

The Best Christmas Present Ever



Delphinia Longstreet



A "New Woman" Novel



Reluctant Press TV/TS Publishers

This story (including all images) is a work of fiction. Any similarity to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental. All situations and events herein presented are fictional, and intended only for the enjoyment of the reader. Neither the author nor the publisher advocate engaging in or attempting to imitate any of the activities or behaviors portrayed.

Persons seeking gender reassignment surgery, hormone therapy or any other medical and/or body-altering process should seek the counsel of a qualified therapist who follows the Benjamin Standards of Care for Gender Identity Disorder. This material is intended for persons over the age of 18 only.



Copyright ©) 2014

Published by Reluctant Press
in association with Mags, Inc.
All Rights Reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced without the written permission of the publisher, except for brief quotes contained within a critical review.

For information address
Reluctant Press
P.O. Box 5829
Sherman Oaks, CA 91413
USA

Call toll free (800) 359-2116

www.reluctantpress.com

The Best Christmas Present Ever

by Delphinia Longstreet

I

Lieutenant Colonel Royal Carson “R.C.” Lawton relaxed in his folding chair and gazed up at his tall Battalion Sergeant Major, Charles “Charlie” M^CGrath who was smiling broadly.

“OK, SarMajor,” he grinned, “What’s on your so-called mind this time?”

“Whom me, Sir?” The man tried to sound innocent but the laugh kept bubbling through.

“OK, whom did you pillar today, SarMajor?” R.C. grinned.

“Why, nobody, Sir!” the pained man replied with an insulted expression. “I’m the easiest going guy in the whole damned U. S. of A. Marine Corps!” he boasted. “Why would you think such a thing?”

“Yeah, and I’m Queen of the Goddamned May!” R.C. grinned. “Whassup?”

“Well Dawg, as you know, it’s Jonze’s birthday today, so I put him on KP to keep him outta Cookie’s hair while he makes the cake and all.”

“What hair?” R.C. laughed. “Cookie’s balder’n a basketball!”

“Yeah, I know. And then Cookie put him in the grease pit!” he laughed.

“Ouch!” R.C. winced visibly.

“And then some! You should have heard Jonze bitch!” Charlie laughed.

“No thanks, I don’t want to be within ten clicks of him when he gets his dandruff up!”

“No, Sir! Me neither. That’s why I took a powder!”

“Chicken!”

“Braaawk! Braaawk!”

“Damn, I’m surrounded by out-of-work comedians!”

“Did I ever tell you about the time I dated Jane...”

R.C. held his hand up. “Only about a million times!”

“But Dawg, this here’s a new one,” Charlie managed with a pained look on his face.

“Coming from you it’ll have a beard down to its ankles, it’ll be so dang’d old!”

“Yuh gots a pernt, Sir,” the SarMajor mused, stroking his chin. “Whadda we gonna do about

Thanksgiving?" he asked suddenly. "The turkeys 'n punkins ain't got cheer yet."

"What? No turkeys? We got plenty of them hanging around! Us'n's oughta get some use outta summa dem," R.C. laughed.

"Wrong kinda turkeys, Sir," the BSM grinned. "Naw, that ain't the prolem, Dawg. Cookie wants tuh have punkin pies with 'em and there ain't a punkin within a thousand miles of this damned sandbox!"

"Hmmm, that do present a prolem," R.C. admitted. "Lemme call Regimental."

The BSM grinned widely. "Now that's what a dawg colonel's good for, Sir!"

"That's why I get the big bucks, you turkey," R.C. grinned back at him.

"So you say, Sir, so you say. Just so's it gets done in our lifetime!"

"Damn, you're so impatient!" R.C. mused. "No wonder the guys want to boil you in oil!"

"But I would make such tender meat, Sir!" the BSM laughed.

R.C. picked up his field telephone, dialed a number, spoke briefly, then hung up. "There, Cookie'll have his damned turkeys and punkins on tomorrow's mercy flight."

"Allus said youse Dawg Colonels had more uses than just takin' up valuable space 'n' breathin' alla that free air," BSM M^cGrath laughed as he beat a hasty retreat.

"Oh, yeah? Up yours, SarMajor!" R.C. called belatedly, laughing in spite of himself.

* * *

II

“Awri’, what’s on your mind now, SarMajor?” R.C. asked, looking up from the report he was writing. “Din’ yuh gets enough outta me fer Thanksgiving?”

“Aw, Dawg, let’s fergit that, OK? Naw, we gots us another prolem now.”

“OK, lay it on me.” R.C. sat back in his folding chair and waited expectantly.

“Well, as you know, Christmas is coming up in a coupla weeks...”

“Yeah, so?”

“So, the guys’d like to have a tree and ornaments and presents and I sorta promised ‘em a huge turkey dinner with all the trimmings and all.”

R.C. groaned. “So now you want me to scrounge the damned turkeys again?”

“And the punkins and the ice cream and cream for whipping, er, Cookie made up a list of things he needs.” He passed a piece of paper across the desk. “Yuh oughta be able to find this stuff easy.”

“Damn!” R.C. groaned. “All I am to you Greenies is a damned button pushing supply clerk!”

“Yes, Sir,” BSM MCGrath agreed, “but you know which buttons to push, being uh officer ‘n’ all.”

“I swear, you guys will be the death of me yet! Regimental hates to see my ugly puss comin’ through the front door because they know I’m allus on a foraging mission ‘n’ lookin’ tuh steal ‘em blind!”

“Yeah, but since yer a Dawg Colonel, no one says word one tuh yuh!” BSM MCGrath pointed out needlessly. “Sides, it’s Christmas and I...er, the guys, are sorta plannin’ on it, yuh know, Sir?”

“All right! All right! I know when I’m licked!” R.C. growled. “Now get yer scrawny ass outta here so’s I can finish this damned report fer regimental!”

BSM MCGrath turned and started for the door, then hesitated. “Uh, Sir?”

R.C. looked up. “Yes, SarMajor? Something else on your so-called mind?”

BSM MCGrath came back to stand in front of his colonel’s desk. “Yes, Sir...sorta,” he admitted.

“Well, out with it! I ain’t got all day like some lazy-assed SarMajors I know,” R.C. teased.

“Yes, Sir.” BSM MCGrath looked ill at ease. “Uh, Sir, I know you’re not all that gung ho ‘bout the Christmas and New Year’s holidays and all...”

“That’s my business!” R.C. snapped in irritation.

“Yes, Sir, meaning no disrespect, Sir, but every year my church congregation back home sends cards to alla the guys in this sandbox, and this year one came that has your name written all over it!”

R.C. sighed. “Now that’s a crock of b. s. if I’ve ever heard one!”

“It’s true, Sir.” The SarMajor took a slender envelope out of his pocket and handed it to his commanding officer. “See?” His finger pointed to the addressee.

R.C. looked at it, then blushed and looked up at his SarMajor. “*To One of Our Brave Fighting Men Far From Home.* That isn’t my name, SarMajor, and you damned well know it! Give it to one of the guys who go out on patrol every day and put their lives on the line! This ain’t for no R.E.M.F. like me!”

BSM MCGrath drew himself up to his full height, all six foot four inches and two hundred twenty pounds of hard muscle and replied, “Sir! I was given a direct order to give this card to you and no one else! And since that order came from the high command, I am duty bound to deliver it to you, Sir! ‘Sides, is you

is or is you isn't a brave fighting Dawg far from home?"

"There are others more qualified," R.C. equivocated.

"No, Sir, there ain't!" the man retorted hotly. "N' you know it! Sir!"

R.C. laughed softly. "Charlie, yer as full of shit as every Green Gyrene I have ever known!"

"Yeah Dawg, now take the damned card afore I fergit yer a Dawg Colonel 'n shove it up yer scrawny ol' ass!" He saluted smartly, spun on his heel and strode purposefully from the tent.

"Well, I will be damned!" R.C. murmured, staring at the retreating back of his SarMajor.

Smiling, he read the salutation again. "*To One of Our Brave Fighting Men Far From Home.*"

"Oh well, in for a dime, in for a dollar!" he muttered as he slit the envelope open. Inside, he read:

"To One of Our Brave Fighting Men Far From Home

As we enter this most holy of seasons, our thoughts ever turn to those who are so far

away from their loved ones. It is with the utmost thanks of those of us who enjoy our freedom

due to the efforts of those of you who place yourselves in harm's way to protect us.

Our hopes and prayers go out to each one of you with the wish that this horrible war will

soon be ended and you are returned safely to those of us who love you so much.

God bless each and every one of you and keep you safe!

Rhonda Suellen

But the surname was blurred so badly that even under the microscope and x-ray machine in sick bay it could not be deciphered! Lord knows I tried!

But, eventually I gave up and cornered my BSM. He grinned and replied, "Gripe, gripe, gripe! That's all you damned lifers ever do! Can't you take the fuckin' card in the way it was meant to be without griping? For Crissakes Dawg, don't look a gift horse in the mouth! Besides, if you ever get to my neck of the Big Sky Country, you'll have a most pleasant surprise when you discover the truth of the matter!"

And he would say no more on the subject.

Well, I took that card out and read it so many times it became shop-worn with deep creases and little tears, but always the same inspiring message, "Come home safe!"

But who had sent it? I puzzled over it for weeks!

And never did find out anything useful.

Then New Year's came and with it a renewed effort by the Iraqi insurgents to throw us back into the Arabian Sea. Well, we weren't about to let that happen, so we fought back.

Which brings us to the real beginning...

It was late February and we had been dodging incoming shells for days, always looking over our shoulders and watching the locals disappear just before another barrage began. They always knew. Most of the locals were decent people wanting to be left alone to go about their business as usual. It was the radical militants who made trouble for everybody else!

I was helping unload a truck of supplies when we heard the whistle and a shout, "Incoming!" And we fell to the ground or huddled behind something or ran for a doorway or something. But this time three of

the locals were caught out in the open! It was a woman with two small children.

As one man, BSM M^CGrath and I dashed from cover and threw our bodies over the three civilians to protect them from the blast. I heard a loud noise in my ear, something like rain falling on me and this woman screaming for her children...and then nothing.

I woke up three days later on an airplane bound for the burn unit in Germany for treatment along with BSM M^CGrath who had borne the brunt of the burning oil the bomb had exploded.

The personnel at the burn unit about had a cow when I insisted on sharing the ward room with my SarMajor. "It's just not done, Sir!" a bright young female nugget told me. "He's *enlisted!*" she insisted as though he were carrying some sort of horrible disease!

"And if he's not in that bed next to me when he wakes up, you'll be a yardbird no fucking class!" I thundered. Fortunately, another light colonel, a surgeon, saw my records and my M.O.H. and informed the nurse that I could do as I wished because of it. She didn't like it, but she backed off.

Well, SarMajor M^CGrath woke up two days later, hungrier than a starved grizzly bear with a sore tooth and from the way he bellowed orders, he had the whole hospital upset and jumping! After more than twenty-some years in the Corps, he knew most of the high-ranking officers personally and anything he wanted, he got! Immediately, if not sooner!

"Hey, Dawg!" he greeted. "Where're us'n's at? It sure ain't the sandbox!"

"Somewhere in Germany, I think," I replied because I wasn't really sure.

"Hell, that's better'n duh Kuwaiti prairies!" he grinned.

We lay up in those hospital beds and watched Armed Services Television, mostly westerns and shoot-'em-up gangster flicks, arguing about anything and everything that came to mind until we were sick of the whole mess.

I discovered that he had a younger brother who was in law school and acing it royally! From the way he talked, I knew my SarMajor was proud of his brother in a way I had never felt for my own brother. His dad owned a lumber yard that had been started back after the Civil War to provide lumber for the building boom in Washington State and that several years previously, he and a partner had started a small furniture factory to provide furniture for the Government's myriad housing projects in the tri-state area (Washington, Idaho and Montana). The factory was being expanded even as we lay there in our beds discussing it!

He learned that I was a fraud by several years because of my enlistment when I was just fifteen years old and he got a charge out of the way I had carried that dumb nugget out of the brush. "Damn, Sir, I'd've proly left his sorry ass to the Cong!"

"Couldn't do that, SarMajor," I demurred, "Uncle Sam had a bundle invested in the so and so."

"Hey, you got time in, why don't you retire and come to Montana with me? For damned sure the Corps won't let me stay in with these burned-up legs! I got my time in and I been thinking about it my own self. You could come to our town and work in the factory. You said you liked making furniture and Dad can use all the help he can get...er, *good* help, I mean!" he grinned wryly.

"Yeah, picture that, me calling *you* Sir!" I laughed.

"Ain't that a kick in the ass, Dawg?" he laughed.

And that same nugget heard him call me, "Dawg," and she about had conniption fits all over the damned ward...again! "That's insubordination!" she squeaked angrily. "He's enlisted!" And again she

made it sound like he had some sort of horrible disease.

“Ensign,” I cautioned, “he and I fought together for two tours in Nam and one in the sandbox and he’s earned the right to call me any damned thing he wants to! Now, I don’t want to hear one more word out of you or, as I promised you once before, you’ll be a yardbird no fucking class quicker’n you can say, ‘Dawg!’ your own self!” I threatened.

And that was the end of that.

Charlie and I practically lived in the physical therapy rooms, trying to get our strength and muscles back in shape so we could get out of that damned hospital burn ward. I got tired of using the machines, doing rep after rep and and running in place and seeming, at least to me, getting nowhere fast.

Then, one afternoon, SarMajor Charlie M^CGrath collapsed while on the tread mill and he died in my arms right there on the floor. His last words were, “Take care of Rhonda and my Marie!”

I tell you, I just sat there holding his body while the tears rolled unchecked down my cheeks to splash on his face.

I cried.

And cried.

I could not help myself.

Nor could I stop myself from crying.

It just wasn’t fair.

Charlie M^CGrath had a loving wife waiting back in the States.

Charlie M^CGrath had a son waiting for his return to the States.

Charlie M^CGrath had a daughter, who also waited for her father to come home.

Charlie M^cGrath had his whole life to live and enjoy!

Me?

I had nothing.

I was nothing.

And now, that's all that was left.

Nothing...

And for once, the ensign had nothing to say as I held his dead body and cried like a baby.

Anyway, I requested and was granted permission to accompany my SarMajor's body back to the Z.I. for a full military burial in his home town. As I was getting ready to leave, I was called into a general's office and presented with the Medal of Honor for Battalion Sergeant Major Charles M^cGrath, awarded (of course) posthumously, and a silver star for my own "heroics" during the explosion back in the sandbox.

It seemed that the woman and children we protected were the wife and children of a high muckey-muck Kuwaiti sheik who had barrels of pull.

(Get it? *Oil* barrels.)

Big deal...

Oil barrels or none,

Sheik or not,

M.O.H or no,

Battalion Sergeant Major Charles "Charlie" M^cGrath was still dead!

I sat in the back of that airplane that brought me and a flag-covered steel casket back to the States, and I cried the whole damned twenty-one hours it took!

Such a waste!

* * *

III

It was with a heavy heart that I accompanied that body from Germany to Spokane in Washington State, the closest place to the SarMajor's (a hoot and a holler, he used to say) hometown in the Big Sky Country, the Rocky Mountains of Western Montana, not too far from Idaho to the west and Canada to the north. It was a small town, not even shown on most maps, but it had a church, a general store, and a gas station/garage. For anything else you had to drive about sixty miles or so south southwest to Coeur d'Alene in Idaho, the nearest city. Oh, yeah, there was also the McGrath lumber and furniture factory that was owned by the SarMajor's father by way of marrying his mother back in the day.

The scenery and terrain reminded me a great deal of Down-Eastern Maine where I had grown up. Woods, solitude, wild animals, and very few people to spoil the quiet beauty of Mother Nature.

Well, I did have an older brother and sister who had run as fast as they could to escape the dull backwoods and live in civilization, Boston and NYC, as soon as they graduated high school. Me? I liked the woods and stayed on even after the house caught fire when I was twelve and burned to the ground. Dad and I spent two years rebuilding the house and making usable furniture, and I do believe that it was the happiest time of my life up to that time.

Then my parents died; both were in their late sixties and my greedy brother and sister "executed" their wills, except that I never got my share and they had no reasonable explanation as to why I didn't.

But, being just fourteen and big for my age, I figured I could look out for myself and I spent a year living off the land. Then, just days before I turned fifteen, I got talking with a Marine veteran and decided that I would join up. I "borrowed" my brother's birth certificate that said I was twenty, wandered on down

to Boston and enlisted. Nobody questioned me, just looked at my size and passed me without comment.

I took basic at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, then advanced infantry training, then went on to jump school at Fort Benning, Georgia. Now it never made much sense to me to jump out of a perfectly good airplane into God-knew-what, but question the Marine high command?

You kidding? Nevah hopen, G.I.!

After jump school, I became a Marine Sniper. That was a prelude to The Nam where I served four tours before I got shot in the ass and spent a year on Okinawa. Then it was back to The Nam where I yanked a dumb-assed second looey out of the line of fire, then hauled his sorry ass two miles to an evac helio. It turned out that the s.o.b. was the only son of some governor of some damn state or another and I was sent back to the Z.I. to be awarded an M.O.H. by his nibs, Le Presidente des Etats Unis, Lyndon B. Johnson, by Texas and by Gawd!

At least the food in D. C. was better than in The Nam!

It was in Nam that I first met Master Sergeant Charles "Charlie" McGrath and we tied one on several times during two tours.

But, on the basis of the M.O.H, I was offered a chance at O.C.S. and ninety days later, I walked out of Camp Pendleton, California a brand new nugget (gold bar) second looie! By my birth certificate, I was twenty-six years old. Actually, I was just twenty! It's some sort of law somewhere that you have to be twenty-one to be a commissioned officer. But, there was this don't ask, don't tell policy, and I sure didn't want to upset the apple cart! So, I didn't tell.

Over the years after The Nam, I was stationed here and there, sometimes even with now-Senior Master Sergeant Charles "Charlie" McGrath until Saddam invaded Kuwait. I was just short of having twenty-one years in as an officer (twenty-seven, counting my enlisted time), freshly promoted to Lieu-

tenant Colonel, and at the ripe old age of forty-two, was thinking seriously about retiring when all this started.

The death of my best friend, Battalion Sergeant Major Charles “Charlie” M^CGrath, took the wind right out of my sails, so to speak. I had lost my will to be or do.

At the closest Legion Hall we held the funeral and it was one of the hardest things I have ever done, handing that folded American Flag to this six-year-old boy with the M.O.H. around his neck who was trying so hard not to cry, but who cried as I placed the flag in his shaking hands. I held him while he sobbed, patting his back gently and telling him that his father was a hero and never ever to let anyone tell him differently! And I meant, no one!

He nodded soberly. “I won’t, Colonel,” he promised through his tears.

Then I was holding his wife and four-year-old baby daughter while she cried and believe you me, I cried too. I had lost the best friend I had ever had and I felt the loss deeply.

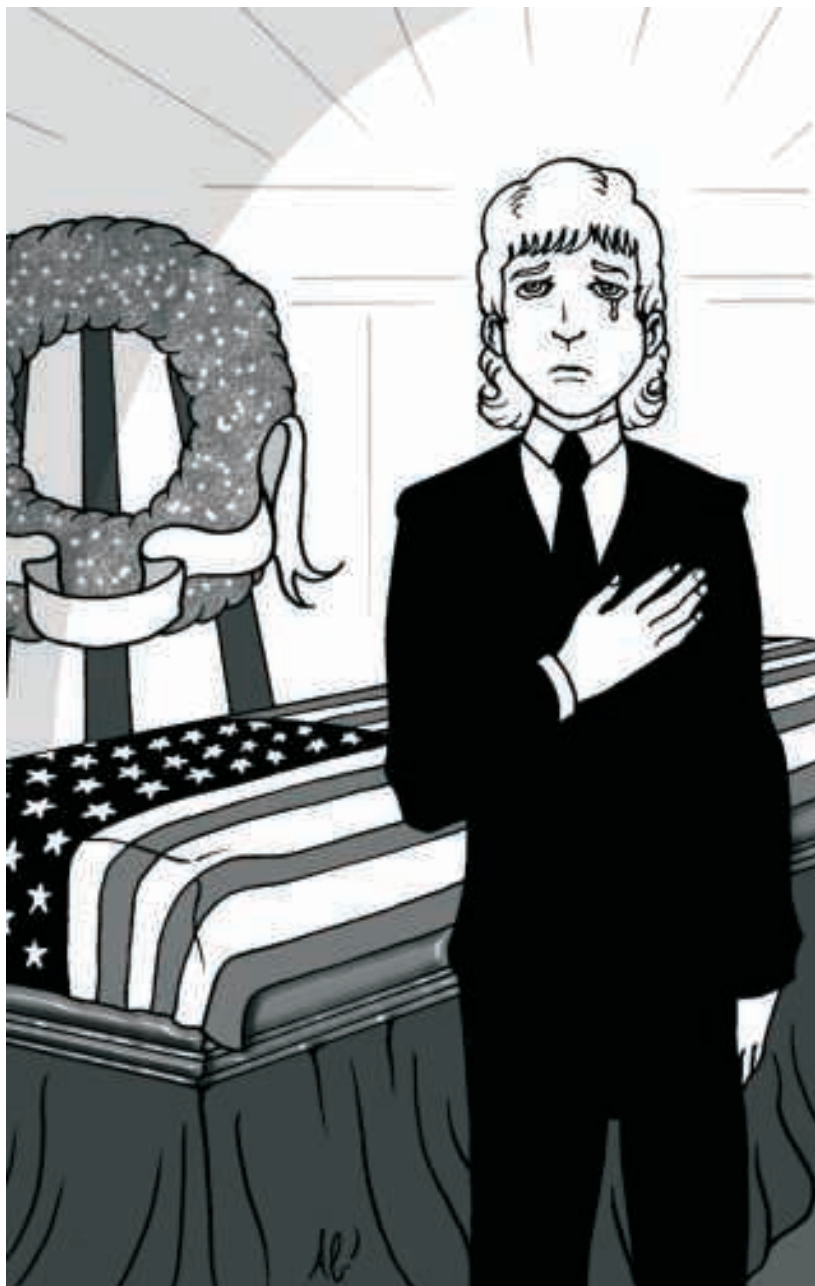
There, I met my SarMajor’s father and mother, Charles (“Chaz”) and Rhonda Suellen M^CGrath, and I had to tell them how their son had died saving others at the risk of losing his.

Yes, I cried while I told them.

I couldn’t help myself.

I briefly met his younger brother, Ronny, who disappeared shortly thereafter to return to Spokane and final exams. He seemed like a sort of wimp to me, limp-wristed, soft spoken, “soft” all around, kinda small at five-two or so, but direct with the longest blonde hair and prettiest blue eyes I had ever seen!

Now, I don’t think that I’m like *that* at all, but the truth of the matter was that I had always preferred the company and comradeship of men and to me it was a sad day when the Corps allowed women in!



Not that I had anything against women, per se, it just seemed to me that they were not combat material, something I soon learned was not always true! Some of those Lady Gyrenes were tougher than many men I had known in twenty plus years! And Lord help you if you called them Ladies!

I had known several cross-dressed persons in my years. I hadn't led a sheltered life, not by a long shot. But most of those I had known looked like men in a dress and that turned me off big time. No, I much preferred the softer, smaller, more believable ones, just never had had an opportunity to test my theory! Or, I didn't have the guts to try! Take your pick.

Anyway, the M^CGraths soon discovered that I had retired from the Corps and was not all that enthusiastic about returning to Maine, not that I had anything against Maine, I just had too many sad memories that I did not want resurrected!

So when Chaz asked me to stay around for a bit, I agreed readily and soon found myself living in my late SarMajor's old bedroom! I was reluctant as Hell about that, but his mother, Rhonda, assured me that the room was just going to waste otherwise, so I settled in, but only after telling them that I was duty-bound to contribute and that I would have to do some kind of work to pay them back.

"Good!" Chaz enthused. "You're good with your hands and you like to make things out of wood, so you can work in my furniture factory, by damn!"

And that was how I met Big George Washington Lincoln, the Bigga Boss of the furniture factory. Big George's grandfather had become partners with Rhonda's great grandfather and Big George just naturally worked for his grandfather, starting when he quit school at eight or nine years of age, some eighty or more years before, which made him in his late eighties or early nineties, but you would never have known it! Big George was as hale and hearty and strong as a man half his age and he ruled his little empire with an iron hand!

Big George was the grandson of slaves, six foot six, two hundred twenty pounds of muscle and sinew and brains! His son, Little George, his grandson, Baby George, and his great grandson, Tiny George, all worked at the factory, and he would just as likely chew them out for their mistakes as he would someone outside his immediate family! Big George always said, "If it ain't right, it ain't right!"

So, I went to work as a helper, which meant that if there was a dirty job to be done, it was my job to do it. Some come-down for a light colonel, eh? But you know, I didn't mind. I liked it. I didn't have to think about what I did, I just did it. I had no responsibilities except to please Big George.

Then, a younger man came to work and he became the helper. I was promoted to lathe man in the factory, putting blocks of wood on a lathe and turning out table legs, chair legs, dresser legs, you name it, I turned them out! It was boring, but I took satisfaction in seeing my efforts taking shape under the guidance of my own two hands.

Baby George stopped by one afternoon. "You know, R.C.," he commented, "the Bigga Boss must like you. I've seen guys like you pass through here like water in a sieve, but you just stand there like an old oak tree, keep yer cool and do your job. Da Bigga Boss likes that in a man."

I started with surprise. I had never noticed any such thing.

About then, Big George walked by. "If'n yuh hain't got enough work tuh do, Baby, I can damned sure fix you up!" he growled.

"Yas suh, Boss Man!" Baby yelped. "I'm gone!" And he was!

Big George turned to me, "Well, what you gawping at, white boy? Get to turning them laigs!"

"Yes, Sir!" I smiled and turned to my lathe.

“I got my eye on you, boy!” he warned, “so you better watch your candy ass close! Yuh hain’t too big tuh get uh n’ass whompin’!”

“Yes, Sir!” I turned, snapped off a smart salute, then turned back to my lathe.

And he stalked off in high dungeon!

I laughed to myself, convinced that I had had the last word!

Next morning, Big George stopped me at the door to the break room. “You’re working with Little George today.” And with not another word, he stalked off.

That day, I did work with Little George. For a man in his seventies, Little George set a fast pace and by our first break, we had unloaded two trailers and re-loaded one of them.

Big George met us at the break room. “Took you turkeys long enough to load that last trailer,” he commented sarcastically.

I was about to give him a sarcastic remark in return when Little George broke in. “We was slowed down by alla the nails in the floor and we had to pull alla them first so’s we woudn’t damage the packaged load,” he alibied.

Big George stared at him for one long moment.

“Honest, Boss, I ain’t jerking yuh off!” Little George insisted.

“Humph, excuses, excuses,” he snorted and muttering to himself, he stomped off.

“Well, I be damned!” I was shocked.

“Let me handle the Boss Man, R.C.,” Little George told me. “He’s got a hard on for something and the best way around it is to be quiet as a church mouse!”

I didn’t like it, but I saw the wisdom of his remarks.

Anyway, when we got back to the loading docks, Big George was right there watching us and we busted our humps getting those trucks in and out. We worked so hard that we missed the lunch whistle and worked right straight through the whole afternoon.

When the quitting whistle blew, we looked up in some surprise. We had not only worked straight through lunch, we had missed our afternoon break too!

In the locker room, we were changing out of our work clothes when Big George stopped in to gaze at us. "You turkeys trying to set some sort of record er sumthin?" he growled.

Little George looked at him in surprise. "No, Suh, us'un's jus' lost track uh time, dat's all."

"Humph, excuses," Big George grunted and turned to me. "I still got my eye on you, white boy!"

And off he went, muttering to himself.

"What the Hell did you do to piss off the old man?" Little George asked.

"Beats the living dog shit outta me!" I replied. "But, while he's chewing on me, he's leaving some other poor bastard alone!"

Little George stared at me, then laughed heartily. "R.C., for a honky white boy, you're all right!"

Little George and I worked on the docks for two weeks under the watchful eye of Big George and it made me sort of uneasy. He never said anything, but we were aware of his presence nonetheless.

Then one day Big George stopped me at the locker room door when I punched in. "You're working with Baby today," he announced, turned on his heel and stalked off without another word.

I hunted up Baby George, a hulking giant of a man in his early fifties and found that I was working with

dowels and bezels. "The Boss Man said you'd be here," was his only comment.

He began making bezels of several different sorts, then stepped back. "You do it."

So, I did. He watched me for several minutes, turned and walked off, leaving me alone. So, I did bezels all day, alone. I had no idea whether I was doing it right or not because no one was around to correct me if I wasn't! Quitting time, Big George was there. He looked at the pile of bezels I had done, nodded his head once. "Not bad for a white boy," was his only comment.

Next day, Baby was waiting for me. "Watch." And he went to work making pieces to fit the bezels I had made yesterday. He stepped back. "You do it."

Now there was one thing I had noticed about Big George and Baby George; they didn't waste too many words! Unlike Little George who loved to talk!

I made several parts while Baby watched. He grunted and walked off. Not knowing what I was supposed to do, I kept turning out parts all day. Again, right at quitting time, Big George was there to look over what I had done. "Humph, yuh shows promise," he grunted and stalked off.

I worked with Baby for two weeks, every day learning something new, with never a word nor a comment one way or the other from either man.

Finally, at the end of the second week, Baby turned to me. "Not bad. I seen worser. Monday see the Bigga Boss." And that was it. In two and a half weeks with the man, he had not spoken more than fifty words and yet, he got his message across clearly. I sensed that had I been unable to follow his lead, I would have been on the docks for the next year or two!

On Monday, I got out of Chaz's old army jeep and entered the locker room to punch in and found Big George waiting by the time clock. "Humph, shining up to the Boss Man, hunh?" he growled.

“No, Sir, I’m staying at his house and he offered me a ride in to work, that’s all.”

“I got my eye on you, white boy!” he snapped peevishly. “So you’d better toe the line!”

“Yes, Sir,” I replied. “Er, Baby said to see you this morning before I started work.”

“Yeah, you’re with Tiny in assembly.” He turned and stalked off.

Tiny grinned. “Boy! You musta really pissed him off, R.C. ! I ain’t never seen him bounce a man around like you!”

“Aw, he’s just pissed because I rode in the old man’s jeep.”

“No, it ain’t that,” Tiny disagreed. “He’s got something else chewing at his craw. I know how my great-grandpap thinks!”

“If you say so,” I agreed. “Now, we’d better hustle afore we get chewed for being late to work!”

“Yuh gots a pernt!” he grinned. Now, where had I heard that before?

And so I went to work in assembly putting furniture together, a lot like when our house burned down and I helped my dad build replacements. I fitted and glued and clamped and was whistling merrily when I became aware of Big George watching me. “Morning, Boss!” I greeted.

“Humph, damned kids!” he snorted and went in search of Tiny.

At noon, Tiny and I went down to Lois’ Luncheonette. Tiny ordered his to go, so I did too and we went back to the factory. It was a pleasant day in early June and the scent of the surrounding trees was intoxicating. Tiny and I dawdled along, eating from our bags and walked through the plant door just as the whistle blew. Of course, Big George was right there with his big old railroad watch and he was glaring at

us like we had killed his pet rattlesnake or something worse!

“Working hours be from eight to noon with a fifteen-minute break at ten. Then it’s back at one with a fifteen-minute break at three, then work till five. Work means you’re where you’re supposed to be, ready to go to work at one o’clock, not five after nor five to, one sharp! You turkeys got that?” he demanded.

“Yes, Sir,” Tiny squeaked. “It won’t happen again!”

“See that it don’t!” Big George growled and stalked off muttering to himself.

“Damn, what crawled up inside him and is eating at his craw?” I growled.

“Aw, he don’t mean nothing by it,” Tiny alibied affectionately, “it’s just his way of reminding us that he’s the Bigga Boss around here, that’s all.”

“He sure has a funny way of showing it!” I commented angrily.

“Hey, R.C., long’s you do your job and keep screw-ups to a minimum, he may grumble and groan and mutter and all that, but if he’s really mad at you, you’ll know it right off, believe you me!”

“Yeah, I heard him chewing out Jensen the other day when he broke the band saw slamming that oak log into it instead of pushing easy.”

“Like I said, when he gets a mad on, he shows it. He can’t help it!”

Business picked up and Big George started a second shift, putting Little George in charge and moving me to foreman of the day shift.

It was easy work for me, just like being Battalion Commander back in the day. I let my SarMajor, Baby George, drive the crew and I took credit for what he did.

Sometime in mid-June, I called Maxine's Diner for take-out, my favorite, hot pastrami on toasted rye bread with curly fries, extra crispy and a cup of hot chocolate with those little marshmallows on top. When I walked into the diner, I saw my order sitting in my usual place at the counter. I yelled out to Maxine, the lady behind the counter, "Hey! I thought I ordered it for take-out!"

Hearing no answer, I sat down, poured ketchup all over the fries, took a big bite out of half a pastrami on toasted rye, munched some fries and took a long swallow of hot chocolate. "Aah! Now that hit the spot!" I murmured as Maxine came out.

"Hey, Hot Shot! Whadd'ya think you're doing?" she demanded in surprise.

"Having my lunch, that's what," I grinned, "but I would have sworn I ordered it to take-out."

"You did, big boy!" she exclaimed holding up the take-out bag with my meal.

"Then, who ordered this one?" I stammered, embarrassed.

"Him, standing right behind you," she dimpled.

I turned and what I saw caused me to leap to my feet immediately, almost knocking the little guy right through the plate glass window behind us!

I saw a short, slender, long-haired blonde, blue-eyed male person (well, he was dressed sorta male-like) standing there and for a moment, I was rooted to the spot.

I mean a runaway Mack truck couldn't have budged me!

"Oh, I am so sorry!" I gasped, grabbing his arm to keep him from falling flat on his keister. "I didn't know...I thought...you like hot pastrami on toasted rye bread with curly fries, extra crispy and hot chocolate with little marshmallows floating on top and...and...like that?"

He smiled. "Guilty as charged. Hello, my name is Ronny McGrath, and you are..."

"Oh, I'm Royal Lawton, only all my friends call me R.C.," I blurted inanely.

He cocked his head to one side. "R.C., eh? I think I'll just call you Royal."

"You can call me anything you wish!" I stammered, blushing profusely.

"So now that you two have met, what do you want me to do with this?" Maxine asked, waving an arm in the air with a mischievous sparkle in her eyes.

Ronny took pity on me and grinned at Maxine. "Bring everything to the booth, Max, OK?"

"Sure, Ronny, anything for you!" she agreed, smiling with all her white teeth!

"Thanks, Max," he replied with a wide grin of his own. "You're a real doll!"

She grinned too. "Yep, a real life Barbie Doll!" she quipped. "You know, something you undress, play with, dress again and put away until the next time you want to play!"

He blushed at her implication and turned toward a near-by booth.

I followed him to the booth and slid into the seat opposite him while Maxine slid our meals before us. "Bon appétit," he smiled, taking a tiny bite.

I ate.

I was too tongue-tied to talk!

Where had this person been all my life?

He was exactly what I had been looking for, and here he was, my SarMajor's brother!

Oh, cruel fate!

I was devastated, to say the least.

Anyway, we sat there and talked and talked and talked, long past lunch hour and well into the late afternoon. I listened as he told me about law school and his ambition to become a voice for those who needed one; the homeless, children, women anyone who was in need of proper representation in a court of law. And the more he talked, the more mesmerized I became.

I was in love for the first time in my life.

With another man!

And he didn't even suspect!

It was well after two before I realized the time. "Oh, hey, I hate to break this up, but if I don't get back to the factory, Big George will chew me a new one!" Hastily I stood. "Maybe we can continue when we have more time?" I asked hopefully.

"Oh, I'll see to that. I'll be working in the head office until I go back to law school in late August for my final year. Just tell Big George that you were with the Boss's son and he'll grumble, but he won't fire nor harangue you!" He smiled and I noticed that he had the cutest little dimples!

I reached out to shake hands with him, but when he slipped his hand into mine, I got the jolt of my life! The electricity between us was startling!

Ronny laughed. "Think nothing of it, Royal," he murmured sweetly, "I often have that effect on people. Something about my body chemistry or something." He apologized.

"Wow! You sure make a helluva impression on a guy!"

Smiling as the tingle lingered, I paid Maxine for our food.

"You'll do just fine, R.C. Lawton," she smiled. "You take good care of our Ronny! Hear?"

Now what did she mean by that?

I nodded at her and hurried out of the diner and back to the factory where I was met at the front door by Big George at the time clock. He had his watch out. "Work starts at one, not three fifteen, white boy. That means you too, foreman or not!" he stated bluntly.

"Yes, Sir," I apologized, "but I met Ronny M^CGrath at Maxine's diner and we started to talk and I guess time just got away from me. I'm really sorry. It won't happen again."

"Ronny, hunh?" Big George mused. "That dang boy's gonna be the death of me yet!" And without another word, he turned and stalked off, still muttering to himself.

I watched him go and I wondered why he hadn't chewed me out. There was just no figuring that man, no how, no way, no matter what! Damn!

Anyway, since I was Day Foreman, I had frequent occasion to be in the front office where Ronny worked and I guess I made a pest of myself by hanging around so much. It Chaz or Rhonda ever noticed anything out of the ordinary, they never said, much to my undying gratitude.

That evening, at supper at the M^CGrath home, Chaz and I breezed into the kitchen where Rhonda was working. "Get washed up, you two. Ronny's bringing his girl friend, Emma Halsten, home for dinner."

"That bitch!" Chaz exploded. "Why don't she leave him alone?"

"Now, Chaz, it's his decision," Rhonda soothed. "We have to abide by his choices."

"I don't have to like it!" he grouched. "There are plenty of nice girls he could choose from! Instead he picks that loser!"

“Now you be nice to her, Mister Charles Myron McGrath, you hear me?”

“Yeah, yeah, I hear!” He went up behind her and gave her a smart smack on her ample behind. She turned, waving her huge wooden spoon in his face. “But I don’t haf’tuh like it!” he added with a leer.

“You behave yourself!” she ordered, blushing.

“Now, Roni,” he whimpered, “don’t get me all excited! Remember my bad ticker! The dang doctor warned me about getting over-excited!”

“I’ll over-excite you, you uncouth lump!”

“Hey, I’m just as couth as the next fellow, more than that bitch could ever be, allus bragging how she’ll change things when she’s in charge! Like Hell! I’ll see her in Hell with her back broke before that’ll happen! She don’t want to get in no pissing contest with me! Goddamned leech, that’s what she is! Just like alla the rest of them Halstens!” he raged.

“Charles McGrath!” she warned. “She’s trying to better herself. She’s the only one in her family who ever graduated high school and gone on to college. That says something for her character.”

“Yeah, that she’s a damned good actor!” Chaz grouched. “She oughta be on the stage and the next one leaves at six-thirty!” he growled menacingly.

He gave her a quick kiss, squeezed her unsuspecting breast and darted away before she could strike him with her spoon!

“Darn you! Stop that monkey business right now!”

Chaz grabbed his chest. “Oh, oh!” he moaned. “I’m getting overexcited!”

“Get out of here, you...you...evil man!” she threatened.

“See how they treat you? You work and slave and give them everything they want and this is the thanks a feller gets!” he lamented to me.

"I'll thanks you!" She waved the spoon in the air as she made a dash for him.

Laughing, he fled through the door, closing it in her face.

I had to laugh.

"You want some of this spoon, Mr. Smart Ass Lieutenant Colonel R.C. Lawton?" she threatened.

"No, Sir, Ma'am, Sir! I was just leaving." And I beat a hasty retreat too.

Behind me, I heard, "I didn't think so!"

In the washroom, Chaz explained to me about Ronny's girl friend. "She's trash!" he declared, "Comes from that bunch of ne'er-do-wells up in Hogg's Hole, the Halstens! Not a one of them has ever worked one day in their miserable lives and yet they allus have money to blow on snowmobiles, four-wheelers, jalopies, motorcycles, rifles and shot-guns and such! Buncha thieves, crooks, and con men!" he blustered angrily. "Oughta be run out of town on a rail after we tar and feather the whole lot of them!"

It seemed that for years there had been rampant petty thievery in the tri-state area, some break-ins, even some assaults. They were suspected, but nothing had ever been pinned on them directly.

Ms Halsten was twenty-three years old, a sophomore at the same University where Ronny was going to law school, and, according to Chaz, had latched onto him like a leech!

Chaz had discouraged the relationship but Ronny had a mind of his own, frail as he seemed!

Like Rhonda said, "When he gets his back up, he is as stubborn as a blue-nosed mule, just like his dad and older brother are...or, were," she finished, wiping a quick tear from her cheek.

Dinner was a strained affair. Chaz wanted to speak his mind, but Rhonda kept kicking his ankle to discourage him.

Even Ronny could sense the tension and he did try to curtail Emma's ill-chosen remarks, but to no avail. She blabbered on with her offensive remarks until finally, Chaz had had enough! He got up, threw his napkin to the table and stalked angrily into the living room to start a fire in the fireplace.

Ms Halsten just snorted and went on with her inane remarks.

Finally, dinner was over and Rhonda invited Ronny and his date to sit in the living room and have after-dinner coffee and talk.

"Cain't do hit, Mrs. M," she objected with her nasal twang. "Us'n's're on air way upta Hoggs Hole fer a big party fer air boy cheer!" And she waved her hand in the air, indicating Ronny.

"Now see here," Chaz began, but a quick kick to his ankle by Rhonda and his objection died with a soft whimper.

"Well, have fun!" Rhonda replied brightly but I could see that she was greatly disappointed. She and Chaz had been looking forward to an evening with their only remaining son, and here this...this...*woman person* was destroying their hopes without any consideration for them at all.

And I resented her too.

I had looked forward to an evening with Ronny and his parents, and to say I was disappointed would be to understate the obvious by several clicks!

I could see that Ronny was embarrassed and humiliated by Emma's crass attitude, but he said nothing, just apologized to his parents and left with her.

"Damn that woman!" Chaz blurted after they had closed the door behind them. "Hells bells, she knew

damned good and well we wanted Ronny here to-night, and she goes and pulls that crap!" he grouched.

"We must accept Ronny's choices, dear," Rhonda tried to placate Chaz. "We must accept his decisions, whether we like them or not. He's a grown man and well able to think for himself. After all, we brought our boys up to think for themselves," she reminded him.

"All he sees are pointy tits and a round swinging ass!" Chaz blurted without thinking. Immediately, he blushed and turned to Rhonda. "I'm sorry, Honey," he apologized.

She patted his hand. "Yes, dear, I know. I can see too."

I felt like an interloper and stood to leave.

"Hey," Chaz objected. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I thought I'd take a walk and sort of clear my head," I equivocated.

"Like Hell!" he exploded. "You stay right here and keep us company!"

"But, but," I stammered.

"You're more of a son to us than a guest anyway, so sit right there and keep us company like a good boy!" he ordered sharply.

"Yes Sir," I capitulated reluctantly.

"Don't 'Sir' me, you young whippersnapper!" he growled. "I was a sergeant major and an enlisted man! I had to work for my pay!"

I grinned. "And I didn't?"

"You damned officers had it easy!" he teased with a sly grin.

"You try working in a sandbox twenty-four-seven!" I snapped, half in anger.

“How about a jungle in southeast Asia?” he countered.

“S’not the same!” I shot back.

“Now, boys,” Rhonda broke in, laughing, “let’s not play Can You Top This? tonight.”

“Sorry, Mrs. McGrath,” I apologized.

“Me too, babe,” Chaz added.

Rhonda glared at me. “And if you call me Mrs. again, you great oaf, I’ll take a willow withe to you! It’s Rhonda or Roni or Mom and don’t you forget it!”

I grinned. “Yes, Ma’am.”

Chaz laughed. “She’ll do it too!” Chaz pointed out. “She’s got your number, R.C.!”

“You shut up too!” she glared at him. “I’ve had about enough of big boastful men bragging and bullshitting for one night!”

I stared at her. I had never seen her this upset and immediately regretted getting her going.

“I’m sorry, Roni,” I apologized gently.

“You’re right, babe,” Chaz agreed. “Me too.”

And for the rest of the night, until bedtime, we spoke quietly, if at all.

Chaz and I were eating breakfast just after six the next morning when Ronny came dragging into the house. He sat in a kitchen chair and sipped at his coffee.

“Kinda late getting back, aren’t you, son?” Chaz asked.

“Sorry, Dad,” he answered tiredly.

“Your mother was worried sick about you. She kept imagining all sorts of nasty things happening to

you and she was pacing the floor most of the night,” he scolded. “Kept me awake too!” he added.

“Sorry, Dad. Emma had a bit too much to drink and there’re no phones up at the old Case Hotel and I couldn’t just leave her there.”

“The Case Hotel?” Chaz was astounded. “Why that place has been abandoned for thirty years or more. I woulda thought it’d fallen down long since.”

“No, Emma’s grandfather got the place for back taxes and they’ve fixed up some of it so that some of them could live there,” Ronny explained.

“Live there? Hell, boy, it’s fifty miles from nowhere and the road is nothing but two ruts through the forest and most of that’s disappeared, what with the wind and rain and snow and ice and all.”

“Well, someone dredged a gravel road up there and built bridges across the streams and it’s much more accessible than even when it was going full blast.”

“I wish you’d stay away from places like that!” Chaz huffed.

“It’s OK, dad,” Ronny replied. “I do love her, you know.”

“You’re loving the wrong person!” Chaz retorted.

“Let’s not argue, Dad,” Ronny raised his hand to stop Chaz’s tirade.

“Why can’t you find someone decent?” Chaz stormed.

“Give her a chance, Dad,” Ronny begged.

Chaz rose, grabbed his John Deere cap and turned to me. “You coming, R.C.?”

“You bet, Boss,” I agreed.

“Let’s get outta here afore I say something I’ll regret later on!”

And he stomped out the door, slamming it loudly behind him.

I looked at Ronny. "Sorry about that. He's been kinda touchy lately," and I hurried out to catch up before I'd have to walk the five miles to work.

* * *

IV

Things sort of settled down after that. Ronny worked in the office with Rhonda and Chaz and I guessed they had buried the hatchet or something, because nothing more was said about Ms Halsten.

That Ronny continued to see her was obvious, like it or not. As Rhonda reminded Chaz several times, "It's Ronny's choice and we have to abide by it!"

"Don't mean I gots to like it!" Chaz grumbled.

Me? I steered clear of anything even remotely connected with the McGraths' problem with their son and his chosen. I didn't like it one single bit, but knew I had no say in the matter.

Eventually we settled into a routine where at least everyone was speaking pleasantly enough to one another, but the elephant that was Ms Halsten was always lurking in a corner of the room.

She even made an appearance or two and got everyone upset with her snide, biting remarks about how she'd get rid of all the old dead wood (meaning the Lincoln family, Chaz, Rhonda and me). She never said anything where Chaz could hear her, but she had no qualms about saying what was on her mind where Big George or I could hear. I burned under her remarks about us being dead wood. If it weren't for Big George's efforts, the place would have struggled along for years.

I kept my thoughts to myself, knowing I had to make a decision one way or another...soon. I knew that I could not go on working with the one I loved

with all my heart with never him knowing nor with any chance of success! I was between a rock and a hard place.

One day in the middle of June, right out of the blue, Chaz told Ronny, “Hey son, why don’t you take old R.C. here out to our favorite spot by the lake? Get some fresh air, the both of you. We’ve all been working kinda hard of late, and you deserve a break.”

“Sure, Dad,” Ronny agreed in that musical trill of his, grabbed my hand and trilled, “Well, what’re you waiting for, Big Boy, an engraved invitation?” and he pulled me towards the door.

“I’d follow you to Hell and back!” I exclaimed, misquoting a favorite Marine saying.

He blushed slightly, but not as deeply as I did when I realized what I had said!

Outside the office, he dropped my hand, much to my regret, and started off down one of the paths behind the factory. It ended by the side of a small lake about a mile away, and he led me to a short spit of sandy beach that jutted out into the water. He stopped and looked around.

“Well, this is it. What do you think?” he asked.

I gazed across the lake towards the towering, snow capped mountains reflected in the mirrored surface and whispered, “It’s the most beautiful place I’ve ever seen!”

“This is where Dad proposed to Mom just before he went off to Korea, and it’s also where they repeated their wedding vows when he came home. It has a very special meaning for our family.”

“I can see why,” I murmured. “It’s as beautiful as anything I’ve seen the world over.”

“And that’s only the top of it!” he giggled. “In summer, it’s good for swimming and it’s great for fishing year round! Me’n Tiny used to come here when we were kids. We were Boy Scouts, just like Charlie was,

only he got to be an Eagle while Tiny and me only got to be Life Scouts. Still, it was a lot of fun camping out here, fishing and then frying up what fish we caught for our dinner.”

He paused in recollection, then shrugged. “Back then, Tiny had a club foot and I was a complete nerd. We became best friends and did everything together. Big George whaled our butts on more than one occasion for getting into mischief. When Tiny was about twelve, he stumbled on a trail and broke his club foot. Dad insisted on taking Tiny to a specialist. Big George objected because of the cost, but Dad wouldn’t listen. Dad can be as stubborn as a blue-nosed mule at times!” he laughed.

“It runs in the family,” I commented lightly.

“Anyway, the specialist fixed Tiny’s foot and now he walks as good as anyone else. He was good enough to get into the Marines and fight in Viet Nam,” he finished proudly. “But now, I haven’t been here in two or three years, nor, to my knowledge, has he.”

“Why? It’s so restful.”

“I don’t know, I guess we just grew away from it.”

“That’s sad.”

“It sure is,” he agreed, turned, stepped on a small pebble, stumbled and fell against me! We fell to the ground, me on the bottom and him right on top of me!

“Ooof!” my breath left me in a rush.

“Oh, Royal! I am so sorry! Are you hurt?” he asked breathlessly.

“My dignity’s broke in four or five places, but I think I’ll survive,” I quipped brightly.

“You nut!” he scolded softly.

“That’s what all the squirrels out in the woods say,” I replied with a grin.

“Oh, my,” he caught his breath audibly, those soft, plump lips mere centimeters from mine, his sweet breath intoxicating. Slowly, hesitantly, he lowered his head and those tempting lips met mine, gently at first, then with increasing pressure as we lost ourselves in the wonder of our first kiss!

His arms slid around my neck and he held me tightly! I could feel the softness of his body writhing against mine as my one hand went around his waist to hold him tight while my other caressed the firm roundures hidden in his ski pants. The kiss seemed to go on forever and ever and I was wishing that we would never have to part!

Silly me!

He stiffened in my arms, raised his head and looked at me with consternation written all over his flaming face. “Oh, no! No! I’m not...I can’t...oh, Royal, what you must think of me!” he stammered.

“If you’re going to apologize for kissing me, Ronny McGrath, you can forget about it! I am not one bit sorry I kissed you! It takes two to make a kiss and I will treasure it for the rest of my life!”

“No, we can’t...I’m engaged...and...and...all...” he stammered. Hurriedly, he disentangled himself from my arms, stood and rushed off through the woods.

I lay there, still stunned with the ferocity of our kiss, knowing I would never, could never, forget it!

After a few minutes, I got up and went back to the office. When I walked in, Ronny was not there.

“Where’s Ronny?” I asked.

“Oh, he said he wasn’t feeling well, so he went on home to rest,” Rhonda explained, a worried look on her face. “I hope he’s not coming down with anything.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” I replied, “He was fine in the forest. That’s a very pretty spot!”



“Yes, it’s Chaz and my favorite spot,” she replied with a wide smile.

“So Ronny said.”

Chaz came into the office. “Hey, R.C., I want you and Tiny to go into Spokane and pick up a special load of ironware. It’s there but they can’t deliver before next Monday and we need those pieces yesterday!”

“Sure Boss, glad to do it.”

I went out to find Tiny, locating him seated behind the wheel of the semi, waiting for me. “Took you long enough to find me,” he twisted my tail.

“Woulda found you earlier ‘cept you was hiding in the truck!” I bantered.

“Come on, Hot Shot!” he grinned. “Time’s uh wasting!”

We went southwest to Coeur d’Alene, then west to Spokane, got the material and arrived back at the factory just before midnight. Big George was there, waiting for us with a crew and they unloaded the trailer in quick time. Big George’s only comment, “You two turkeys made fairly decent time.”

I was amazed!

He had passed up a perfectly good opportunity to berate us and he had let it slide by!

There just was no figuring that man!

* * *

V

It was a hot afternoon in early July, right before the July Fourth celebration, when Little George had a heart attack and collapsed on the loading dock, right into the arms of his father, Big George!

Big George never said a word, just picked his boy up from the dock, carried his dead son out to his old Studebaker pick-up, put the body in the passenger's seat and drove away to the funeral home.

Big George did not come to work the rest of that day nor the next, he just sat in the funeral parlor greeting Little George's relatives and friends. He shed not one tear the whole time that anyone ever saw.

The second day after his death, we buried Little George in the Lincoln gravesite. Chaz shut the factory down right after the death and every man got paid his regular salary the whole time they were off.

The day after the funeral, we were all surprised to see Big George show up at his regular time and watch to see that every man went to his proper work place. The only change he made was to promote Baby to Little George's spot and we all went to work.

Just before first break, Ronny came out of the office and stopped before Big George. He put his hands on the old man's shoulders affectionately. "I am so sorry, Mr. Lincoln," he whispered, tears rolling down his cheeks. "I know you figured you'd be the first to go and that Little George would take over from you, but sometimes God has a different slant on things. Whatever it is or was, Little George will be well taken care of until it comes time for the rest of us to join him. My heart aches for your whole family!"

Then, to the amazement of every man watching, he stood on tiptoe, hugged him tightly and kissed Big George right on the lips! "I am so very sorry, Mr. Lincoln!"

Big George just looked at Ronny. "You allus was a damned good boy, Ronny," he praised as he caressed the tear-streaked cheek affectionately. Then he just turned away abruptly and walked away.

There was absolute silence on the dock for several moments. We each wanted to say something, but not one of us knew what to say!

Finally, Ronny looked up and saw the men watching him. “Aw ri’, what’cha gawping at? Get to work or I’ll fire the lotta yez!” he growled, and by damn, he sounded just like Big George!

“Yessir, Boss,” came from several men who jumped to obey.

Ronny glared at the rest of us. “Well?” he growled.

“We’re going, Boss!” and the rest of them disappeared, leaving me and Tiny standing there.

“Well?” Ronny retorted testily.

“We work here, Boss,” Tiny explained.

“Get to work then!” and he stalked off. For one minute, it was as if Big George were there!

“Damn!” Tiny muttered. “I ain’t never seen the Li’l Boss so upset!”

“That Ronny McGrath’s all right in my book,” I whispered, my feelings obvious.

“You’re damned straight he is!” Tiny agreed.

We fell to work with a will, but we did not see Big George nor Ronny again that day.

That night, Tiny and I were in the locker room and since it had been a hot, dusty day, we were stripping to take showers.

“Damn!” Tiny exclaimed. “I knew you and Charlie was burned some, but never knew it was like that!” he whispered reverently, his eyes glued to the scar tissue on my back and arms.

“These ain’t bad,” I replied, “you shoulda seen some of those other kids in the burn unit!! God, it were awful! I couldn’t wait to get outta there.”

“Yeah, I can imagine,” Tiny agreed. He looked at me strange like. “Hey R.C., did you ever find out about that Rhonda Suellen girl?”

“Nope, never did. At first I thought it was Mrs. McGrath, but she denied it with a laugh, so it couldn’t have been her. Why? You know who she is?”

He grinned. “Sure I do! I’m surprised you haven’t figured it out by now.”

“So, tell me already,” I ordered.

“Nope! I value my life too much to spill the beans! You’ll find out when she wants you to find out and not one second before!

“Hey,” Chaz breezed in, greeting us with, “you guys looking for a ride home? My jeep’s ready and waiting if you are!”

“No, thanks, Boss,” Tiny demurred. “I got enough of them things when I was in The Nam! I’ll just stick with my old crate.”

Yeah, some *old* crate he had, a brand new Dodge Ram Crew Cab six-by-six, four-wheel drive with huge balloon tires and every other accessory offered by the Chrysler Corp on it, plus some that weren’t offered by Chrysler, but that Tiny thought were necessary anyway! It was fire engine red and if there were a trail Tiny had not been able to navigate, he hadn’t found it yet! Still, Tiny kept it polished and waxed and washed and cleaned out. No empty beer cans nor cigarette butts nor waste paper in his baby!

One day while in town, someone put a scratch in one fender and he about had conniption fits! He cursed and cussed and drove straight over to Coeur d’Alene to the Dodge dealer to have it fixed!

Tiny loved his truck almost as much as he loved Maudie, his wife of thirty-plus years.

After that, things settled into a sort of a rut, but we all walked softly around Big George, dreading causing him anguish which would result in merry Hell for the man who provoked him!

It was bad enough walking on eggshells around Ronny!

But July crept along and became August and September loomed on the horizon. Labor Day was a company holiday and we all gathered on the village green to have our company picnic. Big George was in rare form that day, dancing with all the ladies, and I noticed that not one woman refused him!

We were watching the horseshoe pitching contest (Tiny was winning hands down!), sipping our beer when Big George turned to me. "I been watching you real close, boy," he began.

I grinned at him. "Yeah, hard tuh miss it, Boss Man."

"Don't get smart with me, boy!" he snapped. "I can still take you young whippersnappers without half trying, and don't you never forget it!"

And you know, I firmly believed that he could back up his words easily!

"Don't get smart with me, boy," he repeated. "Chaz and I been watching you real close. We have it in mind for you to run the whole shebang when him and me step down and..."

"Hey, whoa up there, George!" I held my hand up. "I don't want that job no how no way never and not ever and I refuse..."

"Shut up, you young snot!" he growled. "We been watching you all year and you got it in you to be a good Boss. Not so gooder's me nor Chaz, but pretty damned good anyhow."

I was amazed. Praise, from Big George? Suddenly, I was humbled.

"I'm not good enough, George," I began.

"Nope, not yet, yer not, but yer a learning mighty quick, for a white boy, I mean!"

We sat there in the shade, two men talking peacefully.

George began, “The day Chaz brung you into the place, he had already decided to have you run the whole thing when we couldn’t. I was not as set on it as he was, but then we talked and I learned more about you and your friendship with Charlie and I began to test you. I figured that if you could put up with all the shit I could lay on you and not be pissy or sulky about it, why then you might just make a decent company general manager in time.

“My great grandpap partnered up with Ronny’s great great-grandfather, Hiram Custis, right after the war (he meant the Civil War) and they went through some hard times together. But they stuck it out and by the time I was born just before the turn of the century, they had a damned good lumber business going.

“Things kinda slacked off after the first World War, but somehow they stuck it out and by the time the depression started to ease up, they were once more in the black. I came to work here when I was but six year old as a sweeper back in about 1905 or so and it was my job to keep the piles of sawdust from getting so high they’d clog the blades. After a while, Grandpap put me on the docks part time. I still had to go to school every damn morning. I hated school since it meant I couldn’t work full-time. I quit when I was twelve and my grandpap never forgave me for that. To him, education was the foundation of success.

“I was a big strapping fellow, ‘most as big’s I am now, and strong. I could lift logs other men could only think about! When Grandpap died, my daddy become boss lumberman. By then alla the Custises was dead and Rhonda had married Chaz and he took over.

“My pap died right after the last big war (World War II) and Chaz made me plant super. That was in 1949. I was most forty-nine year old er so.

“Anyway, Chaz and me, we built the lumber business and when the fedr’l gov’mint started building them housing projects for returning veterans, we started building furniture, and we did damned good

at it too! Along about 1950 or so, Chaz and me signed papers to recognize me as half-partner in the business, but nobody knows, except his wife and son. Nunna my family knows.

“They’ll know soon enough,” he finished.

“Look, you old goat,” I blustered, “if’n you think I’m gonna wait around to run this outfit and put up with your bellyaching until you die, Mister, you got another think coming!”

George smiled at me. “Yep, you’ll be a humdinger of a plant manager, white boy!” he gloated. “If’n yuh c’n keep yer nose clean!”

He drank the rest of his beer and stood up. “Think I’ll go home and take a little nap. I’m feeling a little poorly,” he announced and belched loudly.

Immediately, his grand-daughter, Martha (Tiny’s youngest daughter), who kept house for him, came up to us. “Y’all right, Grandpap?” she asked worriedly. “You been sitting out here in the sun a way too long!” she scolded sternly. “You want me to come along to help you?”

“Nah, I’m all right, Matty. Why wouldn’t I be? Damn women, allus fussing after a man something fierce ‘bout sumthin’ er uh nother!” he complained, winking at me.

So, he said good-bye to everyone, “See y’all in the morning!”

He climbed laboriously into his ancient pick-up and drove away.

It was the last words anyone ever heard him speak.

Martha said later that she looked in on him when she got home and he was snoring peacefully, so she didn’t disturb him.

Imagine our great surprise when Tiny came to work with tears running down his cheeks that next

day. Big George had died peacefully in his sleep. He was two days shy of his one hundredth birthday!

Chaz immediately shut the whole operation down and ordered every employee to attend Big George's funeral, or look for another job!

We buried Big George Washington Lincoln the Third on his one-hundredth birthday right beside his son, Little George Washington Lincoln in the Lincoln family plot. Gruff as that old man had been, he was loved as few men ever are. The tears shed at his service were testament to that.

Ronny McGrath gave his eulogy at the Church. He wasn't two paragraphs into his speech when he started crying, fat tears rolling unchecked down his cheeks as he told how he felt about George.

They say that men aren't supposed to cry.

B.S.!

Not a man in that Church had dry eyes before everyone had had their say. Not one disparaging word was uttered that day. Even those who had not particularly liked George kept their mouths shut. There would have been a lynching if they hadn't!

The first day after we went back to work, Chaz called me into his office and told me that I was now General Manager of the lumbering and the furniture business! I was overwhelmed! All those times in the Sandbox when my SarMajor and I had joked about this, I was now doing it for real!

Ronny came up to me in the office. "I loved that man," he began as his eyes teared up. "He was my inspiration, you know. He was a self-taught man, but there was very little that he did not know about! We had many a serious discussion about things in general while I was growing up.

"He never forgot where he had come from, but he did not wallow in that life. Instead, he lived life as a man should, facing up to his responsibilities and

overcoming difficulties that other men would have never even tried!

“The Lincolns have not had an easy time of it. There were many who thought that my great grandfather should have fired Big George and given his job to a white man. But great grandfather Custus told them all where to go! The first George Washington Lincoln was his partner, and like he used to say, ‘A man does not screw over his partner!’

“A *Real* man, he meant,” Ronny added needlessly.

He wiped a tear from his eye. “I’ll never forget my dearest friend, Mr. George Washington Lincoln the Third!”

And he turned to walk away.

I knew exactly how he felt.

I too had grown to love that gruff old man as much as I had my own father.

* * *

VI

Big George’s family took the news of their half-ownership of the company calmly. They agreed that since they all had a vested interest-share of the success or failure of the business, they had better see to its success rather than otherwise. They agreed to share the profits or losses equally and they all signed agreements to that effect.

I was not surprised when I learned that George Washington Lincoln had left his old railroad watch to Tiny, but it came as a bolt out of the blue when he willed his old Studebaker pick-up to me so, as he claimed in his testament, “The boy has a ride to work ‘thout bothering the Boss Man (Chaz),” he stated blandly. I thanked the whole Lincoln family publicly for letting me have that old truck as I knew some of them had coveted it too.

“Nope, Grandpap said you wuz tuh have it. He even said so in his will. I never knew he had one uh them! But, what Grandpap wanted, Grandpap gets. So you get the truck. End of argument!” And Tiny stalked off, his back stiff and straight, just like Big George!

Damn! Big George had rubbed off on him big time! Would I never escape the man’s influence?

Truth was, I don’t think I really wanted to.

What I wanted was to have Big George back running things!

But if wishes were fishes, we’d all have some to fry, as my own grandfather used to say.

It was no surprise that Big George willed his old railroad watch to Tiny; like his grandfather before him, he would take it out and look at it, then look at whoever had roused his ire. More than one man was shaken to realize that Big George had just taken a new body!

Now there hasn’t been a Studebaker dealer in the States since Studebaker went out of business in 1954 when they merged with Packard and the last Studebaker was built in 1966, ending almost one hundred and twenty years of manufacture. I tell you, I looked and sent e-mails until I was blue in the face (so to speak) until I found this restorer in Las Vegas and I paid him over twenty-five thousand dollars to restore that pick-up to better than showroom condition! I carried it there on a company truck, covered with a linen duster. When I got word it was ready (it took two years to find all original parts and make some of the parts that were no longer available anywhere!), I took the same company truck to Las Vegas to pick her up and there she was.

She was a beauty! No wonder Big George had loved her! She had original fire engine red paint and everything was polished and chromed and shiny and I about cried, I was so happy.

Since then, I have kept my baby under that linen wrap, safely resting in a heated garage when not in use and I only take her out for holidays and parades or other special occasions.

One such special occasion was after Tiny had a heart attack on the same spot on the dock where his own father had died. It just seemed fitting to carry Tiny's casket to the cemetery in his grandfather's beloved Studebaker! But, that was a coupla years later, after the big "fuss," I mean.

On Halloween, I got the surprise of my life.

When I went back to the office after talking with the newest Big George, number five, I saw this gorgeous blonde in a swirly white dress seated at Ronny's desk.

"Oh, my God, Marilyn!" I gasped. "I thought you were...were..." I stammered.

This apparition turned and smiled sweetly, "And just what did you think, Mister Royal Lawton?" she asked, her cheeks dimpling attractively, the pleated skirt swirling excitingly around nylon-encased calves perched atop four-inch high heeled white sandals! Her slim waist just ached for a man's fingers to encircle it with his love!

Of course it was Ronny McGrath!

He was wearing a replica of the dress worn by the screen star Marilyn Monroe in the movie, *The Seven Year Itch*, complete with shimmery nylons, white sandals, painted nails, lipstick, the whole nine yards, and he was beautiful! He looked more like Marilyn Monroe than the real Marilyn Monroe!

"Like me, Royal?" he trilled, standing and twirling the pleated skirt around his gorgeous legs. "It's Halloween, my favorite time of the year! I'm going trick-or-treating with Emma, wanna come with us?"

"Marilyn!" I gasped in shock. "I'd follow you anywhere!"

“Ain’t she a pip?” Chaz teased, turning around. “I saw the real woman once, but this is better’n I ever saw!” he praised.

“I do this every year, Royal,” *she* explained, “Mostly because I can!”

“Wow!” I was tongue-tied.

If I hadn’t fallen in love with this boy when we met at the diner and later when he fell on top of me and we kissed, I was now! The twin straps of the top held definite breasts, small, but definite!

“Emma and I are going to the Halloween dance in town tonight and I’m excited. I’ve never been on a date with her dressed like this! I’m not sure if I should,” he added worriedly. “People might think the worse of us...” he added uncertainly.

“If she won’t take you, it’s for damned sure that I will!” I blurted without thinking.

“Thank you, Royal.” Did I detect a slight chill in his words? “You’re such a sweet man.”

“Well, the offer stands regardless,” I repeated inanely.

All day I had to sit or stand by while the girl of my dreams went about her business. Yes, I was jealous of Ms Emma Halsten! She was as much a threat to my happiness as any male swain could ever be. And I hated her with a blue passion!

Isn’t it funny how love can cause a man to hate someone?

I couldn’t stand around and not take her into my arms and see if that first kiss could be rekindled into a fresh start, so I went out into the factory and bugged Tiny until he turned on me. “Look, R.C., I don’t know what’s crawled up yer ass ‘n got you riled, but I ain’t the one. Now, I gots work to do, and if you want production, get outta my shop! Go chew a lemon or a persimmon or something sour and leave us peons alone to do our work!”

I just stared at him, shocked that he would speak to me that way.

“Tiny...” I began.

“Look, R.C., fire me if you want, but go do something. Get drunk, smash windows, wreck a car, but do something or that anger you got will destroy you!”

He was right. God, was he right! I left the plant area, saddled up one of the company geldings and rode out. I took my tent, two blankets, some food and just rode off into the sunset. Only it was still well before noon! I just rode away without a word to anyone. I think they all knew...

I stayed away for three days, just camping in those mountains, alone, yet with thoughts of Ronny just an instant away from my conscious mind.

So, I cried.

Oh, how I cried!

The tears rolled down my cheeks in rivulets to drip off my chin, and I didn't care.

All I could think of was my Ronny dancing with that fucking Ms Emma Halsten and it was eating my heart out with envy.

Me, a tough, battle-hardened Green Gyrene Lifer, jealous of a woman!

In my past life, I would never have dreamed such a thing were possible, much less real enough to harbor thoughts of murder.

Yes, I considered that possibility.

At great length!

‘Hell,’ I thought, ‘Who’d miss her?’ I’d make Ronny forget her for I knew instinctively that Chaz and Rhonda would be happy with her out of their son’s life.

But how would they take me in her place?

How *could* they take me in her place?

No matter how I figured it, I was up that well-known tributary without means of viable locomotion!

I would have to leave the scene.

Go away.

Go far away.

There was no other solution.

I couldn't stay here and watch someone else enjoy the love I had searched for all my life.

I had read in "*Soldier of Fortune*" magazine that mercenaries were being recruited to fight in Africa and even the middle East.

Yes, that was what I would do.

I could do that.

I had already done that!

On the third day, I rode out of the mountains and went back to the McGrath home.

"I had to think," was my only explanation.

And we settled down in what could only be described as an armed camp waiting for the battle to begin. That that would come, I had no doubt.

None whatsoever!

It started Thanksgiving day right after dinner. Ronny brought Emma to dinner and she constantly ran down everything with utter disregard for the impact her words had on Chaz and Rhonda. She ran on and on about how she hated Rhonda's décor and how when she married Ronny, things would change!

Finally, even Rhonda had had enough and when Emma commented on the antique dishes we were eating from, Rhonda hissed through tight, angry lips,

“My great great grandmother Custis carried those dishes from New Hampshire to Missoula in 1863 without breaking one single cup or saucer! And if you think I’m going to just throw them away because some modern day hussy doesn’t like them, you’ve got another think coming, Missy!” she stormed angrily.

I think Ms Halsten realized she had crossed a line because she kept her mouth shut after that.

Mostly.

She never did have any thought for others.

She was totally focused on Ms Emma Halsten and what she wanted.

Then, Ronny laid the bombshell on us.

“Emma and I are getting married on Christmas Day,” he announced proudly.

I saw the looks of dismay on Rhonda and Chaz’s faces and I felt like I had been kicked squarely in the balls! I was suddenly sick to my stomach and wanted to throw up.

But, “That’s good news, Ronny,” I managed after choking on the words. “I wish you all the best and all the happiness in the world!”

“Thank you, Royal,” he beamed.

“Yep, I got right down on my knee and popped the question!” Ms Halsten bragged. “And he said yes! By gum, he’ll make a Helluva wife...er, I mean, husband!” she corrected quickly.

‘Wife is right!’ I thought maliciously. ‘For me!’

“Excuse me,” I murmured and left hurriedly. I did have to throw up then!

I don’t know what reaction Rhonda and Chaz showed their son, but I knew it would not be sincere no matter how they might act or sound.

Outside, I thought about what she had said.

She had proposed to him.

It wasn't his idea!

Still, he had said, 'Yes,' so he must have some feeling or something.

Somehow, I just knew in my heart of hearts that Ronny McGrath would never ask.

That was a male prerogative, wasn't it!

And, he was a *male*, wasn't he?

From what I had learned from the first time I had seen him at his brother's funeral, he might have physically been a male, but inside and otherwise, he was female to the core!

And about to marry the wrong person!

No, he should be engaged to me!

Not to that worthless piece of trash!

I wanted to die.

Before they left, I managed to catch Ronny alone and attempted to talk to him. "Look, Ronny, I wonder if you're making a mistake, rushing into marriage without considering the consequences. I mean, your parents care deeply about you and would hate to see you get hurt."

"It's all right, Royal," he told me. "I've known Emma for a long time and..."

"That's not the same thing as love!" I exploded. My God, couldn't he see my heart on my sleeve just begging him to take it?

"I'm truly sorry, Royal," he spoke softly. "I know you and Dad and Mom think you are doing this to help me, but believe me, I have thought long and hard about the situation and it is really the only way for me to prove...to prove..."

“Prove what, Ronny?” I asked softly. “That there might be something else better, someone else who could love you in the way you so richly deserve?”

“I...I...don’t know what you mean!” he stammered.

“You know exactly what I mean!” I persisted. “Just admit it! Admit marriage is a mistake, at least a marriage to Ms Emma Halsten!” I urged.

“I’m sorry, Royal, *we* can never be!”

‘Aha!’ I thought. ‘He’s not as dumb as he acts sometimes!’

“Why not, Ronny? All you have to do is accept it!”

“Royal, my mind is made up and that’s all there is to it. I am truly sorry!” he insisted doggedly.

“No! Stay! We can work this out!” I countered vehemently.

But he turned away, shoulders shaking. I wanted to touch him, hold him, comfort him, but didn’t dare! I didn’t want to alienate him any more than I already had!

Inwardly, I was crying my heart out.

I had lost the only decent thing that had ever happened to me!

Not wishing to face anyone, I saddled up and rode off to the mountains for a couple of days. I spent the time feeling sorry for myself, which never does any good!

Returning the following Monday, I laid it on Chaz. “Chaz, the past year has been some of the best times in my life, but it’s time I was moving on. I’m sorry and I know that you and the late Mr. Lincoln were grooming me for the general managership from day one, but I can’t stay. Not now.”

He looked at me with a sort of panic in his eyes. “R.C.! What the Hell you talking about? You’ve been general manager since September and you’ve done a

great job! Things are humming along just about as good's they ever have! Why in Hell you want to throw all that away?"

"I can't explain it, Chaz, but I can't stay here. Not with the way things are."

"It's a woman, isn't it?" he asked softly.

I nodded. "Yes...sorta..." I equivocated.

"Well, Hell, boy, have you talked to her about it?" he demanded.

"Nope," I replied. "I've only kissed her once," I admitted slowly, remembering.

"Did she like it? Did she kiss you back?" he asked hopefully.

I nodded. "Yes, until she realized what we were doing. Then she jumped up and ran away."

"Hell's bells! Is she married?"

"Not yet."

"Then talk to her. Tell her how you feel. Don't let this opportunity slip away! Life's too damned short to play games! Hell, R.C., your time in the Marine Corps should have taught you that! Look at what happened to Charlie! Don't make his death worthless because you're afraid to tell some woman that you are in love with her!"

I nodded. "I know, and that's why I have to go. It's an impossible situation."

"Who is it?" he demanded.

"I can't say."

"Can't? Or won't?" he demanded harshly.

"Take your pick, but come Christmas, I'll be gone. Tiny's as good as I am and he'll do a good job for you, since he takes pride in being part-owner and all."

“Damn it!” he exploded. “Tell me who this woman is and I’ll talk to her! You owe us a damned sight better explanation than this half-baked b.s. you’re laying on me!”

I shook my head. “It’s over, Chaz. I’ll leave the house if that makes you feel better, but come Hell or high water, when the New Year comes, I’ll be a long gone Johnny Come Lately for sure! I’ve thought it all through and that’s my final decision, Chaz.”

“Sum-na-bitch! There goes my retirement!” he lamented and lapsed into silence.

After that, things got very strained between us. Rhonda became cool to me when Chaz told her my decision. But, my mind was made up. If I couldn’t have the love of my life, then I for damned sure was not going to stand around and see that bitch ruin him!

So, we went along in a sort of armed truce state with Ms Halsted making plans for marriage to Ronny and me avoiding them like the plague.

I think he suspected my feelings for him.

I know I could never forget that single kiss and the intensity we had shown one another.

He had to know how I felt!

I could sense it in the way he had responded to my “pep talk” on Thanksgiving.

Then, a week before Christmas, I was sitting in Maxine’s Diner having my lunch when I overheard a conversation in a booth catty-corner from me. It was Emma and a scruffy-looking character I recognized as one of her cousins. As far as I knew, he had never worked a day in his life and yet he drove an almost new mini-van which, unlike Tiny, he was letting go to pot. The thing hadn’t been washed since he bought it and inside was filthy as though two hogs lived there.

“Yuh got thangs all set up?” I heard him ask her.

“Shet yer fuckin’ mout!” she snapped. “Yuh wan’ duh whole fuckin’ town tuh know are bidness?”

Sensing something about to happen, I surreptitiously turned my cell phone towards them and recorded the whole thing. I had a feeling that things were about to change...

For the better...

At least for me!

I was right!

“Ah, nunna dese yokels knows frum shit!” he snarled but lowered the volume of his voice.

“Don’ youse kid yerse’f, Rufus! Dey’s sum sma’t gahs ‘round cheer,” she snapped testily.

“Nun’s so sm’rt’s you ‘n me, baby!” he smirked, grasping her hand and squeezing it intimately.

“Look, Rufus, us’n’s gots tuh take hit cool ‘til ah gets uh ring on ‘is finner. ‘E’s not so dumb ‘at he cain’t see duh oblivious!” she warned.

“Well, hurry hit up, wud’ya? Us’n’s need summa ‘at cash frum duh factory tuh pay gramp’s taxes er he’ll lose duh damn hotel. Den where’d he live?”

“Yeah, yeah, ah knows dat! Yuh gots duh ring?”

“Ra’t cheer, baby gurl!” He handed her a small box. “But be kerrful showin’ hit ‘round Coeur d’Alene er Spokane. Hit’s sorta warm, if’n yuh knows whut ah means!” he laughed.

“So whut? Long’s hit gits ‘is candy ass in fronta uh preacher, ‘at’s all ‘at counts. Yuh gots one lahn’d up?”

“Yeah, cousin Thad sed ‘e could do hit, but ‘e wants his’n in return.

“Uh nother piece uh mah ass?” she whispered, smirking knowingly.

“Yuh gots hit, baby gurl!” he snorted.

“Christ-on-uh-pogo-stick, jus’ la’k you’n Jim Bob, allus wanna shove hit up mah ass!” she grinned.

“Hain’t no babies dat way, baby gurl,” he grinned back at her.

“Yeah, dare’s ‘at fer shore,” she admitted.

“Jus’ don’ go fergettin’ yer aw reddy married tuh me!” he warned.

‘Hello?’ I thought. ‘Now that should put a crimp in her plans!’

“Haow cud ah evah fergit? Yuh premind me ever fuckin’ tahm yuh sees me!”

“W’al, youse Halsten gals air kinda fergitful sumtahms,” he teased.

“Youse Halsten men hain’t much better!” she retorted testily.

“Now don’ git yer panties caught in yer crack, Hunny Bunny, jus’ keep sight uh air goal, ‘at candy-assed McGrath kid ‘n ‘is daddy’s munny!”

“Ah know! Ah know!” she retorted angrily.

“Damn, whut uh namby pamby ‘e be! Yuh shore ‘e’s uh gah?”

“Yeah, ‘e’s uh gah aw ra’ht. Not much uh one, but ‘e is uh gah awra’ht. Hell, yuh shud see ‘im inna mini-skirt, nylons ‘n’ high heels! Wit’ dem l’il titties uh his’n, ‘e makes uh better lookin’ gal ‘n’ most gals ah know! Damn, ‘is ass sure do shake nice w’en ‘e walks uhrount in ‘is hah heels!” she commented fondly. “umph unh! La’k jelly hit be!”

“Yeah, he cud make uh mint fer us’n’s on duh street in Tacoma er Coeur d’Alene!”

“Nevah hopen, Rufus! Least wise not in Tacoma! Naw, ah gots more’n mind tuh let cousin Marv take

‘im down tuh L A. Lotsa gahs wit’ loose cash there, ‘n’ summa hit cud be our’n ra’ht quick l’ak!”

“Whut if’n ‘e objects?”

“W’al, I’ll jus’ haul ‘im over mah knee, pull dem panties down ‘n’ blister ‘at fat little ass ‘til ‘e sees duh light!” she bragged. “How’d’ya thin’ ah gots ‘im tuh ‘gree tuh be’in’ married tuh me enny haow?”

“Yuh din!” Rufus laughed.

“Shore did, ra’ht in front uh Fanny Mae too. Ah’m tellin’ yuh, his li’l weenie wuz standin’ tall w’en ah pushed ‘im off’n me ontuh duh hard floor! ‘E wuz on’y too happy tuh do’s ah tolt ‘im!” she bragged. “N’ Fannie Mae sez ‘e’s uh purty good cunt lapper, too.”

“Damn! Ah’d’a lak’d tuh’ve seen dat!” Rufus whispered reverently.

“W’al, mebbe yuh’ll get’cher chanct afore us’n’s ships ‘im off tuh Marv!”

“Damn! Dat mouth uh his’n’s jus’ made fer suckin’ a stiff cock! Dem lips air so soft ‘n’ fat ‘n’ ah c’n ‘most feel ‘em wrapped ‘round mah dick ra’ht now! Hot damn! Ah’m uh gittin’ harder’n uh i-ron pole!”

He took her hand and drew it to his crotch.

“Yep,” she giggled. “Yuh shore air! What cha gonna do ‘bout hit?” she teased.

“Burry hit up yer ass, ‘at’s whut!” he leered at her.

“Yeah, later, after ah marries up wit’ duh fuckin’ li’l pansy-assed fruit cake!” she laughed.

“Jus’ don’ fergit yuh wuz married tuh me firs’ n’ have bin since yuh wuz eight year old!”

She sighed. “Yeah, ah know, mah asshole’s bin sore ever since dat first night! ‘N’ ‘at wuz fifteen year ago!” she lamented.

“Tahm flies w’en yer havin’ fun!” he grinned.

“Fun? All yuh kept complainin’ ‘bout wuz haow taht hit wuz after mah pussy!”

“Yer asshole’s tahter’n yer pussy!” he grinned. “N’ no chanct fer babies neither!” he repeated.

“Yuh never wuz uh pussy hound, wuz yuh, Rufus?”

“Not l’ak yer brother Gerry! ‘E c’n never git unuff uh yer pussy!”

“Yeah, w’al, ‘e wuz duh one who broke ‘er in w’en ah wuz six er so! Damn, whut uh cock ‘e got atwixt ‘is laigs!” she sighed in remembrance.

“S’not so big’s mahn!” he bragged. “Hey, w’en yuh gonna slip ‘im duh ring?”

“Tuh night, wah?”

“Jus’ askin’,” he commented.

“W’al, stop yer askin’!” she retorted angrily.

“W’al, if’n us’n’s hauls ass, might be Gerry ‘n’ ah cud get in uh three-way wit’ yuh afore yuh leaves fer Tacoma.”

“Possibilities,” she laughed. “Shore, wah not? Us’n’s c’n git ol’ man Maury ‘n’ ah’ll have sumthin’ tuh suck on whilest y’ll git yer rocks off in mah pussy ‘n’ asshole!”

“Great! Let’s shit ‘n’ git!” He threw a couple of bills on the table.

“Soun’s la’k uh plan tuh me!” she laughed and they hurriedly left the diner.

Holy shit! I had the scoop of a life time.

But what good would it do me if I still didn’t get the girl?

Er, the boy, Ronny?

I paid my bill and went back to the office.

I whistled happily all the way!

As I walked in, I greeted Rhonda and Chaz with, “Hey, Boss and Big Boss I’ve got something here that both of you should see and hear before you do anything else!”

“What is it, R.C.?” Chaz asked, looking up from his book work.

I played them the clip of Emma and Rufus talking in the diner booth.

“Well, I’ll be a sum-na-bitch!” Chaz exploded. “Imagine that cunt wanting to make a street walking whore out of my son! I’ll have her fucking ass for that!”

“No, Siree, Mr. Charles Myron McGrath,” Rhonda interrupted, “You’ll just have to stand in line. Her ass is grass and I’m her lawn mower!”

“Where’s Ronny now?” I asked. “That’s where she will be heading.”

“In Spokane, studying for an exam,” Chaz answered.

“Then we better get there p.d. damned q.” Rhonda interjected. “C’mon, we’ll take my Olds!”

And, we did. Take her Olds, I mean. That Rhonda had a lead foot and she covered those ninety or so miles in less time than it takes to tell. Chaz and I hung on for dear life as she hurtled her car up and down hairpin curved mountain roads until we got to I-90, then it was full speed ahead until she stopped at a police station in Spokane to alert them to what was going down.

They promised to send a patrol car to the scene and we left. In front of Ronny’s boarding house, we saw Emma’s battered old Pinto. Rhonda kinda touched its bumper when she stopped, except that Emma’s car was scrunched between her Olds-98 and a big old oak tree. Emma Halsten wouldn’t be going

anywhere until Rhonda moved that big old boat of hers!

We rushed into the house where we found Emma grinning from ear to ear. “Too late, folks, us’n’s air on air way tuh Hogg’s Hole tuh be hitched up. Ah gots mah cousin Thaddeus tuh do duh job. ‘E’s uh real preacher ‘n in uh hour er so, us’n’s’ll be hitched up ‘n’ dare hain’t uh damned thang yuh kin do ‘bout hit!” she gloated. “And hain’t nunna youse invited neither!”

She pointed to the huge, sparkling diamond ring on Ronny’s third finger, left hand. “E’s uh wearin’ mah ring ‘n’ whut ah sez goes frum naow on!”

“Now, Emma, after all, they are my parents,” Ronny started to object.

“Shut yer fuckin’ cake hole!” she ordered. “Dey’d onney cause us’n’s lots uh trubble, l’ak us’n’s disgusted earlier.”

“Keep that damned cunt occupied for five minutes or so, R.C.,” Rhonda ordered. “Tie her up if she resists.” She turned, “Ronny, you come with your dad and me. We have something to show you.”

“Hey, wait jus’ uh damned minute c’here!” Emma protested. “Us’n’s gotta git goin’ ra’ht naow! Duh preacher’s uh waitin’ fer us ‘n’ all!”

“Shut up, cunt!” Rhonda shook her fist under Emma’s nose, “or else I’ll slug you!”

“Sit down,” I ordered Emma, and pushed her down into a chair. I stood over her menacingly.

“Yuh cain’t do dis tuh me!” she shouted. “Ah gots mah ra’hts!”

“And I have a left if you don’t shut your damned trap!” I snarled, shaking my fist in her face. She glared daggers at me, but did not try to escape and soon, reluctantly, she shut up.

Rhonda and Chaz took Ronny into another room and were gone for three minutes or so. Then, Ronny came back.

He looked at Emma with a shocked expression on his face. "How could you?" he asked, tears streaming down his cheeks. "I would have done anything for you!"

"Shut up, yuh fuckin' pussy!" Emma snarled. "Dey cain't prove nuttin'!"

I played the clip on my cell phone for her.

She stared at it, open-mouthed.

"Yuh fuckin' sneak!" she snarled at me. "Yuh spied on Rufus 'n' me!"

"Yep, pretty good, wasn't I?" I smirked.

Ronny twisted the ring off his finger and gave it back to Emma. "Give it to your real husband!" he told her angrily.

There came a knock on the door. It was two great big, hulking Spokane cops, loaded for bear!

"You gots sumethin' relating to the Van Couver's robbery?" one huge cop with the name tag "Romanski" rumbled.

"In her pocket," Rhonda pointed.

He took the ring and whistled. "Wow! Looka that stone, O'Brian!"

"Ah foun' hit," Emma alibied weakly.

"Sure, and I'm Oberon, the King of the Fairies!" the other officer, an Irishman, O'Brian, laughed.

Romanski stared at his partner. "Hey, I din' know you wuz that!"

The Irishman, O'Brian, stared in disbelief. "Shut up, bone head!" he laughed again.

“Hunh? Whut’d ah say?” he asked, befuddled.

We showed them the tape of Emma’s confession and in seconds, she was handcuffed and being led out to their patrol car.

“Thanks, folks,” O’Brian told us. “We been looking for these miscreants for a long time!”

“She’s all yours, Officer,” Rhonda smiled. “I’m just glad to be rid of her!”

“OK, folks, but remember now, you have to stop at the station house and make statements before you leave Spokane,” Officer Romanski warned us. “It’s the law.”

“Yes, Officer Romanski,” Chaz assured him. “We are not criminals. We’ll be there.”

“No, Sir,” he agreed, “but I’d watch who I had for friends in the future! You were lucky this time.” He grinned, saluted smartly, and they were gone.

“Let’s go home,” Rhonda quipped. “I’ve had enough excitement for one fucking day!”

Chaz giggled. “More’n w’en ah brung yuh home frum duh horse pistol wit’ air baby gurl?” he teased her, lapsing into the vulgarity she hated.

“Shut up, you idiotic moron,” she warned. “God, you are so uncouth at times!”

“Hey, I gots plenty o’ couth!” Chaz objected. But at a hard glare from Rhonda, he subsided.

Ten minutes later, we were at the police station giving our statements.

And I got the biggest surprise of my life!

The Rhonda Suellen I had been searching for all along was right under my nose, Rhonda Suellen was Rhonda Suellen M^CGrath, my Ronny!

I was speechless.



I could only stare at them in shock.

“You didn’t know?” Chaz asked in amazement. “Why, I thought everyone knew!”

“Well, I didn’t know!” I stormed. “I have asked at least five hundred people who Rhonda Suellen was, but except for Tiny Lincoln, no one would admit to knowing anything, and that damned Tiny refused to tell me, saying that I would find out who she was when she wanted me to find out and not one blessed minute before! He was shaking in his boots!” I added. Finally, I ran out of steam.

So Rhonda explained. When Roni (Yes, all along the name was spelled Roni by those who knew and only outsiders, me, for instance, spelled it Ronny!) Ronny was not Ronald, as I had thought, Roni was Rhonda Suellen, there was a slight mix-up. She explained. “When the nurse took him from the doctor, she didn’t see a tiny penis so she said the baby was a girl. The doctor took her word for it and what did we know? She looked like a girl to us!”

I felt so stupid.

“Imagine our surprise when Roni was two years old and we discovered there was something wrong. The doctors told us that a mistake had been made at birth. At first glance, Roni had a non-existent penial protrusion and the delivery nurse had marked him down as a female. His birth certificate still reflected that error! The doctor just took the nurse’s word for it.

They had been calling the baby Rhonda since birth, so by the time they discovered the truth of the matter, they figured it was too late to upset the apple cart and left it alone.

So there we were, Roni and I, in the back seat of Rhonda’s Olds, neither one of us daring to say or do anything to alienate the other. Finally, his little hand crept across the seat and touched mine.

“I hope you’re not too disappointed at learning the truth about me,” he whispered.

“What? That you look great in a mini-skirt, nylons and high heels? My dear Roni (yes, now I was in the know too!), I don’t care one whit about that. You have been the center of my whole existence since I ate your curly fries, and if that weren’t enough, that kiss by the lake did me in.! Not a minute goes by that that scene is far from my thoughts! Seeing you as Marilyn on Halloween only confirmed my feelings. But I don’t care about any of that, I love you! There, now you know! And I don’t care that you know! I love you! And I’ll tell the whole damned world that I love you!” I averred.

I fully expected him to draw away from me in abject horror. Instead, he grasped my lax fingers and squeezed gently. “Silly, boy!” he whispered. “Me too!”

“You too, what?” I was puzzled.

“Me too love you.”

“Don’t tease me like that, Roni!” I croaked.

“Not teasing you at all!” he whispered. “I knew that day by the lake when I fell on you and I kissed you that I was in love with you, but I tried to deny my deepest feelings because of societal norms that frown on such things! And when you tried to talk some sense into me on Thanksgiving, I realized that you were right, but I just couldn’t bring myself to admit I was wrong about Emma! I was so sure she’d reformed herself!

“Oh, Royal! I have been such a fool! I am what I am!” he blurted.

“And if that makes me different, then I’m different and I will no longer deny myself!” I turned to him to see a bright light shining from his eyes and I knew he was telling the truth!

I reached out, took him into my arms. His face turned up expectantly, his eyes closing, his lips parting slightly, his sweet breath blowing gently on my face. I bent, touched, increased pressure and he returned me effort for effort. Before I realized what I

was doing, I was doing it! I was kissing the love of my life and he was kissing me back!

I was in Heaven as I held his precious, precious body against mine.

“Oh, Royal, I’ve been such a fool!” he repeated.

“Shhh!” I soothed him. “It’s OK!”

“Hey, back there,” Chaz cried, “be careful! You’re rocking the boat!”

“Yes, Daddy,” my love replied. “My boat is being rocked too!”

I didn’t know if they approved or not, and at that point, I didn’t much care! As long as Roni loved me and didn’t turn away, I was happy!

After an extended, silent spell, “So, that’s the woman?” Chaz asked softly.

“Yes, Sir, she’s the one!” I agreed softly, smiling from ear to ear.

“You take good care of our son...er, daughter!” he warned.

“I’ll guard her with my life, Sir!” I vowed!

“You damned well better!” Rhonda chimed in.

Now who would have thought that a retired light colonel of the U S of A Marine Corps could ever be in love with another male? Except that deep down, I had realized all along that he was *not* a male, but a *female* wearing the disguise of a boy!

I held my love all the way back to the house as he cried and cried. I thought he was crying about his loss of Emma. I was wrong! He was crying because of the lost time we had missed because neither of us had had brains enough to take that first step.

Once we crossed the line, we both knew there would never be a going back!

Back at the house, Roni wore a mini-skirt, nylons and high heels in front of his parents for the first time. Oh, he had worn dresses when he was a baby, but that was twenty and more years behind him! And he had dressed as Marilyn at Halloween for years, but that didn't count.

Did it?

Not to me!

Nor my Roni!

Nor Roni's parents.

Still, Emma had one thing down pat. He did have the cutest little titties and boy, were they ever sensitive! A mere touch of cloth or inquisitive fingers and they got hard as nubbins, making delightful little dents in his shirts or blouses, whichever he had on at the time.

I came to love unhooking his bra for him and rolling and squeezing those delightfully hard little nipples between my caressing fingers while he shuddered with arousal and urged me on.

Me?

I didn't care what he wore, just as long as he came into my arms for his kisses, caresses and loving! I was quite adamant about that particular aspect of our burgeoning relationship!

He never objected.

Not once.

He never looked back!

Neither did I!

Why should we?

A shining future lay ahead, just waiting for us!

* * *

VII

One day later, Christmas Eve. I got the only present I really wanted. Everything else paled beside my real want!

Roni, Miss Rhonda Suellen MCGrath, become my lover!

I could not have asked for a more delightful present!

Ms Emma Halsten had tried to make a man of him...

Well, a transvested street walker...

But with me, he was all woman!

It seemed that he had hidden his femaleness and femininity for ages, and it had taken an almost miracle to bring us (him and me) out of the closet.

And together.

But once we were out, there was no going back!

Rhonda and Chaz had suspected their son of being “different,” and had tried unsuccessfully over the years to encourage that difference. Except they hadn’t known how.

Back in the deep woods of Montana, there weren’t too many “outed” transvestites, let alone any transsexuals to relate to or to seek help or advice from.

Chaz was happy with the arrangement because now he could plan his and Rhonda’s retirement.

Rhonda was happy because now she had another girl to share with.

Roni was happy because now she didn’t have to pretend to be something she was not.

Big George was happy because things were going along smoothly now.

Me?

I was happy for obvious reasons.

What about Ms Emma Halsten and the rest of the Halsten clan?

What about them?

They weren't too happy.

She and Rufus and several other members of the Halsten tribe were all convicted of burglary, breaking and entering, possession of stolen property, fencing of same, possession of burglary tools, and general mischief among other things. Ms Halsten got an additional six months for calling the circuit judge (who had already sentenced her to seven and a half to fifteen years) a "cock sucker" in open court.

The judge took umbrage at her remarks, especially when she cursed him out after giving her six extra months for her outburst. When she continued her harangue, he made the six months consecutive.

That finally shut her up.

She later wrote a letter to the judge apologizing for her remarks, but the judge was having none of it. She served a full ten years and six months. She was not a model prisoner.

We did not hear one word from her in all that time, nor in the years since she was released.

Charlie's widow, Marie, and I had dated several times when I first came to town, but nothing had ever come of it. Then she met a returning veteran whom she had dated before marrying Charlie and they hit it off big time.

The wedding was great! Chaz was in his element as father-of-the-bride and Charlie IV was the cutest little best man in his little tuxedo. Rhonda III made a beautiful ring bearer and flower girl. My Roni? She

was the most beautiful bride's maid I have ever seen!
In my opinion, she out-shone the bride!

But, what do I know?

Rhonda Senior says I am prejudiced and can't see
the forest for the trees!

What forest?

What trees?

Still, she may be right.

The grandkids stayed with Rhonda and Chaz while
their mom was on her second honeymoon, and I
swear, two more spoiled kids you never saw. Except
they weren't affected by it at all. They were the same
cheerful, obedient pair when their mom returned
(dreading to have two spoiled rotten brats on her
hands) only to find the kids were just as she had left
them.

Well, almost.

Little Charlie talked constantly about working in
the lumber mill. He was what, six, seven, eight? And
Roni III was planning on working in the office when
she was big enough to fit in the Boss' chair! And she
wanted to learn every job in the plant first so she
would know what she was talking about.

She followed Tiny around like a shadow, badgering
him with question after question, and seldom taking
No for an answer. She truly wanted to know. Like she
told him time after time, "How'm I going to learn any-
thing if I don't ask questions?"

Tiny didn't have an answer to that, so he just
shrugged and let her do her thing. And when he
would smile in her direction, she positively glowed
with happiness. She thought he could do no wrong.
Tiny was as much her grandfather as Chaz was.

If Tiny thought he had a leech, it was only because
he didn't have Little Charlie tagging along with him
like I did, and he badgered me with question after

question about lumber and furniture, until I put him to work sweeping the saw dust in the assembly room.

Like the original Big George before him, Tiny was a stickler for correctness. "If'n hit ain't ra'ht, hit ain't ra'ht, 'n' no talkin' 'bout hit'll make it ra'ht!" He was very conscientious about his job and more than one man commented on the fact that he was more like his grandfather than his grandfather had been!

I sic'd Three onto the newest Big George (Tiny) and he followed the man doggedly, asking dumb question after dumb question until I thought he would go crazy.

But, Big George just laughed. "How's he gonna learn anything if'n he don't ask questions?" And so, Three soon became a favorite of the assemblers, so much so that the new Bigga Boss gave him his own work bench and told him gruffly, "OK, big fella, yuh wants tuh learn tuh make furniture, here's yer bench 'n' uh full seta tools. Git tuh werk!" And he turned and walked away.

Three said nothing, but very carefully wiped every single one of his new tools, giving them a light coat of oil before storing each in the drawer space provided. Then he went to the foreman and asked, "What do you want me to do, Sir?"

The foreman looked down at him thoughtfully. "Can yuh follow directions, kid?"

"Yes Sir, I think so," Three replied seriously.

"Hey, Samson," the foreman called to a cousin of Big George. "Show the kid what you do."

"Sure, Boss," Samson agreed with a wide grin.

He and Three worked on the same stool all that afternoon and Samson was surprised when his new "man" did better work than most other apprentices and he took pride in his accomplishments too.

From then on, as soon as Three got home from school, he was at Samson's bench learning how to make furniture.

Until the day Chaz took him up to the office and started him on the books. Rhonda III was angry to think that Three could come do her work when she couldn't do his.

So Chaz took her to Samson, telling him, "Teach her what you taught Three."

Samson nodded. "Yes, Sir."

Chaz called the foreman and told him to assign Rhonda III a bench and a tool kit, that she wanted to learn how to make furniture, so since Samson had done such a good job on Three, he had now earned another apprentice.

And so it was. Rhonda III proved to be as quick to learn as her older brother and in some ways, was better. But, Samson just taught her without comparing her to Three and she learned quickly and well.

After Christmas, Roni and I took a vacation, motoring down to California, San Francisco, to be exact. Same sex marriage was legal in California at the time – well, it wasn't *illegal* - and we were married in a small chapel near Oakland.

Roni was now Mrs. Royal Carson Lawton and I couldn't have been prouder.

Back in Montana, word leaked out of our marriage and several of the more violent and out-spoken homophobes started some ugly rumors about us that floated around the factory like a bad smell.

Until Big George heard them.

He approached the two ringleaders, two hulking lumberjacks, one named Swensen and the other named Bronson. Both thought they were pretty tough nuts to crack, so when Big George came striding up to them, they tried to bully him as they had done to so many men in the past.

“Hey, Swede,” Big George hailed Swensen, “I been hearing your loose lips speaking them rumors about the Li’l Boss and her husband and I think it would be a damn good idea for you to shut your fucking cake hole permanently. Don’t you? I mean, somebody could get hurt by that kind of talk.”

“Oh, is that so?” Bronson challenged. He wasn’t afraid of Big George because he outweighed him by fifty pounds or more.

His first mistake was, he thought.

His second mistake was, he opened his mouth. “Whut’re yuh gonna do ‘bout it?”

“Why, I’ll have to take steps,” was the calm response.

Swensen laughed. “Yeah, long ones on yer way outta cheer!”

He slapped his knee and he and Bronson bent over with their loud, raucous laughter.

“Well,” Big George answered quietly, “never say you weren’t warned, boys.”

“Warned? By a puny li’l runt like you? It is to laugh!” And the two of them roared at their joke.

“Yeah, show me a boy and I’ll show you the biggest prick you ever saw!” Bronson taunted.

“Go punch out,” Big George told them. “You’re both fired.”

“Hey! Yuh cain’t fire us’n’s!” Bronson objected. “Us’n’s got ra’hts!”

“Yeah!” Swensen chimed in. “La’k ‘e jus’ sed!”

“Yeah, us’n’s got ra’hts!” Bronsen crowed again.

“And here’s a left for you!” Big George replied calmly.

And, although he was at least fifty and more pounds lighter than either of the men who loomed over him, he lashed out with his left, catching an unsuspecting Bronson squarely in the mouth. Bronson stared at Big George as though thunder-struck.

“Why, yuh lousy li’l pip squeak! Ah’ll larn yuh, yuh li’l bastid!” And he cocked his big ham-like fist to strike at his enemy. He tossed his fist lazily in the direction of the waiting man’s chin.

And it whizzed through the air where Big George was standing.

Only Big George was no longer there!

As Bronson bent forward from the force of his blow, Big George hit him with a one-two punch to the belly and jaw. Bronson went down like he had been struck with a peavey handle!

“Why, yuh li’l sum-na-bitch!” Swensen yelled and charged in, swinging wildly.

His huge fist passed harmlessly over Big George’s shoulder and before he could recover, the same one-two punch came out of nowhere, catching Swensen in the belly and under his glass jaw.

Swensen fell to the dock, out cold.

Big George dusted off his hands. “Get these two loafers outta mah fact’ry!” he ordered three by-standers, and without waiting to see that his orders were carried out, stalked off.

“Holy shit!” one of the men marveled. “Did you see that?”

“And he never even broke a sweat!” another marveled.

“Yeah, I guess they teach yuh things like that in the Marines!” another marveled.

“Well, he sure learned it somewhere!” was the consensus of opinion.

“Fer damned shore t’warn’t larnt in dis fact’ry!” a third man chimed in.

“Oh, I dunno ‘bout dat,” another offered, “The Bigga Boss, Big George, the firs’ one, I means, he were a pretty tough fella his own self. He coulda tooken any three just l’ak Swensen er Bronson t’hout even thinnin’ ‘bout hit!”

“Yeah, he were a tough old bastid!” someone else commented.

“Yuh c’n say ‘at agin!” two or three more agreed.

It didn’t take long and the story of the fight was on the lips of every employee. But Big George had the satisfaction of knowing that no one would spread vicious rumors around his factory again!

Roni, who had taken to wearing mini-skirts, frilly blouses, nylons, high heels and makeup to work, cornered Big George on the loading docks one afternoon when he was not aware of her presence.

“Mister George Washington Lincoln, Sir, I would’st speak with thee,” she whispered.

He turned, started by her appearance. “Ma’am?” he croaked, puzzled by her odd speech.

She placed her hands affectionately on his massive shoulders. “I just want to thank you for what you did to those two ruffians.”

He blushed rosily. “Aw, Ma’am, it weren’t nothing!”

“Yes, it was!” she corrected. “You defended those of us who cannot physically defend ourselves against such bullies and I want you to know that I appreciate it even if no one else does!”

“Aw, Ma’am, it t’weren’t nuttin’...” he insisted, blushing furiously.

Then, before he could escape, Roni leaned up and kissed him full on the lips in the same way she had kissed his grandfather after his father’s funeral.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Lincoln," she whispered, turned and walked away.

George stood there for a moment in a total state of shock. He finally became aware of the staring faces around the dock when he looked up. "Youse guys ain't got nuttin' tuh do? Get tuh work, dammit, afore I fire the whole damned lot uh yeez!" Like Big George Washington Lincoln before him, he squared his shoulders and stalked off in high dungeon.

"Holy shit!" Carney whispered. "He sounded just like The Old Man did!"

"Amen to that," Nelson agreed.

They all hurried off to their jobs.

And that was the last disparaging remark anyone ever heard.

A lesson hard learned is a lesson well learned.

Just ask Swensen or Bronson.

"I be damned," Big George was heard to mutter to himself in wonder, "The li'l Boss called me *Mr. Lincoln!* How about them there apples? Who'd uh ever thunk it?"

* * *

VIII

Then, came the end of January and Roni went back to Tacoma to finish up her third year of law school. Damn, I sure missed her. It was awful cold in that bed without her warm body next to me! And an electric blanket, while some comfort, is not the same thing at all!

I looked forward to weekends. From Friday around six in the P of M until about five in the A of M on Monday morning when Roni left for Tacoma, she was mine...all mine!

Well, not exactly...I had to share her with Rhonda and Chaz and Three and Roni III and Little Precious Pup, the West Highland Terrier puppy that Rhonda had given her for her birthday.

Damn little yippy dog knew who buttered her bread and she made damned sure Roni knew she loved her.

Me?

Not so much.

She tolerated me because I took care of her while Roni was at school, but as soon as Roni came on the scene, I meant less than chopped liver to her!

Came May, finals, graduation, with summa cum laude honors and a Juris Doctorate Degree that she hung on the wall next to the Christmas card I had received so long ago.

Holy moley, had it been two whole years?

Yep!

And then some.

The thing Roni was proudest of was that her degree was issued in her real (her birth certificate and her married names) name, *Rhonda Suellen McGrath Lawton!*

Now if you think I saw more of Roni after graduation, you have another think coming!

She commandeered the spare bedroom next to ours and locked herself in with her law books and study materials. Now she was studying for the multi-state bar. She had applied to Idaho, Montana and Washington State for licenses to practice family law.

I had thought I might see more of her after she took the damned bar exam in late June.

But, no!

Shows you what I knew!

She was so worried and distraught about possible failure that she was a wreck, no fit company for man nor beast, let alone a husband or parents or friends who loved her!

As July became August, she became more and more introspective, shutting out everything that was not focused on her Law studies.

Finally, the Saturday before Labor Day (one year after Big George's death), she got a letter from the Attorney General's Office in Olympia, Washington. She held the letter in trembling hands, not daring to open it, not daring to face the possibility of bad news.

So, I opened it for her.

She had passed the Bar exam and was being admitted to the State Bar of Washington!

What did my Roni do?

She fainted dead away!

A week later she got another letter, this one from the State Attorney General's Office in Boise, and once more she couldn't open it.

So I did.

And she was now a member of the State Bar Association in Idaho and authorized to practice law in that state too!

But, nothing from Montana.

Some friends of hers from law school had her convinced that Montana had flunked her and that was why she had not heard.

It was just before Halloween when she received a letter from The State Attorney General's Office in Helena. She was so sure she had failed Montana that she was physically ill!

I opened the damned thing and she was now admitted to the State Bar of Montana, licensed to practice law here too.

We found out later that the machine Montana used to grade exams had broken and it had taken two months to get it replaced.

Bureaucrats move very slowly.

If at all!

Now I would see my wife more frequently.

Right?

Wrong!

She founded an office in Coeur d'Alene and she let it be known that women and children were especially welcome as clients.

Soon, she was overwhelmed with women and children having legal problems of one sort or another and she had to hire three helpers, a paralegal and two more attorneys, all three militant feminists!

It wasn't long before they gained a reputation as man haters. Mostly that was because they went after deadbeat fathers, child abusers, wife beaters, alimony skippers and the like.

Once they took on a case, they almost never lost.

Soon, some other lawyers had nick-named them "The Lesbian Squad" or "The Cunt Squad" and "The Pussy Parade," names they relished and encouraged in every way possible.

In their tight mini-skirts, shiny nylons, bullet bras and high heels, they seemed to just take over any courtroom they entered and several complaints were lodged against them by some male attorneys that these women were brazenly influencing juries by their manner of dress!

To placate the disgruntled contemporaries, they stopped wearing mini-skirts, dropping their hems to

mid-calf, but changing from slim skirts to full pleated creations with voluminous petticoats that were eye-catching in their own right!

And still the complaints poured in.

The women fought back with the only effective weapon they possessed, their femininity!

So someone brought a discrimination suit against them alleging they did not hire males! That was shot down when a lawyer husband of one of her partners admitted that he had been doing legal work for his wife right along, and that took the heart right out of that suit!

So, instead of suggestive opaque blouses, they began wearing fully transparent or lace ones that left nothing to the imagination.

This proved to be the dissenters undoing. One of their most outspoken enemies had made the mistake of verbally assaulting a female lawyer in front of a female judge, a lawyer who had no connection to Roni except that she was female.

Immediately the word went out and every woman who had a male lawyer handling her case, will, estate, whatever, was fired out of hand and a woman hired in their place.

Now one or two instances of dissension in the ranks can be overlooked, but when thousands of angry women add to the clamor, you have to sit up and take notice!

Not only are women fifty-one percent of the total population, they had begun to realize that this meant power. Power to make their own destinies. Power to decide!

And so it was. The State Supreme Court of Montana was the first to announce full equality for women in the court system. Idaho followed a week later and Washington state joined the ranks two weeks after that.

And that was not the end of it. Suddenly, male attorneys in Wyoming, Utah, North and South Dakota, Oregon, Nevada and even California lost women clients in mounting numbers.

It was obvious that someone had stirred up a hornet's nest and women were making themselves heard.

They were a force to be reckoned with!

In numbers too large to be ignored!

And they knew it!

The women, I mean.

And Roni prospered.

She worked primarily out of Coeur d'Alene, taking weekends to devote to her long suffering and patient husband, me!

When I complained that I didn't see enough of her, she giggled. "Make an appointment, dear, or better yet, move to Coeur d'Alene!"

Yeah, sure! Just up and move, just like that!

Hunh?

Like Hell!

But what was I going to do with her?

She continued to laugh at me.

My friends?

What friends?

Chaz was no help.

"Don't ask me!" he snorted. "You're the one who's married to her!"

Rhonda?

“I have troubles enough keeping my own husband out of trouble!”

Big George?

“She called me *Mister Lincoln!*” was his response.

My other “friends” in the factory?

Suddenly, they were all too busy to stop and talk!

What a revolting development that was!

Chester A. Reilly would have been so proud.

Damn it all!

* * *

IX

One night just before Thanksgiving that next year, Roni sidled up to me and ran her hand slowly along my jeans-covered thigh.

I waited, sure she had an ulterior motive.

Finally, the suspense got to me. “OK, Babe,” I whispered, “what’s on your mind? And don’t you dare tell me your hair!” I warned.

“Oh, it’s nothing, Royal,” she whispered, but I could tell she was distracted.

“OK, I’ve been around you long enough to know when something’s bothering you.”

She looked up at me. “Royal?” she began timidly, “I want to have children!”

I had never thought of that. I mean, how do two males – OK, OK, so she was female, almost, but she still could not have babies! “OK, we’ll adopt one or two or three or as many as you want!” I quipped.

“I’m being serious and I don’t mean adoption!” she declared, getting a little hot under the collar.

“Then what do you mean, Roni?” I asked quietly.

“I want to have S.R.S.,” she got out finally.

“S.R.S.? What’s that?” I had no idea what she was talking about.

“I want to become a real woman for you,” she whispered quietly.

“Baby, you’re all the woman I ever wanted!” I reminded her firmly.

“I’m not all the woman that I want to be,” she countered, “that’s why I want to have the S.R.S.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Roni. What in Heaven’s name is this S.R.S.?”

“Sex Reassignment Surgery.”

“Oh.” I still didn’t know what she meant.

“You still don’t know what I mean, do you, Royal?” she asked.

I shook my head. “No, Roni, I don’t. But if it’s what you want, I’m all for it, whatever it is!”

“You really don’t know what it is?” she asked, head cocked questioningly.

“Nope. But if it’s what you want, go for it!” I repeated.

“I want to have the surgery to change my sex,” she explained.

“Change your sex? Can they actually do that?” I asked, astounded.

She nodded. “Yes and more, they can even implant viable ovaries and a womb so that one can conceive children and deliver them in the regular way,” she explained.

“My good God!” I whispered reverently. “I never dreamed,” I admitted. “Shows you just how out of touch with the real world I am!”

“No, you’re not out of touch, you just never thought of it,” she teased.

“You got that right! But if that’s what you want, Roni, I’m all for it! When? Where?” I asked.

“There’s a clinic in the Midwest somewhere, I’m not sure where, but I have their brochure and from what I can ascertain, for about a hundred thousand dollars, I can be a real virgin for you and able to give you children!”

“Holy Mother of God!” I whispered. “Think of that! Me! A daddy! Wow!”

“I’m glad you feel that way, Royal because I have already contacted them and am just waiting for a date to go...”

I grabbed her and kissed her hard. “OK, Babe! Go for it! Have you told Chaz and Rhonda yet?”

She shook her head, “Not Daddy, but I did discuss it with Mom and she’s all for it. She and Dad want more grandkids and I’m the only available one who can do it!” she giggled.

“This calls for a celebration!” I yelled excitedly.

I opened our bedroom door and announced, “Hey, everyone, Roni’s gonna have a baby!”

“What?” Chaz yelled in disbelief. “How? When?”

Roni laughed. “Relax, Dad, I still have to have the surgery so I can get pregnant in the first place!” she explained.

“Well, what in Hell yuh waitin’ fer?” Chaz bellowed excitedly.

“Remember your weak heart, Charles,” Rhonda cautioned.

“Whazt weak heart? Did you hear what our daughter just said?” he bellowed.

Rhonda nodded. “Yes, Charles, I heard and I think it’s wonderful.”

“Wonderful?” he bellowed anew. “It’s a damned miracle!” he enthused.

So we had to sit down and explain the whole procedure to him. I admit some of the things we had to do seemed a bit awkward, but what the hey, Roni wanted it, so that made it all right with me!

No, it was more than all right with me!

Why wouldn’t it be?

I mean, after all, I had married her for richer or for poorer, for better or for worse, and what could be worse than an unhappy wife?

With our complete backing (Chaz, Rhonda and me) and our total moral support to bolster her resolve, Roni made all the necessary arrangements, and shortly after the beginning of The New Year, she boarded an airplane for a flight to the city where she would become a woman.

We all wanted to go with her, but when she reminded us that recovery would be a long and probably painful process, she really did not want her family to witness her misery.

“Better you remember me as a laughing, happy woman like I am now than some caricature of myself when you think of this period in my life.”

Well, none of us wanted her to be alone, but in the end, she had her way, as usual. Those who worked with her were thrilled for her! They threw her a going-away party (Rhonda was invited, Chaz and I were not!) and according to Roni, it was the most fun she had had since admitting her love for me.

Oh? I was fun, was I?

Somehow, that rankled and I went around with a chip on my shoulder for several days, until she left. Then I was really lonesome!

Since I was so miserable, I saddled up my favorite gelding and rode off into the sunset...well, not really the sunset, but I think you know what I really mean!

One thing about the mountains and the deep forests, the peace and quiet is addictive, or at least tolerable. Up on the slopes it was cold, cold, cold, after all, it was the dead of winter. Now some people might think I was crazy to isolate myself like that, but solitude is relaxing. Well, it is to me.

And after all, without Roni to keep me on the straight and level, why not? Better I be by myself when I was so miserable than around the factory with an attitude that would frost an Eskimo!

I got snowed in at a line camp as the aftermath of a blizzard and it was three weeks before I was able to get out. I wasn't alone because I had a radio with me and plenty of batteries so I was able to communicate. When I ran low on supplies, I radioed out and a plane dropped a pallet near the cabin and all I had to do was bring it to the cabin. Wood was no problem. I was in the deep forest, remember? There is plenty of fallen limbs, dead trees and the like. The only problem is getting it to where it can be used. Which meant going out into the cold to gather it.

We (the gelding and I) were snug, warm and cozy and needful of nothing. To pass the time, I started writing this story. Yeah, I know, vanity, vanity, vanity, thy name is vanity.

So, sue me!

You know, a laptop is a handy thing.

It's small.

It's compact.

It's portable.

And it has what you need to keep records, or at least copies of what you write.

(I wonder if the Corps has discovered computers yet?)

Nah!

That would do away with paper work.

Heaven forbid!

Anyway, here I sit, typing away and wondering how Roni is making out.

The heavy snow just slid off the roof (finally!) which means it's thawing.

Spring is on the way!

Now I can go back home!

I'll finish this up later on.

Thanks for reading it thus far.

* * *

X

Holy Mackerel! I just ran across this half-baked manuscript on my old laptop. I had forgotten all about it! I mean, that was several years ago when Roni left me to have her surgery and a lotta stuff has happened since then.

First, Roni came home just bubbling with excitement and happiness. Her coworkers threw her another party, a "Welcome home, Roni" party and again Rhonda was invited but Chaz and I were left to our own devices. Women! Who can figure them? For sure I can't!

I mean, I've been married to Roni in the regular manner (Church wedding in our home town!) for six

years now and eight since we exchanged vows in California that time.

That doesn't mean that our second marriage was any the less binding on us than the first, it was Montana didn't recognize our first marriage, full faith and credit agreements notwithstanding, so we opted to go the whole nine yards with showers, bachelor parties, big church wedding with a white satin gown for the bride and a full dress light colonel's uniform for the groom. Just because I'm retired from the Corps does not mean I am no longer a Marine!

Once a Gyrene, always a Gyrene, it's written in stone in *The Manual for Marine Officers!*

Roni was absolutely beautiful. She wore a floor-length white satin and lace creation, fitted bodice that emphasized her swelling breasts, going to the tight waist (a twenty-two inch corset!), with long fitted lace sleeves and a swirling skirt that had several petticoats under to give it "body."

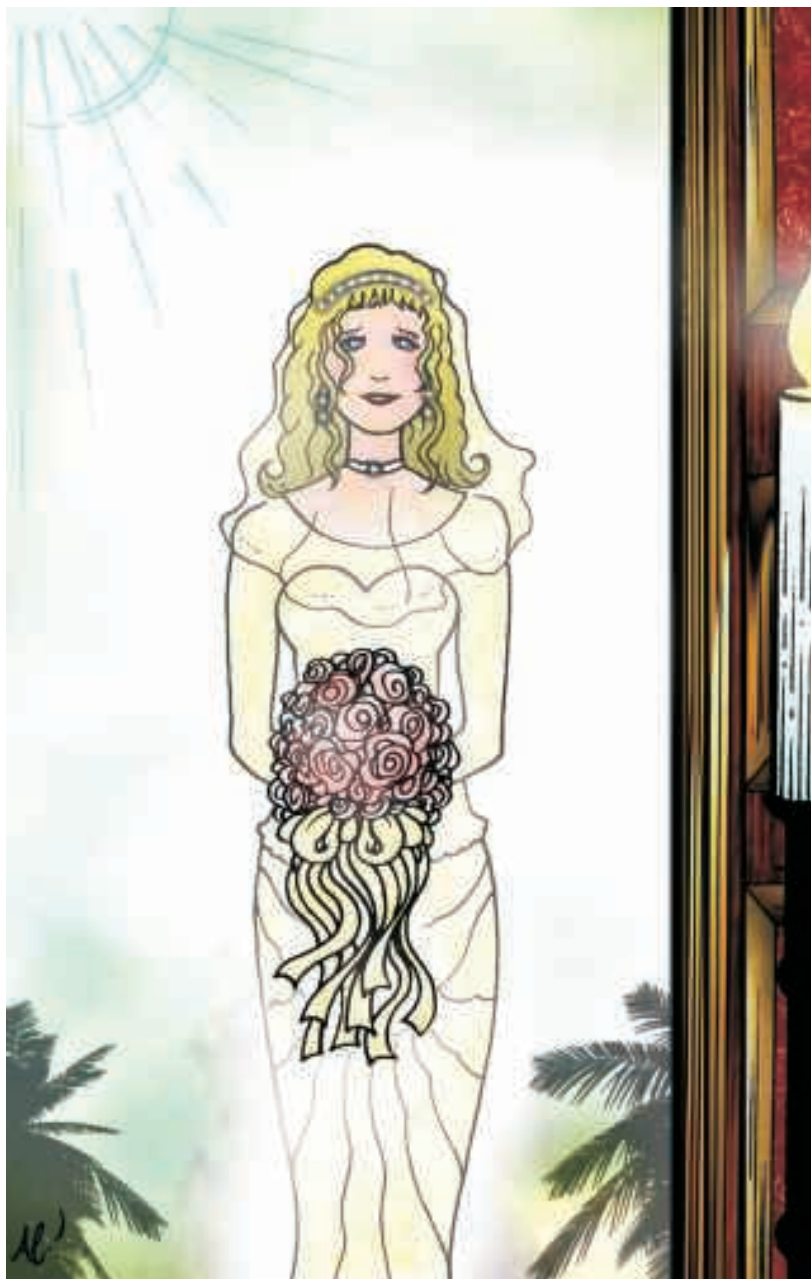
When I finally got her alone, I discovered a white satin bullet bra and almost non-existent string bikini panties! I had the devil's own time getting her garters unhooked from her nylons and those damned straps around her ankles didn't help matters either!

Her veil was fastened to a rhinestone tiara atop her curls and fell in shimmery waves around her upper body giving an ethereal effect to the whole ensemble.

My heart was in my mouth as she hesitation waltzed down the aisle on Chaz's arm. He had the widest grin on his puss, like the cat that swallowed the canary! I mean he couldn't have been prouder if he had been the groom!

Rhonda was not only the Mother-of-the-Bride, she was Roni's bride's maid, and the two of them looked so much alike, it was obvious even to someone as dense as I that Roni should have been a girl from the get-go!

OK! OK! I know! I know!



“What about your wedding night?” you ask.

Well, what about it?

It was a typical wedding night. A fumbling husband. An apprehensive bride. Both of us laughing so hard at the incongruity of our situation.

We had already gone through our first encounter without hesitation. But this time, it was different. How? Well, for one thing, Roni was a woman now. That means she had a slightly different anatomy between her legs than the first time.

When we tried to consummate our union, I kept aiming too high, or low, depending on your point of view, and as a result, I kept missing the whole point of the drama.

And that started us laughing. The more we laughed, the funnier it became. The funnier it was to us, the harder we laughed!

Finally, we just gave up, cuddled together and went to sleep.

In the morning, we finally got it straight between us and after some heavy panting and powerful shoves, I finally made a woman out of my bride! She bled all over the sheets and she cried for hours, but not from any pain, she was so happy to at last give me what a wife gives her husband, herself!

Whatever you want to call it, I loved her more than I did the first time I kissed her, and I love her today twice as much as I did on our wedding night which is less than half the way I love her now!

A couple of days later, we were in the McGrath kitchen shooting the breeze when the subject turned to women's sexes. After some rather detailed explanation from Roni about her surgery, Chaz asked, “Great! Can I see it?”

“Charles Myron McGrath!” Rhonda exploded. “Really! I should think you'd seen enough!”

“Yeah, but I never seen my own daughter’s!” he complained.

Roni smiled and I wondered.

Did she?

Or didn’t she?

She never said.

I never asked neither!

Six months after Roni returned to my bed, she announced to me and Chaz and Rhonda that she was pregnant.

I was stunned!

Yeah, I know, the whole idea behind having the surgery was to be able to have children, but the actuality is different from the supposition!

I paced and paced the hospital halls for hours until finally they caught up with me to announce Roni had given birth to a son, and she had named him Royal Custis Lawton, the Royal after me and the Custis after her mother’s maiden name.

I would have gone with any other name but Royal, but she never gave me a chance to object.

I would have probably caved in without a whimper, but I wasn’t even asked!

And neither Chaz nor I were invited to the numerous baby showers that were given in Roni and baby Royal’s honor. So, what else is new?

Anyway, my son was a delight! He laughed; he gurgled; he wet his diapers; he messed them too! Oh, did he ever mess them! A stockyard would have smelled better!

“That boy’s a chip off the old blockhead!” Chaz observed one afternoon.

“Hey! You saying I stink?” I demanded.

He grinned. "You said it, not me!"

Roni laughed. "Now what?" she asked. "Honestly, you two are the worst possible examples for my son!"

"Your son?" I demanded. "I had something to do with it, remember."

"Yeah, you paid the hospital bill!" Chaz chimed in.

I threw up my hands in disgust and went back to my factory. At least out there I got respect!

As time went by, another Lincoln, Big George's younger brother, Master Chief Machinist's Mate Hiram Peter Lincoln, retired from the Navy after thirty-one years and was hired to take the place of Sam Samuels who was retiring after forty years as head mechanic and going where the sun shone, at least part of the time: Arizona!

Along about that time, another Lincoln came aboard, Li'l Baby George (Tiny's grandson) who, as near as he could figure, was number seven in a straight line from the original George from the Civil War time. No, he did not work in the factory. He was hired to sell furniture and keep the company books.

Did a damn good job too because within weeks we were swamped with orders and had to expand the factory threefold! Some people are just too damned good at what they do! Anyway, Chaz and his better half, Rhonda, took the winter off and went to Arizona to check it out. When they returned, neither had too many good words to say.

It was too hot, too dry, too many old people, etc., etc.

What did they expect?

A buncha kids?

Seven came to me one day. "R.C., I want to try something new in accounting."

I stopped dead. "What? What's wrong with how we're doing it now?" I demanded.

He sort of wilted, but he stood up to me. “Look, I know you’re married to the owner’s daughter and all, but...”

“Half-owner. The other half is owned by the Lincoln Trust. You know that! Now, what’s wrong with the way we do it now?”

“Nothing, except that it’s antiquated, that’s what.”

“Antiquated? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“R.C., it makes no allowance for computers.”

“And you can fix that?” These damned computers would be the death of me yet!

“Sure, it’s easy, but it’ll cost a few bucks.”

“How much? Remember, if it doesn’t work, part of the money comes out of the Lincoln trust fund!”

“Yes, I know that,” he admitted. “But I know it’ll work.”

“OK, you have a month to show me. OK?” I relented.

“Just don’t condemn it until I have a chance to show you.”

“You’re on, Big Shot!” I grinned.

I went back to the office later and found Dolores, Seven’s pretty wife and their one-year-old son, Eight working away. Well, Dolores was working. Eight was seated in his jumping chair and having a ball all by himself. My Junior was in a twin jumping chair and he was laughing and gurgling right along with Eight while their mothers were hard at work.

Roni looked up. “Royal! I can’t believe how more efficient this system is! Why instead of going through ledgers for information, all I have to do is push a key and there it is! Well, not that easy, but a lot easier than it was before. I wonder why we didn’t think of this long ago?”

“That’s because you’re all dinosaurs!” Dolores laughed. “People get so used to something that they never think that someone else might have discovered an easier, better way to do the same thing.”

Roni laughed. “Dinosaur? I’ve been called a lot of things, but that’s a new one!”

Dolores blushed, her face matching her red, Irish hair. “Oh, I didn’t mean...”

“All right!” I interposed, “What’s going on here? And where’s my coffee?”

“Coffee! That’s all you think about!” Roni teased. “That, and sex!”

“Quiet, woman! Seven was babbling on about some new accounting system he invented and I gave him a month...”

“He didn’t need a month, Royal!” Roni replied. “Just one lesson in computers and I am sold! It’s so good, with the proper software, I can apply it to the law and work right from home!”

“Sounds good to me, Baby Doll!” I enthused.

“That way I can be with Junior and still be involved in my practice,” she went on.

And so, M^CGrath Enterprises was dragged kicking and screaming and protesting all the way into the Twenty-First Century and the age of computers.

And you know, after several years of using them, I often wonder how we ever got anything done before they came along!

But, you know all that so I won’t belabor the obvious.

A tragedy.

Maria and her new husband were killed by a drunk driver coming back from a New Year’s party in Coeur d’Alene two years ago, and Roni and I adopted Chaz

III and Rhonda III, and now they are officially Lawtons, but still use the name M^CGrath.

Three is getting to be a better woodworker every day. His foreman says he puts older workers to shame with his ability to grasp and convert to wood an idea that usually has other workers scratching their heads in puzzlement for days.

Rhonda Three has quit the factory, but don't let that fool you. She just returned to the office and the computers. She's a product of the computer revolution, you see. She knows what makes them tick and what gives them burps and is able to fix most problems with no outside help. She can also program them to do things I would never have believed.

She is worth every cent of her weekly allowance!

As is her brother, Three.

They're both lobbying for raises.

Damn kids' union!

Then Roni got pregnant again.

So did Dolores.

And they had their babies the same day in the same hospital in adjoining delivery rooms! They named their daughter Rhonda Suellen and Roni named our daughter Dolores Franklin.

I never did find out where the "Franklin" came from!

Both babies did fine. Dolores had a red-haired girl and Roni's came out blonde, a perfect picture of her mother and grandmother. Chaz kids me about getting the big head, but that's OK.

They are beautiful children!

Now they bounce around in their jumping chairs.

Junior and Eight?

Well, they're starting to walk and they are inquisitive to a fault. Yesterday, for example, they discovered waste baskets. They think it's great fun to watch someone fill one up so they can upend it right there on the floor in front of everybody.

Dolores just groans and mutters, "I'll be so glad when you're old enough to go to school!"

"Bite your tongue!" Rhonda scolds fondly. "How else are they going to learn?"

"A good swat on those well-filled diapers would do a world of good!" Dolores retorts.

"How dare you belittle this adorable boy? You ought to be ashamed of yourself!" Rhonda scolds, scooping the miscreant up and cuddling him protectively in her lap.

"Gamma!" whichever one she has. She's Gamma to both.

Oh, yeah, the computerization of M^CGrath Enterprises worked out great. A lot of the paperwork has been eliminated and it seems funny to me to realize that our records are now kept on round pieces of shiny plastic. Who'd uh think it?

Surely not a dyed-in-the-wool ex-Gyrene with green blood!

Then Chaz reminds, "Ain't no such thing as an ex-Gyrene!"

Me?

I'll try not to cut myself!

Too deep...

* * *

XI

That brings us just about up to date.

Except, Tiny had a heart attack while working on the docks and, true to my promise, I carried his casket to the grave site in the bed of Big George's old Studebaker pick-up truck.

It was the least I could do in memory of the patriarch, George the Third!

Little Charlie and Little Rhonda are teenagers with the typical teenaged problems (thank God acne was not one of them!) but on the whole they are polite, responsible, well-adjusted persons. They are a constant delight to Chaz and Rhonda when they are home and not off traveling the country. Chaz says that no matter where they go, nothing compares to the Big Sky Country that is Montana.

"It's nice to see new things, but it's always a pure pleasure to see those Rocky Mountain crags that are Montana, my home, sweet home!" according to Chaz. Rhonda echoes this like a mocking bird!

Roni has given us another granddaughter, well, daughter in my case, named Rhonda Suellen Lawton, what else? Her older sister, Dolores, absolutely adores her new sister.

Little R.C.? He can take her or leave her. Not that he doesn't care for her because he does. It's just that being almost a teenager, he has other things on his mind. Baseball. Track and Field. Hunting. Exploring the woods with his scout troop. He's just two merit badges short of becoming an Eagle Scout.

His main hero nowadays is little Charlie who is a sort of straw boss in that Big George lets him have the responsibility for keeping time cards straight, that machines are in working order – if one is broke down, it is Little Charlie's responsibility to see that it is brought to the attention of maintenance and that it gets fixed in a timely manner. If it doesn't, he goes to Big George and if the mechanic doesn't have a good excuse why it's still broken, Big George is all over him like white on rice!

No, as far as I knew, none of the boys have any transvestic leanings, but Little Rhonda is quite a

tomboy in her own right. She's a tough little girl and has blackened several boys' eyes when they tried to get fresh with her. Still, she doesn't seem to have a particular interest in girls either.

"A late bloomer," her grandmother says.

Her bedroom walls are covered with pictures of all the latest teenage heartthrobs, all boys, of course, so she's just a typical teenage girl in that respect.

Oh, well, we'll just have to wait and see.

Just look at how the rest of us turned out!

###