word spread fast and it wasn't long before Tony's was jammed with people eating chili and talking to each other about Jesus. It got to where the place couldn't contain everyone and he had a word with my dad.

"Victor, what am I gonna do? I'm bustin' the walls and I can't fit all these people in here."

"Tony, I have an idea and let's find a larger space that can accommodate everyone."

My dad found a church in Berwyn and two hundred people showed up on a Saturday evening, many of them truck drivers, and a spirit of Christian brotherhood and fellowship flooded the room. One of the men said a name was in order for this organization of Christian believers and they began brainstorming.

"Let's come up with something that clearly expresses what we do."

"We gather to praise the Lord."

"We witness to others about Jesus."

"And what did Jesus call his disciples?"

"Fishers of men. Let's call ourselves Fishermen for Jesus."

"Isn't just about everyone here a truck driver? How about the Transportation Fishermen's Club?"

"That's it! All in favor, say aye!"

The motion was carried and the Transportation Fishermen's Club was born that evening. People brought their families and the wives cooked for everyone. Gospel pianists showed up and played for a singalong. A cop joined the ranks and played the saw like a violin. He placed the wooden handle on his knee and held the top of the saw with his left hand, then bowed on the flat edge with his right hand and the music brought tears to the eye. Pastors from various churches offered their services and we heard powerful sermons. But the most fun was the annual picnic held at a Cook County forest preserve on a Saturday afternoon. There were hot dogs, hamburgers, potato chips, pop, ice cream, and Tony brought cauldrons of chili and made grilled cheese sandwiches on a Weber grill. The men and boys played Clincher softball and the cop swung the bat with one arm and knocked the ball over everyone's head. The day wound down and everyone pitched in to clear the things away, then a word of prayer thanking the Lord for such a wonderful day and may God bless us all. By the time the sun went down, every kid was unconscious and our dads loaded us into the car and took us home.

Author's note: I don't know how long the Transportation Fishermen's Club ran as I stopped going to the meetings when I was thirteen, but I do know that many souls were led to the saving grace of the Lord Jesus Christ by these dedicated men.



## Help Wanted

I scanned the want ads in the Oak Leaves newspaper and an advertising company was looking for a proofreader. Although I had no prior experience, I was good at spelling and grammar, so I applied for the job. I got a phone call two days later and reported to personnel.

"I'm Norm Williams."

"Pleased to meet you."

"Says on your application you're a good speller."

"Spelling bee champ three years in a row."

"Will you take a spelling test?"

"Sure."

I passed with flying colors.

"You nailed the test."

"I have a question."

"Shoot."

"What do you do here?"

"We write the help wanted ads for just about every newspaper in America."

"I see."

"Do you want the job?"

"Yes."

"When can you start?"

"Now, if you like."

"Follow me."

I was ushered to a small cubicle.

"This is Bitsy and she'll show you what to do. Let me know if you need anything."

Bitsy spoke up.

"Proofreaders work in teams of two, one reading the ad and the other making corrections. Are you familiar with proofreader marks?"

"No."

"There are a lot of them but we only use a handful and they'll become familiar as you use them with greater frequency. I'll read the ad and you make corrections. Use this red pen and I'll show you which proofreading mark is called for."

When your appetite is out of control, reach for Bud Blockers, the taste bud inhibitor and dietary aid most recommended by doctors and pharmacists.

"You're kidding me."

"Sometimes it's hilarious. Try this one."

Your wife won't come near you. She says I love you from across the room. You sleep in twin beds. What's wrong with me, you ask. It's your beard, dummy, it's like sandpaper. Only one solution. Sliced Steel Razor Blades...for the cutting edge man.

Every ad had to be out by Friday and we scrambled to meet the deadline. Sometimes it was difficult keeping up with the flow, but then the cavalry showed up. Shock Advertising had an arrangement with a temporary employment agency to provide fill-in proofreaders. These characters stood in the doorway of our cubicle and said the same thing.

"I don't know what I'm doing here. This isn't what I do."

Bitsy greeted them warmly.

"Oh, so nice of you to come and help us."

They came and went, reading ads, grumbling most of the time.

A guy showed up one afternoon.

"Is this proofreading?"

"Yes."

"I don't know what I'm doing here. This isn't what I do."

What do you do?

"I'm an inventor."

"What's your name?"

"Vince De Leonardis."

"Are you kidding?"

"What?"

"Your name."

"My real name is Frankie Passa but people make fun and call me Frankie Pasta, so I came up with Vince De Leonardis."

"Why not call yourself Leonardo Da Vinci?"

"I don't want anyone to think I got a big head."

"I see. What have you invented?"

"A travel aid for people who don't know how to get around."

He pulled out a piece of blue felt with a string attached from his pants pocket.

"Ta da! The Pocket Globe. I'm gonna sell a million of 'em!"

He held it by the string and it opened to reveal a sphere of planet Earth. There were various cloth patches of green, red, yellow, and orange. Something resembling the seven continents could be seen although it appeared some of them were not in the correct geographical location.

"Let me understand, you pull it from your pocket and then what?"

"What do you mean? You look at it and know where you're at. If you wanna go somewhere you see it on the globe."

"Vince, you've got the European continent in the Gulf of Mexico and shouldn't the North Pole be at the top? You've got it in the Arabian Sea between India and Madagascar."

"I was never much good at geography."

"You said people can look at the globe and then get from point A to point B, but how exactly does that happen?"

"What do you mean? You're here and there's South America. Figure it out."

"I don't know, Vince."

"What? You think the Pocket Globe won't work?"

"I didn't say that. It's a novelty and perhaps there's a niche for it. A gift shop, maybe."

"That sounds like a good idea. What's a novelty?"

Author's note: Vince De Leonardis wasn't the brightest guy and the Pocket Globe was discussed no further after that first day.



## I Heard It Through The Grapevine

The rain was coming down hard and I could hardly see where I was going. Through the mists a neon sign blinked on and off and I impulsively swung my car across four lanes of traffic. I was drenched by the time I reached the front door and shook the rain from myself like a dog. I stepped inside and was met by the stares of black people looking at me inquisitively. A woman as tall as my chest greeted me.

"Well?"

"I was driving by and thought I'd stop in."

"You're all wet."

"It's raining outside."

"You're dripping all over my floor. Dry your hair with this towel."

"Thank you."

"What do you want?"

"Can I come in?"

"Are you a troublemaker?"

"No, ma'am."

"That wasn't really a question as Ozzie won't stand for it. When someone makes trouble I get upset and that upsets Ozzie."

She cocked her head toward a big mean looking black guy staring me down.

"Ma'am, you won't even know I'm here."

"You can sit by the piano."

"May I order something from the bar?"

"A waitress will come around. What's your name?"

"Mark."

"I'm Cookie and I own the place. Welcome to The Grapevine."

I sat down by the piano and a long, leggy black chick strolled up.

"Hello, white boy. I'm Courtney."

"Hi, Courtney. I'm Mark."

"Are you lost?"

"I'm in the right place."

"You sure?"

"I knew it the moment I saw you."

"You're a charmer. What can I get for you?"

"Budweiser."

"Bottle or glass?"

"Bottle, please."

"Be back in a jiff."

The pianist played and sang beautifully, the notes flowing from his fingertips and I sat enthralled. I stayed until closing time and most of the patrons had gone home. Courtney came over.

"Last call."

"No more, thanks."

"Did you enjoy yourself?"

"Yes, especially the music. Was that jazz?"

"Yes, honey. That was jazz and Charles Calloway has been here a long time."

"I play piano."

"Maybe you can play for us sometime."

"I don't want to embarrass myself."

"Come on, white boy. I'll bet you're good."

I liked sitting by the piano, but so did everyone else and sometimes I didn't get a seat. I was sitting at a table and Charles Calloway walked over.

"Courtney says you play piano."

"Not very well, I'm afraid."

"I'm on break and let's see what you got."

"I'd rather not."

"I'm not asking."

And he made me go.

Every head turned and every set of eyes were on me. I hesitated and Charles gestured to get busy. The only tune I knew remotely resembling jazz was Misty and I tentatively began playing.

Look at me, I'm as helpless as a kitten up a tree  
and I feel like I'm clinging to a cloud, I can't understand  
I get misty just holding your hand

I checked in with Charles looking for a nod of approval, but he didn't so much as glance at me. I played and sang the piece through, closing with a tag on the final phrase.

Everyone was on their feet applauding.

Courtney came over and gave me a kiss.

"Honey, you were fantastic."

I felt as though I were in a dream and Cookie came over.

"Why didn't you tell me you could play like that?"

"You didn't ask. Anyway, I'm not that good."

"Not good? Sonny, I want you to play here every Sunday and Monday when Charles has the night off. The pay is \$150 a night and a tip jar. What do you say?"

"Thanks. Can I think about it?"

"Think fast, kid."

Charles beckoned me to his table.

"Sit down. What's your name?"

"Mark."

"Mark, you're good."

"Thanks, but Misty is about as good as I get."

"And that was damn good."

"Charles, I can't play like you."

"Son, you don't have to play like me and you'll find your own voice in time. What you have to do right now is go where the music leads and tonight it led you here. Where it will lead next is anyone's guess and you gotta stay with it, learn more tunes, keep getting better. Jazz isn't a destination, it's a journey and enjoy the trip."

"Cookie offered me a job playing when you're not here."

"I heard."

"Do you think I should take it?"

"You impressed her enough to offer you the job, so perhaps give it a try."

"Charles, do you really think I'm good?"

"I do, young man, and you have something to say."

"Thanks."

"One more thing, women love piano players and Courtney has her eye on you."

Author's note: Charles Calloway played The Grapevine for thirty-five years until his death in 1994 and Cookie died a year later. The Grapevine closed its doors and the neon sign blinks no more.

## To Grandma's House We Go

I loved my grandma and couldn't wait to see her. She wasn't as eager to see me, not that she didn't love me, she just had difficulty coping with little boys having raised four girls with my mom, her youngest. We drove to her house every Sunday after dinner.

"That's where your cousin goes to college."

"I know, Mom."

"Someday you'll go there, too."

My dad looked at me in the rear view mirror.

"You're going to medical school to become a doctor."

"Don't worry, Dad. I'll be a doctor."

I ran up the stairs into the house. Grandma lived upstairs and my aunt and uncle lived on the first floor.

My mom straightened my shirt and combed my hair.

"Go see grandma and tell her I'll be right there."

I dashed up to the second floor and grandma was sitting in her chair.

"Grandma!"

I rushed into her arms.

"I'm glad to see ya!"

"Grandma's glad to see you, too. How are you doing in school?"

"I'm the smartest kid in my class. I won the spelling bee."

"That's wonderful. Now sit down over there and don't touch any of my things."

My mom came to do grandma's hair and I went back downstairs.

My dad was grandma's handyman and she was not the most patient lady. I can still hear her on the phone with my mom.

"Jen, is Bud coming to fix my sink?"

"We're all coming, Ma."

"Are you going to do my hair?"

"Don't I always do your hair?"

"Never mind. Make sure he brings his tools."

She occasionally came for a visit, but she watched a soap opera called *As The World Turns* which cut into my lunchtime program. We only had one TV and her viewing schedule trumped mine.

"Mom, why can't I watch *Bozo's Circus*?"

"Because grandma has to watch her program."

"But I'm missing the *Grand Prize Game*."

We had a fearless German Shepherd, but it was a different story with grandma. She gave the dog a disapproving look and it cowered away, a stricken expression on its face.

"Lie down on that rug and not a peep from you."

She slept in the guest bedroom and the dog made its way into her room, put its paws on the bed and rested its head on grandma's arm.

"Jen, Bud! Help me!"

My mom and dad came running.

"Ma, what happened?"

"That dog put its head on me. It was going to eat me."

"Ma, she wouldn't hurt you. She's telling you she loves you."

"Well, I suppose it's alright, but I don't want her on the bed."

My dad snapped his fingers.

"Stay here with grandma. Good girl."

The dog lay down on the floor with her head between her paws and stayed there the rest of the night.

The aroma of grandma's homemade bread drifted throughout the house and drew me to the kitchen.

"Would you care for a piece?"

"Yes, please."

She cut a slice, slapped butter and jam, and passed it over.

It was gone in three seconds.

"Can I have more?"

"No, you'll ruin your supper."

"I'll eat my supper."

"I know you will."

"I mean I'll eat it even if I have another piece of bread."

"I said no."

I reached for the loaf.

"What are you doing?"

"I want more."

"I told you no."



"I want another piece of bread!"

"Don't raise your voice to me. I'll take off my slipper and blister your backside."

"I'd like to see you try."

And before I knew what happened, she threw me across her knee and raised her slipper in her right hand. I didn't know an old lady could move that fast and I was stunned.

"Do you still think I can't do it?"

"No, Gramma. I'm sorry."

She hugged and kissed me.

"Go watch TV."

Author's note: Mayme Gross was born November 17, 1891 and died January 14, 1970. She was a tough lady but underneath the steel was a heart of gold. She had ten grandchildren and loved all of us. She gave me a pocket transistor radio with an earphone and I sneaked it into school so I could listen to the World Series.

## An Empty Stocking

I contracted pneumonia, my breath coming in gasps. I was hospitalized and they put me in an oxygen tent. My parents were frantic and thought they were going to lose me, but things took a turn for the better and the pneumonia gradually receded until the doctor said I was well enough to go home. My mom burst into tears and sobbed.

"Bud, what if we had lost him? I couldn't have taken it."

"I know, Jen. Neither could I, but he made it and here we are."

Christmas arrived and we had a spruce Christmas tree which my mom decorated beautifully with ornaments, tinsel, and lights. We also had an aluminum tree and it turned round on a stand. A color wheel cast shades of green, blue, red, and yellow. I lied mesmerized under the tree and drifted off to sleep. My mom said that tree was the best babysitter she ever had.

My parents gave me every toy under the sun...Mouse Trap, Crazy Clock, Lie Detector, Creepy Crawlers, Monopoly, Clue, Stratego, and a Bobby Hull hockey game. I loved the hockey game and my dad got me up in the morning.

"Wanna play some hockey?"

I leaped out of bed.

"Sure, Dad!"

"We'll play until I have to go to work."

It came with the six NHL teams, but I always took the Chicago Blackhawks.

"Can't I be the Blackhawks just once?"

"Mom says I have Indian blood and I'll be the Blackhawks."

I walked around outside and saw a kid I knew.

"What are you doing?"

"Walking around."

"It's sure cold out."

"Sure is."

I noticed he wasn't wearing gloves and his coat was ragged. He didn't have a hat, either.

"Feel like going to my house?"

"Sure."

"Come on."

We went inside and he looked at the fireplace.

"Is that real?"

"Yeah."

"Can we build a fire?"

"My dad doesn't want me messing with it."

"Oh."

"I'll show you my room."

We bounded up the stairs.

"Is this all yours?"

"Yeah."

"I share a room with my three brothers. We sleep on bunk beds, two to a mattress."

I didn't know what to say.

"Is that a Bobby Hull hockey game?"

"I got it for Christmas. What did you get?"

He didn't say anything.

"You must have got something."

"A checkers set from the five and dime."

"What else?"

"That's it. My dad drinks and we don't have any money."

He went home and I sat in my room. I felt troubled and had a hard time falling asleep.

My mom came home from work and I was lying on my bed.

"Hi, sweetie. What are you reading?"

"Hi, Mom. I'm reading Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Sea by Jules Verne."

"Such a fine author."

She looked around my room.

"Where are all your Christmas gifts?"

I hung my head.

"Tell me."

"You know that kid down the street?"

"Which kid?"

"The kid who lives in the old house Dad says is falling down."

"Yes, go on."

"I gave him all my stuff."

"You gave him everything?"

"Even the Bobby Hull hockey game."

"Sweetie, what on earth possessed you to do such a thing?"

"I felt sorry for him. I have everything and he has nothing."

She didn't say anything and her eyes were misty.

"Mom, am I in trouble?"

She hugged me and held me close.

"No, sweetie. You're not in trouble and you're a good boy."

Author's note: I was born with a spirit free from materialism, but I think giving all my stuff to the kid down the block set that in motion and I'm still generous to a fault.



### Tony Bennett at The Fairmont

We had a Motorola HI-FI stereo system and state of the art in 1959. It had a record player and AM-FM radio. I was four years old and running through the house, and my mom headed me off and steered me to the Motorola.

Take my hand, I'm a stranger in Paradise  
All lost in a wonder world, a stranger in Paradise  
If I stand starry eyed, that's a danger in Paradise  
For mortals who stand beside an angel like you

Tony Bennett had a longstanding series of engagements with The Fairmont worldwide. It was a sizzling hot summer day and I needed to go someplace cool. I heard he was in town and went to The Fairmont Chicago that evening, accompanied by the lovely Margaret Mary Keane. He was appearing in the hotel nightclub, The Metropole, and the maitre'd greeted us at the door.

"Your name, sir."

"Mark Willett."

"I don't see that name. Do you have a reservation?"

"No, I don't."

"I'm sorry, but we have a full house."

"I'm disappointed, but surely you can get me in."

"I'm afraid I can't."

"I'm sorry to hear that, but perhaps something can be done."

I oiled his palm with a C note and he didn't bat an eyelash.

"Wait here, please."

He returned a moment later.

"It seems we have a cancellation and please come with me."

We followed him and he gestured to a table.

"Enjoy the evening, sir. I'll send a waiter around."

"Mark, can you believe this? We're sitting at the front table."

"Peg, it cost me a hundred bucks and I believe it. But you're worth it."

"I am, aren't I?"

"You know it, sweetie."

A waiter came and we ordered cocktails with a tray of appetizers. The atmosphere was keen with anticipation and the entire scene was reminiscent of Rick's in the movie Casablanca.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Fairmont Hotel and Metropole. The nightclub proudly presents Tony Bennett!"

I know I'd go from rags to riches  
If you would only say you care  
And though my pocket may be empty  
I'd be a millionaire

He was at the top of his game and regaled the audience with one hit song after another...Just In Time, The Good Life, Close Your Eyes, Because Of You, Smile, I Left My Heart In San Francisco, Who Can I Turn To, Put On A Happy Face. The show drew to a close and he sang his final song.

Take my hand, I'm a stranger in Paradise  
All lost in a wonder world, a stranger in Paradise  
If I stand starry eyed, that's a danger in Paradise  
For mortals who stand beside an angel like you  
I saw your face, and I ascended  
Out of the commonplace, into the rare  
Somewhere in space, I hang suspended  
Until I know, there's a chance that you care  
Won't you answer this fervent prayer, of a stranger in Paradise  
Don't send me in dark despair, from all that I hunger for  
But open your angel's arms, to this stranger in Paradise  
And tell him that he need be, a stranger no more

The ovation was deafening and everyone was on their feet. He stepped from the stage, walked to our table, and stood in front of



us. He grinned and his eyes sparkled like blue diamonds. I could hardly contain myself.

"Mr. Bennett, my earliest musical memory is my mom playing A Stranger In Paradise on our record player when I was four years old and here you are singing it in person."

He drank me in for a moment, then took both my hands in his.

"It does an old guy like me a lot of good to see a young cat like you enjoying my music. Thank you very much. Good night to you and your lovely lady."

He moved to the next table.

"Mark, can you believe him?"

"I know, honey. They don't make guys like that anymore."

Author's note: I'm writing this on August 4 and Tony Bennett died a few weeks ago. I listened to him countless times and he greatly influenced my singing. How little I realized when I was four years old sitting in front of the Motorola the effect he would have on me and there will never be another like him.