From Mike:

*After John Osborn’s presentation on self-publishing last week, I have decided to self-publish a collection of “Sunday Letters” I wrote over a 30 year period. These were handed out to the congregations I was serving and sent over the internet to about 400 other friends, acquaintances, and relatives. My purpose was to share my curiosities, amusements, and passions with people. These letters have helped me build and deepen countless relationships with others. The “voice” that emerged in them has shaped my own sense of self: to journey through the treacherous terrains of our individual and collective lives of with gentleness, strength, humor, and conviction.*

*I have not decided how many “Letters” to put in the book, or how to arrange them. I also have some short pieces of “mindfulness” writing that I would like to intersperse among the “Letters.” As I select and edit these letters, I look forward to the critiques and suggestions of my friends in the Writers’ Café… I think.*

*Written August 11, 2019*

My parents, John and Esther, quietly observed their 66thwedding anniversary this past Wednesday. Not being sure what to get them, I checked the internet to see what gift goes with number 66. But nobody in cyberspace seemed to know anything about being married that long.  One website did offer this:  "There are no traditional symbols associated with the sixty-sixth anniversary, but congratulations anyway."

As their oldest offspring, I figured I should come up with *something*. After all, 66 years of marriage is a whole lot of "better and worse, sickness and health, and richer and poorer."

Finally I came up with this: an investigation of their wedding and honeymoon and a “Sunday Letter” on that long ago event that they can share with all their friends and family. Being their son, I didn’t want any X-rated reminiscences, and so I interviewed my mom instead of my dad. I also read her diaries and letters she wrote and loaned to me. What surprised me most was that everything I am sharing is stuff I’d never heard before… I guess because I’d never asked.

The rowdiest moment of their wedding came while a soloist warbled the "Lord's Prayer."  My parents were kneeling at the altar, whispering and giggling during the whole song.  It wasn't the soloist who amused them; it was something my mom whispered to my dad at that moment.

Here’s the story: My mom's mother (my Grandma Haworth) was resolute that kissing was inappropriate in a church wedding.  And since Grandpa Haworth was performing the ceremony (my mom's dad was a pastor) and since he pretty much had to do what Grandma told him to do, it looked like the young couple would be denied this delightful ritual at their own wedding, an 8 o'clock Friday night affair in the Argenta Evangelical United Brethren Church.

Grandma asserted herself too early, however, giving my mom several weeks to lobby for a reversal.  And at the last second, with no time left to get the breaking news to the groom, Grandma relented.  The first my mom was able to convey the good news to him was while the two of them were kneeling during the Lord's Prayer.  They would get to kiss in front of everyone after all!

Grandma might have relented regarding the "kiss decision," but she did prevail when it came to picking out my mom's honeymoon nightgown: a pink strappy affair with long puffy bloomers.  No wonder my dad made sure they moved at least 5 hours away from his in-laws less than a year after he married my mom.

Their engagement had become official seven months before the wedding. On Christmas Eve, 1952, both families gathered at the groom’s parents' home in Hartford, Illinois.  After a big meal of southern comfort food (fixed by my Grandma Smith) Grandpa Haworth made the formal announcement.

There was a wax "star candle" at the center of the table that day, a treasured relic my parents have kept all these years, filling the middle of it with new wax when needed.  For the engagement announcement, my mom's parents gave her a nice conservative blue dress and my dad's parents gave her a necklace.  I guess nobody thought my dad needed any extra gifts since he was getting the girl and didn’t need anything else.  Formal engagement announcements appeared in several local newspapers in the days that followed.

The one thing I did know before my interview with them was that my parents were pen pals before they met.  My dad was in the army at the time, serving in occupied Japan.  So, his girl cousins talked the new preacher's daughter into writing him some letters.  When he got back to the states, my parents met up.. .and Grandma Haworth, from that moment on, pretty much lost control over her daughter.

She tried though.  Even though Grandma never gave my mom "the talk," she compensated by ambushing my parents with a doctor's appointment a few days before their wedding. Out of the blue, Grandma solemnly informed them one day that the doctor wanted to see them both.  And when they showed up, they were surprised to discover that the doctor had been tasked by Grandma to explain "s-e-x" to them.

Grandma Haworth wasn't all trouble though.  She handmade the genuinely lovely wedding dress my mom wore.  And she organized a delightful cake and punch reception in the church basement after the wedding.  (There were no meals or dances or bands or other reception festivities among conservative Protestants in those days.)

Many of my parents' wedding gifts included handmade embroideries.  Among other items, they got a pink ceramic deep dish bowl that my mother still uses to make her Jell-O.  They also got a toaster, an iron, and a hand mixer.  The presents included a table radio, wool blankets, sheets and linens, numerous Pyrex baking dishes, an iron skillet, and tableware.  A pastor (who would influence my dad to enter the ministry) gave them a large painting of Sallman's "Head of Christ" (one of more than half a billion that were produced since it was painted in 1940).  They also raked in four cash gifts, none more than ten dollars.

My mom kept a diary of their honeymoon.  After the reception and a trip back to the Argenta parsonage to change and get their belongings, my mom records that "we told everyone good night at 11 p.m. and headed off for our first night at the Parkview Motel in Decatur."  (Many years later, my parents were surprised to see that the chambers of their wedding night rendezvous had been remodeled into a nursing home.)

Wisconsin was the destination of their honeymoon, and Grandpa Haworth insisted they take his 1945 Packard, a car long past its prime at that time.  My mom reports that they almost ran out of gas on their way to the motel that first night.  (I would have thought that Grandpa would have given them a full tank of gas along with the car, but maybe that was one more trick Grandma had up her sleeve...to keep her daughter pristine as long as possible.  Although: the Packard was a pretty big car, and I suppose that more than a few Americans were conceived in its back seats after the driver had announced that they had 'run out of gas.')

Mom reports that they got to sleep about 1:30 that next morning.  Her diary doesn't mention anything that happened on the second day, except that they spent the night at the Marlu Motel north of Rockford, three miles from the Wisconsin border.  On Sunday morning they drove to Madison, Wisconsin, where they attended worship at the First Evangelical United Brethren Church on Wisconsin Avenue.  Sunday night they headed up to Wisconsin Dells, where they rented a cabin for a couple nights.

On Monday, my mom records, "Mrs. Smith made breakfast for Mr. Smith for the very first time."  They toured the Dells that day and returned to their cabin for supper where she fixed them "sandwiches and beans."  They only stayed at Wisconsin Dells for a couple days, my mom noting in her diary that it was "too commercial."

On Tuesday morning, the new bride turned 19.  She recorded that day that "Old Mrs. Smith is moving rather slowly this morning due to advanced age."  She also recorded that my dad woke up at 5 a.m. and sang "Happy Birthday" to her.  In the afternoon they had fun petting the animals at "Deer Park" and drove through several of Wisconsin's small towns.  That night they went to their first movie as a married couple, "By the Light of the Silvery Moon," starring Doris Day and Gordan McRae. It was a double feature that night, and the second movie was "Bright Road."

On Wednesday, they went swimming in Lake Geneva and headed back to Illinois, where they found a church that had a Wednesday night Prayer Meeting which they attended.  A day later they returned home from their honeymoon, several days earlier than expected, due to running out of money.  And they took up residence in their first home, 926 Whitelaw Avenue, Wood River, Illinois.

One year after their wedding, they were living in Naperville, Illinois, in an apartment over a garage, my dad a freshman at North Central College.  For their first anniversary, due to being almost broke, they had to choose between a restaurant or a play.  My mom decided to fix fried chicken at their apartment and they would blow their money on the play.

By the way, I was there for that anniversary, but only 24 days old.  They left me for the first time with a babysitter, and for the play my mom wore her first nice outfit since the pregnancy:  a stylish blue dress just purchased.  My nursing time rolled around about halfway through the play.  And her body was right on schedule...minus me.  That was the moment she realized that "style" might have to be redefined.  Anniversaries since their first one have been more elaborate and expensive, but none left better memories.

The years went by and they renewed their marriage vows at church services on their 25thanniversary and their 50th.  I preached the sermon at both of those ceremonies, two of my happiest moments in nearly half a century of preaching sermons.

Lately, it has become important to my parents to mark each anniversary, because, as my mom says, "We never know when one of us may not be here for the next one."  Perhaps their 66thanniversary is extra special to me because of the severe stroke that my dad had a few months ago.  It's the first anniversary they've had that I haven't taken for granted.

Most of the people my mom and dad know now were not even born when they were married.  Only seven who attended their wedding (including my mom and dad) are still alive, and a couple of those have severe memory loss.  Most of their wedding gifts are long broken, beyond repair, or buried in some landfill.

They still have that Jell-O dish in the cupboard and that Sallman "Head of Christ" on one of their walls though. Maybe I’ll inherit the dish someday. But I don’t want their Jesus poster.

I have my own weird and abstract icon of Christ: it is the picture of John and Esther on their wedding day, fresh from the altar, fresh from giggling together, fresh from kissing in front of Grandma Haworth. I don’t think we come to know Christ by gazing at some anonymous male model posing in a painter’s studio. I think we come to know Christ in the way he himself said we would: when two or three are gathered together…

In this photo of my parents, they are looking into the camera at people yet unborn, into a future they can neither see nor imagine. Looking back into this photo, I can see two people walking into a future they will navigate well, toward a host of people they will walk with and bless. It takes *two* ordinary humans to portray the singular Christ, for then there is relationship, love, and eternal possibility. I will never hang a Sallman in my house. Yet I will not ever be without the photo of my parents. Happy 66th.

From Julia:

The Docks--Ludington to Saugatuck

It took 23 minutes to get to Pentwater from Ludington on the snowy roads. We didn’t see anything, not even children playing.

“Now what?” Pat said.

“Maybe check the Pentwater Municipal Marina. See if there is a Manager.”

After a little poking around we discovered that the marina manager and the village manager were the same person. He would have some information on the Fannie Mae.

It turned out that his office was down near the docks in a small building with peeling white paint and three parking spots out front. A sign, “Captain Billy, manager, ” hung over the door. Captain Billy was somewhere in his fifties, a navy watch cap pulled over his grizzled hair, bib overalls, and a worn Carhartt jacket. A typical harbor rat. He looked up from his desk when we walked in.

“We’re looking for information on the Fannie Mae and John and Barbara Liebowitz, her crew.

Captain Billy pushed his chair back from the desk to face us.

“They came through here on their way to Ludington just before the last storm. Figured they could make it to harbor in advance of the squall. They didn’t. They blew up.”

“We saw it happen,” I said. “They were moving along just fine, trying to avoid the storm, when, Boom! A rumble and a column of flames. Nothing left but a slick on the water.”

“Geez!” Captain Billy shook his head. “I knew that boat. They just had it serviced a week ago. Greg Amundsen who runs the dry dock did the work. He didn’t notice anything out of line or he would have fixed it and said something. His desk is right there.” Captain Billy gestured to the other side of the small room. “He should be in soon. If you want to talk with him, why don’t you wait?”

Pat and I perched on the battered bench next to the door.

A few minutes later a new Ford pickup pulled up next to the shack.

Greg Amundsen, a tall, slender man in his 40’s wearing blue jeans and Levi jacket, was less eager to talk about the Fannie Mae than Captain Billy. Maybe he was afraid he’d be blamed for the explosion or maybe he was just feeling lousy. An accident like this one with people you know in a boat you had just serviced was bound to make one feel off. He grunted hello and headed for his desk.

Once we made it he clear we were merely looking for insights into the explosion, he brightened up.

“Nice folks. I’ve worked on their yacht for years. It is, was, a pretty thing, Schaefer 770. Perfect for the lake. Two staterooms, main salon with teak and holly flooring, galley, twin Penta Volvo engine. You get the picture, your typical $200,000 craft.”

We sat in silence, envisioning a beautiful boat. Its small crew. Lost.

I shook my head. “They were headed for Ludington. A storm was coming; they were hurrying. They just blew up.”

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By the time we got back home, the emergency vehicles clogging our driveways and the road behind our cottages were beginning to pull out.

I inched the RAV4 along in the weeds next to the gravel to avoid the other vehicles and swerved to dodge a state trooper heading for the main road.

That night we had drinks early. “Why not?” I asked, settling in front of the fireplace. “Today has been a nightmare. An explosion. People dead, a sunken yacht….

“Maybe we can figure something out tomorrow,” I said as I put another log on the fire. ”We could start by talking with Captain Billy and Greg Amundsen again. They live nearby. They might be in better shape now some time has elapsed after the explosion. There has to be something that they have noticed. Something on the docks…”

The following morning Pat and I headed for the Pentwater Marina.

“I hope they’ll be in,” I said as I pulled up to the Captain’s office.

Captain Billy’s battered red Ford truck was parked next to the office as before. A second truck, a new, black, F150 Ford, was parked on the other side of the building.

“Geesh. If that’s Amundsen’s, he isn’t poor,” I said under my breath as I parked near the front door. “$70, 000.00 plus, at least, according to the sticker at Johnson’s Dealership, last time I went car shopping. It’s out of my league but I dream.”

Both men were in. After some chitchat, I got to the point. “I’m sure we are all still rattled from the explosion and sinking of the Fanny Mae,” I said. “Pat and I are still want to know what happened. Why now? Why here? And how?”

“What would cause a boat to blow up? I mean, was there

some sort of gas leak?” Pat asked. “Or had someone hidden an explosive somewhere? Who would do that? A former work companion? An ex-partner?”

Captain Billy shifted in his chair. “Why don’t you sit down? The best we’ve got is the bench or the kitchen chair in the corner.”

We settled into the same spots on the bench we had used before.

Captain Billy began, ”If you don’t mind me asking, why do you want to know?”

“We saw it explode, right in front of our cabins. It rattled our windows, the emergency personnel parked in our driveways, used our stairs to get to the beach. It feels personal, as if we are all connected.”

Greg Amundsen nodded his head. “I guess that makes sense. It always seems if you see an accident, you are drawn in somehow. Maybe this is no different.”

After a pause, Pat continued. “Why would such a thing happen? I don’t know about engines, but I have never heard of one exploding before, at least under normal circumstances.”

“They don’t. There is no reason for it. I just worked on that boat a week ago,” Greg said. “It was in tiptop shape. Hurrying to get to port before a storm shouldn’t have done anything to it.”

There wasn’t much more the men could tell us. “If you think of anything, let us know,” Pat said as we headed out the shack’s peeling door.

“Next we head to Ludington,” I said as we walked to the RAV4. “Then Saugatuck. Likely the Liebowitz used the harbor there as well.”

Our luck changed when we hit Saugatuck. A couple of guys were on the docks scrubbing algae off boats that were raised out of the water on cradles. They didn’t to have much to add to what Gregg had said earlier, just that someone had been spotted sneaking around the boatyard after hours, at least according to the watchman. No more information than that. Just a sneaking stranger.

The Ludington marina was busy. The SS Badger had just pulled in from Manitowoc loaded with vehicles and passengers eager to explore western Michigan.

The SS Badger is huge--410 feet in length, 60 feet wide, carrying 600 passengers on the four hour trip between Ludington, Michigan and Manitowoc, Wisconsin. She takes up a large section of the dock in the Ludington municipal marina.

We stopped to look at the big boat, then headed for the RAV4.

“Saugatuck next?” Pat asked as we slipped inside the RAV4.

From John O.:

*June 1992, Stillman Valley*

Elizabeth’s birthday, followed by graduation the next day, arrived sooner than she’d thought it would. No one celebrated with her, except for a brief visit by Caroline and Henry with a small gift. She attended a classmate’s grad party in Rockford and partied with a small group. Afterward, she returned to her empty house filled with whispers.

The day after graduation was the first Saturday in June, hot, humid, hazy, sunny, Illinois June. Elizabeth paced the living room, her gaze each time she pivoted targeting the Tennyson book on the coffee table. Her letter to Next Reader Number Five hid behind page 77, written on the thinnest paper she could find, which she’d cut small so that when folded the sheet didn’t protrude beyond the pages, didn’t spread them, left no sign it existed.

The book whispered to her.

Each turn, a new thought crowded her mind.

She had to hide the book, those were the rules in the letter, it was what you should do.

She wasn’t really a Next Reader, she’d found the book before her mother intentionally hid it, so that disqualified her, the rules didn’t apply, she didn’t need to hide the book. The book, irritating though it was, belonged to her mother, she should keep it.

But she would break the thread, if she just kept the book, stuck it in the bookshelf, forgot the whole thing.

Then she’d listen to the book whisper forever, which drove her mad. Did books ever die? Would it ever stop whispering? It was a hundred years old, perhaps it wouldn’t. Would the other books ever shut up, now that they’d found their voices, would they stop if she hid the Tennyson?

If she put the book somewhere, someone might find it, find her. Did she want that? Or was she just being paranoid, like her mother, assuming the worst?

She should hide it.

She had to hide it.

She wanted it to go away, she didn’t want it to come back, didn’t want to hear that persistent, indecipherable little murmur.

She must hide it somewhere deep and dark. After all, the letter said, *where it will someday be found by chance or fate*. Someday could be a long time, Elizabeth felt.

She stopped pacing by the coffee table. She had already found the perfect place to fulfill the letter’s directive and to bury the damned thing deep. Time to make it happen. She picked up the book, slid it into an empty shoulder bag that would double as a purse, grabbed her keys from the hook by the door, put on a ball cap, tucked her long hair under it, stepped out the back door into the heat.

She double-checked that the door was locked.

After the five-block walk to Elizabeth’s destination in midday sun, perspiration trickled down her back. The book remained oblivious, continuing to whisper all the way.

She slowed her pace as she neared her goal, waiting for the right moment.

Aunt Edna’s Antiques occupied an old house, older and larger than Elizabeth’s. Located on Stillman Valley’s main street, the store drew customers from a several county area. Elizabeth had noted before that the store’s busy time was Saturday mornings, and she was glad to see several cars in the crushed rock parking lot. A vehicle pulled in as she approached the lot. A large family, two adults and four children piled out and headed to the store. Elizabeth eased up behind them, attached herself to their group, pulled her hat brim down, tried to make herself small, not easy when you’re six feet two. As luck would have it, two couples were exiting the store at the same time, which added to the hubbub.

Elizabeth kept her head down, didn’t make eye contact, prevented her vivid blue eyes from imprinting on someone’s memory. She slipped unnoticed past the store owner seated behind the front counter, Aunt Edna herself, who was occupied with corralling the four children who had just entered and explaining how breakable antiques could be.

She dashed behind the wide staircase, which blocked her from view, scanned the store, searched out the larger furniture pieces, which were clustered in the old dining room and a former bedroom. There were various dressers, chests, armoires, and side tables, but none were quite right. Passing through into the kitchen, she discovered a passageway to the back door. A narrow back stair on the left led to the second floor, with a *More Goodies Upstairs!* sign next to an arrow pointing up the steps. On the right, closed off by a chain with an *Employees Only* sign, stairs went down into musty-smelling gloom. Elizabeth glanced back, saw Aunt Edna busy with the big family, stepped over the chain, descended to a dim, damp, bare bulb lit space.

Old furniture and other goods filled the basement, waiting to be displayed upstairs after minor repair and a good cleaning. She wandered about, seeking the perfect spot. The book’s murmuring had subsided. Perhaps it was looking about, curious about these new surroundings, she thought.

“Come on, Elizabeth,” she whispered. “It’s just a book.”

She peeked into a dark doorway, an old coal bin by appearances, felt for a light switch, flipped it on. Armoires, bookcases, and other tall cabinets filled the space. She wormed her way sideways down a narrow aisle, found what she sought. Against the back wall stood an old walnut secretary, its varnish worn away. The glass was still intact in the upper doors. She could see the empty bookshelves in the dim light. The slanted front that folded down to form the writing surface held a key. She pulled out the support slides, lowered it.

Two small drawers were revealed. The warped wood resisted when she tried to pull one open but gave way to her persistence. She withdrew the Tennyson from her bag, held it above the drawer, found it a perfect fit, dropped it in.

Whispers began again. She touched her hand to the book. “Goodbye. Sorry to be tucking you away like this, all by yourself, but I must do what the letter says. I don’t intend to ever see you again.”

She slid the drawer closed, muffled the whispers, flipped the top shut, stifled them completely. She turned the key, pocketed it.

Retracing her steps, hoping for a clean getaway, she raced up the stairs, stepped over the chain, collided with a man coming down the passage. She gasped. He clutched her bare upper arm to save her from falling down the stairs, pulled her back from disaster, pulled her close.

“Oh, *mi scusi, signorina*,” he said.

Elizabeth had never seen a man so gorgeous.

“Are you alright, ma’am?” Releasing her as she regained her balance, he remained near to her, his face all concern. His eyes were dark brown, almost black, his skin olive-toned, his hair curly, black. Despite the heat he smelled clean, wholesome. His dress shirt, sleeves rolled up, was open an extra button.

“Yes, I’m … fine. I’m so sorry, I didn’t see you.”

He smiled. “Then we are both blind, I suppose.” His accent was European, Italian, she thought. He waved a hand through the air. “Do you work here?”

“No, no. I was just leaving.” She pointed at the back door, glanced toward the front. “Could I ask you to do something for me?”

The man bowed his head slightly. “Anything to atone for my clumsiness.”

“Would you please not mention that you saw me go out the back door?”

“And who is it that I’m not to say has left under suspicious circumstances?” He smiled, placed a hand on his chest. “I am Antonio Genova. At your service, no matter how suspicious.”

Elizabeth laughed. “I’m Elizabeth.” She could smell his breath, chai tea, perhaps, she thought.

“Then clumsy Elizabeth, you must give me your phone number so we can meet, and you can explain this mystery to me over espresso. You like espresso, no?”

Elizabeth’s face warmed with a smile. She hated espresso but would learn to love it if that meant seeing this handsome man again. She gave him her number, which he wrote on his wrist with a pen that appeared from nowhere. Without another word, she slipped out the back door, hurried away.

Her thoughts returned to Antonio Genova many times on the walk home. They also wandered to the book and the letter and its whimsical words. If she hadn’t found the book when she did, she might not have met him. Was it chance or fate? She didn’t know. She didn’t care.

From Jo:

Dream Horse Part 2 – Jo Thomas

Not long after this visit, there is a long journey by ship across the Pacific, home to the grandparents' house in California. On board, with nothing to do, the girl discovers *Black Beauty*, a novel told from the point of view of a horse, and she reads it several times. Published in 1877, it urges those who own and handle horses to train their animals with gentleness and treat them with kindness, taking their feelings into account. It’s an idea she holds onto, despite the considerable number of people she will meet over the years who will insist on the importance of “showing a horse who’s boss.” As time goes by, she will read shelves of books, collect pictures and postcards, and make countless drawings of horses, too many—even---to throw them all away.

Shortly after they arrive in California, a friend invites the family to Pasadena to see the floats and the palominos with the silver saddles in the Rose Parade, but at the last minute the children are left behind. Seeing her disappointment, the friend later brings her two tiny flat plastic horses, one black and one chestnut brown, stamped with bridles and English saddles. They are so small she can close them in her fist. She keeps them on her pillow. As she walks to school through a vacant lot, she imagines she is riding them down the path. Synthetic as they are, they are real in a way that her ever-shifting life as an Army daughter rarely is.

There is a dreamlike quality to the new homes, new schools, new teachers, and new neighbors who materialize and disappear as the family shuttles from coast to coast. The children have imaginary friends. The girl has someone she calls "the Cheeseman." She once makes a hat from a cottage cheese box so she can look like him, and her father takes her picture. Billy calls his friend "Ba Black Sheep," but he refuses to describe him. One day when the family is driving down a two-lane road in Missouri, Billy cries, "Ba Ba!" and points. They look and see an old man driving a cart and a mule. They all wave at him, but the father doesn't stop the car. The children have two grandfathers, one on each coast, but rarely see either of them.

They spend one summer in an attic in Kansas, where it’s unbearably hot, and they have the measles. They live in an apartment in Norfolk, Virginia, where a sister is born. They add a brother in San Juan, Puerto Rico, where they go for Sunday picnics on an empty beach that is now the site of the Isla Verde airport. It is 1953, the first year of the Cuban revolution, and American tourists are still in Havana. The family’s house in Puerto Rico overlooks the entrance to the San Juan harbor, and their back yard includes a wall that is part of Castillo San Felipe del Morro. The ancient Spanish fortress is surrounded by the Army post, Ft. Brooke. The officers’ golf course goes in and out of its moat, and the girl wheels her new baby brother up and down its ramps and tunnels in his stroller. No one pays much attention. In the years to come, everything but the fortress will be torn down for a national park. At the time, their house is solid enough to see them through a hurricane.

The children acquire friends and pets and leave them behind. The legs of the girl's model horses—china, plastic, bronze---break in their boxes with each move until they disappear entirely from a dock in Brooklyn.

During the early days of black and white television, they live for a time in Clarendon, Virginia, a suburb of Washington, D.C., where "Pick Temple" is a local children's television celebrity. He shows western movies, and each day he lets one lucky child from the studio audience sit in the western saddle he has affixed to a fence on the set. The girl dreams of being the one chosen to sit in the saddle. It doesn't occur to her that some children have real ponies and real horses. She and Billy have stick horses with fat stuffed heads, manes of yarn, and reins of plastic. A hedge next to the house makes an arch they call Eagle Pass. One wonderful day, their mother takes them to Hecht's department store, where children can be photographed riding a pony. The mother is afraid of ponies, but she lets them get on. She doesn't buy the pictures. Later, when the family moves away, Billy takes up baseball. His sister rides her bike, but she pretends it's a horse.

There will be, briefly, real horses in the life of this girl. Her father hints of this when he stops to say good night and tells her the family is moving to Louisiana in a few weeks. He’ll be stationed at Camp Polk, and they’ll live in the country this time, he says, in a house by a lake. Perhaps—just perhaps---she can have a horse. She lies awake most of the night, thinking up the perfect choice. She wants a mare, grown-up but young, about four years old. For color, she decides on dappled gray.

In Louisiana, the lake is fetid, contaminated by the septic fields that bubble up black through the grass behind the houses. In an extraordinary stroke of luck, the children once catch a bass in the lake, using nothing more than a safety pin, bread, and a string, but it is the only living thing anyone ever finds in the water. Snakes live on the banks of the creek that feeds into the lake. The children see them, twisting and slithering, below the wooden footbridge where the creek empties into the lake. They imagine the worst---water moccasins, rattlesnakes, coral snakes---but they never really know. When they are bitten, it is by mosquitoes and yellow jackets and the ants that build colonies with entrances that tower over the ground like chimneys. Twin Lakes, as it is called, is bordered by woods, a tree farm, and fields of peanuts. There's not a horse in sight, only a dusty mule that is brought out occasionally to plow.

At the new school, where many of the children don't have shoes to wear, the teacher asks her students each day if they've taken baths at home and brushed their teeth. If they say yes, they get stickers shaped like bars of soap and toothbrushes to put on a chart on the wall. The girl is proud of her row of stickers until she realizes that some of the others have only a few stickers or none at all. Then she is ashamed.

The family gets a dog, a border collie named Laddie who becomes Billy's best friend. Finally, one magical day, the father announces he's buying the girl a horse. A sergeant who moonlights as a horse dealer suggests several possibilities, and the colonel, who doesn't ride, chooses a stubby brown and white pinto gelding named Shorty. The $35 price includes a bridle and a western saddle. Shorty's owner throws in an old Army blanket to go under the saddle. The sergeant drops the horse off in the back yard, and the family leases space for him in a pasture on the other side of the woods.

Shorty doesn't like people, especially children, but the girl, who is ten years old, doesn't realize this. She doesn't see that he is swaybacked and ugly, a horse that a fair-minded person might call a nag. Shorty whirls and kicks when she tries to catch him for a ride, but she believes that he'll get over this. She forgives him when he bolts and tries to run under tree branches. One afternoon, he does finally scrape her off by running under a clothesline that catches her under the chin. Fortunately, she's riding bareback and, instead of breaking her neck, slides off before she knows it. At dinner that night, her parents see the red rope burn that runs across her throat from ear to ear. That's it, they say, the last straw, but the girl begs to keep the horse and promises never again to ride through anyone's back yard.

She doesn't notice the spare-time activity that is ultimately Shorty's downfall. Unseen, he spends hours leaning against the fence posts in the pasture and finally pushes one to the ground while the girl is at school. All the horses escape to run up and down the four-lane highway. The mother, still terrified of horses, leaves her baby daughter with the neighbors, and pursues the horses on foot without success until the highway patrol intervenes. Shorty is exchanged for a small brown Tennessee walking horse named Dan.

Dan is two years old and so obedient that he is immediately stolen. When the girl arrives to get him on his second day, the other horses are grazing, and he's gone. The horse pasture lies just outside a neighborhood called Redbone Alley, where the children are forbidden to go. The girl walks up and down the streets looking for Dan because she can't really think of anything else to do, and she's surprised when she finds him tied up in someone's back yard. A family is out in the driveway. She walks past them, unties her horse, and takes him home. No one says anything, and she doesn't tell her parents. Two months later, they sell Dan because the family has to move again.

From Russell:

He carefully drives his car out of the parking space and again negotiates the narrow passage around the apartment building. He drives two blocks and pulls the car over. He gets out. He wipes his license plate clean.

Back in the parking lot far from any overhead street lights a man wearing an old fedora sits in a black sedan with the glove compartment open so to bring dim light into the cabin of the car. He has two cameras. He is pleased with the infrared photographs. Despite their otherworldly character they reveal the subjects recognizable as Bruno and Holly. He particularly likes a picture of Bruno gazing up at Holly’s bedroom with a silhouette in the background of Holly at her window. There was just enough ambient light for the traditional camera to capture the images of Bruno on the fire escape scaffold, at the front door and entering the apartment house. The dark figure in the car lingers over a telephoto of Holly in her translucent nightgown.

Satisfied with his work he cautiously drives out of the parking lot with the headlights off.

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“What do you think you are doing?” Jan nearly yells. “Where are you going?”

Bruno drives and Jan sits next to him in his car. They have just finished shopping for furniture for their new house.

“To the hardware store, of course.”

“Don’t be a wise ass, Anthony,” Jan says in frustration. “Where are we going? You’ve lost your way. This car, the new house, these crazy investments. We need none of it.”

“It’s not a question of need. It’s just that we should take advantage of what there is---what life has to offer.”

“This isn’t what life offers; it is what you are taking,” Jan says as she vacantly looks out the car’s window unaware of the moving landscape. “And this relationship with Ben Santo makes no sense. Why is he interested in you?”

Bruno doesn’t answer because he can’t fully answer.

He purchases some light bulbs, picture hooks, waste baskets, a dish rack, and shelving for their new home.

They drive back in silence until Bruno says, “Maybe he just thinks I deserve to have all I want.”

“Who?” Jan asks.

“Santo. Maybe Santo thinks I deserve to have all I want.”

Jan lowers the back of her seat in the car so she is nearly lying flat, “Why would he care?”

The car enters a neighborhood of million-dollar homes and estates. Bruno drives up the driveway past formidable brick pillars to the circle in front of a stately home.

“Who’s that?” Jan sits bolt upright and sees a late model sedan with a dull grey finish and scattered dents sitting in the driveway. Bruno pulls up beside it and parks his gleaming new BMW next to the battered old vehicle.

The driver of the car slowly gets out. It is Dr. Rosatti.

“Bob, what are you doing here?” Bruno blurts out. “How did you find us?”

“I’d invite you in for tea or coffee but we haven’t moved in yet,” Jan says.

“That’s quite all right. I just want to chat with Anthony. Go inside Jan, I’m sure you have a lot to do.”

Jan enters the house and Bruno walks closer to Rosatti as he explains. “We just closed on this house last week. We have the other home for three more weeks so we are slowly moving in. How did you find it?”

“Reardon told me all about it.”

“Well, let me show you around if you don’t mind the clutter.”

Calm and matter of fact, Rosatti responds, “I’m actually not interested and I want to visit my son before it gets too late.”

“I understand he is doing much better at Summit.”

“How did you hear that?”

With a slight smile Bruno says, “Reardon.” Rosatti’s face shows no humor. Bruno goes on, “If you are not here to view the house, why are you here?”

“We are having a staff meeting next Tuesday evening and it is important for you to come. I didn’t want to leave messages all over the place and I wanted to make certain you came.”

Bruno thinks it is unusual to call an important meeting on short notice. “Why didn’t you send out a memo last week?”

“Well, the meeting is not for all of the staff. By the way Anthony, don’t tell anyone about it. It is 6:30 at Capriccio’s Restaurant. Do you know the place?”

Bruno perplexed asks, “Why a restaurant? Why not one of the hospital conference rooms?”

“Well, it’s not all medical business and there will be some outside people.”

Bruno presses on, “Who are the outside people and who on the staff are coming?”

Bruno senses Rosatti’s reluctance to reveal anything but Rosatti finally says, “I can’t tell you who will be there outside of our group but I am only inviting Dave Reardon and Thomas Lehman, the cardiac surgeon besides you from our practice.”

“Sounds mysterious,” Bruno says lightheartedly with a grin but he sees Rosatti’s taciturn demeanor does not change. “Of course, I’ll be there.”

“By the way,” Rosatti concludes, “come about thirty minutes earlier and I will give you some background information.”

“Tell me now.”

“Tuesday, I’ll tell you more Tuesday.”

Rosatti turns to get into his late model car with its blotchy finish, dents and scars. The contrast of the two automobiles begs a comment and Rosatti says, “Beautiful machine you have here, but I’m not into automobiles.”

“Me either,” Bruno confesses, “but I have to say it is luxurious.”

Rosatti taps the hood of his car and says, “This guy gets me from point A to point B reliably.” He pauses, “And after all it is just transportation.”

Bruno doesn’t respond.

Rosatti gets into his old vehicle and drives down the driveway on his way to Summit Rehabilitation and Life Center to visit Thomas.