

Tales from the vault

by

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### THE GANG FROM 19th STREET

The footsteps on the dock echoed across the quiet bay. I had been fishing alone for the past half-hour; enjoying the peaceful tranquility of the early morning, as the mist evaporated from the air and the dew on the dock's seat cushions shocked the sleepy cobwebs from my mind.

The fish either hadn't gotten up yet or, like me, didn't want to disturb the bay's serenity. I was so at peace with the world that not catching any fish didn't even bother me. Having been an only child I liked a certain amount of privacy, and I had found that by getting up early in the morning I could have my private time and be ready to face the world later in the day.

I turned to see Richard strolling out on the dock carrying his fishing poles and tackle box. Richard and I had been friends since he moved into my neighborhood when he was six and I was three. We had grown up together, and along with John; who was in the cabin and probably still

asleep, had formed the infamous "gang from 19th street" as we liked to call ourselves.

For most of our pre-teen and adolescent years we were inseparable. We played sports together, raised hell together, terrorized the neighborhood together, and most of all, fished together. Two miles to the west of our neighborhood was the Des Moines river, two miles to the east was a large pond and creek. Whenever we had free time and decent weather we could be found fishing at one or the other.

No matter what we did however, Richard was always the best in the neighborhood. He was the fastest runner, the best in all sports, and by far the best fisherman and hunter. He had been my hero growing up--and now he was in trouble.

"Morning Rich."

"Mornin' Bill, anything biting?"

"I haven't had anything yet," I said. "It's been so peaceful, it hasn't even bothered me. I've got a minnow out there that's basically drowning and I've just been relaxing."

The sun had come out of the low morning clouds by now and the last of the mist had been burned off the lake. The reflection of the sunlight on the smooth surface of the water was actually painful to the eye if it was looked at directly.

"It looks like it's going to be a beautiful day," Richard said, breaking the silence.

"It's been so relaxing up here this past week that I hate to see it end," I replied.

"Boy, that's no shit. It's been so peaceful up here that it almost makes me forget what's going on at home," Richard said, bringing us back to reality.

"Have you thought anymore about what we talked about earlier Rich?"

"A hell of a lot more than I care to talk about. I feel better about what you told me though; at least it buys me some time. I've tried not to think too much about it though, I'm trying to enjoy this week you know. It's as close as I've come to relaxing in months."

"I know it isn't any consolation to you Rich," I said, "but I have been trying to think of some way to help you out and I'm totally at a loss. If the bank doesn't want to cooperate with you there's nothing you can do. Eventually you'll lose your house."

\* \* \*

After high school Richard had gone to work at the local packing plant. When John graduated from high school he went to work for the railroad hauling, meat from the packing plant. I broke the pattern when I graduated. I continued my education at the local junior college and worked at a local

department store.

The local economy was booming due to the prosperity of the farmers. Since Richard and John were making good money on their jobs, they continued to act as my big brothers. They usually paid for our fishing trips, road trips to high school and college football games, and whenever we happened to meet in a bar or restaurant they insisted on paying. It didn't matter that I was working, they made more money and wanted to pay.

After junior college I went on to college and got my four-year degree in finance. After graduation I moved to Des Moines and started working at a medium-sized \$100 million bank as a loan officer trainee.

The distance weakened our bonds of friendship, but we still tried to keep in touch. Whenever I went home we usually got together and if they got a rare chance to come to the "big city", they'd give me a call or stop by to see me at home.

Several years had passed since my graduation from college and I had become a loan officer at the bank. Indirectly the bank was the reason that our fishing trip had come about.

It was an early summer day when the sun was shining brightly in a deep blue, cloudless sky; and the grass and trees were a vivid green. With conditions like that, I found

it hard to concentrate on bank business and had been daydreaming about the old days.

My reminiscence's were interrupted when Al Tompkins stopped by my office to see what I was up to. Al was in his late fifties and enjoying semi-retirement. A couple of years ago, when he was having some problems getting his business off the ground, I had taken a chance on him.

After loaning him \$20,000 to get started in the business, the bank's management informed me that they didn't agree with my decision and if the loan went bad I would be held responsible.

Fortunately, Al's business was doing very well, and, when he inherited a great deal of money and property from his uncle's estate, Al had paid off the loan early and put his son in charge of the business.

Al had promised to never forget my going out on a limb for him and was constantly trying to repay me for taking a chance on his loan. However, bank policy, and my own personal ethics, wouldn't allow me to accept his generous offers.

Al now spent most of his free time at a cabin in northern Minnesota that was part of his inheritance. His fish stories, and pictures of his catches, gave me an inspiration.

"Al, I think I figured out a way you can 'repay' me for

that loan," I started hesitantly.

"Just tell me what it is, I'll sure do my best," Al said, leaning forward with interest.

"I was just thinking about my old neighbor's and how we used to go fishing all the time. We used to fantasize about going up to Minnesota or Canada. If I could get them to go with me, could we use your cabin sometime? I'd be happy to pay you rent."

"Only if I can go along too," Al replied. "From the way you've described the way you fish, I wanna go along just to laugh at you trying to take a fish off the hook--if you could ever persuade one to bite in the first place!"

My next task was to talk Richard and John into going along with me. The farm economy had reached an almost Depression-like state in my home town, and it had affected both of my friends. The packing plant where Richard worked had closed six months earlier because of the failing economy, laying off or moving over five hundred workers. Since the packing plant was the main customer of the railroad that John worked for, his hours had been cut severely and then he was laid off all together.

When I called Richard to see if I could talk him into going on the trip he informed me that John had moved in with him. John had gotten separated from his wife Sharon, and had moved in with Richard and his family until he could get

things straightened out. Richard said he was happy to have John around the house for company. "Misery loves company," he joked, "Not to mention a little help with the house payment."

Richard didn't sound too enthused about my idea. "I really can't afford it Bill, and I'll bet John can't either. It would be fun, but you know how screwed up things are in this town."

"Yeah, I know," I sympathized, "but when was the last time you've gotten out and done something to relax lately? I'll bet it's been months! If you guys can split gas money up to the cabin, I've got everything else covered: food, beer, bait, you name it. Just bring a couple of extra bucks along in case we decide to play some cards and we'll have a relaxing week hauling in big fish and re-telling old lies, maybe even start some new ones."

"Well, I won't promise anything, but I'll talk it over with John and see what he thinks," Richard said.

"That's all I ask. I'll call you Friday to see what you've decided."

After hearing the sadness in Richard's voice, I made up my mind that I had to get my old friends to go on the trip with me. One way or another I had to convince them. Their pride would never allow them to accept any money to help in their financial difficulties, even if I could afford it.

At least by taking them on this fishing trip I might help them to forget their problems for a little while.

I was so confident I could talk Richard and John into going that I got the directions to Al's cabin prior to calling Richard. Much to my surprise, they were both eager to get together and figured by cashing in all their beer cans they could afford the gas. After arranging final details and giving Richard directions to the cabin, we agreed to meet at the cabin in two weeks.

\* \* \*

Al's cabin was nestled in the woods down a long gravel road off the highway. It was the only cabin on a small wooded bay extending off the main body of a small lake. The cabin was a cozy, two-story cottage that Al's uncle had built many years ago. We entered through the kitchen door and looked around. The kitchen was small but efficient, with a large refrigerator and gas stove. The white steel counters and cabinets glistened with cleanliness.

Looking into the living room, I could see a large, round wooden table for eating, cards, and all the other necessities of "roughing it". The table was surrounded by heavy wooden chairs and was situated in front of the stone fireplace.

The wood floor was covered by a large beige throw rug, ringed by rustic-looking, leather-covered furniture. The one exception was a gaudy, flower-covered sofa that rested

against the far wall of the living room opposite the large picture window that overlooked the bay.

"That damn sofa is incredibly ugly," Al said, confirming my unspoken thoughts. "But I got it dirt cheap. Since it folds out into a bed, it comes in handy when I have an overflow crowd like this week."

I volunteered to sleep on the sofa, that way everybody could sleep in and not be bothered by my early morning prowling. Al took me up the creaky wooden steps to show me the three small bedrooms, and then we went out to the van to bring in the rest of the luggage and supplies.

"Hell, those guys won't be here for a couple of hours yet, let's go out and do some fishing!" Al cackled.

"Sounds like a winner to me," I replied. "Hopefully we can catch a bunch of fish to get a head start on Richard. We're gonna need all the help we can get to keep ahead of him. I think that guy could catch fish in the middle of the desert!"

We walked out of the cabin and down the fifty feet to the shore and Al's long dock. The bay was smooth as glass and reflected the dark blue of the clear sky. The shoreline on both sides of the dock was heavily wooded, unbroken by other docks or cabins.

"How come you wanted to have these guys along on this trip?" Al asked, rummaging through his tackle box for a

lure. "I know you used to be close when you were younger, but that was years ago."

"That's true," I said, groping in a pail for an elusive minnow. "This trip is something we'd always talked about when we were kids. Rich and John are both having a tough time of it and I'd like to help them forget their problems, if only for a little while."

"Got ya, ya little shit," I muttered, interrupting myself as I caught a minnow and put him on my hook.

"They're too proud to accept charity," I continued, "and if I tried to pay for everything that's how they'd look at this trip. Letting them pay for the gas gives them a chance to save face. What really pisses me off is that they'd always pay my way and buy things for me when we were younger. They wouldn't listen to me when I argued with them. This is just a way of saying thank you to them...by the way, thanks for letting us use your cabin."

"No problem, it finally gives me a chance to thank you for helping me last year when I needed it," Al said.

"You're as stubborn as your friends when somebody wants to thank you."

"That was different: that's my job!"

We settled into silence as we cast our lines out and waited for the fish to start biting.

About a hour and a half later we heard voices from the

cabin, "Anybody here?"

"They're here!" I shouted, reeling in my line and running down the dock to greet my old friends.

Al wandered down the dock after reeling in his line, and I introduced him to John and Richard as we walked back to the cabin and the refrigerator full of ice-cold beer. Beers were opened and passed around as we settled down in chairs around the living room and began our small talk.

"How are things in the old neighborhood Rich?" I asked. "Your mom getting along okay?"

"She's doing okay. We don't see her too often, only when we drop the kids off for her to babysit."

"Dad said he saw her out in her garden the other day and she's as spry as ever!" John said. "He said it looks like she's got another great crop of strawberries."

"She always had great strawberries!" I recalled, licking my lips at the delicious memory.

"Yeah," Richard muttered.

"John, I was surprised to hear about you and Sharon," I said, turning towards him.

"It hasn't been easy on either one of us. We got so used to having a good paycheck coming in from the railroad. You never think your job is going to end. Sharon put up with it for awhile, but then she started bitchin' we should move somewhere else and look for work. I still hope the

plant will open again, but it doesn't look good."

"Any word on the plant opening up?" I asked.

"There's always rumors it will, but I'll bet it's closed for good," John said.

"Bill tells me it's really got your town screwed up," Al said.

"That's no shit...the unemployment office is the only busy place in town," John said.

Richard remained strangely silent throughout the conversation, staring out the picture window with glassed-over eyes.

An uneasy quiet settled over us, interrupted only by an occasional bird chirp from the trees surrounding the cabin. We sat sipping our beers, lost in individual thoughts on the sad state of our home town.

Al got up and headed for the refrigerator to bring back another round of beers. "Why don't you guys get your poles out and go fish for awhile? I'll throw the steaks on the grill in a while and we can eat in about a half-an-hour."

We headed for the dock while Al sat down to finish his beer before starting dinner. The fishing was slow, giving us time to talk over the good old days, a conversation that Richard rarely participated in. He eventually moved to the other end of the dock to increase his chances of landing a fish. After forty-five minutes Al yelled down that the

steaks were ready, so we reeled in our lines and headed for the cabin.

"Catch anything?" Al asked, as we sat down at the table and started to eat.

"Bill and I each got one," John said, "and Richard got bit by a couple of mosquitoes."

"Bill told me you were always the neighborhood's best fisherman Richard, what's up?" Al teased as he passed out new beers.

"Don't worry," Richard challenged, snatching a beer from the tray, "there's plenty of time yet and when the week is over we'll see who has the most fish!"

Al gave Richard a prolonged stare and then attempted to change the subject. "Have you repossessed any cars lately Bill?" he asked me.

One of the most unpleasant aspects of my job at the bank was to repossess cars. It was a dirty, thankless job, but occasionally it had its humorous moments; and Al loved to hear repo' stories. Both John and Richard put down their forks and picked up their beers.

"I nailed one a couple of weeks ago. I had been trying to catch the asshole for a month. When I'd go to knock on his door, no one would answer, but I could hear a radio blaring inside. I'd leave a note stuck in the door, drive around the block and when I went by his house again the note

would be gone, so I knew he was getting his messages."

"What were you telling him in the notes?" John asked.

"Nothing really. Basically I was asking him if he had any problems. I was begging him to come in for help; but I also informed him if he continued to ignore me I'd have to repossess his car.

"I didn't hear anything from him so I started looking for his car, but couldn't find it anywhere. Then one of our tellers said she had seen the car at the softball complex on a Tuesday night. That really pissed me off because I play softball on Tuesday nights--and I'd never thought to look there."

"How did your teller know it was the right car?" Al asked.

"It was a very distinctive color combination, and also the deadbeat had vanity plates with his last name on them.

"For the next week Joan and I kept an eye on the softball parking lots. Finally she came to our dugout and said she had the car spotted. I couldn't leave the game because we were short on players, so she parked our car across from the deadbeat's and waited for our game to get over. That way, if he took off, she could follow him and then come back and get me so I could 'steal' it," I paused to take a sip of my beer and then continued.

"As soon as the game was over I ran like a bat out of

hell to the parking lot. Joan backed our car out and I threw my equipment in the back seat. I'd been lucky enough to get duplicate keys made on the deadbeat's car, and I grabbed them off the dash. It had started to sprinkle and people were leaving the ball fields so I had to act fast.

"I walked up to the car and started to unlock the door. Suddenly a guy came running out of the exit and ran right towards me, yelling, 'Wait a minute!'.

"I thought I was dead. I pulled the keys out of the lock and got ready to defend myself, but fortunately the guy kept running past the car to a group of people in the next row of cars."

"What'd ya do then?" John asked.

"I got the hell out of there. I jumped in and started the car, but as soon as I let the clutch out the car killed. It was starting to rain harder and I knew the deadbeat would be out any second. I started the car again and this time it kept running.

"I breathed a sigh of relief and drove towards the gate with Joan following in our car, figuring the worst was over. While I was waiting at the gate for the old couple ahead of me to pull onto the highway and started honking their car horn and waving at me. I didn't know them--they must have been friends of the deadbeat. Then I knew I was dead!

"All of a sudden I heard Joan honking her horn behind me

and waving at these guys. They gave me a funny look but they went by me to see who the woman was who was waving at them.

"Finally the old duffers ahead of me pulled on the highway and I hauled ass right behind them, and Joan was right behind me. We hadn't gotten too far down the road when it started pouring rain.

"The next morning I got a call from the deadbeat chewing me out for taking his car. It turned out he and the girl he was trying to impress had to walk home in the pouring rain, needless to say his date was not impressed."

John and Al got a chuckle out of the story, but Richard remained silent, thinking to himself. "Have you ever had to take anything from someone you know--a friend?" he asked quietly.

"You get to know some of these deadbeats pretty well, on a first name basis with the wife, kids, the dog; but never anyone I would consider a friend," I said. "Anyway, I don't think a friend would allow himself to get in that position without talking to me first. Together we could work something out."

"I didn't think banks repossessed cars," John said, "I thought they hired that sort of work done for them."

"I should be so lucky," I said. "Maybe if you come and talk to our president he'll listen to you--then I won't have

to repo' anymore. But for now I'll still be your friendly neighborhood car thief."

"Don't you ever worry about someone pulling a gun on you," Al asked.

"I've always said it's only going to happen once. If I can get away without the deadbeat pulling the trigger, I'm going right back to the bank and resigning. People are getting more desperate with a depressed economy, but you can't pay me enough to make me face a gun."

The conversation gradually changed as dinner continued to a close with the majority of the conversation dominated by Al, John, and myself. Richard remained silent until he went to bed shortly after we finished eating. He complained he had a headache and was fatigued from the long trip.

The long trip had taken its toll on all of us. Although Richard was the first of us to go to bed, the cabin was soon dark as the rest of us went to bed to prepare for a full day of fishing tomorrow.

I woke early the next morning, and discovering I was the first one up, decided to get in some early morning fishing. The cabin was so quiet in the early morning the rustle of my corduroy pants could be heard as I went to the refrigerator to grab a Pepsi to help clear my head of its early morning fog.

I hadn't been fishing long when I heard someone coming

down the dock. Looking back I saw Richard walking down the dock with his pole and tackle box.

"Morning, Rich."

"Mornin'."

"Sleep well last night?" I asked.

"Not really."

"I had a little trouble myself," I said. "I wanted to get down here and start reeling in fish. I gotta stay ahead of the 'old master' right?"

Looking across the mirror-like surface of the bay we heard a snapping, cracking noise--like a clothesline full of sheets drying on a windy day. "Look over there Rich," I said, pointing to the flock of Canadian geese landing noisily across the bay, their honks now joining the sound of their fluttering wings.

Richard said nothing. He looked up briefly, grunted, and went back to digging in his tackle box and working on his pole.

Forgetting about the geese and Richard's stony silence I again concentrated on fishing, casting my line out and slowly retrieving it.

"Remember the old days when we used to go fishing down at the river?" I asked.

"Things were a hell of a lot easier then," Richard admitted.

"Yeah. We'd always talk about how you were going to grow up and play for the Twins and I'd play for the Yankees. Or else you were going to be a famous race car driver. I've always been surprised you didn't become a mechanic. With your ability you'd have been great."

"I've thought about it, but it costs too much to get started. I just plain don't have the money, and I'm not on the best terms with the local bank anyway."

"Oh?" I asked, and laughingly added, "Too bad you don't live closer to Des Moines, you could come to me and I'd make you the loan."

"I don't know...", Richard said, then suddenly asked, "Do you enjoy your job?"

I continued to slowly retrieve my line. "Yeah I suppose so. The pay is okay, and I have great benefits," I said, watching my line intently.

"Even when you have to repossess something?" he asked, his voice dropping almost to a whisper.

"It's a necessary evil. I don't do it because I enjoy it," I replied, turning towards him as I finished pulling my line from the water. "What's wrong with you anyway? You've been down in the mouth since you got here."

"I've got a question to ask you," Richard said. "I can't talk to my banker about it...."

"I really couldn't afford to come up here this week, but

it sounded like fun--something I haven't had in a long time, and I needed to get your advice."

Richard was quiet for a minute as he cast his line into the lake. I took advantage of the silence to cast my line out also.

"How do you give your house back to the bank?" Richard blurted out.

I looked away from my line glanced at my friend, rapidly reeling in his lure, a tear forming in the corner of his glassy eyes.

"Is it really that serious?" I asked, reaching out to squeeze his shoulder. I was aghast that the friend I had always looked upon as a pillar of strength was crying. I had known him since he was six years old and had never seen him shed a tear.

"Hell yes! I couldn't sleep all last night, trying to think of some way to ask you, but I couldn't think of anything. It's not anything new though--I haven't had a decent night's sleep in months."

"How far past due are you Rich?"

"The last payment I made was in May, but it was April's payment, so I'm three months behind now."

"Won't anyone buy the house from you?" I asked. "It's in a good neighborhood, I'd think it'd sell."

"Not for anything close to what it's worth."

"Do you want to give the house up or make the bank foreclose?"

"It's my house damn it!" Richard said. "I've lived there for seven years..., started to raise a family there, it's mine damn it! I don't know, maybe one of those rumors about the plant opening again will be true. If it opens again, I'll be able to catch up in no time."

"But what if it doesn't?"

"I don't know...."

"If you want to stay there, then stay." I told him, the banker in me taking over. "If you can make payments every now and then--do it. If the bank accepts the payment, they have to hold off foreclosure action until six months after your last payment." It felt strange telling someone how to get ahead of the bank, but I couldn't help myself.

"After six months, if the bank forecloses, you only lose your house," I continued, "the bank can't sue you for any of the remaining deficiency. The bank will almost certainly want to retain that right, so they can't foreclose on your house until at least a year from the date of your last payment."

"I wanna pay Bill, I just can't! I gotta feed my family too ya know!" Richard said through his tears.

"I know..., " was all I could reply. I stood there holding my fishing pole, silently watching my life-long

friend sobbing.

I could think of nothing I could do to help him. If it was a small loan, I could have helped him make payments or re-written the loan at my bank. But I had bills of my own, I couldn't afford to make another mortgage payment.

The mortgage bankers at my bank wouldn't even look at a loan out of the Des Moines area. They certainly wouldn't consider rewriting a delinquent loan for an unemployed worker.

The best I could do was to tell my friend how to default on a loan. To turn him into a "deadbeat".

But he wasn't a "deadbeat": he just couldn't pay. It wasn't his fault! How many times had I heard those words from across my desk and smirked on the inside at the person saying them? It was a joke to tell in the break room when you had a deadbeat crying at your desk--a sort of status symbol. How come I wasn't laughing now?

Because none of those deadbeats had given me my first beer, or shown me my first Playboy. Suddenly I was really seeing my job from a different perspective.

Richard's sobbing had quieted now. "Please don't tell John or anybody else about this Bill. They don't know--I don't know, I don't want anybody to know!" Richard pleaded.

"Don't worry," I replied, heading down the dock to head off John and Al, who had just come out of the cabin, "Get

yourself together and come in when you're ready.

"Nothing is biting down here!" I yelled up to the cabin, motioning John and Al back inside, "I hope you bums have breakfast ready!"

\* \* \*

"Have you decided what you're going to do Rich?" I asked.

"I've got faith in the plant. I'm going to stay in the house. Once the plant opens, I'll be able to work it out with the bank."

"The only way it will work in your favor is to talk it over honestly with your banker Rich," I said. "If they see you're trying to cooperate with them, they might be easier on you. Take advantage of any help you can get."

"It's gonna be tough, but I'll go see them. Hopefully they'll go along with me."

"Don't you guys ever sleep?" John's question echoed across the still water as he yelled out the kitchen window at us. "Breakfast is ready if you want it."

"Feel like scrambled eggs after scrambling our brains?" I asked.

"Hell yes!" Richard said, "We'd starve to death if all we had to eat was the fish you catch!"

"Well, if you'd share your's...."

\* \* \*

The rest of the fishing trip went smoothly. Everybody settled down, drank beer, fished, and watched Richard catch the most fish--as usual. We decided the trip was so much fun we'd have to do it again sometime..., but sometime will never come again.

John moved to Florida to try to find a job; he doesn't get home anymore, although he did offer to have us come down to Florida and stay with him. "Fishing is great in Florida too!" he said.

Al isn't around anymore either. He dropped over dead one day with a heart attack about six months after our fishing expedition. I've lost some new friends too.

About a year after our fishing expedition I had to go back to my home town to help Richard move his belonging's into his mother's house. The bank had tried to understand but eventually had to foreclose.

And me? I had plenty of time to help him move. Shortly before going back to help Richard move, I knocked on a deadbeat's door to talk to him about a payment. Only I didn't get to talk to him. Instead of the deadbeat answering the door--I came face-to-face with the muzzle of a double-barrel shotgun.

### REPOSSESSION FOR FUN & PROFIT

Most of the twelve desks in the bank lobby were unoccupied at this time of the afternoon. I was alone in the far corner of the lobby, done with all my work for a change, and still had two hours before I could go home. All the officers except Mr. Earnest, the bank president, had taken the afternoon off and were golfing. Since I wasn't an officer, only an officer trainee, and the only non-golfer in the bank, I had to stay.

Mary, who sat in front of me and often collaborated in my schemes, was helping a young woman open a savings account for her son. At the desk next to Mary, Jan was trying to help Mr. Pitts and his wife invest their certificate of deposit.

Opening my top desk drawer I found a pile of junk mail where I had tossed it this morning when I was busy. Taking the thick rubber band off the envelopes, I wrapped it around my left index and middle fingers and quickly skimmed the

advertisements, tossing them into the garbage as quickly as you peel a potato. I found nothing of interest, but the rubber band was intriguing.

Since it was a thick rubber band, it had a powerful snap to it, and I could stretch it over eight inches. Holding one end on the leather of my chair, I pulled the rubber band as far as I could. Releasing the other end gave a satisfactory POP that echoed around the lobby, causing a few heads to scan the area for the source of the noise.

Because the source of the noise was concealed by my desk, no one could confirm that I was the guilty one. To further throw off any suspicion, I put what I hoped was a surprised look on my face, and gazed around the lobby as if searching for the source of the noise also; stopping for a second on anyone who looked in my direction. That was enough to remove suspicion from me, and when no one was paying attention to me I dug in my desk for more toys.

I felt eyes staring at me and gazed up to see Mr. Pitts watching me. Pitts runs a small hardware store down the street from the bank but to listen to the old fart talk you'd think he was putting the whole Sears chain out of business single-handedly. Whenever one of the bank employees had to go to his store we referred to it as "descending to the Pitts." Okay, so it's a poor excuse for a joke--it's a poor excuse for a store. I don't understand how he could be staying in

business, whenever I was in the store I was usually the only customer.

In banking you've gotta be nice to the customers, and for 95% of the customers it's no problem. But Pitts is in the worst extreme of the other 5%. He usually cuts ahead of the other customers waiting in the teller lines and tosses his deposit in, saying he'll pick up the receipt later. Then he barges into Mr. Earnest's, the bank's president, office to talk to him.

The tellers resent the way he just throws the deposit bag at them. The customers who are waiting in line get upset, because they feel the bank is giving Pitts special treatment, and take out their anger on the first person they see, the teller. Since Pitts is such a good friend of the president everybody is afraid to complain about him.

I don't know what Mr. Earnest sees in the Pitts. With their disgusting personalities (or lack of personalities), they couldn't be the most ideal friends, and their business didn't bring in that much money to the bank. From what I had heard the tellers say, the deposits Pitts was so desperate for were nothing that spectacular.

They were physically unattractive. He was a tall, skinny, sloppily dressed man with an incredibly large bald head; usually glistening with sweat as he planned his next corporate take-over.

Mrs. Pitts wasn't much better. She was a short, mousy little woman who dressed plainly and never wore any make-up. She reminded me of one of those little dogs, like a Pomeranian or Pekingese, that follow you around, yipping and nipping at your heels, but as soon as you turn around they scramble away like you shot at them. That was how she followed her husband around. While he would bellow at someone about a minor detail, she'd be beside him, yipping in her two cents worth, feeling safe in his shadow.

I decided to let Jan worry about the Pitts and looked across the lobby at two of the tellers talking. Shooting them with paper wads could be interesting but I didn't know if my rubber band would shoot that far. Besides, there were customers at the desk in front of me, and I might accidentally "shoot" one of them.

It might have been fun to wing the little boy though. He was one of those kids who just stare at you, you know the kind: they don't blink, they hardly move--they just stare at you like your fly is down or something. I felt self-conscious anyway, I wasn't doing anything constructive, but I wished the little brat would look somewhere else.

Normally I was swamped with work on an afternoon like this, but since consumer loans had been slow lately I had no real pressing business, and it was easy to get bored. I tried to catch up on my bank reading, but my god, that's

worse than my old college text books!

Digging around some more in my desk, I found a couple of new pencils I had sharpened and never used. I love a sharp pencil. Personally, I use a mechanical pencil so I always have a sharp point, but I keep wood pencils around for customers to use.

The electric pencil sharpener the bank used wouldn't give me the long, tapered point I like, so I took my pencils to a law office on the third floor of the bank that had a manual sharpener that gave me a more ideal point. One of the firm's lawyers was in my service club so it gave me an excuse to visit him, plus they had cute secretaries.

I spread the rubber band between my index and middle fingers and absent-mindedly stretched one of the pencils into the rubber band, like a miniature sling shot, eying the high ceiling of the bank lobby. The part of the bank my desk was located in used to be a theatre, so it was extra high. Springing the rubber band, I wondered if it had the power to reach that high. Pulling the rubber band as far as possible I thought might be enough. Maybe I'd try sometime when the bank was empty.

Suddenly the pencil slipped from my fingers. Lunging forward in my chair, I desperately snatched at air, but the pencil was already gone.

It had just begun its flight, but was already well

beyond my reach, slowly tumbling end-over-end as it soared towards the ceiling. Quickly I searched the lobby, looking for the pencil's potential landing site....

They say right before you die that your life passes in front of you. Visions of important moments were beginning to pass before my eyes, replacing my view of Mr. Pitts, my boss' friend Mr. Pitts, who was trying to squeeze a better interest rate out of Jan. He was sitting there oblivious to the fact that a pencil with his name on it was tumbling through the air above him.

High school graduation was the first thing I remembered. Some boring college professor was telling us how we were the future of mankind. If we were the future, mankind was in big trouble. The guy on my left was drunker than a sailor on Saturday night, the guy on my right was so stoned we almost had to chain him to his seat to keep him from floating away, and the majority of the class, myself included, had had at least a couple of beers before the ceremonies started.

Right as the speaker was reaching the most dramatic moment of his boring speech, pausing to heighten its importance, my fellow graduate on the left began to gag and then loudly puked--fortunately to his left. Instead of splattering me, he got Mary Kay Kent--class priss. Her screams did an effective job of ruining the speaker's dramatic pause. Better her than me though, I would have

screamed much louder, and would have colored the screams with a great deal of profanity as well.

College graduation was next. Actually, not the ceremony itself, I couldn't comment on that, since I had been partying the night before and forgot to set my alarm clock. I've talked to people who were there, and they assure me that I didn't miss anything. The major excitement was when my parent's discovered I wasn't in attendance. Mom was sure I was kidnapped, and I think Dad was kind of hoping I was.

By the time I had recovered enough to realize what had happened and rushed to the auditorium to catch my parents, they had left. It took the better part of the day for us to get together and get the story straight. I tried to comfort Mom that no one would want to kidnap a hung over, unemployed college graduate anyway, and that her fear's had been groundless. I think about then she was starting to think like Dad, wishing I had been kidnapped.

My next vision was the day I was hired at the bank. Mr. Earnest was telling me, "Scott, with your potential you can go far in banking." Yeah, far back in the closet to get my coat before I head to the unemployment line....No, it couldn't be that bad.

Looking again at the pencil's flight, I saw that there was a good possibility it would hit the ceiling. I began to feel relieved, and leaned back to ponder my good fortune.

The pencil slowed in its upward flight, and I again began to gauge its trajectory.

I'd always enjoyed banking, it was a shame my career would have to end so abruptly. I guess I had it coming, screwing around on the job, but somehow I'd always figured if I was going to get canned it would be for some work-related reasons.

The pencil had slowed to a stop, poised at the peak of its trajectory scant inches from the high ceiling...so close, yet so far. I looked at the target, hoping he had moved or was about to move, but no luck, Pitts was right where he had been when the pencil started its flight and showed no inclination of moving.

Why couldn't it have been the little brat in front of me? He deserved a pencil stuck in his pointy little head. The little snot-nosed kid had been bugging me ever since he sat down. At least I could have enjoyed my predicament a little then.

Of course there was still the possibility that I had miscalculated. A near miss wouldn't break my heart. I could have had a good laugh about it later on after I had caught my breath again. Or maybe the eraser would hit him instead of the point, I could always pray.

Pitts was still sitting innocently unaware of his fate. His head must have looked like a large target for the pencil

to hit now that it had started its descent...why did he have to be so bald? If he had some hair on his head, it might at least cushion the blow.

Did I mention I like sharp pencils? I have a fantasy about the perfect pencil tip: it tapers to a point only an atom wide. Unfortunately it wouldn't be practical, because as soon as it was used the perfect point would be gone. Still, I always try.

The pencil that was speeding towards Mr. Pitts' unprotected skull was one of the sharpest pencils I ever had. Why should his head be protected? People don't normally get attacked by pencils in your average bank lobbies. Maybe the eraser would hit him, "Please God don't let it be the point!" I prayed.

Pitts sat at Jan's desk, oblivious to his impending agony. Shit! Why did he have to be a friend of Mr. Earnest. He was a pain in the ass to the rest of the bank.

Still hoping for a near miss, I began to wonder what his reaction would be. Pain--hell yes, there'd be pain! A heart attack? Could be, he looked like he had a rough day. Christ! Now I was going to be a murderer! Maybe he was a tough guy, impervious to pain, a sort of walking "Old Ironsides." He'd just shrug it off, look around to see what had hit him, see if anybody saw him get hit--maybe chuckle about it, and go back to whatever he was doing.

No. If the initial impact didn't kill him, he'd scream bloody murder. I thought he'd probably come to my desk, threaten to beat the hell out of me, demand an apology; and after I apologized go Mr. Earnest and demand that I be fired anyway.

After I was fired my reputation would spread, no one would want to hire me. I'd spend the rest of my life wandering aimlessly looking for half-smoked cigarette butts and cursing the guys who invented rubber bands and pencil sharpeners.

The pencil had reached its final destination before my startled eyes. For just a split-second everything froze, the pencil poised perfectly perpendicular to the bare skull beneath it. The gods had decided to smile on me though, the eraser, not the sharp point, had hit the shiny flesh. The victim hadn't had time yet to react to the impact.

Ah, if that moment only could have lasted. But now, as the pencil began to recoil from the skull, Pitts' eye's opened wide in wounded outrage. At the place where the pencil struck, a small red spot appeared. He'd probably have a little bruise from the impact. It might be kind of funny to hear him try to explain the bruise: "I was hit by a pencil at the bank." But then again, since I was the one to hit him, maybe it wouldn't be so funny.

Mr. Pitts quickly slapped his head with a loud smack, as

if swatting at an annoying fly, but the offending pencil had already bounced clear and fallen harmlessly to the carpet.

I've never been able to hide guilt very well. It's like a big arrow appears pointing at me and the words "I did it" pop out in bright neon lights across my forehead. I can bluff my way through little things like snapping the rubber band against my chair, but when the pressure is on I crack like an egg with a thin shell, spilling everything. If I try to lie my way out of my guilt, all I end up doing is stuttering, and blushing an incredibly intense fire-engine red.

Pitts spotted the tell-tale signs of my guilt and roared in anger and anguish, "YOU DID IT!" He stormed to my desk, screaming obscenities that went unheard in my shock. His wife was right at his heels, echoing his words in little yips. I wondered in my terror if I threw a stick if she would fetch it.

Although I was already staring at him, I pretended to be taken aback by his angry allegations. "Wha, wha, what?" I managed to stammer cleverly.

"He did it! He did it! I saw him do it!"

Oh shit! I had forgotten about the little rug rat in front of me, who was screaming at the top of his lungs. If I had to hit someone why couldn't it have been him?

I jumped out of my chair to attempt to deny my victim's

allegations. He stood across from my desk, feet spread apart, hands on hips, and loudly accused me of every foul crime imaginable, all the time his wife's yips growing louder (Oh God, I wished I could find a stick!)

I leaned backward and spread my arms in front of me to fend off his angry barrage of accusations. Mr. Pitts suddenly stopped talking, Mrs. Pitts stopped yipping, it was only then that I saw what had stopped them. The rubber band still dangled at the base of the index and middle fingers of my left hand.

"Yes, I did it," I said quietly. Any hope of lying my way out of the predicament was gone. The neon lights on my forehead clicked off and the arrow disappeared. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to do it. I've been having a lousy day and this just tops it off. If I was aiming for you I never would have hit you," I stammered, my voice drifting off.

"I don't give a damn!" he said, roaring as a mortally wounded animal might. The rest of the bank was quiet, the few people left in the lobby silently watching our confrontation.

"Your irresponsible behavior and attitude show you have no business working in a bank. I personally am going to report you to Mr. Earnest, who is a very good friend of mine, and I'll see to it that you are fired. Let's go, Irene," he said, and with his wife tagging along faithfully

at his heels, started towards the president's office, patting his head and looking at his hand to see if his wound was bleeding. I didn't like the sound of that "very good friend" part.

Mr. Earnest was standing in the doorway of his office, waiting with a puzzled look on his face, watching Pitts and his wife weave their way through the empty desks, muttering obscenities the whole way. When they reached his office he escorted them inside and closed the door. Soon muffled expletives and occasional yips were heard across the silent lobby.

Now what the hell am I gonna do? I wondered, trying to decide the best way to explain to my family that I had been fired. Family hell--how would I gonna tell my fiance? She was busy planning our wedding that was less than two months away. I tried to figure out how we could feed our wedding guests with food stamps, and would I be able to get them in time? Getting fired for embezzlement would probably sound better than the real cause of my dismissal. Either way I was done as a banker.

Another muffled roar from Mr. Earnest's office caused me to duck my head. At least I had livened up the afternoon, and I certainly wasn't bored anymore--but I probably wasn't employed either.

"Good shot Scott!" Jan whispered loudly.

Jan and a couple of other customer service girls smiled and gave me the thumbs-up sign. At least somebody was happy about this.

Suddenly Mr. Earnest's door opened and Pitts and his wife emerged, both scowling in my direction. Pitts rubbed his bald head one more time, turned, and walked out of the bank, his wife again faithfully on his heels.

I quickly looked away, but not before seeing Mr. Earnest writing something at his desk. Knowing the end was near, I began searching around my desk for a legal pad to compose my letter of resignation. I was still rooting under piles of papers when Mr. Earnest called me into his office a couple of minutes later.

I began the long walk to his office, carefully avoiding the eyes of my soon to be ex-co-workers. Mr. Earnest motioned me to a chair and closed the door. Sitting down behind his desk, he sat down and opened a drawer to pull out an envelope. Looking quietly across the desk at me, he slowly slid the envelope between his left thumb and index finger.

"Do you know why I've asked you in here Scott?" he finally asked.

"Yes sir," I replied. "Mr. Pitts just complained about me shooting a pencil at him and now you're going to fire me. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to do it. He just wouldn't accept

my apology...." Realizing how silly my babbling must have sounded I shut up.

"Yes, Mr. Pitts wanted me to fire you, so I have drawn up this notice for you," he said, leaning across his desk to hand me the envelope he had been playing with. "Open it...."

I stared at the envelope in my hands, but thought of my future. How long does it take to start receiving unemployment? My car payment was due the next week and I wouldn't be able to afford it. Great--first the bank fires me, then repossesses my car; I had all sorts of excitement to look forward to.

"Go ahead, open it," Mr. Earnest repeated.

I ripped open the heavy bank envelope with shaking hands, pulled out the piece of bank stationery and started to read. "You are hereby ordered to requisition one pencil sharpener from the supply room. William Earnest, President."

I looked up in stunned disbelief.

"I can't officially condone your behavior Scott, but I finally got it out of Pitts that you had tried to apologize and explain your actions and he wouldn't let you. You've shown me by the way you're acting that you are genuinely sorry.

"When Mr. Pitts showed me how sharp the pencil that hit

him was, I could see why you go three floors to sharpen them. As a punishment for horsing around and potentially injuring a bank customer, you are to keep a pencil sharpener at your desk. That way you won't be scampering all over the building to sharpen your pencil's and gawk at secretaries. Also, to show the others that you are being punished, you are to sharpen any employee's pencil who wants it sharpened.

"Unofficially," he continued, "you couldn't have harpooned a bigger horse's ass if you'd tried."

"But I thought you were friends!"

"One of the first things you need to learn is that not everybody who says he's my friend really is."

"But he's always in your office talking to you," I said.

"Yeah, and because my house is by a corn field it seems like I've usually got at least one mouse in my garage, but it doesn't mean the mouse has replaced my dog as the family pet," Mr. Earnest said.

"As further punishment, you are going to help the collection department liquidate Pitts' hardware store. We've been trying to keep it quiet, but his business has been terrible and he wants out of it.

"He showed you today that he's not really much of a people person. His attitude towards customers has been lousy for years. He always acts like he's doing the customer a

favor when he opens his door. He always refused to adjust his store to modern retailing methods, and once the new Wal-Mart came to town it was all over but the shouting. I realize he's a horse's ass, but I hate to see a local business go down the drain."

"But my job is making consumer loans, not closing down commercial accounts, I don't have any experience," I said.

"Then this is just what you need," Mr. Earnest said.

"It's obvious consumer loans are slow if you have enough time to experiment in shooting pencils into space. There is going to be an opening in the commercial loan department soon, this could be just the nudge you need to help you get the job." He got up from his desk and headed towards the office door, "You're doing a good job so far, just don't let me catch you shooting pencils again!"

I stumbled back to my desk, still in shock, but determined to be the best banker possible for Mr. Earnest. I had gone into his office an unemployed man, and come out being considered for a promotion.

The lobby was quiet now, with only a couple of employees left in the area. The smile on my lips answered their unasked questions and I settled again at my desk.

Digging around on my desk, I quickly found what I was looking for, "Repossession For Fun & Profit". This article had put me asleep earlier, but now by golly, it was gonna

help me get a promotion--not to mention a little revenge.

### BANKERS' HOURS

"Yes...thank you very much Alice, I'll expect the check by Friday, be sure to let me know if something comes up and you can't make your payment. Okay--good-bye," Denny Murray hung up his phone.

"Damn!" he continued, muttering under his breath.

When Denny looked up from his desk he noticed the curious look on my face. It's not that I'm offended by an occasional swear word, and a bank certainly isn't a church, but I've always thought you should watch your language when a customer might overhear you.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked, "don't you have anything better to do than gawk at me?"

"I was just wondering why you were cussin' Alice, she said she'd pay by Friday," I responded quickly, trying to look like the bright, eager to learn, on the job for a week, bank trainee I was.

"That's what she's said the past month and a half! Sure

as hell when the mail comes Friday her check won't be there. But since she has 'promised', I can't do anything until Friday.

"Do you realize that if she doesn't get her payment in this Friday, and wants us to wait till the next Friday, that we'll have to carry her at month end? A couple more like her and we get called on the carpet to explain everything to the bank president, and that's not something to look forward to."

"Mr. Jacobsen seems like a decent enough guy to me," I replied.

Denny snorted, gave me a knowing look, and continued. "It's obvious he's never called you on the carpet--it's not pretty. He was a hard-assed collector in the old days before all the legal changes, and he still thinks it's the 'good old days' of easy collections.

"You'd think the laws were written by deadbeats. If I didn't know that ninety percent of the jerks can't write, or read anything more complicated than a beer label, I'd think so too."

I'd only been working in the bank's loan department for a week, but I'd already heard this tirade several times. Denny considered people who couldn't pay their bills, for whatever the reason, to be the scum of the earth: "lower than whale shit," he'd say.

"I've gotta get rid of this frustration," Denny said, digging through a stack of collection cards on his desk. Finally, he found what he was looking for, and opening his desk to pull out a key ring. "Come on Tony," he said, "we're gonna go steal a car."

"B-But you said she had until Friday to make the payment," I stammered, stalling for an excuse.

"Forget her, there's nothing we can do until Friday. This car belongs to different deadbeat. He's gonna have to pay because Alice pissed me off. Besides he had his phone number changed to an unlisted number, and that pisses me off too. This just isn't gonna be Rick's lucky day.

"The only thing that pisses me off more than a deadbeat with an unlisted number is when they have an answering machine," Denny continued. "They can't afford to pay on their loans but they go out and buy a goddamn answering machine. And they still don't return your calls when you leave a message for them!"

"It's getting close to 4:30, Denny. How does the bank feel about overtime?" I asked.

"They get pissed when I don't have it. They don't think we're working hard enough if we're not at the bank twenty-four hours a day. One of the first things you learn about bankers' hours is that there ain't any such creature."

Realizing that escape was hopeless, I followed Denny to

his car. "We get twenty two cents per mile travel allowance to hunt the 'beats'. Putting our odometer readings on the file cover documents our expenses when we go to court."

"Go to court?" I asked. "Even after we've repossessed the car?"

"You bet," Denny said, starting the car and pulling out of the bank parking lot. "The bastards have made life hell for us, so we have to repay 'em. By the time we get a car recovered, fixed up, and all the fees and lawyer expenses paid, there's always a deficiency and we can sue 'em."

"But if they're not paying their bills, what makes you think they'll pay the deficiency?"

"They usually won't; but it's fun to watch the sheriff serve papers on 'em with all their neighbors around, and then watch 'em squirm while our lawyers' barbecue 'em in court. If they don't pay off, they get a judgement they carry around with them until they pay, and every time they apply for credit and get turned down, they'll think of me. That'll teach 'em to not pay so I have to go talk to the bank president."

Leafing through the file, I asked Denny how he happened to have a set of keys for the car we were looking for. Looking over at him, I saw a strange gleam in his eyes as he explained. "We popped this car once before, and I just had a gut feeling that it would come in handy to keep a set

when we sold it. The first guy moved out to Oregon and thought he didn't have to pay anymore. I called a repo' company out there and they stole it while he was at work; they found a loaded pistol under the front seat."

Hearing about the gun, my head snapped back from gazing out the window. "Do you run into that very often, guns I mean?"

"Not often enough," Denny said as he turned into the parking lot of the packing plant. "Keep an eye out for a powder blue Corvette. Take a look at the title in the file for the license number."

This guy is nuts if he wants to face a gun, I thought to myself while I dug through the file looking for the title. "Webster County QDU 215," I said, repeating the license number.

Driving slowly down the lines of cars in the parking lot, Denny scanned one side while I scanned the other side. When he noticed all the open parking spots in the lot, Denny glanced at his watch. "Don't think we'll find him here today, his shift is over," Denny said. "We'll check the rest of the lot though, just in case."

I had hoped to find the car in the lot to avoid a confrontation with the owner. We'd just use the keys to take the car and he'd never be the wiser.

But maybe I was being nervous for no reason, after all,

I'd never seen the guy before. "What's this...", I paused to hold the folder sideways to read the name, "Rick Glenn look like?" Rick Glenn--sounded kind of wimpy to me.

Denny snorted. "When he came in to look at the car we nicknamed him Jethro, for that guy on 'The Beverly Hillbillies'. You know the type: big, strong, and not real intellectual. One of the tellers went to school with him, said he had the potential to be an All-American football player until he got drunk at a school dance and put three guys in the hospital during a fight."

"Oh...", I had to ask, I thought to myself. I liked it better when he was a faceless wimp.

"Where are we gonna look next?" I asked, pulling out the loan application to look for possible leads.

"I thought we'd drive by his house, even though he probably isn't home; and then drive by some of the bars around town."

Again I looked at Denny in slack-jawed surprise. We're gonna look for a violent drunk in bars? And then tell him we're taking his car? Shit! I hadn't been at the bank long enough to be covered by the health insurance plan--and if I kept hanging around Denny I never would be.

Denny had a hard, determined look on his face as he pulled the car out of the parking lot and pulled onto the highway. The cloud of dust from our hasty departure from the

gravel lot slowly drifted over the remaining cars.

We turned onto a side street and Denny sped through a dizzying maze of streets, slowing only for stop signs--not stopping, just slowing a little bit by putting his foot in the vicinity of the brake pedal.

Pulling to a stop in front of the address listed on the loan application, we found a tired looking, small white house that desperately needed a new coat of paint, or siding, or maybe the best bet would be a well-placed stick of dynamite.

Taking a short tour around the house (being careful to avoid several obnoxious piles left by an unseen large dog), and looking through a window into the deserted garage revealed that nobody was living here anymore.

"If he'd cashed in all those beer cans before he moved he'd have had enough money to make three car payments," Denny remarked calmly as he walked away from the window.

Beer cans! I pressed my face against the window, shielding my eyes with my right hand and scanned the interior of the garage. Large bags overflowing with empty beer cans were scattered along the far garage wall. There went my chance of his joining AA because of his violent behavior.

"Come on," Denny said, "Let's go check some bars."

Taking a last look at the overflowing bags and saying a silent prayer that Rick had had a thirsty roommate, I

reluctantly turned and walked back to the car.

I looked at my watch and saw it was close to 6:00. Rather than tell Denny what time it was, I asked him, and hoped he would see how late it was and call off the search.

"Don't worry about the time Tony, you'll get paid. You didn't have anything going tonight did you?" he asked, in a voice that indicated it wouldn't have made any difference if I had.

"Nothing really, just a ball game on the tube later. But if we're going to be much later I should give the wife a call."

"You'll be home in time--Hey, is that our car up there?" Denny shouted.

We were stopped at a stoplight at the edge of town. There was a car ahead of us waiting to make a left turn, making it difficult to see very far, but a couple of blocks ahead, a dirty blue Corvette had pulled out of Charlie's Place and was headed out of town.

"It could be," I said, hoping to be wrong.

"Come on light--change damn it!" Denny was impatiently muttering and beating the steering wheel with his fist. His complexion was getting redder by the second as his anger quickly increased.

If this light doesn't change soon, I won't have to worry about repossessing any cars, I thought. I'll be too busy trying to find somebody who knows CPR to work on Denny, he's

on his way to a coronary.

The second the light changed, Denny laid on the horn. "MOVE THAT FUCKIN' CAR!" he yelled out his open window, and continued to lay on the horn.

The anger and impatience in his voice shocked me. This guy is a maniac, I thought to myself. Looking out of my open window I saw I wasn't alone in my thoughts.

An elderly lady was stopped next to us waiting for the light to change, and she had the misfortune of having her window down also. She stared at our car in amazement as the color rapidly drained from her face.

Denny was still impatiently honking the horn and loudly berating the driver of the car ahead of us. Noticing my silence, he interrupted himself to see why I was so quiet, and noticed our pale-faced neighbor.

"What's the matter lady? Ain't 'cha ever heard 'fuck' before?" he yelled at her.

This seemed to shock her into a sort of recovery and she quickly drove away. The car ahead of us finally got a break in traffic and turned the corner while she pulled away on our other side.

This signaled the start of the "Murray 500", in which I was an unwilling participant. Denny roared in and out of traffic still bellowing to himself about "damn sight-seers" and "worthless tourists". I scrambled around the front seat,

first locating the seat belt, and after a few desperate seconds of frantic digging, the buckle, and strapped myself in.

It took Denny a several minutes to overtake the Corvette's large lead at seventy miles an hour. "I think it's him, can you read the license number?" Denny asked me.

Leaning forward, I squinted to read the license plate, which was bracketed by bumper stickers. One read "N.R.A." Recalling the earlier repo of this car had involved a gun, I struggled to convince myself that the bumper sticker didn't stand for the National Rifle Association. National Reading Association was a possibility, but somehow Rick didn't sound like the bookworm type.

As we got closer it was easier to read the other bumper sticker: "If it becomes illegal to own a gun, only crooks will have guns", the bookworm idea was definitely dead--shot between the eyes with a .30/.30.

"What's the plate number?" Denny asked impatiently.

"QDU...215," I murmured as I sank back in the seat, wishing I were wrong.

"We're gonna nail this bastard!" Denny cackled gleefully, pounding his fist on the steering wheel.

"Did you read the bumper stickers?" I asked.

Denny leaned forward, "I see the dumb shit never bothered to take off that N.R.A. crap after he bought the

car from us."

I perked up upon hearing this, at least our beer crazed drunk wasn't a gun wielding, beer crazed drunk.

"Of course," Denny continued to himself, "he was kind of excited when he saw the bumper stickers on the car, like he was a gun nut too."

I slumped back again to contemplate this revolting development. I realized if he did pull out a gun and start shooting at us I would be protected by the engine if I stayed like this.

Denny leaned forward over the steering wheel, his eyes glazed over with excitement as he stared at the Corvette. "Nervous kid?" he asked, his eyes glued straight ahead.

"If you consider being scared shitless a symptom of nervousness, I guess you could say so," I mumbled, and slumped farther down in my seat.

"Yeah, ain't it great?"

As we pulled into the small town of Badger, the Corvette slowed and turned right. Denny quickly pulled up on its tail and turned also. The Corvette angle-parked in front of the only bar in town. Denny screeched to a halt behind the Corvette and blocked it in.

We hadn't been quick enough to catch Rick outside the bar, his large body had just disappeared into the bar as we turned the corner. Oh well, I thought to myself slumping

back in my seat, now we can just steal the car without any confrontation; too bad, I added sarcastically.

Denny thought the same thing as he bounced out of the car and ran to the Corvette and put a key in the lock. "He's changed the fuckin' locks!" Denny yelled over to me, "Looks like we're gonna have to go in and talk to him."

What a rude way to be shocked out of such a tranquil state. I mustered my courage, sat up straight in the car, and stepped out onto wobbly legs.

"Couldn't we maybe just leave a note on his windshield asking him to come in and pay...", I started in a half-hearted attempt to reason with Denny.

"Nah," Denny interrupted as he headed for the door to the bar, "it'd probably be there for a week before he noticed it. Besides, you're giving him too much credit if you think he could read it. There's only one way to handle deadbeats like this." When I reached Denny at the bar door, he opened it and we walked in.

Conversations died when the bar's occupants caught sight of Denny and me in our three-piece suits. The only sound to be heard was Rick loudly talking to friends as he wove his way to the back of the bar.

I felt like I was on stage, the hostile audience lost in the dark smoky haze, a small ocean of brightly-colored seed company hats. Resisting the temptation to do a little

soft-shoe, I gave them a sheepish grin and nervously cleared my throat, while Denny searched the bar for Rick.

I sensed my proximity to the pool table, and realized how easy it would be for someone to miss the cue ball and "accidentally" break their cue stick over my head. I tried to look nonchalant as I slowly moved away.

Denny had started to move through the bar and I quickly scrambled to follow him. I felt safety in numbers, even if my partner was on the demented side. Maybe he could be a shield if people started throwing things like glasses, bottles, tables....

We found Rick at the back of the bar, standing watching a card game, leaning on a softball bat with one hand, and a beer (a beer!) in the other. Armed and considered dangerous in my book.

"Rick, we've gotta talk," Denny said, gaining Rick's attention.

"Oh, hi Denny. What's up?"

Motioning to a table in the corner, Denny told him again we had to talk.

Pulling up chairs, the three of us sat around the table. Since Denny was still carrying the softball bat, I sat as far away as possible.

"We've gotta take your car Rick." Denny started out, "You're way past due. Tell him how much Tony."

I jumped when I heard my name and gazed across the table at Denny in bug-eyed terror. It's not enough that you've got a death wish, I thought, but you've got to take me to the grave with you.

I turned mechanically towards Rick, pulled the collection card away from where it was paper-clipped to the cover of his file and tried to read the figures. While I read the figures, I struggled to ignore the proximity of Rick and his softball bat.

Terror has a way of making it hard to focus my eyes, but eventually the figures became clear. "Y...Y...You're over two months past due," I managed to stammer out squeakily, and silently cursed how my voice had refused to function.

I pondered apologizing to Rick for his owing the bank so much, or offering to make payments for him out of my own pocket, but decided to die with dignity. True, it was a small, tattered, shred of dignity--but it was dignity just the same. "Yeah, I'd planned to come in and talk to you about giving back the car," Rick said. "I don't need it anymore. Follow me out to my parent's farm, I'll clean out my stuff and you can take it. I just gotta give this bat to Bill over there and we can go."

This is too easy, I thought to myself, involuntarily flinching when Rick put the bat back on his shoulder and turned to walk over to his friend.

The bar was still quiet, so I told Denny I would go out to move our car. The quiet was too spooky for me, I had to get out.

Walking back into the bright sunlight I found I would have to work my way through a small crowd that had gathered outside the bar. Obviously curious about Denny's strange parking technique, they instantly were quiet when I walked out the door. No one made an effort to move so I could get to the car. I had begun to feel nervous about how to get around the hostile crowd when Rick and Denny came out of the bar.

When they recognized Rick, the crowd began to mumble and slowly parted; I quickly darted to the car through the opening and crawled into the front seat. Denny climbed into the car and backed up to let Rick back out the Corvette and we slowly followed it out of town.

"Why did we have to go after him?" I asked. "He said he was going to come in to see you about giving the car up."

"If you believe that, I've got some prime ocean front land in the middle of the Sahara desert I'd like to sell you cheap," Denny responded sarcastically. "Your kid'd be president of the bank if we'd have waited for him to come in."

"But I don't have any kids..."

"See what I mean?" Denny asked.

"Oh..."

"That was a piece of cake though," Denny said triumphantly, and I had to wonder if he had failed to notice the crew of "bakers" that had been waiting outside the bar for us.

We turned into a farm yard surrounded by run-down buildings outside of town where Rick pulled the Corvette in next to a pick-up truck and began pulling things out from behind the passenger seat.

Denny got out of the car and started to walk up to watch Rick unload the car. I turned around to get the credit file out of the back seat, where it had been tossed when we got back to the car after we had left the bar.

Suddenly I heard a thud, and the car rocked from side to side. I hadn't heard any words exchanged--any violent threats, or the sound of any blows. The car rocked again, the only sound I could hear was a scratching noise.

After a few moments of silence, I slowly turned around, dreading what I might see. I peered over the dashboard and saw Denny watching Rick unload his Corvette. Looking to my right prior to getting out of the car I came to face to face with the largest dog I had ever seen in my life. It looked like a combination of large black labrador and a grizzly bear. His large furry face was pressed against the window along with his huge paws, his hot breath steaming up the

window.

It was easy to understand why we hadn't seen the dog when we first arrived at the farm, we had probably mistaken him for a stray cow, a piece of machinery, or maybe a small building.

This was obviously the same dog that had left the deposits all over Rick's yard back in town. Crawling over to the driver's side of the car, I opened the door and stood up. I looked around and saw the dog coming towards me, his teeth bared. I suddenly found myself behind the steering wheel. I wasn't sure how I had gotten there, all I knew was that I was damn glad to be there and still have the dog on the outside.

"He don't bite!" Rick yelled.

I rolled down the window a couple of inches and yelled back, "The son of a bitch is gritting his teeth at me! Don't tell me he doesn't bite!"

"He's smilin' at ya! That means he likes ya!"

Yeah, he likes bones too, and I bet he doesn't smile at them. Thinking about it for a moment, I hadn't heard him growl, and his tail was wagging.

Well, at least being worried about this mutt took my mind off a gun. I crawled over to the other side of the car, took a deep breath, opened the door and quickly got out and started walking to the 'Vette.

Although the dog was nudging my hand with his nose, I continued to walk towards the car, and tried to ignore him. "He's just smilin'," I muttered under my breath. I felt like my hand was a sacrificial offering to the dog, but all he had done so far was lick it a couple of times. As I reached the 'Vette, I hoped I was the wrong flavor.

What an incredible pile of garbage! Dirty clothes, fishing poles and a tackle box, tools, maps, and other assorted paraphernalia were scattered throughout the car. Rick was busy throwing all of this onto the pile he had already started in the back of the pick-up.

Walking around to the front of the car I peeked in at the passenger side of the car to see if I could find the gun I was sure was lurking there. If a gun was there you'd have to look hard, because it would have been buried under at least a case and a half of empty Budwieser cans.

"Tony, why don't you go get the personal possession's form from the file so Rick can sign it when he's got everything out of the car."

"Sure," I said, and trotted back to the car to get the file, the dog hot on my heels. After digging through the file I located the right document and brought it back.

"Here's the form Denny," I said, handing him the papers.

"Thanks," Denny said. He took the forms from me, and began to explain them to Rick in a loud voice so I could

overhear. That was Denny's teaching philosophy: no hands on experience, just talk loud, they'll pick it up.

Suddenly Rick stopped and said he had forgotten something in the glove compartment. He climbed back into the car, opened the glove compartment, removed a couple of items and climbed back out. In one hand he had a small box, in the other, a pistol.

I started to back away, hands in front of me in a feeble effort to fend off the bullets, and babbled incoherently. Both Denny and Rick looked at me curiously, then looked at each other, shrugged, and went back to signing the remainder of the forms. The dog tagged along at my heels, giving me curious looks, and an occasional lick of the hand. Maybe fear gave me a different flavor.

I went back to the car and stayed there, utterly humiliated. The dog stayed by the car for awhile cocking his head from side to side giving me curious looks and occasional "smiles", until he tired of waiting for me and wandered back over to Rick and Denny.

Denny climbed into the Corvette and drove out of the farm yard as I numbly followed in his car. As I looked in the rear view mirror, my last sight was of Rick waving good-bye to us, the pistol carelessly shoved in the waist band of his pants.

I decided if this was an easy repossession my heart could

never stand a tough one. When I looked ahead and saw Denny's head bobbing to the music it was obvious he had enjoyed himself.

I thought it over and decided it had indeed been an interesting day. I had gone out on my first repossession (and lived to tell about it), learned several new obscenities from Denny, managed to avoid starting a riot in Badger (how I still don't know), and been tasted (and rejected) by a dog that could have starred in "The Dog That Ate Cleveland", and if he hadn't eaten it, he certainly produced enough waste to fertilize a better part of it.

Coming back to earth, I realized Denny had parked the Corvette in front of the Badger bar and was waiting for me to pull up beside him.

"What's going on?" I asked, as I pulled the car to a stop.

Denny seemed excited again. "When we were in here before I thought I saw Leo Davis. The bastard is three months past due and I wanna go in and give him hell...."

The hell with this, I thought, I've been worried about the deadbeats being crazy, and Denny's the one who's a basket case. The rest of Denny's rants and raves went unheard as I put his car in gear and roared out of town.

### A CHRISTIAN FOR THE LIONS

It's not every day you lose a customer, at least I had never lost one before. I don't mean make them mad enough to take their business to another bank, or have them die--I mean have them die because of something you did.

I can still remember the phone call, it's indelibly etched in my mind; but then again, I just got the call a few minutes ago.

I had been reading a magazine, trying to digest my lunch, when the call came. .

"Prairie Trust & Savings Bank; this is John."

"John--this is Ed...", I recognized the voice of Ed Trotter, manager of the local travel agency, and my next-door neighbor.

He sounded shook, like the time a charter he had booked to England was stranded for two extra days because the airline they flew over on went out of business before they could fly back. Ed didn't take stress too well.

"What's up Ed? Did you lose another airline?" I asked jokingly.

"Worse...I lost your customer. I'm sorry, I didn't mean..." his voice trailed off.

"What? What do you mean, you lost my customer?"

"Remember Mr. Christian? The guy who won the safari from your bank last month?"

"Sure. You did a great job of lining up the details..., the airline didn't go out of business again did it?" I asked, beginning to dread the customer's angry reaction to the schedule mix-up even before he came roaring into my office. I don't take stress real well either.

I'm the bank's marketing officer. The safari was my idea for a promotion to celebrate the bank's seventy-fifth anniversary. The bank president, Ruben Ainsworth, had been hesitant about the idea but I had finally convinced him of its merits. The best part of the idea was that since Ed was my friend, we would get the trip at a very cheap price.

"I wish it were that simple," Ed went on, as I felt my heart becoming a lump in my throat. "I just got a telegram that says Mr. Christian was eaten by a lion."

"What do you mean--eaten by a lion?" I asked. "That's insane, no one gets eaten by lions anymore. I think they've got them on restricted diets or something now...are you sure?"

"Not entirely," Ed admitted, "I just got the telegram and it doesn't make a lot of sense. The only way it reads right is that he has been eaten. I don't even know for sure who sent the telegram."

"Could it be somebody's idea of a sick joke?" I asked.

"I don't know, I'm still checking it out, but I thought you'd want to know."

"Thanks a whole hell of a lot," I said. "Your part was easy. I have to go tell Ainsworth about this and he's gonna go nuts!"

"Sorry," was all Ed could say, and with a click the phone went dead in my hands.

"How could this happen to me?" I wondered out loud, as I hung-up the phone. They had never taught me how to handle this situation in college. Yeah, they'd said that occasionally marketing plans backfire--but never anything concerning customers getting eaten by promotions.

I could still see the drawing we held in Ruben's office after work for the grand prize winner. I had wanted a big drawing with the press and public invited--thank God we hadn't. The first name we drew was Roger Ethington, who was several months past due on his loans.

"See now why we didn't want this drawing publicized?" Ruben asked me. "Can you imagine how galling it would be to send one of our biggest deadbeat's on a trip like this? The

press would be taking pictures, and I'd have to smile and shake the crook's hand--I'd have to count my fingers when I got through to make sure they were all still there!"

As I agreed with him, I could see the vice-president of the loan department grilling his assistant on how Ethington had gotten into the bank and registered for the contest without being hassled about a payment. It looked like a pretty one-sided conversation.

The next name was written illegibly on the entry. I offered to look up the address in the city directory, but Ruben told me to forget it. "If they don't want the prize bad enough to write their name clearly, they don't deserve to win it."

Elmer Christian was the next name we drew from the box. Naturally, the rich get richer, I thought to myself. He wasn't a millionaire, but he ran a successful real estate office, and was rumored to have made quite a bit of money as a crooked landlord. Since Christian was a good friend of Ruben's, those facts weren't mentioned.

Since he had written his name clearly, wasn't delinquent on any of his debts, and was Ruben's friend, it was almost unanimously decided that Elmer would win the trip to Africa. No one voted against him, but the vice-president of the loan department was still busy chewing out his assistant, and didn't vote.

Ruben is definitely not going to be happy about this, I thought as I prepared to go to his office. Looking across the lobby, I could see through the plate glass window that Ainsworth was alone so I got up to tell him the gruesome news. I began the long walk to his office, secretly hoping to be intercepted by an irate customer with a complaint about the bank, interest rates or anything but animal welfare, I thought we'd already contributed enough for one day.

I envisioned the headlines: "Prairie Trust Feeds Christian To Lions" or "Bank Promotion Has Bite In It". It was going to be hard explaining this to the press--but even harder to explain to Ainsworth. Not only had a promotion back fired, one of his wealthy friends had been the main course. I had arrived at his door and knocked tentatively.

"Come on in John," he said, relaxing a little in his high-backed chair. The chair reminded me of a throne, and Ruben expected to be treated like royalty when he was seated in it. "What's up?" he asked pleasantly.

"Well Ruben, we might have a little bit of a problem....," I started out.

"Like what?" Ruben leaned forward, an intense look coming across his face. He disliked trouble; and even more, disliked the bearer of bad news.

"Remember the guy we sent to Africa on a safari?"

"What do you mean, 'Do I remember the guy we sent to

Africa?'" he asked, " Hell yes! My old friend Elmer Christian. A lot of people think he's cantankerous, but I get along fine with him. I didn't care for that safari idea too much at first but I've got to admit it's grown on me. Especially since Elmer won it. He didn't care much for the trip at first, said he had entered hoping to win the portable TV, but by the time I got through selling him on the trip, he even forgave a twenty dollar golf bet I owed him!"

"Well, I just got a call from the travel agency," I continued, "and there's a 'possibility' that he might have been eaten by lions...."

"Jesus Christ!" Ruben exploded. "I was against this safari business from the beginning--eaten by lions. Don't they feed those things over there? Didn't they have guns...I thought on a safari the people KILLED the animals!"

I remained quiet as Ainsworth continued his ranting, hoping he'd calm down.

"This is another mess you've gotten us into. First you schedule a customer picnic, buy thousands of hamburgers and buns, 'Gonna feed the whole town' you claim; and it pours rain. In the middle of a drought YOU bring rain. The farmers loved you--all we had to show for it was a few wet customers and soggy hamburger buns!"

The mention of the picnic brought an involuntary cringe from me, but Ruben wasn't through.

"Then you schedule a grand opening celebration for our new drive-up. Gonna give away a \$100 savings account, and some officer from First National Bank wins it! It must have been a record for the shortest savings account in history. He opened the account and then immediately took out all the money...Jesus Christ! Are you just gonna stand there or are you gonna talk?"

Gulping, I tried to calm him down. "Now Ruben, we don't know for sure that he's been eaten," I said bravely, even though I wasn't convinced, "Ed's checking it out now."

"That's another thing, booking this trip through that dip neighbor of yours. He strands a plane load of people in England for two days and we use him anyway!"

"You make it sound like he was the one flying the plane, or it was his lion that ate Christian," I said in defense of Ed.

"It might have been, and he's too cheap to feed it!" Ruben was getting off the deep end here. "This bank has been in my family for seventy-five years and nothing like this has ever happened before. Dillinger cased this bank; was gonna rob it, but figured it was too tough and went somewhere else. You--you've done something even Dillinger couldn't do, brought embarrassment to the bank.

"We shouldn't have screwed around with the drawing, then that deadbeat Ethington would have been the one eaten.

If he had creditor's insurance we'd be paid off. Why didn't we let him stay the winner?"

Then you'd have had to count your fingers, I thought to myself. Personally, I'd trust Ethington more than I would Christian from the stories friends had told me about his real estate dealings.

"If that lion did eat Christian, he won't go hungry for a long time, 'cause I'm calling that neighbor of your's and buying two one-way tickets to Africa for you and him, and I'll have you BOTH fed to him."

Ruben was really rolling now, beating his desk in frustration. "Since YOU were trying to save money (me?), and insisted that we didn't need to buy insurance on this trip, we'll probably get the pants sued off of us. As dirty a business man as Elmer was, his wife is even dirtier.

"Now get outa here--I've gotta call Sam to see how much we can get sued for this!" Sam was Ainsworth's brother, and the bank's attorney.

I stumbled back to my office in a daze. Why couldn't it have been the guy from First National, we'd still have to explain how someone had been eaten by a lion, but at least there'd be a little justice to it. First National was always beating us in promotions, it'd almost be worth it if we could feed one of their officers to the lions.

The idea of becoming a selection on a lion's menu didn't

particularly appeal to me. I could only hope Ed had found out more, preferably better, news about the safari.

Plopping into my chair, I stared at my cluttered desk top and silently reflected on my banking career. I had wanted a behind-the-scenes job, not the pressures of a loan officer's responsibilities. My friends from college teased me about becoming the "next Milburn Drysdale" from the Beverly Hillbillies.

Once upon a time, I had naively believed that was how bankers really behaved. Every now and then I even meet a banker who still thinks that's the way a banker is supposed to act.

The job was perfect for a new college grad who had majored in finance and marketing. A small, family owned \$35 million bank, Prairie Trust was really too small to warrant a full-time marketing officer, but they had big plans.

The bank took a chance on me, they had never had a full-time marketing officer before, but since I was fresh out of college I came cheap. If we could start getting more deposits and loans with my ideas, promotions and bigger bucks were in line. Business had been picking up, but when word got out we'd become the town's largest exporter of lion food....

Focusing again on my desk top, I located a legal pad and started to try to come up with a press release regarding

Christian's disappearance. Nothing came to mind, it was hard to explain when I didn't have all the facts.

It maybe wouldn't hurt to draft a letter of resignation, I thought bitterly. I'd be damned if I was gonna give Ruben the satisfaction of firing me, much less feed me to the lions.

The ringing of the phone interrupted my reflection and caused me to jump. I snatched the phone off its cradle and almost shouted, "Prairie Trust. This is John!"

"John, this is Ed..."

"What have you found out?" I interrupted.

"There was a mistake," he paused quietly, as I held my breath. "I'm not sure what happened yet, but Christian and his wife are okay."

Relief flooded over my body like a welcome shower. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Christian sent the telegram himself. He was mad because the lions were on a feeding frenzy and the guides wouldn't let them out of the land-carriers to take pictures. The telegram I got said, 'Bad trip. Stop. Lions Eating Christian Stop.' There was supposed to be a 'Stop' between Eating and Christian. Damn Western Union!"

"Ed, I'm happy to tell you this phone call lost you some money!"

"Whatta ya mean?"

"Ainsworth was gonna buy two tickets to have us fed to the lion if your first call had been right."

"Really?"

"I'm sure he's full of hot air--but I wouldn't push him at this moment. Anyway, thanks for the call, and for God's sake get Christian home on time--and alive!"

I sagged back into my chair and heaved a contented sigh. Even though I'd endured a tongue-lashing from Ruben, I "probably" wouldn't lose my job because of this thanks to Ed's last call. We surely wouldn't get any negative publicity at any rate.

Ruben! I'd better call him and let him know that everything is okay. Looking across the lobby, I could see he was in conference with his brother. Judging by the scowl Ruben had just thrown in my direction, I could guess what they were talking about.

Dialing 1 for the "throne room", as the employees mockingly called Ruben's office, my call was intercepted by his secretary Gloria.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Ainsworth is on the phone at the moment, may I take a message?" she answered robotically.

On the phone? He had just been talking to Sam. Looking across the lobby I could see Sam still in the office, and Gloria had been right, Ruben was on the phone.

"Gloria, this is John, tell Ruben to call me right away,"

I said hastily.

"But he's with Sam..."

"I know who he's with," I interrupted impatiently.

"That's what I'm calling about. Tell him I've got an answer to the problem."

The line went dead as Gloria hung up. Watching from across the lobby I could see Ruben talking adamantly on the phone, occasionally conferring with Sam.

When he hung up, Gloria immediately started trying to call him. Ruben attempted to ignore his ringing phone; then glared at the phone, as if his imperial glare would stop the ringing.

Finally he picked up the phone, and in a matter of seconds the phone came alive in my hand as Ruben's roar of, "Now what do you want? This had better be good!" assaulted my ear.

"It is," I yelled back triumphantly. "Ed just called and Christian is okay--there was just a mix-up on the telegram."

"You're kidding me," Ruben moaned, "Just a second..." I could see him cover the mouth piece of the phone and talk to Sam. Something wasn't right, I thought that Ruben would sound a little happier about the mix-up. The way Sam slumped in his seat showed he shared Ruben's sentiments.

"...and so we don't have to worry." I could hear Ruben

saying mockingly, as he uncovered the phone's mouth piece.

"John, you're sure about your news?" he asked me anxiously.

"Oh, Christian might be mad because he couldn't get out and rub elbows with the lion's, but other than that he's fine."

"Damn!" Ruben muttered. This definitely was not the reaction I had expected.

"What's wrong?"

"You'd better come to my office John, we've got a little problem."

Puzzled, I got up from my desk and hurried across the lobby towards Ruben's office. I was interrupted by one of our teller's half-way across the lobby.

"John, Mrs. Fox has a \$100,000 check from Sam Ainsworth she'd like to have cashed." Wonderful, I thought, when I wanted an interruption I couldn't get one. Now when I'm in a hurry I get employees who can't figure out anything.

"What's wrong Sue?" I impatiently asked the teller. "Sam's good for it, hell; he's Ruben's brother!" I could see Ruben glaring at us out of his open office door. When my eyes met his, he beckoned me impatiently.

"Well, actually he doesn't have enough in this checking account to cover a check this large..."

"I'm sure he plans on transferring some funds from one of his other accounts. Couldn't you handle it? As you can

tell from Ruben's red glare I'm late for a meeting with him and Sam right now."

"Maybe," Sue said meekly, "but I need an officer's approval on any checks this large, even if it is the bank president's brother."

I took the check from Sue's hand, but didn't look at it. Taking a pen from my pocket, I quickly initialed Mrs. Fox's check. "I'm sorry, I'm kind of pre-occupied," I said, handing the check back to Sue, who gave me a curious look as she walked back to the customer.

Crossing the rest of the lobby unmolested, I was quickly escorted into Ruben's office.

"Hi Sam..."

"Humph!"

"Cut the hello's," Ruben interrupted impatiently. "Are you sure about Elmer's accident?"

"There wasn't any accident," I said, "unless you consider Western Union's mess-up an accident. Christian's fine."

"That's what I was afraid of," Ruben muttered. Sam was muttering under his breath also, but I couldn't make out what he was saying.

"What's the problem?"

"Well, Sam's in a partnership with Elmer in the real estate office. With the economy here in Gruver not going too good, they've been taking some heavy losses on the properties

they own." Ruben was interrupted by a low moan from Sam, then continued. "If Elmer had been eaten in Africa, their insurance would have bailed him out; now they're back in the hole again."

"I'm sorry to hear that Sam," I said, looking over at his slumped form. My sympathies were dismissed by a pitiful wave of his hand.

"Is there any way that dip neighbor of your's could feed Elmer to the lions?" Ruben wondered out-loud.

"Just a minute," I said, breaking into his reflection. "A little while ago, you were talking about sending Ed and me over to Africa if Christian had been eaten--now you want your friend to get eaten! What gives?"

"Sam is family, Elmer's your basic slimy weasel," Ruben rationalized, "cheats at golf too!" he muttered under his breath.

"It looks like Sam is gonna get stuck with a loss, but at least we aren't gonna get stuck for much of it," Ruben seemed to brighten a little as he thought out loud to himself. "All of his loans are at First National Bank," he cackled gleefully, "Since he's family he can't get loans here!"

"Not a lot of people knew that Sam was in a partnership with Elmer. I knew it, and the First National Bank knew it. I didn't know he was losing so much money though, he's always

been kind of close-mouthed about business. The last time I talked to him about it he was even talking about buying some of old Druscila Fox's property, but I think I talked him out of it."

Ruben looked as happy as a flea in a kennel. Sam stirred uncomfortably, and I was jolted into reality at the mention of Mrs. Fox.

"I might have a suggestion that can help Sam out," I said nervously, glancing at Sam out of the corner of my eye.

"What's that?" the Ainsworth boys answered in unison, Sam eagerly, Ruben in a contented voice.

"Ed was telling me that his boss at the home office just came into a lot of money and was talking about getting into real estate. He probably wouldn't be interested in beautiful downtown Gruver, but it's worth a shot."

Sam was already heading out of Ruben's door as I finished the sentence. "See ya later!" he shouted back to us.

Ruben wandered back to his chair and leaned back contentedly. "It's been quite an afternoon, hasn't it John? We got Elmer back from the lions, and maybe saved Sam from some trouble too. Even if he does end up going belly-up, First National will be holding the bag. They won't make any public noise about Sam having trouble, because we have some of their officer's loans and some of them are having problems, we'd just let that slip, so everything is looking

pretty good. John, you did a fine job, why not take the rest of the day off?"

"Ruben--the way my nerves feel, I think I'll take you up on that." Glancing at my watch, I saw it was already 3:30 in the afternoon; big deal, I normally left at 4:30 anyway, but if something was wrong with Sam's accounts I wanted to be out of the way. "Thanks."

Leaving Ruben's office, I paused to reflect on the day. Although I probably wasn't going to get a raise for the day's activities, I had at least calmed Ainsworth's fear of a lawsuit, and negative publicity. Somewhere in Africa there were some hungry lions that were going to have to look elsewhere for their next meal, because I wasn't going. I'd sacrificed enough of my flesh in Ruben's butt-chewing.

I figured I deserved the rest of the day off. I'd go home and work off my frustrations in my own domestic jungle--my garden. There were no lions there; bees, gophers, an occasional snake--but no lions. I like it that way.

As I walked out of my office, I saw Sue coming out of Ruben's office, she was in tears. Smoke was rolling out of Ruben's ears as he followed her out and stormed across the lobby in the direction of my office. I silently returned to my office and picked up the phone, maybe it wasn't too late to book a flight to Africa--I'm sure that the lions would be

gentler.

### I'LL TRADE YOU A MICKEY MANTLE

My dog eats jigsaw puzzles. Well..., not the whole puzzle, just a piece or two, so when you get to the end of the puzzle there is always a piece or two missing, you know how that is? Mom and Dad have looked all over for those pieces and never found them.

We were watching "Punky Brewster" a few weeks ago and her dog was helping her father put together a puzzle. Dad figures that our dog Miles is just the opposite. He says Miles is too dumb to know where the pieces of the puzzle go so he gets mad and eats them. "Watch out for jigsaw farts!" he told us. I don't know what they'd smell like, but it sure sounded funny.

Me and my little brother Paul like to help Mom and Dad put the puzzles together. I get a few right sometimes, but since Paul isn't even three years old he doesn't get many right--he's better than Miles though. Since I'm in the second grade I've put together a lot of puzzles, but Mom and

Dad's have thousands of pieces, so they're real hard.

Mom and Dad don't let us help them with the puzzles too often. Dad says we have our own puzzles and games and they don't play with ours, so we shouldn't expect to play with their things. He says we're supposed to share things, but sometimes he doesn't.

My dad is a vice-president for a bank in Des Moines. All of my friend's say we have a lot of money; Dad just complains that he doesn't make enough. I don't understand, all of our stuff seems pretty nice. He says the only people who make money in a bank are people who own a bank. Whenever he tells his friend's that, they all laugh, I don't know why, but since they laugh, I laugh too.

Once I asked Dad if we were really poor. He said not really. Then I asked him how come he always told people that he never made enough money. I said that some kids at my school had parents who didn't work at all, and sometimes when I'd go to their house's they never talked about not having enough money. One of my friend's dad said he had to deal with my Dad, but then he wouldn't say anything more.

Ever since then, Dad doesn't complain about not making a lot of money. He still wishes sometimes that we had more money, but he never complains about not having any money.

Dad is always trying to tell funny stories, and sometimes he really does. Dad used to tell people about

when I was a baby and my Aunt Kathy was trying to change my diaper and I started to pee "just like a fountain," Dad would say, "all over Aunt Kathy."

Now that Paul is around Dad usually only tells stories about Paul; like how when Miles was a puppy, Paul was chasing him around and then Miles tried to slip through the bars of the playpen and got stuck. Dad says it was real funny watching Miles' legs scrambling away but not going anywhere. I guess that sounds funny, I don't know, I was outside when it happened.

When the weather's nice I like to play in our backyard. We have a playhouse that is shaped like a big "A", with a couple of windows in it and some boxes to hold our toys. There's a sandbox in front of the playhouse, and between the sandbox and bushes is my "fort". Dad got a big lawn mower this summer, one he can ride, and when he wanted to throw away the box I took it in the backyard and made it into my fort; it's more fun than the playhouse.

Dad got mad. "What the hell does he need that for?" Dad asked Mom. "He's got that playhouse out there he never uses. What are the neighbors going to say?"

Mom protected me. "I'm sure the neighbors could care less", she said. "Most of them have kids themselves, and you know how kids are. You buy them an expensive toy and they'd rather play with the box. It will rain pretty soon,

the box will fall apart, and he'll forget about it."

Well it hasn't rained much, and when it has the bushes have kept a lot of the rain off my fort, so it's still in good shape. I've cut a couple of windows in it and colored it with my crayon's, so it looks like a real fort.

I was playing in the fort with my toy gun, shooting at Paul, who was playing in the sandbox. I'd shot him so many times that he wasn't listening to me anymore and kept playing with his cars in the sandbox. Dad stuck his head out the patio door and yelled, "Dana, do you want to go to the mall with me?"

"Yeah," I yelled back. "Wait a second."

Paul started screaming he wanted to go too, but Dad said he had to stay home with Mom. "It's not fair, Dana always goes with Daddy," he said to Mom.

"That's okay Paul," Mom was saying to him as Dad and I walked out the door, "I was just getting ready to bake some cookies and you can help help me out by being my official taste tester." If there's one thing that'll usually quiet Paul down it's eating cookies.

"What's out to the mall Dad?" I asked.

"They're having a collector's show," Dad said. "I thought you might like to go along and see how your 'old man' buys those coins in our collection's."

Dad is real neat about collecting things. He's

collected coins for years, and just started collecting stamps in the last couple of years. Dad has started collecting coins for me and Paul, we each have three coin proof sets from the year we were born in Dad's office safe in the basement.

I'd like to see them more often, but Dad says it's safer to keep them locked up. He says he paid \$5.00 for my sets, got 'em cheap he says, and now they're worth almost \$8.00. Dad says by the time I'm old enough to appreciate them they'll be worth a lot more.

Dads doesn't want me to talk about the proof sets or our other coins because he doesn't want a lot of people to know we collect 'em. "Times are tough," he says, "and if someone knew we keep coin collections here they might be tempted to break in." I guess that makes sense, but I still wish I could show my collection's to some of my friend's.

I like to do all kinds of things besides collect coins. Most of all I like to play baseball. My little league coach, Mr. Hall, says that I'm the best player on our team and I always try real hard, 'cause I want to play for the Chicago Cubs--they're my favorite team--when I grow up.

I play in the infield, usually at shortstop, and Mr. Hall really likes me out there cause I'm about the only one of our guy's who can pick up a ground ball. I have a real good arm for throwing the ball too, but sometimes I throw

real wild. Dad says he'd like to sit behind the first baseman to see if he can find out what I'm doing wrong, but then he laughs and says he'd be too worried about getting hit with one of my throws to watch for what I was doing wrong.

Dad comes to all my little league games and watches me play. He says that his parent's could never come and watch him or his older brother Andy play and he doesn't want me to go through the same thing.

Dad really likes baseball, he played shortstop on his college baseball team. Since I play shortstop too, he's always giving me advice on how I can play better. Even though Mr. Hall thinks I play pretty good, Dad can always find something I can do better. I guess I'm pretty lucky Dad can find my mistakes, 'cause I really wanna get better.

He says it hurts him to watch me throw so wild, he keeps telling me what I'm doing wrong, but I'm just having trouble figuring it out. I wish he'd play catch with me more often like he says Grandpa used to do with him and Andy. Maybe if we practiced together I'd figure out my mistakes, but when he gets home from the bank it's late, or he wants to work on our collections. I'm pretty lucky, 'cause at least he always makes my games.

Sometimes Dad takes me to Iowa Cub games. It's not the same as watching the real Cub's, but it's close. When just

the two of us go we sit by the bullpen so we can listen to the players talk--they don't always talk about baseball you know.

Sometimes, after hearing what they are talking about, Dad makes us move way back in the bleachers. But sometimes we even get to talk to some of the players, and once I even played catch with one of them. I always take my glove to the games in case I can catch a foul ball, and the player even let me keep the ball when we were done. Dad had him sign the ball, and now he keeps it in our safe. He says I have enough baseballs already, and someday the guy might be famous and I'll be able to tell my kids about how I played catch with him.

Dad says the reason he likes to sit by the bullpen is that the players are so much more informal. He says it reminds him of when he was younger and playing ball with Andy.

They only got to play high school ball together for two years. Dad says that he was always the better player, but Andy was pretty good too, and a "real hustler", like Pete Rose. They really got close those two years Dad said, he hopes Paul and I can be that close. "Being brothers is one thing," Dad said, "but when your brother is one of your closest friend's you're really lucky."

Andy wasn't a good enough ball player to get a college

scholarship, so he decided to join the Army. He had to go to Vietnam and just before he was scheduled to come home, he got killed.

Dad did get a scholarship to college, and even though he says he was pretty good he wasn't good enough to play pro ball. Sometimes when Dad is telling me the stories at the ball park he starts to look off in the distance and starts saying, "What I'd give to just walk on that field, Paul would've been so proud..."

I guess I've started to babble; that's what Dad says. He says I talk so much I start to babble and no one can understand what I'm talking about; anyway, I was telling you about how we were going to the collector's show.

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When we got to the mall we just started walking around, looking at all the different things people collect. There were people selling coins, stamps, old dishes, almost anything you can think of. One guy was selling comic books, and when I picked one up to look at it he yelled at me. I got scared and went to tell Dad about it so he'd go tell the guy off; but Dad yelled at me too. "Don't touch anything!" he said. "If you break anything here it will cost me a fortune."

After the comic books, we found a guy selling baseball cards. Dad started to dig through a box, mumbling names to

himself, so I walked to the other end of the table and looked at some cards in a glass case. They were neat pictures, but I didn't know who they were. Pretty soon the man behind the table saw me and tried to talk to me.

"Hi there little man! What's your name?"

I didn't say anything. Mom and Dad have warned me about talking to strangers.

"Dana! Tell the man your name!" Dad said to me, looking up from the cards he was digging through.

"Dana," I said quietly, a little mixed-up; after all, the man was a stranger.

"Do you play baseball?" the man asked.

"Uh-huh."

"You play very good?"

"I guess okay."

"He's probably the best player on the team," Dad said. I started to feel my face get warm.

"You ever hit any home runs?" the man asked.

"Sometimes...."

"He usually has at least one a game," Dad said. I started to get warm again. I really don't like to talk about myself, or hear other people brag about me. Dad starts to do that sometimes, and it's real embarrassing.

"Well, I've got a gift for a big home run hitter," the man said, handing me a Chicago Cub's schedule with his name

on it. "Remember me when you get to the big leagues."

"Thank you sir."

"Say, am I reading these prices right?" Dad interrupted. If I ever do that I get chewed out.

"What ones?" the man asked.

"This Mickey Mantle, it says \$200, and Henry Aaron for \$150. Those must be code numbers right?"

"Those are the right prices," the man said, "and they go up every month."

Dad seemed to be thinking. "I think we might have some of those at Mom's. Andy and I used to take clothespins and clip them to our bikes so when the spokes hit them our bikes would sound like motorcycles."

That sounded like fun. I wished that I could have seen Dad and his brother doing that. Dad doesn't do a lot of fun things like that anymore, being so busy at work all the time. Maybe if Andy hadn't been killed in the war things would be different. I hope nothing ever happens to me or Paul--I wouldn't want us to be sad like Dad gets sometimes.

"They aren't going to be worth much then," the man said, waking me up.

"Yeah, but we had lots of them," Dad said. He sounded real excited. "Come on Dana, we're going to Grandma's."

Grandma's house isn't too far from the mall, and she was real happy when we stopped. Dad told her what he was

looking for, some of Andy's old boxes. Grandma thought they were in the attic. I wanted to go along and help him, but they wouldn't let me. Dad went to look for the boxes, and Grandma got me some milk and cookies, and brought the TV into the kitchen so we could watch cartoons. If I couldn't help Dad I had the next best thing, Grandma makes great chocolate chip cookies.

"Mom, I can't find them!" Dad called down from the attic.

When Grandma went upstairs to help him look I went along. I don't get too many chances to look around in Grandma's attic, so I always like to go up there when I get a chance. Dad was sitting on a box surrounded by a bunch of open boxes and wearing an old baseball glove on his hand.

"Look in the box you're sitting on, lazy!" Grandma told Dad.

Dad jumped up and looked at the box he had been sitting on. He reached down to take the lid off, but it was too hard to do with the baseball glove on. The box was taped shut, so Dad took off the glove and tossed it to me so he could dig in his pocket for a knife.

Dad looked inside the box after he had cut the tape and taken the lid off. "Found them," he said excitedly, taking out an old blue box, and opening its lid.

"Can I see them Dad?" I asked.

"Okay...but you've got to be careful."

"I will," I promised as I took the lid off the box and looked in at the brightly colored cards, all of them with names I hadn't heard before. Why would people want to spend so much money on these?

"What are you going to do with these, Steve?" Grandma asked Dad.

"Sell them; they're worth a fortune," Dad said getting real excited.

"Do you think that's what Andy would have wanted?"

"Andy's not here anymore Mom. He died defending some no-name hill in the middle of the jungle, and I really don't think he would care if he were still around," Dad didn't sound as excited as he had earlier, and he looked around until he found the old baseball glove. He put it on and started beating the pocket with his fist, the whole time he stared at the shoe box.

"Your children never got to meet Andy. All they know of him is a few pictures, and our memories. We were all hurt when he was killed in Vietnam, but your children shouldn't have to suffer for his death," Grandma stopped for a minute and looked at Dad--just looked at him staring at the blue shoe box.

"Those cards belonged to Andy and he always seemed to enjoy them. Knowing the type of person Andy was I think he

would have wanted your children, his nephews, to have those cards; and not to keep in your safe either. You don't need the money that bad."

Grandma walked down the stairs and into her bedroom. Dad picked up the shoebox, and he and I followed her downstairs. We found her looking out her bedroom window, she was holding a picture of Andy, I think Dad told me once that it was Andy's high school graduation picture.

"Andy didn't die on a no-name hill, it was hill number 849 outside of Khe Sahn," Grandma said to Dad without looking around, "you know that.

"Seeing that shoe box brought back so many memories. Andy always bought his baseball shoes from Penney's, and every year he'd put his baseball card's in the new shoe box. You always had to buy your shoe's from the sporting goods store; Penney's was never good enough for you.

"You ended up giving your baseball card's to the little brother of some girl you were trying to impress and she turned around and dumped you. Yet you want to take your brother's cards and sell them--about the only legacy he could leave to your children."

Grandma stared at Dad for a few seconds, and then started to talk again. "Your father and I were so proud of you. Andy used to tell me how proud he was of you--starting on the baseball team when you were just a freshman. He had to

struggle so hard to even be a part-time starter by his junior year. He knew he was never very good; but he loved baseball."

Dad was quiet for a minute after Grandma finished talking. "I'm sorry Mom, I didn't mean to stir up painful memories for you. But if I sell these cards we could use the money to help send the boys to college. I'm sure Andy would've liked that."

"It's up to you what you do with the cards, Steve," Grandma said to Dad, "but just think about what I've said."

"I'll think about it Mom," Dad said. He didn't sound as excited as he had been earlier.

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Dad was quiet on the way home. I asked him if he was going to show the cards to Mom and Paul. "Maybe," he mumbled. I wanted to look at some more of the cards, but I didn't want to bother Dad again by asking him if I could.

After we got home I had to chase Paul out of my fort when I got back to the back yard, and he went crying into the house for Mom. I figured she would come after me in a couple of minutes so I ran into the playhouse to hide behind one of my toyboxes.

Hiding behind the toybox, I found the band-aid can where I hid the missing puzzle pieces. I hated to take them, but I figured someday I would find them by "accident".

It would be nice to be thought of as a hero. In the meantime, I'd let them think Miles was eating them; they thought that was funny anyway.

"Dana," Dad was hollering from the garage. Dad? Chasing Paul out of my fort shouldn't have been enough trouble to get Dad into this. Sometimes Mom won't even bother me for chasing Paul around. I peeked out of the playhouse window to get a better look at him.

He didn't look mad. "Dana," Dad called, "come on in here, I've got something I want to show you."

I figured that sounded safe enough, so I tossed the band-aid can into a toy box and ran into the garage.

"Look at where you left your bike," he said to me when I came into the garage.

My bike was sitting in front of the door going into the kitchen from the garage. I'd left enough room to get in and out--you might have to squeeze by a little--but there was enough room to get by. "It looks okay," I said.

"Don't try to be cute. You know our bikes go over by the backyard door. I don't want to have to tell you again." Dad didn't sound like he was real mad, he sounded more like he was thinking about something else.

I moved my bike over with the others by the backyard door. "I wish we could take some of those cards from Grandma's and put them on our bike's and ride around like

you and Andy used to."

"What cards?" Mom asked. She had come into the garage to empty the garbage.

"We found some old baseball cards at Grandma's and Dad and Andy used to put them on their bikes to make them sound like motorcycles."

"Dana, if you don't mind, I'll tell your Mom about it."

Dad and Mom walked into the house, and I followed them in. When I got in the kitchen I found one of Miles' rubber balls and started bouncing it.

"Dana, I'm trying to talk to your Mom, please stop bouncing that ball."

Miles had heard the ball bouncing and started barking from the living room so I threw it in there for him.

"Don't throw the ball in the house."

"But Dad, you told me to stop bouncing it..."

"You know better! Now get in that living room and behave yourself."

"So you found some good old cards at your Mom's?" Mom asked.

"Yeah...a whole box full, I put them over on the counter. Go ahead and take a look at them." I could see Mom go over to the counter and take the shoebox lid off.

"There's a lot of familiar names in here," Mom said after a few minutes. She looked up at Dad, "What do you

plan to do with them?"

"Sell 'em; despite what Mom says."

"What does she think you should do with them?"

"Let the boys play with them. Can you believe that? God, they'd destroy those cards," Dad said. "Andy worked hard to save those cards, it'd hurt him to know that I had given his cards to our kids to play with."

"I don't know," Mom said. "From what I knew of him, and what you've told me about him, I think he'd be more upset about your selling the cards to strangers. I go along with your mom, members of his own family should get to use them, and our boys are his only nephews."

"Great! I'm in this by myself," Dad sounded upset, but also a little sad.

"Look, I don't want you to think I'm ganging up on you," Mom said. "I never got to know Andy that well before he went to Vietnam, and that was before we started dating. I saw him around school, but all I really knew about him was that he was your older brother. Like I said, from everything I've ever heard about him, Andy would want the boys to have those cards to play with."

Dad was real quiet, staring out the kitchen window at the backyard, then he picked up the box of cards and headed to his office downstairs. Dad spent the rest of the night in the basement, working on our collections he said. Once,

when I looked in his door, he was sitting at his desk with the old ball glove from Grandma's attic on his hand and was looking at Andy's cards scattered all over his desk. He was still down there when me and Paul went to bed.

The next day was Sunday and when we got back from church Mom made me and Paul change our clothes before we could go out and play. Dad had gone back downstairs and was closed up in his office again.

It was a nice day outside, but it didn't seem very nice if Dad wasn't feeling happy. I went to the playhouse and dug in a toybox for a truck to play with in the sandbox. When I pulled the truck out, the band-aid box with the puzzle pieces was in the back of it.

I took the box and ran into the house and down to Dad's office. "Dad, I found where Miles has been hiding the puzzle pieces," I said, holding up the band-aid can and pouring the pieces onto his desk.

Dad looked at the can and smiled at me, "I didn't even know Miles used band-aids," he said. "I guess he's smarter than we give him credit for. Thanks for finding the pieces and bringing them in Dana."

"You're welcome Dad. I hope they make you happier," I said as I went back out to the yard.

I hadn't been back outside for too long when I heard Dad call for me. He smiled when he saw me come out of the

playhouse, and turned back into the garage, waving his arm for me to follow him.

"How do you like it?" he asked, when I walked into the garage.

His bike and mine were in the middle of the garage with Andy's old baseball cards stuck all over the wheel's with clothes pins. "Let's go for a ride," Dad said, getting on his bike and watching me run to get on mine, "probably the most expensive bike ride of our lives....," but he was smiling.

### REMINISCENCE AT SIXTY-FIVE MILES AN HOUR

That old familiar feeling of dread leaped into Al Larson's heart as his car began to descend the hill. His eyes took in the view ahead, but his brain tried to convince his eyes that they were seeing a mirage.

It didn't work. There was a state trooper at the bottom of the hill, red lights flashing. The trooper was sitting peacefully behind the wheel, watching his latest victim pull onto the road and slowly drive away.

"Why did I have to be doing sixty-five?" Al wondered aloud. The loan officer meeting in Iowa City wasn't that important, and he really had plenty of time. He just couldn't help speeding.

Al wondered why cops were always around when you didn't need them. He was coming down a hill: he couldn't simply let up on the gas. To slow his car quickly, he'd have to hit the brakes, causing the hood to dip--a sure sign to the trooper that he was speeding.

Al shut off his cruise control by tapping the brakes with his right foot and letting off the gas. It probably wouldn't work, but he figured it would be more subtle than slamming on the brakes.

Flashing lights always jarred Al's memory back to the day in the third grade when he had had his first encounter with the police.

He had been playing baseball on the playground during recess. Al had just hit a fly ball that cleared the chain link fence. Everybody paused to see if the nuns had seen the hit. The nuns would call a ball hit over the fence an out, but if it went unseen by black-shrouded eyes the boys would call it a home run. Once it was evident the hit had gone unseen, the boys started to cheer it.

As their heads turned to watch the ball's destination, the cheers quickly died in their throats. The ball was headed directly for the town police car. It was parked on the other side of the fence where, Old Man Hackett had pulled over a speeder, while the red light flashed on top of the car. The crash of the ball breaking the back passenger window echoed over the suddenly quiet playground.

Old Man Hackett! Al realized he was really in for it, anybody but Hackett! A few weeks before Al and his neighbor, Johnny Myers, had been hunting for sparrows with their BB gun's by Hackett's house and he had warned them not to shoot

their gun's in the city limits.

Of course, they didn't pay any attention to him and the next afternoon Johnny had shot at a sparrow and missed--but he did succeed in putting a hole and a large crack in one of Old Man Hackett's garage windows.

Johnny was worried that when Old Man Hackett found the broken window he would remember that they had been shooting their guns around the neighborhood the day before and figure out they were the ones who broke the window.

Al hated to see his friend worried so he said he'd fix it. Motioning Johnny to follow him, Al began to weave his way through the tall corn in the field behind Old Man Hackett's house. Behind the garage, Al picked up a large lump of dirt and explained his plan to Johnny.

He'd break the window with the dirt clod so Old Man Hackett couldn't tell the window had been shot, and they'd run like hell. The clod would break up so Hackett couldn't get any fingerprints and he'd never be able to tell who broke the window.

Just as Al threw the clump of dirt, Old Man Hackett walked into the garage. The crash of the breaking glass brought him to the broken window to see if he could discover the perpetrators. "I'll get you for this!" he shouted at the corn field. "I know who you are!"

Al and Johnny disappeared into the thick corn, but Old

Man Hackett's bellows easily reached their ears. Al didn't think they'd been seen, but he wasn't sure. He wondered if the dirt clod had broken up, his fingerprints were all over it. He hoped Johnny appreciated what he had done for a friend.

Al didn't think he had done anything wrong, after all, the window had already been broken. Just the same, he felt a little nervous anytime the police car drove through their neighborhood the next few days. And now he had broken the squad car window.

Al panicked. As soon as it was obvious that the ball would break the window, he quickly looked around for an escape. The school looked the best he thought, and he ran the short distance from home plate to the school.

He ran upstairs, and saw he could slide under the heat registers that ran along the wall. When recess was over and his class went by, he'd sneak into line and nobody'd notice, he thought as he slid under the register. Most of him fit, and if he looked away, maybe no one would know who he was.

Al heard them before they saw them. "Geez Sister, you don't know how embarrassing it is when you're giving someone a speeding ticket and a little kid breaks the window on your squad car," Old Man Hackett was explaining to an unseen nun. Al giggled to himself, thinking of how he had embarrassed a policeman, and also at Old Man Hackett straining not to

swear in the presence of a nun. Al's dad had told him once that it was rare for Hackett to say more than five words and not have at least one cuss word in there somewhere.

The nun still hadn't said anything, but Al heard the rustle of her long black skirt slow as it came closer to him--he remained motionless. "Al Larson, wouldt you pleats come out," he heard the nun say in her German accent.

Al knew he was in trouble, Sister Superior could only mean trouble. He had expected Sister Gabriella, his home room teacher, to handle the situation. He briefly wondered if they were bluffing him into giving himself up, but only briefly, as Sister Superior kicked his exposed shoulder and repeated her request, a little louder this time.

Al pushed himself out from underneath the register and stood up, dusting himself off and acting innocent, as if he always hung around under heat registers.

"Let's go to the car Al," Old Man Hackett said.

"Vy didt you run undt hidt?" Sister Superior asked, as she gave Al a knock alongside the head and began to raise her voice. "Dis ist not how you are taught!"

The playground again went silent as Al was led to the police car by the policeman and nun. It wasn't every day the student's recess was interrupted by the capture of a desperate criminal. The red light was still flashing on the car.

"Look at dis, vat you haf done! You shouldt be ashamedt!" Sister Superior said, pointing to the broken window. She was just getting warmed up when Old Man Hackett interrupted.

"Please Sister. I can handle this from here. Thank's for your help, I just want to talk to Al for a minute and then I'll send him in." He turned to open the passenger door, and after he brushed some glass fragments from the seat, motioned Al to be seated.

Al climbed into the front seat, closed the door, and looked around the interior of the car. The dash was much more cluttered than his dad's car. A shotgun was locked in place on the hump between the passenger and driver. Al heard scratchy voices coming from the radio mounted beneath the dash. He didn't see anything that looked like it might be a fingerprint kit, but since he'd never seen one before, he wasn't sure what to look for.

Al's quiet inspection was interrupted when Old Man Hackett opened the driver's door. "Didn't think that damn nun was ever going to leave," he muttered under his breath. "Al, why'd you run and hide?" he re-asked Sister Superior's question in slightly clearer English.

Al shrugged and looked away. The recess bell had rung and the children were lined up to go back in the school. He could see some of his friends as they talked among themselves

and pointed at the police car and its flashing red light.

"I don't know, except I was scared," he said. "I've never broken a policeman's window before, I've never broken anybody's window before--I didn't know what to do," he continued, his lie slipped into the conversation and then he waited for Hackett's reaction.

"Did you think I'd hurt you?" Hackett asked, as he lit a cigarette and put the pack back in his pocket.

"Maybe," Al said slowly, "on TV, policeman are always fighting and shooting. I thought if I hid and you didn't find me, you'd forget about me and go away."

"You should know from watching TV that you can't get away from the police," Hackett said. "I'm going to have to talk to your parent's about this, and then you'll have to work out your punishment with them. You can go back in now."

Al got out of the car and walked across the deserted playground. He stopped at the door and turned to watch the car drive away, its red light still flashing. As he turned to enter the school, Al thought about Hackett forgetting to turn off the light, like something Barney Fife would do.

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Al remembered with a little bitterness that he had ended up paying for that window out of his allowance for over a year, but Hackett never found out who broke his garage.

window. As he came back to reality, Al saw that the flashing lights were still at the bottom of the hill, inviting him to stop.

"Ah, well, I'm only doing 65, he might just warn me," Al thought. Suddenly a horrible thought occurred to him. Debbie had been on his butt to get the new license stickers on the car and he hadn't done it! The cop would see he didn't have them on, and he'd end with a ticket for speeding and not having the stickers on.

He had gotten by once, a couple of weeks ago, with a local policeman. Al had convinced the policeman to check his story that the stickers had been purchased, and he just hadn't had the time to put them on yet. After the dispatcher confirmed that Al had purchased the stickers the policeman let him off with a warning, and told him to get them on as soon as he got home.

As soon as he got back to the car Debbie started to chew his ass. Debbie, who stayed in the car when they were stopped because she had just opened a can of beer. The same Debbie who, the last time she was stopped for speeding, cried her way out of the ticket; and as soon as the policeman had turned his car around and started to drive away in the other direction, had spun out, spit gravel in all directions, and left the town in a cloud of dust.

Since it had been snowing, and Al didn't have a garage,

he didn't try to put the stickers on right then. Also, it was a form of silent protest to Debbie's self-righteous attitude. Whenever the thought occurred to him later on, it was at times that were inconvenient to work on the car. Al realized that now he was going to have pay for his procrastination.

Al watched as the patrol car's flashing lights loomed closer at the base of the hill. He could see the patrolman look over his shoulder as he waited for Al to pull ahead and stop. Glancing down, Al saw that the speedometer still read sixty-two and was slowly decreasing.

Al's guilty conscience was again stimulated by the flashing red lights. He remembered during his senior year when he and Larry Sunde took a couple of dates to a dance at the Roof Garden at Lake Okoboji. Larry had just met a girl from a nearby town and had arranged a blind date for Al with one of her friends.

To impress the girls, Al had convinced Larry to get his older brother to lend them his car, and after considerable begging--to buy them a twelve-pack of beer. Larry was in track at the time and didn't want to do any drinking, but Al appealed to his hormones. Beer would get the girls drunk, and drunk girls would be more likely to want to fool around. It was typical high school reasoning, and Larry thought it sounded great.

After picking up the girls, Al quickly maneuvered the conversation towards beer, and casually mentioned that they "happened" to have a twelve-pack along. The girls weren't sure if they wanted any beer, but Al opened the box and passed the beers around.

Larry was as reluctant as the girls to have a beer. "Christ, it's not like smoking, it isn't gonna cut your wind," Al said. "You only run the 100 anyway, you're done running before you can get winded!"

"Coach Clark thinks I can make it to state this year," Larry said, tentatively taking a beer from Al's hand, "I just don't want to mess up."

"Hey, don't worry, everything will be great," Al said. He winked at Larry and nodded his head at Larry's date, who was leaned over the seat talking to Al's date in quiet tones.

Al quickly drained his beer and opened another, while Larry and the girls nursed theirs. Although he talked a good story, Al wasn't really a drinker either, and slowed his pace as they reached the Roof Garden parking lot. Everybody slid their empties under the seat and went into the dance.

During the band's intermission, Al talked everybody into going to the car for another beer. He hoped the beer, dancing, and star lit night would put the girls in a

romantic mood--he was mistaken. His continued attempts to convince his date into a little back seat fun and games were interrupted by Larry. "The car is starting to smell like beer. What am I gonna do?"

"Throw the empties out the window, there's cans all over anyway."

The girls didn't like the idea, but since they didn't have any better ideas, they went along with it. Al convinced them that everybody else was doing it, so they tossed the cans out the window and went back into the dance.

After the dance they went back to the car and Al passed out the three remaining beers. "You guys can each have one and we'll split the other one," he said, as he handed the third beer to his date, seated next to him in the back seat. When he looked past his date, Al was surprised by the sudden appearance of a white van beside Larry's car; he didn't remember it there a minute ago.

Suddenly the car was flooded by bright light and a tall policeman was at the front passenger window. "Hand 'em out kids, and then get out of the car."

"Damn," Al muttered under his breath, and crawled out of the back seat after his date.

The lights looked eerie flashing against the trees and reflected off the thick fog that had rolled in off the lake. A shorter policeman climbed out of the van and said, "Let's

see your ID's kids."

"I forgot mine," Al said, and slapped his back pocket as the others handed the policemen their drivers licences'. The policemen didn't seem to notice Al's response as they looked over the other licenses and searched the car.

"Stupid Estherville kids," the tall policeman said to his partner. He looked back at the four teen-agers and said, "We usually catch a couple of you every night coming over here to drink. Throwing your cans out the window--shit, you'd might as well put a sign on top of the car saying 'We're drinking beer in here!'"

Al became conscious of cars slowing down to watch the arrest and walked over to sit on a picnic table at the edge of the parking lot. "Where ya goin' boy?" the shorter policeman shouted, and shined his flashlight through the fog at Al.

"Nowhere," Al said, as he blinked into the bright light, "I just want to sit down."

"Just don't get any ideas," the policeman said and turned his light back towards Larry, who had opened the trunk for inspection.

"Larson, what's going on?" Al looked back to see a couple of his baseball teammates who had pulled their car in next to the picnic table.

"Sunde and I just got busted for possession," Al said,

as the reality began to sink in, "now he'll be out of track and no more baseball for me."

"I don't suppose you knew this beer was here?" Al heard one of the policeman ask Larry as he pulled another twelve-pack from the trunk.

Al grumbled under his breath that they wouldn't have had to buy any beer if they had known there was some beer in the trunk.

"It's my brother's car, I didn't know it was there!" Larry yelped in surprise.

"Get in here Larson," his friends whispered to him.

"I can't do that, Larry'd never forgive me for leaving him," Al whispered back.

"He's already caught, it won't make him feel any better watching you get busted too. Those fucking cops are so busy cackling over that beer they found in Larry's trunk that they won't notice you're gone until it's too late. Get in."

"Makes sense," Al said as he cautiously sneaked around the car and climbed in the back seat. After he had laid down, the car backed out and slowly drove past the arrest scene. As they drove away, Al snuck a peek out the window, his last sight before the scene was swallowed in the fog was Larry still trying to explain the beer in the trunk to a policeman who had heard it all before.

\* \* \*

Larry had to pay a sixty dollar fine and got kicked off the track team for the rest of the year, Al remembered, and the baseball team made it to the state tournament where Al had gotten hot enough to win a college scholarship. Even more amazing, Larry was still his friend; the girls, of course, would never talk to him again.

Al realized that he probably wouldn't be lucky enough to have someone save him this time. The patrol car now loomed close enough to read the license number, 313; Al's speedometer read sixty: too little, too late.

I just can't give up without a fight though, Al thought, staring at the approaching lights of the patrol car. It was a matter of principle, he hadn't gotten a ticket yet, and he didn't want to start now.

Al thought of fogging on by the patrol car, but then any chance he might have of talking his way out of the ticket would be gone. Besides, he thought, recalling Old Man Hackett's words, "...you can't get away from the police." Al knew his car could never outrun a patrol car, and deep inside he knew he was too big of a coward to do anything so blatantly illegal in front of a patrolman.

Al faced the reality that he was going to have to talk to the trooper. He slowed as he came near the trooper's car, pointedly ignoring the patrolman as he pulled in front of the car and tried not to notice the flashing red lights that

now filled his rear view mirror's.

Al stopped slowly, so the patrolman might have difficulty seeing the stickers on his license plate. Putting his car into park, Al wondered whether he should wait for the patrolman, or go back to his car? Recalling his drivers training instructor's words that it's always better to please the police, they'll go easier on you, he decided to save the patrolman the trip.

An idea hit Al as he unbuckled his seat belt. When he took his license out of the wallet, Al also removed all but twenty dollars in cash and his Mastercard and automatic banking card. He discreetly slid the cash and cards into his pants pocket as he kept working on his plan.

He'd tell the trooper his little boy was in the hospital at Iowa City, and checked his wallet to make sure his son's picture was easily accessible. He needed a disease quickly, myo-cardular infarction sounded ominous enough. He didn't know what it meant, but it sounded really medical. He hoped the trooper didn't have a medical background, and would find the disease equally dangerous.

It would be his son's birthday in the hospital. Al would tell the trooper he was guilty right away. He was late for the party, and open his wallet and pull out the twenty, telling the trooper it was all the money he had.

"Of course, then my son won't have a birthday present in

the hospital from his dad--his last birthday probably, and no present; but I have to realize you're just doing your job," Al said, practicing his speech to the trooper. He almost believed the story himself. He didn't know if the trooper was going to buy it or not, but the story was worth a shot.

Al checked his side mirror for oncoming traffic before he opened his door. There was no one coming--there was no one there, no flashing lights, no highway patrolman, no car!

As he whipped around in his seat, Al looked out the rear window. The patrol car with the flashing red lights had sped off after a semi that had just disappeared over the top of the hill on the other side of the road.

Al slowly turned back, and when he looked to his left, saw the utility strip the trooper had used to gain access to the opposite side of the road.

He sat back and breathed a sigh of relief, happy to have again escaped a speeding ticket. Mr. Van Driel, his drivers training instructor, could be happy--his prize pupil still had a clean driving record. The next time he saw Larry Sunde they could have a few beers and laugh over the narrow escape. Best of all, Debbie wouldn't know he still didn't have the license stickers on the car, she'd have been really pissed if he'd been fined.

Al became conscious of the radio; had the announcer just said it was 10:30? Realizing he was going to be late, Al

put his car in gear, and checking his rear view mirror, quickly pulled back onto the road. Fumbling at the cruise control, he soon resumed his speed.

Al quickly calculated: Is sixty-five gonna make it? Better make it seventy, I'm feeling lucky today. Besides, he thought smugly, now I've got an excuse if I get pulled over again.

### THE WHITE CROSSES

"Now I suppose that worthless Bown is going to be late picking us up!" he said, getting more perturbed as the seemingly endless wait for their luggage continued. "He knew our plane was landing at one o'clock today."

"Here comes one," said his wife, pointing to a passing suitcase "Did it ever occur to you he may have gotten caught in cross-town traffic?"

"Yeah, I suppose. I'm just kind of ornery from jet lag, I guess. They screw us around at Gatwick, we have to wait for our luggage here, and to top it off our ride isn't here. I can hardly wait to fight through customs."

It was supposed to be Allen and Joan Reindel's dream vacation, and it had been; but something had affected Allen, something he couldn't figure out. Two weeks ago, he and his wife had left their car and four-year old son at Allen's college roommate's home in Minneapolis and flown out of

Hubert H. Humphrey International Airport for a two-week vacation with Joan's brother, Ron, and his family, in England.

Allen and Joan had saved from their jobs at the First National Bank for the past year and, when Ron was stationed in England, the trip became affordable.

The flight over had been uneventful and they had had a good time visiting with their relatives. Except for a day in London, they had avoided any major tourist traps, spending the majority of their time in the small rural villages and made a few sight seeing trips to nearby Cambridge. Now, ever since their last trip to Cambridge two days before, something had been bothering Allen and he just didn't want to face it.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" he asked his wife.

"I said, 'Here comes our last suitcase.' Let's get going. I'm sure John is waiting for us by the front door."

They went through customs quickly, with Joan answering all the questions. When the customs agent asked Allen if he had anything to declare he muttered "No", and continued towards the door.

Allen could see Joan was curious, wondering about her husband's strange behavior. Normally joking and laughing, Allen was usually the focal point of family outings. The last couple of days, however, he had remained to himself. Prior to leaving England, the family had a final picnic at a small

park outside of Gatwick. Allen had uncharacteristically snapped at his nephew for spilling a glass of lemonade. He had quickly apologized to everybody, but his mood remained the same.

"See, I told you he wasn't going to be here. So help me, if he's wrapped our car around a light pole, I'll kick him right in the ass!" he snorted, dropping into a chair facing the parking lot and glaring at the scene in front of him.

"Be calm, I'm sure he's just caught in traffic. Beside's, you're the one who asked him to keep the car. So don't go blaming...."

Across the small parking lot and 34th Avenue, he saw acres of perfectly landscaped and ordered white crosses in the Fort Snelling National Cemetery.

The problem he had hoped to avoid facing was again clear to him, as the memory came rushing back to him.

It had been a beautiful day, and after finishing shopping in the Cambridge town market, Ron had asked if Allen and Joan would like to visit the Cambridge American Cemetery.

"What is it, Ron?" Allen asked.

"Thousands of Americans killed in World War II are buried there, and there's a beautiful memorial to the missing in action."

Allen's father had been stationed in England during the

war and might enjoy seeing some pictures of the place he thought. Nobody else seemed to mind, so they decided to go to the cemetery.

Allen enjoyed reading about the history and action of World War II, and the cemetery sounded like a good place to learn some more about the war. His father constantly talked about how great it had been to serve his country and what combat was like.

Allen had just missed having to go to Vietnam. The war was winding down by then, and his birth date was low enough in the lottery that he didn't have to worry about being drafted. Although Allen enjoyed reading about wars, he hadn't been all that excited about serving in one.

After a short drive through the English country side, they came to a small parking lot, which, although it was getting late in the afternoon, was still fairly full. "Do this many people visit here all the time?" Allen asked, focusing his camera on the cement wall with the American eagle engraved on it.

"Tomorrow is the fortieth anniversary of D-Day, so they are getting ready for the ceremonies," Ron said.

Climbing some steps, Allen got his first view of the cemetery. In the late afternoon sunlight it was beautiful. On a slowly rising hill, for as far as the eye could see, were perfectly ordered rows of white crosses and stars

surrounded by knee-high hedges. Each cross or star had a small American and British flag at its base. In the first section they came to, a small slab of cement with a bronze star embedded in at the base of a cross caught Allen's attention. He wanted to stop and read the inscription, but with everybody in a hurry, he decided to pass.

Pausing a little further up the hill, Ron pointed out an inscription on one of the crosses. "Here lies in honored glory a comrade-in-arms known but to God." Allen had heard of the unknown soldier, but he hadn't realized there were so many unknown war dead. Allen lost count at twenty and they had just started up the hill. Thinking about these unknown service men was when he realized his mood had started to change.

They continued on past the grave markers, finally reaching the chapel and memorial at the top of the hill. The inside of the chapel had a beautiful glass wall facing the setting sun, and on the opposite wall, a large map showing bombing raids that originated from British soil, bathed in late afternoon sunlight.

Now we're getting somewhere, he thought. As his eyes rose up the map, following the various paths that were used by Allied planes to attack Germany he noticed the ceiling was also covered with a large mural showing the various types of bombers, fighters, and gliders used by the Allied forces in

World War II. Angels were mixed in among the planes and the entire mural was surrounded by an inscription.

The exact wording of the chapel's inscription escaped him when he tried to recall it at the St. Paul airport, but the meaning was still hauntingly fresh in his mind. The chapel had been dedicated to the thousands of fliers who had flown on missions from bases in England, and were killed in battle.

The thought of these young men nervously flying off to their death's made Allen think about what it would have been like to fly off on a bombing mission, not knowing whether he would ever return, the thought terrified him; he had to get out of the chapel. Although the sun was still out, the day wasn't as bright and cheery. Looking down the hill, the sun glistened off the white grave markers.

God, I've got to get my mind on something else, he thought. War had never touched his family or anybody else who was close to him. Sure, his father had served in Europe during World War II and talked incessantly about it, but his father had never been wounded, nor had any other members of Allen's or Joan's families. Why should this place bother him?

Looking away from the graves, Allen saw a concrete wall extending away from the chapel. The wall stood about twelve-foot high extending for a distance of well over two-hundred

yards, and was entirely covered with the engraved names of servicemen. A large statue of a service man representing a different branch of the armed forces stood in front of the wall about every fifty yards. Across the top of the wall, the inscription read: "The Americans whose names here appear were part of the price that free men for a second time in this century have been forced to pay to protect the freedom of their allies."

Allen didn't understand the significance of the wall, and thought it might be an index to the graves behind him. He walked alongside it, trying to decide how the wall could be a guide to finding someone's grave. The graves weren't in alphabetical order, the names of the men listed on the wall were.

Ron came over and explained the wall to him. "The numbers behind the names aren't coordinates of the cemetery to help find a grave, they're company names, like 101st battalion. The names on the wall aren't the people buried behind us. All the people listed on this wall were missing in action--over seven thousand in all."

There would be never be any graves for the families and friends of these people to come and honor their sacrifice.

At first Allen went along reading the names quickly, but as he neared the middle of the alphabet he found his step slowing. "What the hell is wrong with you?" Allen asked

himself. "You'd think you were coming up on your father's name or your own!"

As he came closer to the R's, his stride became even more hesitant. Allen moved closer to the wall, acting as if he had seen something that demanded his full concentration, trying to avoid for as long as possible the chance of coming upon his family name on the wall. He hoped no one would notice the tears in the corner of his eyes.

Allen found he could delay no longer. He was in front of the column where he would find his family name. Reimers... Reinap...Reinboth...Reinders.... As the tears began down his face he realized no one with his name was on the wall. Allen stood blinking at the wall, relief flowing through his body.

Not having a common name, Allen was normally thrilled whenever he saw his last name; he never realized how grateful he could feel not seeing his last name. Allen silently said a prayer of thanks.

As Allen stood silently saying a prayer in memory of the thousands whose names were on the wall, and were buried behind him, he felt a soft, familiar hand begin to massage his neck.

"What's wrong, Hon?" Joan asked.

"Nothing," he said, and continued to stare at the wall, trying to blink away his tears while Joan walked on to catch the rest of the family.

After composing himself, Allen hurried after his family, glancing at the names as he went. Spotting a bronze star beside one of the names on the wall, he stopped to investigate further. At the bottom of the column a note said the man had been awarded the Medal of Honor for his heroism in battle. Allen called his family over, pointing out the man's name and his distinction.

"Remember that bronze star on the grave when we came in?" Allen asked, "I wonder if the guy buried there won a Medal of Honor?"

"We can check it on our way out," Ron said, "There's nothing else to see here anyway."

As the family walked along, chattering about the events of the day, Allen ignored the conversation around him. The cemetery disturbed the heroic picture of World War II that he had always carried in his mind. His father had never mentioned that so many people were buried in nameless graves.

The books he read and movies he saw on war never went into any real detail about unknown soldiers, and the deaths were always relatively bloodless. Hopefully seeing a Medal of Honor winner's grave, reading of his heroism, would restore some of the war's glory.

Allen remembered stories his father had told him while he was growing up about Medal of Honor winners; although his father's stories had sometimes gotten tedious, Allen relished

reading a good war story, in fact he had bought At Dawn We Slept to read on the plane trip over. His excitement began to rise as they caught sight of the grave. He had never seen a Medal of Honor winner and this was probably as close as he was going to get.

Now at the grave, they stopped to read the inscription on the the bronze star, but there was none. Looking for the name inscribed on the cross they found not one, but two. The explanation given on the cross was the two airmen in the grave had been in a plane crash and doctors had been unable to determine which remains belonged to each airman, so they were buried in a common grave.

Allen staggered back, again blinking back tears. The men in this grave, in this cemetery, weren't there because of some story book shoot-out, they were the end result of war. There were thousands of men buried here, thousands of miles away from their homes and families; many unknown, and some dying so gruesomely that they were denied the simple dignity of their own grave.

Allen felt betrayed, the stories he had listened to and read with such excitement could excite him no more.

Allen was eager to leave the cemetery, eager to leave England. Thinking he would be safe from the memories of the horrors of war when he returned to the States, Allen instead was confronted with a reminder almost as soon as he had

stepped off the plane.

Allen remembered the pictures he and Joan had taken at the cemetery to show Allen's father on their return. On the flight back, Allen had thought of throwing the pictures away.

Now looking out the window again he saw his old roommate pulling up to the door of the terminal, and in the passenger seat he saw the eager eyes of his four-year old son searching for his parents.

No. He wouldn't throw the painful pictures away. Not only would he show the pictures to his father, Allen would show the pictures to his son. He would keep them for when his son was old enough to understand about war.

Maybe Allen could make his son understand that although wars were sometimes necessary and movies and books paint battles as exciting and colorful, there was also a grim reality to war. Maybe Allen could make his son understand this and make it less painful. He could only hope that this would be the only way his son would find about war.