

Dollars and Nonsense:  
Women at Work

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The School of Letters of the University of the South  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

May 2012

Sewanee, Tennessee

Approved:

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Date:

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## Abstract

*Dollars and Nonsense: Women at Work* is a collection of creative nonfiction essays based on the personal experiences of Candace U. Grissom and the women in her family. Intended to be both truthful and humorous, the four essays each explore the challenges of a different occupation in which the author has been engaged. The first essay, "On Top of a Goldmine, But Still on the Ground," describes lessons that the writer learned while working in her family's jewelry store in a small Alabama town. Next, in "The Reluctant Advocate," the author chronicles her unfulfilling legal career, including struggles with an overbearing senior partner at a law firm. In the third essay, "The Room Where Songs Go To Die," the writer gives readers an insider's look into the business side of Nashville's Music Row. Last, in "Cruise of the Rolling Adjunct," the author describes how her six years of teaching as a part-time adjunct instructor almost ruined her dream of becoming a college English professor. Culminating in an ending that is hopeful without being sentimental, *Dollars and Nonsense* shows how being a young working woman can be a difficult, yet rewarding, experience.

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## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all the women in my family whose lives, work, and dreams have inspired me over the years. Also, I dedicate this thesis to my writing professors from Sewanee, Dr. Sam Pickering and Dr. Karen McElmurray. Thank you for helping me to find my voice.

*Dollars and Nonsense:  
Women at Work*

Introduction

My Grandmother Roberta loved the Kennedys. Perhaps “loved” is not strong enough a term. Grann worshipped the Kennedy’s. Particularly Jackie. For Grann, Jackie Kennedy symbolized poise, sophistication, and breeding: everything a modern American woman could aspire to. Grann’s greatest wish for me was to become the new Jackie Kennedy, a journalist who married well enough to retire to a life of being a style icon.

However, Grann realized that the career path she had chosen for me was unlikely. I was a middle-class girl from rural Alabama. And after all, there can only be one Jackie Kennedy in the world. So, every morning of my school years, I woke up to the sounds of my Grandmother cooking breakfast, followed by the same call to attention:

“Get up, Candy! You weren’t born in the Kennedy family, you know. Some of us have to work for a living!”

Grann was right. In the history of my family on both sides, there has never been a Jackie Kennedy. As far back as I have been able to trace the genealogy of females in my lineage, there has not been a single housewife, let alone a lady of leisure. Teachers, storekeepers, seamstresses, plantation owners, and even ship riveters have existed in abundance, but not a single stay-at-home Mom. The Grissom, Manning, Richter, and Bradford women, as different as they have been in personality, have one trait in common. They are all working species. As the last member of this line, I find myself continuing their tradition.

As a child, I had a Socialist notion of the working world. I remember distinctly being about seven years old and noting for the first time that there was such a thing as an “Employment Office.” I saw it when Grandmother Roberta drove me around town. At that age, I thought that in order to be a member of a profession, all that one had to do was go into that office and fill out a form declaring oneself to be a... whatever. I thought that if a person chose to be an actor or a doctor, all that was required was to write the word on a slip of paper, and then the Employment Office would assign that person to the particular occupation, along with all its necessary accoutrements. For example, if a person wrote “movie star” down on her form, someone would emerge from the back office with a plane ticket to Los Angeles, the keys to a mansion in Beverly Hills, and a personal stylist. In my mind, there was no need for education, and even less need for money. All that was required for a person to be what she wanted to be was to name it. After all, I thought, this was America, the country where anything was possible.

However, in the years between my first conception of how people attain the social status derived from occupations and the present day, my understanding of work has become clouded by experience. In this collection of essays, readers will find accounts of my forays into four different industries: sales, law, entertainment, and education. The accounts of events are as close to real as I can remember them. Whenever possible, I have tried to use the actual names of co-workers and friends. In the places where I have had to alter a name, I noted these facts.

What is it like to come from a family tradition of working women? As far as I am concerned, it is the best inheritance a girl can have. From my female relatives, I have learned self-sufficiency, confidence, ingenuity, and the sense that no matter what hand

life deals, being able to make an honest living as an independent woman is always an ace up the sleeve. In a world where women have been considered a dependent sex, working makes all the difference.

Perhaps no woman I have met during my lifetime has served as a better example of this than my great-aunt Evelyn Richter. An opera singer in her youth, Evelyn studied and performed for several years in New York, before returning to Cullman, Alabama, to marry and start a family. However, Evelyn made one stipulation before agreeing to give up her life in New York. She requested that she continued to be allowed to perform publicly. Since there were no opera houses in Cullman, Evelyn's father built one for her, where she performed until she grew tired of it and closed the house.

In addition to her singing career, Evelyn also managed her inheritance: Richter Paint Store, the oldest continuously operational family business in Cullman. For almost fifty years, Evelyn presided over teams of painters and generations of Richter relatives. In order to prove that she treated all people equally, every Richter who worked at the paint store received the same salary. Each employee received the exact same system of stepped raises, regardless of duty, for the duration of her reign. Evelyn was equally revered and feared at St. John's Lutheran Church, Cullman's oldest church, where she did everything but preach. Every Mother's Day Sunday, until the year of her death at ninety-four, the congregation was treated to Evelyn's rendition of "Mother Macree." Even at ninety-four, she never missed a note. At her funeral, Evelyn requested that her grandson, my cousin Rev. John Richter, end the service with her special admonition:

"What are all of you standing around here for? Get back to work!"

With that in mind, I will end this introduction and proceed with the task at hand.

“On Top of a Goldmine, But Still on the Ground”

At eight o'clock in the evening on Christmas Eve, I answered the phone the same way I had for the past twelve hours.

“Happy Holidays, Wholesale Jewelers! My name is Candy. How can I help you?”

The voice on the other end sounded like three packs a day for years, with a heavy drawl and a sense of near-desperate urgency. “I need a rang wi' rayed rocks in it!”

“Do you mean rubies, sir?” I asked, as calmly as possible.

“Naw, I mean *rayed rocks*. The ol' lady said she hayed to hayve a rang with rayed rocks or I was in th' dawghouse.” This restated plea was punctuated by a couple of raspy coughs.

“Sir, rubies are red rocks,” I said wearily. “We have a large selection of ruby, ruby and diamond, and...” I got no further before he interrupted me.

“Aw, Hell, Candy, this is Fuzz. Cain't you just find me somethin' for a coupla hunnerd bucks and go ahead and wrap it up like always? Or am I gonna have to call yo' Daddy to the phone?”

I resisted the urge to tell him that, at sixteen, I was just as capable as I had been for the last half-decade of picking out Christmas presents for my Dad's friends' wives at the last moment on Christmas Eve.

Instead, I patiently replied, “No, Fuzz, I think I've got you covered. We have some nice ruby and diamond clusters for two-fifty, tax included. I can have one waiting for you, ring box wrapped inside a...” I fished around under the counter for what we had left in “trick” boxes, “Magic Chef Iron Box, in about fifteen minutes. This should avert any domestic disasters.”



“You’re a good girl, Candy.” I could tell Fuzz was smiling as he hung up the phone.

“I know.”

That day, I would fill about a dozen more last minute phone orders for men who would be just as surprised as their wives when said wives opened what they had bought for Christmas. In addition to the sight-unseen call-ins, I would wait on several dozen more customers for the next hour or two, as the final last-minute-men of Cullman did their Christmas shopping. On Christmas Day, I would come back to the store after lunch and do the same song-and-dance again. My parents prided themselves on the fact that our store was the last place open in our small town on every major holiday. As my father always said, “We’re the like First Infantry Division of the jewelry business. First in, last out, and no man left behind.”

\* \* \*

I grew up in the jewelry business. Three months after I was born, my parents decided they needed a more stable way of earning an income than being a cop and a piano teacher. They took out a personal loan for \$10,000 against their mother-in-law’s house and opened up as a jewelry and pawn shop in October 1979. Lucky for them, they caught the crest of the fashion wave in which everyone had to have a heavy gold chain to wear with disco duds. Ever one to find a way to corner a market, my Dad started selling gold by weight, instead of triple-keystone, like every other store in town. Discount gold by the gram became our store’s trademark, and Wholesale Jewelers grew from a hole-in-the-wall, two-counter operation, to a small chain with multiple stores during the decade of eighties excess.

For my part, I spent that decade slowly moving from the back office that was my playroom to the sales floor. At eight, I started wiping down the display cases after school every day for a quarter a case. By the summer after third grade, I was cleaning the repair benches at closing daily, sifting out the gold dust and lost stone chips from the leftover filings to sell to the scrap men who came by every week. My parents let me keep the money I could pan out from these endeavors, which usually amounted to a couple hundred dollars a month. By junior high, I was allowed to start working the sales floor at eight dollars an hour. Rather than being given an allowance, I was taught from an early age that if I wanted money, I should earn it. In that way, even though I was literally on top of a goldmine, I kept my feet firmly planted on the ground. Although it may seem like a sad way to grow up, it was enlightening. In actuality, everything I need to know about people I learned from behind a jewelry counter.

\* \* \*

First, being a part of the jewelry industry brought much more diversity into my life than I would have otherwise experienced. Growing up in a 99% white, small town of 20,000 in north Alabama, the likelihood that I would have ever come in contact with anyone from a different ethnic background from my own was slim. However, because my parents' dealt directly with the manufacturers of most goods, their business associates were from New York or overseas, and the scope of my childhood interaction was widened considerably.

This unique situation was never more apparent than during the Christmas season, when we had almost daily visits from suppliers who hailed from all over the globe. The thing that struck me most about these interactions is that jewelry, more often than not, is a

family business that is passed down through the generations. And, interestingly enough, a person is often drawn into this universal family simply by earning the trust of other families in the business.

The best example I had of this was when I was about seven years old. My Dad had recently begun expanding our inventory to include a wider selection of colored stone pieces, and had arranged to meet with a supplier representative from India. Most often, independent jewelry stores will buy their supply from traveling salesmen. Since loose stones and other goods are easy to steal and expensive to insure when sent by mail, and because it is best to inspect the product in person before purchase, at least until a sense of rapport is established, most high volume suppliers send a salesperson on the road rather than conduct business by memo. Generally speaking, these traveling salesmen were middle-aged guys, whom my Dad would take out for steak or a beer after they finished doing business. However, when our first salesman arrived from India, Ivan Zaveri was different from what we had expected.

Being a seven-year-old from Alabama, I had never seen anyone from India before. I was amazed by Ivan, mostly because he did not seem that much older than I was. Plus, he was willing to entertain to questions of a curious child, even as he was conducting business. On his initial visit to our store, Ivan was only nineteen, and it was his first trip outside of India. Although he seemed nervous, after about an hour or so, Dad was able to make him feel comfortable enough to start talking about himself. When I told him that I watched a lot of British television and aspired to go to England someday, and maybe meet the Queen, he told me a story that I won't forget.

Apparently, among Ivan's family in India is a legend about the ruby that is on the Imperial Crown of India. When the British occupied India, they seized control of all the gemstone mines, including the ones owned by Ivan's great-grandparents. On the day that the soldiers came to inspect the mines, they took the largest stone that the Zaveris had there, an enormous ruby, and sent it to King George V. The Emperor of India made the ruby the centerpiece of his new crown. The piece was created because the Crown Jewels were forbidden by law to leave England. The remainder of the Crown was created entirely from jewels stolen from other mines all over India.

However, George's enjoyment of the new crown was short-lived. After wearing it for the first time in the parade to celebrate his coronation as Emperor of India, George complained of terrible headaches, as if his head were being crushed. Later, he claimed that every time he tried to put the crown on again, the headaches returned, and were so intense that he had to remove the Crown for fear that his head would explode. Although George's retainers attributed the problem to the heavy weight of the Crown, Ivan had another explanation.

"When King George put on that Crown," Ivan whispered to me, "that ruby that he stole from my family was right in the middle of his forehead, here," he pressed a finger to the spot on my face where the traditional Hindu bindi is applied. "In their ignorance, the Crown jewelers did not know that this is a sacred spot of wisdom, and that by putting the ruby there, they were mocking all the Indians who had suffered and died under the British. By giving his new Crown a third eye, what the jewelers really gave George was the power to see the pain that the people of India felt when their lives were taken from

them. That was the reason why George couldn't wear his new Crown, because he couldn't face what he and his country had done to another people out of greed."

I was awestruck. The thought of a magic ruby that had the power to invade a King's mind and make him feel sorry for what he had done was something out of a storybook.

"So, would this happen to any other King who wore the Crown?" I asked.

"Worse," Ivan replied. "The legend says that the next time a British monarch puts on that Crown and sits upon the throne of England, that the Crown itself will speak, and tell of all the injustices that have been done to India in the name of the British Empire. That is why no other King has ever again worn the Imperial Crown of India to this very day."

I was speechless. I thought there must be magic in the world and that whatever caused this magic wanted people to treat each other well. Ever since hearing this story, I have been interested in uncovering the truth behind all the empires that I have encountered.

However, not every person whom I met over the course of my parents' business had an interest in instilling in young people a distaste for greed. Mel Ukelas, an associate of my parents who worked on the National Diamond Exchange in New York, was of the exact opposite frame of mind.

Since my father was a down-home sort of person, it was often left to Mom to entertain and conduct business with diamond dealers who came through our store, and who mostly hailed from New York. Always a flashy lady who considered it part of her duty to wear as much jewelry as possible for "advertizing," my Mom was impressed with

Mel, who was the epitome of the polished New York businessman: from his hundred dollar haircuts to his imported Italian loafers. Like my parents, Mel never took a vacation. His work was his life. Mom and Mel got along so well that they even half-conspired to throw their only children together in hopes of marrying us off when we got old enough.

However, I remember well the time that Mel's obsession with wealth made even my ostentatious Mom become concerned. One Christmas, Mom and Mel were finishing totals on the last order of the season when they got into a discussion of how Mel and his wife spent the holidays, since she was Christian and he was Jewish.

"Eh," said Mel, "I just leave that holiday stuff up to her. I've never really gone in for it and she seems to have a much better time with it. Besides, I'm always on the road then. Busiest time of year, you know."

Still, Mom pressed him a little further. Earlier in the conversation, Mel had shown us pictures of his lavish, newly renovated penthouse in New York, complete with gold-plated bathroom faucets. Although she was impressed, Mom had expressed worry, considering that the news that year was full of stories about home invasions, which unbeknown to us at the time, signaled the desperate beginning of the nation's current economic downfall.

"But don't you ever worry about her and your son living there alone when you're out on the road, with all that is going on these days? Surely, a lot of people see all of those expensive things going in and out of the building. Some of them are bound to get ideas. I mean, what would you do if someone tried to break in and hold them hostage or something?"

Mel's answer came as a total shock.

"I would tell them to take 'em, but leave the diamonds. I mean, you can always find another wife, and make another kid, right? But every diamond is one-of-a-kind!"

Although he punctuated this exclamation with a laugh, Mom and I both knew that he wasn't wholly kidding. After he left, Mom turned to me. She didn't have to say anything, because her look expressed it all.

*God help me if I ever let this business make me that selfish.*

Five years later, Mel died of a heart attack only days after he retired from the Exchange. His son, whom he had hoped would follow him into the business, became a musician instead. His wife spent her days taking the vacations that Mel never accompanied her on. No one ever found out what happened to the beautiful penthouse with the gold faucets.

"But one thing's for sure," Mom said, after we heard the news of Mel's death, "No matter how much he wanted it, there won't be any armored cars following that hearse."

Yet, not everyone I knew who spent time in the New York diamond business became greedy and cynical. One of my favorite salesmen, Phil Grusin, was the opposite. Mr. Grusin had a chipper little groundhog face, round spectacles, and dressed like someone's grandpa from the fifties, complete with tweed suit and newsboy cap. By the time I knew him, Mr. Grusin had retired from the Exchange and moved to Mountain Brook, Alabama, to sell jewelry boxes. His wife and son had encouraged the move because as he aged, Mr. Grusin had become, in their words, "a bit forgetful." They

thought it better and safer for him to peddle presentation methods for products, rather than jewelry itself.

A great lover of music and a cousin of composer Dave Grusin, Phil Grusin's greatest joy in life was that his son had become a musician. At Christmastime, he often brought us things his wife had baked, and sat and talked to my grandmother and me for hours about big band music.

"All this stuff," he often said to me, gesturing around dismissively at the counters full of jewelry, "doesn't mean anything. I have seen too many men live and die for it. What really matters are the people you meet while you're here. That's what keeps me going in it, why I can't give it up, even though my wife nags me to quit every year. If I stopped making my rounds, I would miss seeing all my friends!"

Our last year in business was also Mr. Grusin's last year. We did not know that, at almost ninety, his family had been urging him to reduce his sales route little by little every year, until by Christmas of 2003, we were the only store that he still serviced. Too proud to have anyone worry about him, Mr. Grusin never told us.

Although he always stayed to visit hours beyond the time it took to close the sale, that year we could all tell that Mr. Grusin was reluctant to leave. He had held off getting a cell phone longer than anyone I knew, so I wasn't surprised when his wife called the store a little after dinnertime. However, I wasn't ready for the panic in her voice.

"Oh, my God! Is Phil there? He promised he would be home hours ago!"

When I assured her that Mr. Grusin was here and that he was all right, she asked me if I could go in the back where he couldn't hear me speaking to her. Puzzled, I complied.



“I just knew this would happen,” she said, half-scolding and half-worried. “The doctor told him that this has to be his last year. He doesn’t want to come home because he knows that this is the last trip. He’s not even supposed to be driving the car. Don’t let him know I am on my way, but keep him there til I get there.”

I reassured her that we would make sure Mr. Grusin didn’t leave and hung up. Even though I called everyone discreetly to the back office to let them know what was going on, I need not have worried that he would leave. Mr. Grusin was happy to sit in the middle of the store, regaling everyone with tales of his years in the business: of famous clients he had met, the best deals he had brokered, and just about anything he could think of. Over and over again, he wound himself up in his Burberry scarf, put on his cap, and polished his spectacles as if to leave. By the time he made it almost to the door, he sat down his cases and said, “Oh, there’s just this one more thing,” and we settled back to listen.

About an hour later, his wife arrived, wild-haired and clearly upset. When she finally persuaded Mr. Grusin to leave, he began crying. As if we were in some sort of surreal jewelry-store equivalent to the finale of the Mary Tyler Moore show, he gathered us in a group hug and thanked us for being a part of his family. To me, he gave advice that I won’t forget.

“Candy girl, remember. Always do work you love around people who love you. Then, everybody will be sad to see you go. And isn’t that what we all want? For people to be sad when we go?” He smiled at me, and with a chuckle that sounded a bit like Santa Claus, flew away like the down on a thistle. By spring, we learned that he had died from cancer. But in the end Mr. Grusin got what he wanted. We were sad to see him go.

Looking back on my memories of these three men, it's easy to blend them into one person in my mind. When a businessman is young and idealistic, he cannot wait to go out into the world and make his fortune. Along the way, he carries within him whatever stories that shaped the man he wanted to be. However, by middle age, so many men become wrapped up by the bottom line that they forget what they were working for, whether it was to provide for their family or simply for the challenge of proving to themselves that they could meet their expectations. Eventually though, the best of us come back to look on a lifetime of work as not really about what we earned, but instead what we learned along the way. This was the lesson I learned from these men, and dozens of others, who came to our store each year.

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Of course, salesmen who came from afar weren't the only people from whom I gained wisdom while working at the jewelry counter. Our regular customers, primarily Southerners from the north Alabama/middle Tennessee area, were also a source of both amusement and insight.

The best time to observe people in a sales environment is at Christmas, so naturally, most of my customer-related memories stem from this season. Far from being a mere holiday, Christmas is the occasion by which people, especially in the South, establish what they mean to each other by the purchase of useless and extravagant gifts. Nowhere in the world is this more apparent than in the jewelry business, where every item, and every possible price point, carries an encrypted message in metallurgical code from giver to receiver.

For example, say a young man comes into a jewelry store to buy a Christmas present for a young woman. This is a veritable minefield, for the first jewelry purchase that a man makes for a woman will be remembered, discussed, and relived at family gatherings from that holiday until the end of their lives. This past Thanksgiving, my best friend brought up a pair of gold and diamond kisses-and-hugs earrings that my high school boyfriend bought for me in 1996. This memory elicited a round of inquiries from other friends, as speculation swirled around the supper table with people asking, “Why you never got back together with old so-and-so. He was such a *nice* boy!”

Rarely does any other activity in a young man’s life have as much importance as what he buys his girlfriend for Christmas. Sadly though, any choice that young man makes will be wrong on some level to someone among their acquaintance. Therefore, it is usually best if he pleases himself, and selects something that he would actually like to see on the woman, so that he will at least be able to compliment her when she wears it.

This viewpoint might seem cynical until one considers that each piece of jewelry is not merely an accessory, but in fact a mix of code, worked out in minerals and metal, carrying a precise message of how the purchaser feels toward the recipient. This code has many variables. These can be boiled down into five categories: type of piece, style of piece, type of metal, choice of stones (if any), and of course, price.

Since the best way to learn how to decipher this code is through illustration, I will use the example of a young man named Cary whom I remember waiting on during the Christmas of my senior year at high school. Cary was the shyest and youngest of three children. He had two flashy older sisters, both of whom were cheerleaders and local beauty queens, who were very protective of their baby brother, and a grandmother who

was a lioness of local charitable soirees. Named for his mother's obsession with actor Cary Grant, Cary had little support from the one male member of his family. His father, a local bank executive, was content to hide in his office and at the golf course, while his son spent his youth waiting in beauty salons and carrying shopping bags.

Although his family had shopped with us for years, the first time I ever heard Cary speak was Christmas 1996. As expected, he was a soft-voiced boy, tall and thin, with features to match: pale, almost colorless blue eyes, soft brown hair, and a muted wardrobe of washed khaki and oxford cloth. Although he was a basketball player, I got the impression that his sneakers rarely squeaked on the court.

Even though quiet, Cary knew what he was looking for. He explained that he and his girlfriend, Meagan, had been going out for a year and a half, and that she loved emeralds. He pulled from his pocket several pictures, clearly torn from magazines, of various styles of emerald rings. Each had a single center emerald, about a half-carat, set in platinum, surrounded by bezel-set diamond baguettes. Cary was only about twenty-one, and the choice was more dignified than I expected. A bit worried about the possible pitfalls of a girl his age wearing an emerald, I tried to persuade him that a sapphire might be a more durable and reasonable choice. Yet, over the course of our conversation, I learned that Cary, an architecture major at Auburn, and Meagan, an aspiring nurse, were both mature for their age, and seemed to have enjoyed that rarest of experiences in love affairs: that they had met The One very early on.

After looking over a few selections, we were able to find what Cary had come in for, at a price that he was willing to pay. However, just as I closed the counter, feeling

good that I was about to wrap up a sale for what would surely be a happy couple, I heard the most dreaded words that any jewelry clerk can hear.

“Can you wait just a sec...my Mother is in the car and I wanted her to have a look.”

*Oh, God, no!* I thought. I should have known the sale was too simple. By then, I had been working as a salesperson for four years. During all my experience over the course of that time, I had never once closed a sale, after a young man called in his mother, on the item he picked out to start with. Sure enough, when Cary’s mother swooped in, my record remained perfect.

Cary’s mother, whom I will call Mrs. Grant\*, was a former beauty queen herself. Just like her two glamorous daughters, Mrs. Grant had married, before finishing college, and devoted her life to civic affairs and raising of children. Also, just like her two daughters, Mrs. Grant, even at more than fifty, had a long, flowing mane of rock-video girl, bottle-blonde hair, which she flipped over her shoulder to punctuate every statement that she deemed important. The moment that Mrs. Grant sashayed into the store, I knew that Cary and I were in for trouble.

“Welll,” said Mrs. Grant, in that slow, drawn out purr of rich, kept women, that makes every word seem like a tremendous effort, “I don’t knowww if you two have been together long enough to merit a ringgg, do you Care-Bear? How about a nice pair of...” Mrs. Grant scanned the counters, “earringsss. They’re more, hmmm, casualll, don’t you think?”

Cary and I both winced at his mother's use of what was apparently a childhood nickname. But as we exchanged glances, I knew what Cary was thinking. He felt the relationship was more serious than he wanted his mother to know it was.

In jewelry code, a ring of any kind sends a different message than a necklace, bracelet, or pair of earrings, yet each of the latter is a stepping stone to the former. Any young man seeking to purchase an item for a woman who is exclusively a friend or merely dating is best off with earrings. They say, "I care enough to pay attention to what you are wearing want to buy you something nice, but I am not yet ready to commit." Bracelets are a corollary option to earrings, especially if the woman is more interested in fashion and the man has the sense to understand her. Necklaces are trickier, because they are the last step before rings. Worn close to the heart, a necklace of any kind is best bought only in exclusive relationships. Rings are trickiest of all, since they are rife with implications of commitment.

In most cases, a young man should never buy a young woman a ring unless they have been together for at least a year and are ready to hear the speculation that it might generate. Notice that I have carefully not mentioned watches or brooches. No man should ever buy a watch for a woman who is not his wife, or a brooch for a woman who is not the mother of his child. To do so implies a level of domesticity that comes across as boring in the early stages of relationships.

However, with Cary, commitment was exactly the message he wanted to send. When he didn't get his mother's approval though, Cary seemed reluctant to go through with the purchase. Even worse, after issuing her opinion, Mrs. Grant had gone to the car to call reinforcements. When she came back to announce that Cary's sisters,

grandmother, and even his Dad would be by “to have a look sometime that week,” I thought my sale was sunk. Still, I had one tactic left up my sleeve which I hoped would make my sale, and also win Cary back some of his dignity.

“Why don’t I put the ring on hold in the back here for everyone to come by and look at? That way, it won’t be bought by someone else while you are trying to decide.”

This approach seemed to appease Mrs. Grant, who winked at her son before picking up her ringing cell phone. Clearly, she was the type of housequeen who issued edicts and then swept off with a flourish, leaving her subjects to cope. After she left, Cary and I hatched a plan: we would let everyone come by to look at the earrings that they thought he should buy, but he would still buy his girlfriend the ring he wanted. As icing on the cake, since I knew all of them were going to suggest earrings, I recommended that he buy all four women, including Grandma, small pairs of earrings that were just like what he allegedly bought Meagan. For the most part, Cary liked my idea, especially considering that it solved the issue of having to buy all of them Christmas presents as well. Yet, he was skeptical about whether they would accept his giving in so quickly and treating them all equally.

“Trust me,” I said, “this is all about control. Your Mom and family are trying to reestablish that you aren’t so totally smitten by Meagan that they are going to lose their influence over you. All you have to do is show them that they will be treated equally or better than Meagan, and the threat of her taking you away from them will be averted.”

Over the course of the next few days, my theory proved correct. Cary ended up buying Meagan the ring he wanted. That spring, he came back for her engagement ring: sans Mom. However, Cary had learned his family management lesson well, and for the

remaining five years that I worked at the store, he continued to come in and buy the same thing for Mom, his two sisters, and Grandma, all under the auspices of their gifts being, “just like Meagan’s.”

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When a man moves from buying girlfriend presents to purchasing an engagement ring, the situation becomes more perilous. After years of working at the jewelry store, I determined that it was easy to decide whether or not a marriage would last by the way the man in question selected his fiancée’s engagement ring. Of course, most engagement rings are alike, all focused around a single diamond. The major difference comes in the style of setting that encases the center stone.

The style of the piece is depends on the type of woman. The most neutral settings, such as a simple six-prong Tiffany-style mounting for the center stone, is always the safest bet for men who have not taken the time to observe the woman’s stylistic preferences. The six-prong setting is a classic style that suggests sophistication. It is preferable to the four-prong, which appears cheap and allows stones to be lost easily. A good alternative to the six-prong Tiffany, for women who work with their hands or in office settings where they might be rougher on the piece during everyday wear is a smooth, inlaid bezel setting. When surrounding side stones are added, especially around square-cut center stones, the overall effect is understatedly elegant, and demonstrates that the man perceives the woman’s beauty needs little augmentation. Of course, any type of specialty setting, such as filigree, sculptural, anything quirky or symbolic, should only be selected if the man is sure of the woman’s preferences for overt displays of her



personality. Otherwise, the result is often a near-immediate return of the ring coupled with the unwanted thought in the woman's mind that "he doesn't know me at all."

Since this destructive thought process is normally an early precursor to a broken engagement or worse, a later divorce, it is important that the man selects an appropriate engagement ring. After all, in the already highly-scrutinized world of jewelry purchases, a woman's engagement ring will probably be the most talked-about piece she could ever own. However, that does not mean the woman should accompany the man to the store when he buys her ring. In fact, hovering behavior is often a sign of other problems in the relationship.

Over time, I found that engagement ring purchases could be placed into three categories: female-dominated, power-struggle, and male-dominated. First, I found that in the relationships of couples in which the woman came in by herself, and picked out the engagement ring for her fiancée to buy her usually did not work out. A woman who is unable to trust a man to make what is most likely the first major purchase of their relationship is unable to trust him to do anything else. Most of the time, the marriage was over in less than a year, with the over-dominating female returning to exchange the ring for what she had wanted in the first place, something very "me-centered," like a statement necklace or a big right-hand cluster.

Even worse are the types of female-dominated purchases in which the female in charge is not the future bride-to-be, but the mother of the prospective groom. Inevitably, these women will force their sons to select a ring much smaller than he originally wanted to buy, because "she never had an engagement ring that large when she married his father." This passive-aggressive behavior is a thin scrim that does little to hide the

jealousy toward her usually only-child son, and the resentment of his henpecked father, whom she feels she “settled for.” As with the story about Cary and Mrs. Grant, the mother-dominated jewelry purchase is a salesperson’s worst nightmare.

However, if the couple comes in together, the marriage’s potential for success is not much better. Usually what ended up happening in those situations was a quiet power struggle, with both parties trying too hard to demonstrate that each wanted what the other wanted, calling one another “darling.” Most of the time, both of them were too insecure to make a decision without the approval of the other. Inevitably, over the course of the next year or two, they would find a way to make independent decisions, often when coming in to buy items for the boyfriend or girlfriend that they had on the side. From this I learned that a couple too eager to show they have no secrets often has the most to hide.

The engagements that turned out the best were inevitably the traditional ones. The poor guy would come in, sweating bullets, with a description or picture in hand of a ring that he has seen his fiancée eyeballing. Of course, behind the scenes had been a carefully designed plan on the part of his fiancée to insure that he got the correct message. Then, he would hem and haw over the course of an hour or so, and along the way end up telling most of the story of their relationship before buying a slightly larger version of the ring he initially came in for. By giving her slightly more than what she asked for, the man established the standard for future interaction that would contribute to a successful marriage.

My father understood these engagement ring cues, and developed his own “premarital counseling test,” when the couple returned to buy wedding bands. He

believed that he could predict if a couple would divorce from the test, which went something like this:

A guy and a girl walk up to the wedding band counter. As the man tries on his band, Dad jokes, “Now, what you want is to size this ring a little bit loose, so that it will slip off easily in your pocket when you go to a bar.”

Then, the important thing to watch is the woman’s reaction to this joke. If she laughs, everything will be fine. However, if she gets offended, or gives him ultimatums, then the marriage is likely to fail because her expectations are too high. Of course, when my Mom started using the same test, she found that the same was true in reverse. If she made the joke to the woman, and the man balked, the marriage was also likely to be a complete failure. Interestingly enough, with situations in which one partner blew up at the joke and the other remained jovial, the easy-going member of the pair came back to the same wedding band counter, with a different partner in less than a year. And that time, the second partner always got the joke.

\* \* \*

One might suppose that after marriage, the task of a man seeking to buy a piece of jewelry for his wife would be easier. After all, he should not have to guess what styles she prefers. He can just look in her jewelry box. And for the husband who pays attention to such things, his life as a potential buyer of jewelry becomes easier.

But what happens to the non-observant husband? Or worse, the cheating husband who only pays attention to the preferences of his girlfriend, but pays little attention to the tastes of his wife? In the case of the non-observer, his wife generally accepts his yearly offering with silence. After all, if he is the sort of man not to pay attention to little things

like jewelry, he usually pays similarly attention to the rest of her life. In those cases, the wife simply returns to the store, exchanges her unwanted gift every year for something of equal value that she really wanted, and then after the children are grown, exchanges her life as an ignored wife for one of a newly independent, yet decidedly hardened woman.

As for the men who pay more attention to their girlfriends than their wives, their cases are far more interesting. In my experience, these wayward husbands are almost inevitably professionals of some kind. Most often, they are doctors. They are in these situations because they marry their college sweethearts, who were just as exciting and ambitious as they were before two or three kids pulled them out of the office and into the home. Over the course of a decade or so, their waistlines expand and personal spheres of interest contract. At the same time, their husband's fortunes increase and their eyes wander. Sooner, rather than later, the nurse who looks and behaves just like the woman whom he married ten years before becomes appealing, and an "arrangement" is made.

Where these circumstances become interesting for Dr. Wayward's jeweler is when he comes in to purchase Christmas presents for both his wife and the new girlfriend. One telltale sign of how much a woman is worth to a man is the type of metal that he chooses when selecting his latest jewelry purchase. Platinum is, naturally, the highest value metal and suggests permanence and stability. Gold, whether white or yellow, is a solid, neutral choice, which suggests that the woman is worth some serious money, time, and attention. Silver should be bought only for women to whom a man has a low level of emotional attachment. If a man buys silver for his wife, expect a divorce in the near future, and if he buys silver for his girlfriend, he will never leave his wife for her.

Under no circumstances should costume or plated metals be bought by a man for a woman in a romantic relationship. These choices imply that what is on the surface appears more valuable than what is inside, and could cause the woman to think the relationship is only superficial. Valuable, yet unusual, metals such as titanium should only be purchased for women who have collections of such pieces. Otherwise, the piece will mostly likely not be worn because the woman has nothing to correlate with it.

The customer who sticks out most in my mind as illustrative of the potential pitfalls when the worlds of wives and girlfriends collide is a wayward chiropractor whom I will refer to as Dr. Heyward\*. Every Christmas, Dr. Heyward came in the store to buy his girlfriend-of-the-year, usually an assistant who worked in his office, an expensive present. While there, Dr. Heyward also picked up something cheap and silver for his wife.

However, one year, Dr. Heyward slipped up. He left the expensive platinum and diamond tennis bracelet, intended for Miss Tightscrubs\*, in his jacket pocket for his wife to find. Mrs. Heyward, overcome with emotion that Dr. Heyward had at last bought her an envy-worthy piece, could not contain herself. When he came home from the clinic that evening, Mrs. Heyward had on the diamond bracelet, and very little else.

“So now, David,” said Dr. Heyward when he returned to the store the next day to see my father, “What should I do? I mean, I can’t exactly take that one away from her now, can I? She told me it was the most thoughtful thing I had done in our whole marriage. I would feel like a complete jerk.”

“You are a complete jerk,” replied my Dad laughing, “but I like you anyway. Here’s what I would do: just buy Tightscrubs another bracelet exactly like the one your wife found.”

“But that’s another five grand!” whined Dr. Heyward.

“Hey, man, don’t give me that happy horseshit like you can’t afford it. It’s not like your kids are living at the country club and going to private school fortified by powdered milk. Besides, what is peace of mind in both of your relationships worth to you? Piss off either one of these women, and you’ll be paying that same amount in child support every month.”

Dr. Heyward nodded. All in all, he was an intelligent man who sometimes thought with the wrong head. “Give me another bracelet, just like the other one.” Dad gladly complied.

Beginning that Christmas, Dr. Heyward learned the lesson that all rich cheating husbands with children have to learn at some point, if they want to remain rich cheating husbands and not broke, divorced single parents. The lesson is that, even if he doesn’t love his wife and his girlfriend equally, he can keep the peace if he keeps up the appearance of equality, especially on a grand scale. As my Mom used to say, “If you’re going to tell a lie, tell the biggest lie you can think of. By the time anyone figures out the truth, you’ll already be gone.” Every Christmas until our store closed, Dr. Heyward came in, winked at my Dad, and bought two of the exact same present. And every year, those presents were always identically set in platinum.

\* \* \*

By the time a man enters late middle age, his choice of jewelry items for his wife usually becomes more subdued. Early in the marriage, he might shower her with gemstones. However, by the time their children have grown up and moved away, either the man has already bought his wife everything she wanted or they both have realized that he will never be able to afford such things. I believe that this is why the Mother's Ring was invented: to fill that gap year in a fifty-something's life when he has absolutely no idea what to buy his wife for Christmas. Why else would people continue to purchase, year after year, the same hundred dollar piece of generic, synthetic-stone, free-form setting mayhem that says virtually nothing except "I remember the month in which each of our children was born."

Choice of stones in a Mother's Ring is simple. Every month has a birthstone assigned to it by history and tradition, and each child receives one stone in the ring. This takes the guesswork out of the fourth potentially disastrous area of decision-making for male jewelry purchasers, which is "What type of gemstone to buy?"

Diamonds are, as Marilyn Monroe told us, a girl's best friend. They are therefore the most romantic and universally appreciated stones, and thus a safe bet for almost any woman. After diamonds, rubies are the best for suggesting a passionate relationship, whereas sapphires are preferable for conveying that the woman is respected and admired. Not surprisingly, these three stones are also the most expensive, in terms of price per carat weight. Any other genuine precious gemstones, such as emeralds, tourmalines, amethysts, topazes, peridots, or opals, should only be selected if the woman has a known preference for them.

The idea that each month has a birthstone that a woman is supposed to wear is faulty, because many women do not care for the color of their birthstone. Pearls are a special case, and should only be purchased for married women or for special, official events in a woman's life, such as a graduation, not for Christmas, because they imply a level of steadfast formality that is normally out of touch with the festive atmosphere of the holidays. Although some semiprecious gemstones, such as turquoise, jade, or coral are appropriate if the woman has a preference for them, only for Mother's Rings should a man ever purchase a synthetic gemstone as a Christmas present. Otherwise, the message sent by synthetics is the same as with plated metals: that the relationship is plastic and will not last.

As with any piece of jewelry, the purchase that should be a no-brainer becomes infinitely more complicated when additional members of the family are involved. The most extreme example of this situation is when a man comes in to buy a Mother's Ring for a family with what I call a "Yours, Mine, and Ours Problem." In the case of a YMOP, both spouses have children from previous relationships and also one or more children together. However, on a Mother's Ring, every child is treated equally, one stone per child. Since this does not necessarily reflect the relationship dynamics within the family, selection of a Mother's Ring for a YMOP clan is problematic. Many times, I have seen something as simple as the decision of whose stone is to be put closest to whom reduce grown men and women to tears concluding in that most universal cry of siblings everywhere, "Mom always liked you best!"

The way I came up with to solve this situation evolved from a family with an extreme case of YMOP blues. Both the doctor husband and nurse practitioner wife had



come into the situation with two children apiece from their first marriages, and then they had one child together. Further complicating the situation was the fact that the couple also had five grandchildren. Try as we might, no manner of searching through the special-order settings book managed to turn up anything close to treating all ten of these individuals equally. On the most basic level, standard Mother's Rings come only in three, five, and seven stone forms, which could have been modified to accommodate extra stones if not for the fact that they created a "distance problem," in which millimeters became miles of symbolic, emotional distance.

"Those last three stones seem so far away from the center, it's like they are left out," one biological daughter complained.

"I don't want to be one of those three," said one of the father's daughters from his first marriage. "Every time I looked at that ring on Mom's hand, I would think about how I'm only a step-daughter and not a real one."

"I don't see what the problem is," replied a third daughter, the only biological child of both parents. "I should obviously be the one in the center, since I'm the only one here who is half of both of them." If the other two could have shot daggers from their eyes, she would have died right there on the diamond-patterned carpet.

Stepping back from the colored stone counter and turning around so that none of them could see a teenager rolling her eyes at three grown women behaving like girls, I noticed a possible solution to their problem. Going over to the diamond cluster counter, I pulled out a six-stone star cluster, one of our best-selling anniversary items.

"How about this," I said. "We could take this star mounting, which has a circle of five stone mountings, take the diamonds out and put each child's birthstone in the first

circle. Then, we could add another circle of mounting heads staggered in between these to form a second circle and put the grandchildren there. That way, it would be like branches of a family tree, only in a tiered circle. Everyone has to be an equal distance from the mother, because it's a circle, like the Knights of the Round Table. What do you think?"

The father rolled his eyes and crossed his arms. "I think it's going to be a fight to the death who gets to be in the center of both circles."

"Actually, I thought we could put a stone in the center representing your birthday, sir," I replied. "After all, isn't a husband the biggest kid any wife has to take care of?"

"Totally!" "Yes!" "Definitely!"

For the first time that afternoon, all three daughters were in agreement.

"Sold!" said the father, moving for his wallet. "Anything that keeps the peace is good enough for me."

From then on, I learned never to underestimate the power of circles.

\* \* \*

By this time, Dear Reader, you are probably thinking that buying jewelry for a woman is a completely undesirable quagmire that every man should avoid. After a decade in the jewelry business, I sometimes thought that myself. However, every once in a while a special customer came in who reaffirmed my faith in love within a marriage, and of jewelry's ability to express that love.

Every Christmas Eve, Mom, Dad, Grann, and I all waited to see who the last customer would be. The last customer always had a sort of symbolic significance for us, because he or she represented something of ourselves, people who were so busy working

for others that they had to put their own family's holiday needs last on the list. On Christmas Eve 2003, our last year in business, the last customers on Christmas Eve were my Uncle Talmadge and Aunt Virginia Drake.

For most of my adult life, Talmadge and Virginia have showed us that a happy marriage can exist in the world today. Married just after World War Two, my grandfather James's baby sister, Virginia, and her feisty red-headed husband, Talmadge, opened a motorcycle shop in the late 1940s, which they still operate today. They always seemed so happy, I never knew that their marriage had been missing something that most couples start out with from the beginning. The fact that their marriage had been so successful without it almost led me to throw out everything I thought I had figured out about jewelry purchase as an indicator of the nature of a relationship.

"I'm here to buy this young lady an engagement ring!" announced Uncle Talmadge in his usual boisterous style as he bounded into the store on Christmas Eve with Aunt Virginia behind him.

"Talmadge!" exclaimed Grann, his sister-in-law, "You mean to tell me that you have been married all this time and have never bought this poor girl a ring? Shame on you!"

"Well, I wanted to wait until I could buy her one as big as I thought she deserved. Then I decided that this year, well, we've been married fifty years and I haven't ever yet had as much money as I thought would be good enough, so I figured I she'd have to settle for the best I could offer her."

"Oh, Talmadge!" Virginia exclaimed. "You know you don't have to do this at all!"

“But I want to!” Talmadge stressed. He turned to me. “Say, have I ever told you the story of how I met your Aunt there?”

“No, I don’t think so,” I said. Over the years, Uncle Talmadge had told me dozens of stories, but surprisingly enough, not that one.

“Well, I was at Christmas Eve party that your grandfather James had invited me to, because he wanted me to meet his kid sister. And so I walked into the kitchen, and sitting there at the table was a group of pretty girls all trying to get someone to play spin the bottle, but the guys were too shy to sit down. So I figured what the Hell, I lived through Normandy I can probably live through this, and pulled up a chair. First spin of the bottle pointed me to this little one right here,” he pointed to my Aunt Virginia, who was blushing, “and when she leaned across the table to kiss me, her elbow popped out of socket! Little did I know that she was double-jointed and that sort of thing happened all the time. But it really fished me in. I thought this poor little girl was just falling apart and I had to do something about it.”

“Well, what did you do?” I asked.

“What do you think I did?” he replied. “I’m a gentleman! I married her! Well, not right away though, that was a few months later. First, I got up and went around the table and popped her elbow back into socket and kissed her right there in the middle of the kitchen. But as we were kissing, James walked in and I thought I was really in a fix, because I was supposed to be there to meet his kid sister. Turns out, this was the kid.”

“Virginia, what did you think about all this?” I asked.

“Well, I thought he was the rudest little bantam rooster I had ever met,” she said, tousling his hair. “Short, loud, red-headed, and freckle-faced. But I knew where I stood

with him right away. He set his cap for me, and that was all there was to say about it. I tried to run him off, but it didn't work."

"She didn't try very hard," Grann said to me. "She wrangled James and me into double-dating with them for weeks."

"Well, it seems to have turned out okay in the end," said my Dad, motioning the couple over to the solitaire counter. Diamond solitaires are really the final frontier of the jewelry business, since every person whom I have ever met speculates about one thing when they see a solitaire: price. This is, of course ironic, considering that the very thing that a diamond solitaire is supposed to signify is love, a priceless commodity.

Nevertheless, price will dictate the size of stones that the man can afford. Also, even though the gift will likely be meaningful to the woman if she cares about the man, everyone else in her life who looks at the piece will consider price as a possible indicator of how much he values his relationship. As a result, the safest bet for the man is to spend as much as he is comfortable with to buy a quality piece. By quality piece, I mean that, in most cases, it is better to buy a one-carat, VS-graded stone with a pure or clear color than a multiple-carat, I-graded stone in an off color, just because it is larger and more ostentatious.

Naturally, some women, and the men who buy for them, will prefer the "lot of flash for a little cash" option, and care more for size over quality, but generally speaking anything SI-grade or better is preferable because, once again, it is a sign of class. The most important thing to remember about price point is that, it's not just the woman a man has to impress, but everyone who will be seeing her wear the piece. Ultimately, it is the man's knowledge of the woman's tastes, and the values of those around her, that should

dictate whether he should opt for a flashy cluster to make a big statement across a room, or to opt for an elegant, single stone to impress the intimate.

About a half an hour later, after much persuasion on Talmadge's part to convince Virginia that it wasn't too much trouble, he finally talked her into a carat solitaire, VS-1 grade, set in a platinum six-prong Tiffany mounting. Not the biggest stone in the store by a long shot, but definitely the highest quality we had.

When Talmadge asked how much, my Dad, widely known as the cheapest man in Cullman, wouldn't name a price. A standoff ensued. As a matter of pride, Talmadge refused to take the ring for free.

"All right, tell you what I'll do," said Dad. "I'll cut you a deal. A thousand bucks and it's yours." Behind his back, I could see Dad twisting the price tag off the ring. He slipped it into my hand. When I took it into the back office to throw it away, I saw the real price. Five thousand.

As the happy long-weds left that evening, my Dad smiled.

"Regardless of anything else I've ever told you otherwise kid," Dad said, rolling the counter shut. "Never let it be said that I don't believe in the possibility of a happy marriage."

"You know, David," said my Mom from across the room as she put away a box of jewelry in the safe, "You never bought me an engagement ring either."

He didn't answer her.

"Possibility, kid," He said to me, locking the case with a definite snap.

"Remember that. Only possibility."

\* \* \*

This past summer, I took my first trip to New York City. As I strolled around Manhattan getting my bearings, my wanderings brought me to Fifth Avenue and the Diamond District. On the walls of every building in the District were the same stylized diamond shapes that had been on the windows of my parents' store. Looking around at the names of the companies, I recognized all the names of places that I had called over the years to order diamonds. As a teenager, I had always wondered what kinds of people were on the other ends of those phone lines. What kinds of lives they led, there in the city. Whether they were so different from the people I knew in Cullman, or if their customers, their extended families, were that much different from ours.

It was around closing time, and I stood and watched the brokers come out of the Exchange. I noticed that there wasn't a single man who came out of the building alone. Every man who came out of the Exchange was part of what appeared to be a matched set of father and son. Walking on down to Central Park, I called my Dad to tell him I had realized something.

For better or worse, jewelry really was a family business.

The family was just bigger than I ever knew.

“The Reluctant Advocate”

That day had been a complete 12b6, Motion to Dismiss.

In the morning, I had interviewed with a Tennessee Court of Civil Appeals Judge for a clerkship. She took one look at my lackluster law school transcript, lost interest, and we spent the rest of the half hour discussing the upcoming Nashville Shakespeare Festival.

Clearly pleased with herself for doing her civic duty as being a supporter of “The Arts,” a phrase that she seemed unable to say without placing a well-manicured hand to her throat to stroke an expensive strand of pearls, she could not resist the opportunity to describe the local theater scene once she had turned off to the possibility of offering me a job. Far more impressed with the fact that the “extracurricular activities” section of my resume included theatrical training more than with any trial competitions I had won, she dismissed me with a Bernhardtian flourish.

“Well, honey, I don’t think you’re my first choice for a judicial clerk, but I think you would make an excellent Portia.”

In the afternoon, I performed my same “why I think I would make an excellent law clerk” routine for the Criminal Circuit Court Judge in Rutherford County, Tennessee. He was a tall, sturdy-looking man, clearly a former athlete gone to seed. His office was filled with old sports trophies, and he spoke in clichés, like Crash Davis in the interview scene from *Bull Durham*, only without Kevin Costner’s wry sense of self-awareness. The interview was mercifully short.

No, I had no criminal court experience.



No, I had no aspirations to ever be a prosecutor.

And no, I was definitely not interested in politics.

“Well, darlin’,” he said, as he dismissed me from his office, “I don’t think we’re gonna be able to play ball today. What we’re lookin’ for are team players. Folks who are just happy to be here, and hope they can help the ball club.”

“Maybe if the good Lord is willing, things will work out,” I replied, semi-sarcastically filling out the catchphrase. I wasn’t surprised when he didn’t field the reference. I made a mental note to use more clichés in the future. Because as Crash Davis said, “of course they’re boring, but they’re your friends.”

As I walked to the car, I began to feel that my whole post-law school job search season had been a cliché. Interview after interview, I had met the same two types of potential legal employers. They were sorted by gender. The senior female attorneys and judges had a detached air of superiority, a hundred Queen Elizabeth’s each ruling benignly over her domain, drolly amused that plebeians would dare approach her throne. In contrast, their male counterparts were too insistent on coming off as proletarian good-ol’ boys, fearful that if they didn’t keep their gun racks and golf clubs in sight, their clients and constituents would think that they had lost touch with the common man.

Even though I was ready to retreat from these courts of Queens and Jesters for the day, my Mother, who had come along and waited in the car for moral support, insisted that I make a walking circle of the Murfreesboro city square, handing out resumes in person at each law office door to door. Not eager to pedal my services like some sort of judicial Amway salesperson, I balked. However, given to clichés of her own from time to time, Mom had one ready.

“You’ve spent so much time researching all these jobs. Maybe you’re overthinking things. Let me spin the wheel just once and see where it lands. Just take a resume, go in the next place I tell you, introduce yourself, and ask to speak to the man in charge. What harm can it do?”

Although we didn’t often agree, I had to admit she was right. That day, we had driven three hours already, and I had blown the last two interviews I had scheduled. Surely, handing out resumes at random was better than admitting defeat and returning to Alabama with no prospects.

“What the Hell,” I said, picking up her gambling reference. “Let’s roll the dice.”

Happy that, for once, I had given in without much protest, Mom began circling the square. She eyed each law office front as carefully as if she were looking through a loupe at a diamond. Finally, she spied a place that satisfied her scrutiny.

It didn’t look like a traditional law office. In fact, the two-story, pale yellow Victorian looked more like the home of a quirky spinster aunt than a place of business. Nevertheless, Mom pulled up in front and urged me out the door. As I headed up the sidewalk, I heard the car window roll down behind me.

“And remember, most importantly of all, *be charming!* A professional lady should exude grace, charm, and confidence.”

*And I am going to magically acquire all of these traits while listening to my Mother call out after me through a car window, I thought.*

She waved at me the same wave I remembered from my first day of kindergarten. I cringed.

Still, smiling what I perceived to be my most charming smile, I assertively swung open the door and promptly tripped over the transom, into the waiting room and down the rabbit hole.

\* \* \*

Fortunately, no one noticed my grand entrance for the cacophony going on inside. I stood gawking as an athletic-looking young lady in a tight pencil skirt sprinted toward me, her arms full of file folders. Looking back over her shoulder and screaming, she could not see me. I jumped into the stairway. My sudden movement must have startled her, because she too jumped sideways, overcorrecting and stumbling into the coat rack. Her armful of papers fell to the floor and she scrambled to pick them up. As I bent to help her, I heard footsteps running down the hallway. She looked up at me, with sheer terror in her eyes.

“Whatever you do,” she panted. “Leave here now and never come back!”

As the footsteps came closer, she jumped up. I tried to hand her the papers I had picked up. She snatched them from my hand and bolted toward the door, just as I heard a voice wailing from the next room.

“You will never work in this town again! I can’t believe they ever gave you a law degree! You’re what’s wrong with America! I can’t believe...”

And here the voice stopped abruptly. Its owner sized me up visually, smoothed his hair and straightened his tie.

“Well, hellooo!” He said, taking a deep breath and expelling the words with a big hiss of air, like a locomotive with the air brake put on.

“Don’t listen to this man!” The girl called back, standing in the doorway. “He is like a viper! He will poison every drop of self-worth you ever hoped to have and worst of all, he will *drag you down with him!*”

And with that, the girl spun out onto the stoop and slammed the door behind her with a crash that made a picture fall off the wall.

Surprisingly, the man said nothing for a few seconds. He stepped over and picked up the picture that had fallen and laid it on the bench next to the door. Although I estimated that he must have been over fifty by his face, he wore a soft dark brown tweed Brooks Brothers suit of the type normally seen on college undergrads. When he straightened up, I was amazed that he was shorter than me. His baritone voice did not match his small frame.

“Are you my four o’clock?” he said suavely, as if nothing had happened.

“I don’t believe so,” I hesitated. I turned to see the girl still sprinting down the sidewalk to the parking lot across the street. As I watched her hop in her car and peel out, I noticed that I no longer had my resume in hand.

“I just thought I would stop in and leave my resume, but I think I accidentally gave it away to her,” I said, pointing out the window.

“Oh, well, that sort of thing doesn’t really matter. It’s the connection between people that counts.” He stopped and stepped toward me. I had the odd feeling that I was back in college and the quiet dweeb of some fraternity was about to ask me out on a date. I folded my arms.

He smiled.

“Are you an only child?”

“Am I a what?”

In all of my cliché-ridden post-law school interviews, I had never heard anyone open with an inquiry about birth order. I studied him. He took me by the elbow as if escorting me to a dance, and led me with a sweep into the conference room just off the foyer.

“An only child,” he repeated, as he pulled out my chair and we sat down. “I can usually spot them. We have a certain look, those of us who have grown up in our own worlds.”

“Um, yes, I am,” I replied. “But I don’t see what this has to do with...”

He interrupted me, leaning across the table as if he were about to share a big secret.

“I am too! I mean, I have brothers and sisters, but really, I’m the only one that counts.”

He settled back in his chair smugly and motioned with his eyes toward the window.

“Is that your Mother in the car?”

“Well, uh, yeah. I mean, yes sir...” I faltered, trying in vain to push the conversational train back on track. “But, what I am here for is to ask if you have an opening for a law clerk.”

By this time, he was staring intently into my eyes. I had the strange sensation that at any moment, a waiter was going to show up with a wine list. When I looked down, I noticed that the conference table was not an ordinary conference table, but instead a very

elaborate Victorian dining table that shivered at the slightest touch. He followed my gaze to the tabletop.

“Do you like my table? It was my Mother’s. I ate dinner around it every evening growing up, and now have other attorneys for dinner over it five days a week. Funny how the tables turn like that in life isn’t it?”

He clearly thought this was funny, as he leaned back in his chair and slapped the tabletop, letting out a loud cackle. I mustered a silent giggle that I hoped didn’t display too much uneasiness. Sensing my confusion, he got to the point.

“Well, quite frankly, I was not really in the market for a clerk, but it seems this afternoon that there has been a sudden opening at the firm.” He cleared his throat at the obvious reference to the train wreck we had just witnessed, and continued.

“What I am looking for is a young attorney to become my shadow, to work intimately with me every day without complaint and with little direction. I like to tell people things *once*, and then I expect them to be done *exactly* as I say. It has been my experience that people who are only children tend to possess the ability to focus solely on one way of doing things without question, until it becomes *their* way of doing things. Further, it has been my experience that only children tend to be very driven and very lonely. They tend substitute friends and co-workers for family, especially if they are females who have made it far enough in life to emerge from graduate school unmarried. I assume you are unmarried, with no children?”

He motioned dismissively toward my ringless left hand. I shook my head and mouthed “no” silently. He smiled and leaned back in his chair, weaving his fingers together behind his head and rumpling his hair a few times before beginning again.

“Excellent! Now, I assume that you must be available to start immediately? Do you have a place to stay? If not, there is an apartment in the attic here. I lived there for the first ten years of my practice, before Sarabeth\* made me get a house. I kind of miss it...”

Not feeling like hearing a long-winded tale about his bachelor days, it was my turn to interrupt.

“So, you’re offering me a job?”

“Why, yes, I thought that was understood?” He gave me a look that among undergrads has only one meaning. *Well, duh!*

“Oh, well then, I guess so.” Swiftly, I was learning that part of my new job duties would entail mind-reading. Still, I wondered. “But what exactly will I be *doing*? How much will I earn? What about...”

He cut me off again.

“Details, details. Just do everything I tell you, and you will be completely fine. Why, someday, you might grow up to be as good a lawyer as me!” He cackled again, and rose from the table.

“So, whaddaya say? Are you in?” His eyes sparkled, as if he were issuing a dare.

“Yeah,” I said several times, regaining my voice. “Yeah, I’ll do it.”

“Wonderful! Then let’s get started, I want you to meet the members of my firm.”

Taking me again by the elbow, he led me down the hallway, bellowing into each doorway as he went along.

“Staff meeting! STAFF MEETING! Everybody come meet my new assistant!”

A voice called out from one of the offices, “Oh no, Fred, another one? How many is it this year already? Five?”

“No, she’s the...” he paused a moment, counting in his head. “Third.”

His pause gave him time to remember that he had forgotten to ask me an important question. My name.

“Candace. Candace Grissom. I am from Alabama and I went to Samford for law school. I passed the Alabama Bar in April and just sat for the Tennessee Bar. I will have my results in October.” I added, hoping to anticipate the obvious.

Fred beamed. I could tell he was glad that I was already making an effort to read his mind and stay one step ahead of him.

“Well, I’m Fred. Fred Founder.\* A man who starts things.” He seemed pleased to have his own catchphrase.

“Oh, and one more thing. Do you play tennis? I need a tennis buddy.”

“I was on the tennis team in high school,” I replied. Fred beamed again.

“I knew it! You’re perfect!” He exclaimed, shouting up the stairs, “Her name is Candace and she plays tennis!” Several unenthusiastic groans echoed through the building as the attorneys and staff followed us to the second floor conference room for Fred’s official announcement.

The staff meeting lasted only a few minutes. Afterward, Fred showed me around the office, and along the way we managed to work out the circumstances of my employment. I would start Monday and be paid nine dollars an hour until I passed the Tennessee Bar Exam. After that, we would renegotiate the possibility of my joining the firm as an attorney.

Everything went so smoothly that it seemed too easy. Turns out, it was.



When I got back to the car, Mom asked how it went. When I told her, she thought it was hilarious. I decided to take her cue, and consider most of Fred's grandstanding as a joke.

"Everything's up to chance. If you're not sitting at the table, the light can't stop."

Mom's lighthearted attitude made me feel better, but I still had serious doubts about working for Fred. Considering the circus I had walked into, I had no idea what to expect.

But I should have known there would be plenty of clowns.

Good thing I wasn't coulrophobic.

\* \* \*

Wanting to make a good impression on my first day, I arrived at what I considered was early, 7:45 for an 8:00am start time. However, when I got there, I found Fred standing next to his desk already roaring.

"Where are my pens! How can I be expected to conduct business with no pens! You!"

He pointed at me. Clearly, he had forgotten my name since Friday.

"Where are my pens! What's wrong with you!?!"

What's wrong with you, I thought. I looked at him like he was crazy. There was a cup filled with pens sitting on his desk. I picked it up and handed it to him. He snatched it from my hand and poured the pens out on his desk.

"What's wrong with those pens?" he demanded.

I looked at the pens. Some were expensive looking, and others were plain. I picked one up and tested it out by making circles on a notepad. The black circles it

produced appeared satisfactory to me. I handed him the pen and said I didn't know what was wrong with it. He grabbed the pen from my hand and threw it across the room. It bounced off the fireplace.

“IT IS NOT A BLUE PEN!!!” he screamed, his face turning red. “I MUST HAVE THREE BLUE PENS SITTING RIGHT HERE,” he slapped his hand down on top of the stack of yellow legal pads on his desk, “EVERY MORNING WHEN I GET HERE. GET ME MY THREE BLUE PENS!!!”

Perhaps this is the correct time to mention that I am the most patient person I know. Having dealt with a great number of screamers in my time, I have determined that the best way to deal with them is not to reflect their irascibility.

I replied as coolly as I could muster. “Where might I find said pens?”

Fred glared back at me. “Supply closet. Top Shelf. Only the clear Bic ones. The others are too expensive to use for note-taking. And they have to be *blue*. It prevents forgeries.”

He stood motionless beside his chair. I asked him if he wouldn't like to sit down while I retrieved the pens. Fred replied that sitting down was impossible without having his pens first. Figuring he could stand there tapping his foot like an impatient child all day, I went to get the pens.

As I rounded the corner to the supply closet, a petite red-headed woman, who looked to be about fifty, wearing a purple blazer and librarian glasses on a string, stopped me. I didn't recognize her from my tour of the office on Friday. She introduced herself as Karen,\* and said that she had worked for Fred for over thirty years. The way she said it, she made it sound like she was the last surviving veteran of an obscure foreign war.

“If you’re going to make it around here, you have to learn a few things,” Karen whispered, conspiratorially. “First, Fred absolutely *must* have everything in the same order at his desk every day. Three blue Bic pens with the caps off laid lengthwise on top of three clean yellow legal pads turned at a forty-five degree angle on the right-hand corner of his desk. If they aren’t placed right or, God forbid, are the wrong color or brand, he throws them in the fireplace. Next, the trash *must* have a clean bag and be turned at not quite a forty-five degree angle parallel to the left hand side of his desk, sitting exactly on top of the ring in the carpet. If it isn’t in the right place or has anything in it, he throws it in the fireplace. Last, his mail must be brought in, opened one piece at a time in front of him, and read aloud by his assistant. If not...”

I stopped her. “Don’t tell me...he’ll throw the assistant into the fireplace!”

Karen missed my joke and centered me squarely in a serious look over the top of her glasses. “No. But he will throw the mail in the fireplace. And then fire the assistant.”

She handed me Fred’s mail, three pens, three legal pads, and turned me around by the shoulders toward the door to Fred’s office.

“Be brave! If you can make it through the first week, chances are you’ll make it a year.”

Somehow, I couldn’t catch the infectious chirp in Karen’s voice. I walked back to Fred’s office and silently laid out the pads and pens as instructed. Then I checked the trashcan. It had one crumpled piece of paper in it which looked to be a printing mistake. I unwadded it and held it up to Fred’s inspection. He motioned toward the paper shredder, muttering in a surprisingly subdued tone.

“Always shred everything I put in that trashcan. One of the most important things you can learn in this life is when you are really through with something, leave no trace behind.”

I shredded the sheet as Fred sat down silently. I stood by the side of his desk and waited patiently for my next command.

“I am ready to hear my mail now,” he said with the smile of a contented child.

I proceeded to read through the stack of letters. Most were pleadings and correspondence pertaining to Fred’s open cases, which had to be read, responded to, and filed. That morning, I learned that Fred had five hundred open divorce cases, all filed according to alphabetical order on the open-faced shelves in the walls behind his desk. To my surprise, Fred quietly and calmly told to me how each case file was organized: a large brown expandable file that contained four smaller manila folders, labeled from front to back as “Pleadings,” “Correspondence,” “My Notes,” and “Timesheets.”

“You and I are part of a paper industry,” he explained. “Every file on that wall behind me there represents not only the life of a client, but also the lives of every member of their families. If you or I lose *one piece* of paper, it could destroy the lives of an entire family. That’s why, at any moment, I have to be able to put my hands on every piece of paper in this office. Do you have any idea what a divorce does to a family? I have never lost a pleading or a piece of correspondence pertaining to a case for over thirty years. And I do not intend to start now. That is why I have routines around here. Routines breed regularity and regularity breeds safety, and safety saves lives. Do I make myself clear?” Fred waited intently for my response.

“Yes sir, absolutely clear.”

Suddenly, Fred got quiet. “Do you hate me yet?”

“No sir.”

He seemed perturbed at my answer.

“Why not? Aren’t you afraid when I yell at you? Aren’t you afraid if you make a mistake you will lose your job?”

“No,” I replied, without missing a beat, “because my Mother can yell a helluva lot louder than you, sir. I’ve never been afraid of yellers. Most of the time, it just means that they feel like they are in a situation where they have lost control. And as for the job, well, I was pretty sure I wasn’t going to get one anyway when I showed up here. I had already set my mind that I was going to have to do something else or set up my own office anyway. Besides, I could make more working retail than you are paying me. I’m just here mostly to learn how a law office operates. If you don’t have the patience to teach me, then I suppose I can leave and learn on my own.”

Fred leaned back in his chair and ran his hands through his hair again, just like he had on Friday. I was beginning to understand this was his habitual thinking gesture. As if he were massaging his brain. Finally, he smiled.

“You know, I like you.”

“Thanks. Would you like to hear from the *Tennessean* now?” I said, holding up the paper.

“Maybe a few things until my first appointment gets here,” he replied, taking the paper gently from my hand and flipping through. He squinted at the headlines and handed it back to me, folded to a page that had caught his interest.

“You’re too vain to wear your glasses, aren’t you? That’s why you have your assistant read to you. You don’t want anyone to know you’re nearsighted.” I stared accusingly at him.

“For the record, I have astigmatism, and I would appreciate your not spreading it around. Glasses are for wusses.”

“Well, for the record, you should get contacts,” I said, raising an eyebrow.

“I *really* like you,” Fred emphasized, settling back into his chair as I read aloud.

“I know.”

\* \* \*

Over the next several months, I learned a lot about Fred Founder, probably even more than I learned about the law itself. I learned that he claimed that he worked five days a week, eight to five, but in actuality he worked seven days a week. Those extra two days were usually reserved for his other responsibilities. At the time I worked there, Fred supported three adult siblings, all of whom were in rehab, and helped maintain their families during their absences. Fred also took care of his elderly mother who had only one leg, and was slowly losing the other to diabetes. Perhaps saddest of all, Fred did the same for the family of his long-term live-in girlfriend, Sarabeth. Although he normally told me more than I ever wanted to know about his personal life, he bristled when I asked why he and Sarabeth had never married or why he had no children.

“That’s none of your business!” Fred snapped. Then one day, a few weeks later, Fred dropped a newspaper clipping on my desk. The picture was of an attractive, middle-aged woman who had just been promoted to Head Nurse in one of the departments at Vanderbilt Hospital.

“That’s the reason Sarabeth and I never got married. Go put it in the file marked ‘personal’ in the cabinet by your desk.”

Although Fred kept all of his clients’ case files in plain sight, I had learned by this time that any papers of his own that he wanted to keep safe he secreted away in little two-drawer cabinet next to the assistant’s desk, which was on the wall adjacent to his. When I pulled out the file marked “personal” I was shocked at what I found.

Apparently, Fred had been married once, for only a few months, right after he graduated from college. As was his usual custom, the documents inside were filed most recent to oldest. At the very back of the file was a wedding announcement of a very young looking Fred and the woman in the newspaper clipping. Flipping through the file, I learned that when she and Fred had married, Fred had been a high school English teacher. A few pages later was a copy of their divorce decree, less than a year later. Next was another wedding announcement, with Fred’s former wife and another man, who looked much older than she. Reading the caption, I recognized that Fred’s wife’s new husband had been a prominent Nashville millionaire, who was now deceased.

The rest of the items in the file clearly told the story of Fred’s response to his wife’s choice to leave him for a wealthier man. His law school acceptance letter. His bar passage results. An old article showing the opening of his first law office. And then picture after picture, cut out of newspapers and magazines for the past thirty years, of Fred’s ex-wife and the family she built with her new husband.

“Now you know why I am so interested in divorce,” Fred said. Startled, I realized that he had been standing behind me silently while I read the file. “But I’m not so much on marriage.”

“I’m really sorry that happened to you Fred,” I said. And I was. “But I still don’t understand what that has to do with why you don’t want to marry Sarabeth. I mean, she’s already stayed with you for fifteen years. Obviously, if she was going to leave, she would have done it by now.”

Fred ran his hands over his hair and sat down. “Sarabeth stays with me because I became the sort of man that Mary\* left me for. Rich. Able to take care of her and her whole family. I have no desire to legalize the fact that I am somebody’s safety net. If I had stayed a schoolteacher, Sarabeth would never have given me the time of day. Plus, my family began to fall apart at about the time I started law school. I’d like to say that I chose to take care of everybody just because I loved them, but I’m not going to lie to you about it. What I really loved was the feeling that people needed me, that I could protect them from themselves. That’s why I became a lawyer.”

Fred took the file from my hands and put it back in the cabinet. “So what’s your excuse? Why did you do it? You’re not the type any more than I am.”

“I wanted to make my parents happy. I wanted to make them proud of me.”

“Pride makes people do a lot of stupid things,” Fred said. “Good thing I don’t have too much of it anymore.” Both of us shuffled around uncomfortably through papers on our desks for a few seconds.

Finally, Fred spoke. “Say, did the lady who owns the beauty shop off Memorial ever get her final decree through?”

I looked at him suspiciously, “Why do you ask?”

“Well, I was just figuring if she were a free woman again, I might send you down to the courthouse to get her cell phone number off the pleadings. I mean, she’s been



married, what, three times now, and she's still a dish. I figure she might settle for a short man by now, if the price was right."

"Damn you, Fred! I can't believe I was feeling sorry for you! If you want her number, go get it yourself. Regardless of why you're together, I will not help you cheat on Sarabeth."

Fred grinned. "Do you hate me yet?"

"No. I just think you are a total lech. Not worthy of hatred."

"Don't worry," replied Fred. "There's plenty of time. If you don't hate me yet, you will."

\* \* \*

And so, for the next six months, Fred Founder and I antagonized one another. In addition to his normal divorce practice, Fred was also an environmental activist, at least in the public eye. So I found myself performing all sorts of non-legal tasks, from staging a rally to save a rural bridge to carrying a hybrid barn snake that Fred surprised me with in the mailroom to MTSU for analysis. Although I must admit that chanting "S.O.B." (Save Our Bridge – Fred's idea) and scouting for serpents was not exactly how I expected to spend my time post-law school, it did increase my tolerance level for the high levels of B.S. that I would encounter in my own practice.

Finally, in October, my Tennessee Bar Exam results came in. Thankfully, I had passed. Excited at the possibility that I might now be promoted to a position that did not involve picking up his dry cleaning or taking his gay nephew to buy a dress for the prom, I told Fred first.

"So?"

“What do you mean, so? I passed! Aren’t you going to congratulate me?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because you aren’t ready to be a lawyer. You know nothing.”

“I think I know a few things. I draft all your client letters. I research and write up most of your pleadings. I’ve sat in on every deposition and client meeting for six months. You have an open listing for two new attorneys in Samford’s job bulletin. What reason do you have for not giving me an interview?”

“Because I need you to sit right there, in that chair next to me, that’s why. You have the intellect but not the temperament to be a lawyer. You aren’t mean enough yet, and you probably never will be. To be a great lawyer you have to have a fire in you to hate injustice. I have been unjust to you every day since you’ve been here, and you can’t even learn to hate me.”

Fred stood staring at me across the desk for a few moments. Finally, he pulled out a file from one of the desk drawers and tossed it on the desk.

“Pick the best three resumes from that stack. Call the girls in. If they are articulate and attractive, send for me. If they are fat and stupid, send them home. They’ll break my chairs.”

I looked at Fred, puzzled. “I don’t understand, sir. Are you hiring a new clerk?”

“You idiot! You are hiring your replacement! I want you to meet the girl who is going to replace you. Maybe then, you will learn to fight for your position in this world.”

“Even though I have done nothing wrong, you are going to fire me and hire another girl in my place?”

“No, I am not going to fire you,” Fred said, getting up and beckoning me to follow him.

“I am going to put you in here.”

Fred switched on the light in the supply closet behind the stairway and motioned inside. Under many piles of boxes, I could see an old wooden desk and chair.

“Clean out this room and put the boxes in the attic. This is going to be your new office, effective November 1<sup>st</sup>. You will write up all the documents I tell you to, staying at your current salary, until you learn that you will never be able to make it in this world by being pleasant all the time. When you have learned that you can trust no one to treat you fairly, or reward you for merit of any kind, then you may come into my office, fire the new clerk, and we will discuss the possibility of your joining this firm as an attorney.”

Not ready to become the law clerk equivalent of Harry Potter in my office under the stairs, I said the only thing left for me to say, as firmly as I could without showing my anger.

“I quit, Fred.”

“What do you mean, you quit!” Fred roared with laughter and burst out of the office under the stairs shouting to the whole building. “This lawyer larvae just said she was going to quit me! BWAHAHA!!!”

Then he turned to me. “Don’t you know that I am the best divorce lawyer in the State of Tennessee? That I can make sure you never work in this state again? You wouldn’t be here if you could find any other job in the first place!” He glowered at me, challenging me to lose it.

“There are forty-nine other states that I haven’t tried yet, Fred. And if I fail to find something there, I can always do something else. Consider that you have my two week notice.”

I walked out of the room shaking slightly, but refusing to raise my voice or look at him. What Fred wanted more than anything was to incite me to yell at him, to pitch a fit and run screaming from the building, just like the girl on the day I got hired. But I wouldn’t do it.

On one hand, Fred was right. He was completely in control of the situation. Every judge in Murfreesboro, including the one I had interviewed with on my first day in town, had clerked for Fred at one time or another. It was the worst-kept secret in town that if a person made it from clerk to attorney in Fred’s firm, his or her future was secured in Nashville legal circles forever. The only power I had was to refuse him what he wanted most: to make me just like him.

\* \* \*

For the next two weeks, Fred did his best to make my life a living Hell. Every morning, he forced me to read aloud from various works of Democrat Party propaganda, and screamed “You’re what’s wrong with America!” every time I told him that I was not interested in politics, or at random intervals throughout the day when I gave unsatisfactory responses to any of his questions. Further, he upped the requirements for my work wardrobe. After my first few days at the firm, he had insisted that I wear pencil skirts and heels to work every day, under the guise of “looking professional,” when really I knew he just liked being attended to by a cute girl in a skirt. For my last two weeks, he insisted on a full dress suit with jacket, even though no one else in the firm was required

to wear one. Last, he eliminated my daily breaks and required me to read aloud to him from the Rules of Civil Procedure at any time I was not actively typing documents or answering phone calls. Then, he would quiz me on the Rules, and if I missed a number, he claimed that my failure was proof that I should never have passed the Bar Exam.

My only protests during this time period was quiet ones, carefully engineered so that I appeared to be the ultimate assistant when in actuality I set about doing as many things as possible to drive Fred absolutely crazy, without his knowing that I was doing so. Every day, I deliberately chose the most overweight and unattractive woman I could find to interview for my position, and sent her in to speak with Fred. Knowing that he had an order compulsion, I deliberately disorganized the file of each incoming client and stepped forward to retrieve it as Fred sputtered during their meeting about why he couldn't put his hands on the documents he had only looked at moments before. I set up his tennis dates only with players whom I knew beat him regularly and afterward chided him about being too old to play. Responding to the reporters about his current cases in the news, I sent the most unflattering pictures I could find to accompany his press releases, knowing they would hurt his vanity. When women he had attempted to pick up would call the office to confirm dates, I would tell them he was out to lunch with his real girlfriend. In short, I made his days as difficult as possible without ever directly disobeying him, and enjoyed watching him devolve into fits of frustration, while I remained perfectly calm. Still, I was on the lookout for the perfect prank that would show Fred exactly how much he needed me, but that I did not need him.

In return, Fred pretended to ignore me. I could tell that he knew something was up, but he was too proud to say anything. Locked in this stalemate, we waited out the two weeks.

Halloween was on a Friday that year, and was the last day of my self-imposed two-week notice. As usual, I arrived early on Friday morning at 7 a.m., so that I could help Fred prepare for his day in court.

Going to court was Fred's reason for living. To him, it was the stage upon what he perceived to be the Art of Trial Advocacy was practiced. Naturally, Fred loved being a star.

Court days usually began with my feigning rapt amusement in the office, as Fred rehearsed his opening statements with all the fervor of William Jennings Bryan preparing the Cross of Gold speech. This feat of oratory persisted for half an hour, after which I was obliged to applaud, and then offer suggestions regarding gesture and vocal delivery, but never content. The actual words of the speech, according to Fred, could only be composed by "real lawyers."

As a last ditch effort, I thought I would ask Fred one more time what his decision was going to be about my moving up to lawyer status within the firm.

"Are you crazy?" He retorted, laughing heartily. "You're already doing the work of an attorney for nine dollars an hour, and you don't have the guts to do anything about it. Why in the world would I want to move up someone like you in the firm? If you aren't willing to answer my phones, then maybe you should just go get married and raise someone's children. That's what young woman are good for anyway, with their childlike minds. Overseeing children. The problem with you is that no man in his right mind would

ever want children with you, and no child would ever want you for a mother. That's why you're here. So just sit down and be quiet."

Of all the insults Fred had hurled at me, this one hurt the most. But as always, I didn't let it show. Again, I vowed to look for one opportunity to make a statement with my passive protest before I left for good that day. Turns out, I didn't have long to wait.

At about 7:30 that particular morning, our client arrived. Like most of Fred's clients, she was an extremely wealthy, attractive woman of early middle age who was in grave peril of losing the fortune that she had earned to some cheating scoundrel of a soon-to-be ex-husband. Never mind that these women were usually guilty of the same crimes against the heart themselves. They had been the first to lawyer up; therefore, their free-ranging cowboys would pay.

This particular lady owned a chain of tanning bed businesses throughout the state of Tennessee, which was clearly evident from her tanorexic appearance. Catering to this type of client allowed Fred to assume the role he most favored: an attorney-errand in well-shined Florsheims prepared to engage in legal battle for a divorcing damsel in distress. The fact that Fred's interests in the well-being of these poor women were primarily monetary and secondarily sexual were, in his words, mere details. After taking his client's hand, gazing deeply into her eyes, and giving her his full reassurance that everything would go well in court that day, we were off for the courthouse.

Our opponent that day was a chief nemesis of Fred's, a local lesbian attorney who specialized in defending the husbands of Fred's wronged wives. My role in these proceedings was as Fred's squire. I carried Fred's briefcase as his legal shield, helped him on with the jacket that was his suit of armor, handed him his blue pens which he

claimed to be mightier than swords, and read aloud to him from sheafs of case documents with all the solemnity as if they were codicils to the Magna Carta.

Fate's Weird Sisters must have been boiling trouble against Fred that day, but their brew proved to be my panacea. When we reached the courthouse, Fred and I soon learned that the building was to be bombarded with hourly influxes of the city's school children, who were invited to trick-or-treat the offices of local elected officials.

Undaunted, Fred stationed me as guard by the door of the Circuit Court room, with a warning that I "was not to let children make any noise to disturb the sanctity of the proceedings." Resisting the urge to laugh at the thought that any trial which was to include recriminating photographs of the cheating spouses sneaking into tanning rooms with others could be sanctimonious, I promised to do my best to manage.

Too bad for Fred that I was a better director of children than he realized.

For the next four hours, I incited every elevator full of grade-school princesses and Jedis into absolute frenzy in the hallway of the fourth floor. Knowing full well that Fred would not dare leave the courtroom to quiet down the commotion once he was on a roll questioning witnesses, I led the legions of mischief-makers in endless rounds of every Halloween song I could think of, with emphasis on "There Was an Old Lady of Skin and Bones." I found that song particularly relevant, given the fact that Fred's client was herself of a decidedly leathery and corpse-like complexion. As the shriek-level of the hallway escalated, I could hear Fred's voice squealing out at fever pitch to make his carefully wrought oratory heard.

By the time the day ended, without a judgment rendered, Fred burst out of the courtroom fuming. However, when he attempted to scream at me, all that emerged from



his mouth was a constant stream of venomous whispers. He looked as foolishly overwrought as the villain in a silent film. My retinue of childish revelers bounded gleefully around Fred as he stomped to down the stairs, carrying his own briefcase. When we reached the street, I called out to him.

“Hey, Fred! Looks like I found some real children to watch over.”

And I couldn't resist one last gibe I was sure he would recognize.

“Do you hate me now?”

Fred just stood there in his disheveled suit. With no one there to carry them, the papers from his carefully managed folders fell out onto the sidewalk and fluttered away on the wind. Out on the sidewalk, surrounded by children, I saw Fred for what he was. The kid who had always been left out of everything, and who as an adult tried every day to take revenge on the world. I didn't hate him. I couldn't. As we exchanged looks, I knew that he knew.

Grabbing the hands of the small witches nearest me, I skipped down the sidewalk, all the way to my car. From that moment onward, I vowed to never work in any law office but my own.

\* \* \*

I kept my vow.

After quitting Fred's firm on Halloween, I taught paralegal studies at a local junior college for two years. Then, after my grandmother became ill with terminal cancer, I returned to Alabama and opened my own law practice. Although I took a few divorce cases, the bulk of my caseload was comprised of court-appointed juvenile drug cases.

Over the course of the next two years, I saw dozens of young people, primarily young men, who had destroyed their lives through drug addiction. Slowly, a pattern began to emerge. Most of the young men were only children, who grew up in homes headed by single working mothers. Without a positive influences present, these young men had fallen into either seeking other male role models, such as the flashier dealers in the drug community, or into trying to replace their absent mothers through too-deep attachments to girlfriends. The ones who found father replacements first became low-level drug pushers. In contrast, the ones who found mother stand-ins usually became addicts who stole to provide for themselves and their lovers.

Oddly enough, my early clerkship experience prepared me to deal with these troubled young men. Dealing with Fred was not unlike coping with an undisciplined teenage boy. Both were addicted to the thing they couldn't have: control over other people's actions in their lives. Few people had ever told Fred no, and even fewer people had refused to respond in kind to his outbursts. Tyrants are born of conflict, and when the conflict is removed, the tyrant can only rant. That was the way I dealt with Fred. By making him know that nothing he could say or do actually affected me, I gave him no new fuel of human suffering to consume. And like a fire built on paper, his anger and self-loathing eventually burnt itself out.

After two years of keeping young men out of jail who really should have been in, if for no reason other than to protect them from themselves, I decided to leave the law for good and become a college professor. So far, this choice has worked out fairly well, since I continue today in the field seven years later. Although I found it easy to laugh at Fred's antics, I found little humor in watching the aftermath of guys younger than me who had

ruined their lives. In the end, I never did learn to hate people, or worse, to become numb to the human tragedy that is the legal system. I feel it is more productive to encourage young people who are still capable of doing well in their lives, instead of merely performing damage control with those for whom there is little hope.

Fred still calls me from time to time. Or rather, he requires his latest clerk might be to call me. The inquiry and response are always the same. I am asked if I would consider returning to the firm, and I reply only as an attorney, not as a clerk. I have heard that Fred keeps a file of the Christmas cards that I send him every year in the little cabinet beside the clerk's desk. Sometimes I wonder whether he will ever figure out why I could never hate him. Other times I wonder whether he knows that, deep down, I pity his addiction to controlling others, because I know it was based in his fear of losing control of those he loved.

Regardless, what frightens me most is that Frank may have been closer to correct than either of us knew.

As a reluctant advocate who craves passive resolution over active conflict, I may not be what's wrong with America. However, as my misadventures in the legal profession have shown, that position was filled by many others long before I passed the bar.

“The Room Where Songs Go To Die”

EMI Music Publishing is the largest music publishing company in the world. Nashville, Tennessee is its largest working office. Shuffling through its current catalog of musical holdings, one can find songs written in any genre of music, by any type of artist, from Alan Jackson to Ziggy Marley. Yet, the most interesting room at EMI is full of songs no one has ever listened to, by artists most people have never heard of. This is The Room Where Songs Go To Die.

My initial encounter with The Room Where Songs Go To Die occurred on my first day as an intern at EMI. My supervisor, Stevie, a perky young woman with black pixie bangs, whose parents had named her after Stevie Nicks, made it the last stop on our tour of the premises. From our travels through the building that afternoon, I surmised that the physical organization of a music publishing company was not unlike Dante’s divisions of Heaven and Hell.

On the upper floor were the publishing executives’ offices. Perched atop the creative food chain, they gazed down on the masses of potential artists and tourists who walked along Music Row. Through hard work, nepotism, or luck, each had ascended to his or her venerable position of tastemaker. From there they judged what was hip and what was dead. Tucked into a small back office was the intern room. A place where, among the filing cabinets and racks of CDs, young executive larvae learned to follow the Commandments of Nashville that allowed them to earn their wings.

The ground floor was where music was actually made. Close to the terrestrial world, songwriters locked themselves into small windowless rooms in pairs and trios to

work together. On the best days, after a four-hour session of rhythmic incantation, they emerged blinking into the afternoon sunlight like newborn newts, carrying the latest pop culture spell to cast over the masses. On the worst days, they sat strumming and humming - wordless for hours - staring into the screens of their digital audio workstations and wondering why the muses had failed them. These were the translators of life on the street, and of the hard-packed red clay roads from whence they came. Although they rarely admitted it, each prayed daily, in silence and in secret, that they would not forget the old languages upon which their livelihood depended.

In the basement, behind two rooms full of broken and discarded instruments, was a small, narrow staircase lit by a single pull-chain bulb. At the end of the staircase was a cobweb-strewn, claustrophobic room, painted black. There on dusty shelves, quietly dry-rotting in slender paper boxes, resided the dreams of a thousand would-be entertainers, recorded like ghosts on enough reel-to-reel electromagnetic tape to encircle the world.

“And this,” Stevie said, with a finality that suggested we had come to the end of our journey, “is The Room Where Songs Go To Die.” Just in case I missed it, she pointed to the sign over the door declaring this fact. Obviously written on a discarded cardboard shirt form, the faded Marks-A-Lot letters had lost most of the glitter-pen glue that once made them sparkle. I stared at the undisturbed glitter that had fallen to the floor.

“I made the sign myself when I first came to work here five years ago,” Stevie said, breaking my reverie. “Is there anybody old-school you’d like to look up? We have just about everyone’s original work tapes in here.” She patted the shelves. Dust rose.

I stared out over the mass confusion of tapes that littered the floor and slanted in cockeyed, double-stacked rows on the creaky shelves.

“No. No one I can think of that I really care about. At least, not right now,” I replied. A public relations person by nature and trade, Stevie could sense my distraction.

“Well, someday maybe you will. And then you can come back. Working here and going through back catalog to fill orders, just about everybody finds a pet project. Somebody to rediscover that is the greatest artist no one ever heard about. You just have to dig around in here until you find one.” As she turned out the light and we walked back up the stairs, she stopped and turned back to me.

“You know it’s sad, really,” Stevie said, “to think about all those songs alone down there in the dark. Each one of them is somebody’s story from somewhere. And if you really think about it, most of the people on those tapes are already dead. And that’s all that’s left of them. Most of the time just a scratch vocal and guitar. One mic. Every time I shut the door, I don’t know, it reminds me of a funeral or something.”

Stevie shivered a little. I did too. We stepped out onto 16<sup>th</sup> Avenue into the bright, cool, February sunlight. We exchanged glances, both feeling it even though we had only known each other for a day.

“Early happy hour today?”

“You bet.”

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After law school, I moved to Nashville in an attempt to use my law degree to get into the business side of music. However, I found out quickly that Nashville’s entertainment law firms were unwilling to take a chance on a new grad from a mediocre school with no background in music business. In an effort to compensate for my lack of experience, I clerked during the day and took music business classes at night at MTSU.

After a couple of semesters, a professor gave me the heads up on an opening for an intern at EMI. Since music publishing, with its emphasis on licensing and copyright, was a natural fit for someone with a legal background, I applied.

Not expecting to get an interview after being turned down many times already, I was shocked when EMI called me back the day after I submitted my resume. They wanted me to interview the next day, and if all went well, to start on Monday. Floored, I managed a “yes.”

The next day I was unprepared for the first thing I saw upon entering the lobby at EMI. Right as I came into the waiting room was the framed gold record of “Harper Valley P.T.A.” Although no one in the room knew it, that song had changed my life every day since even before I was born.

In the late 60s and early 70s, my Mom, Linda Manning, had been an artist with Mercury Records in Nashville. A classically trained vocalist and pianist, Mom slowly worked her way out of the honky-tonk circuit and into Hollywood. Wanting to break into film and mainstream popular music, Mom had turned down a series of what her management team considered to be surefire Country radio hits. The last straw had been when she turned down “Harper Valley P.T.A.,” a tune that Tom T. Hall had written especially for her. When Mercury management saw Jeanne C. Riley sell six million copies of what would become the highest selling single in the history of the label, they dropped Mom from her record deal. And she never got over it.

Standing face to face with the evidence of my Mom’s greatest regret, I almost started to cry. Every day of my life, I had heard the story of how, if she had cut that song, our lives would have been different. How I would have grown up in California and she

and I would have had everything we ever dreamed of and never grown old or tired. Seeing that gold record, I knew how Percival must have felt when he first set eyes upon the Holy Grail. I was standing in the musical Promised Land. As I reached for my cell phone to text her, a man came down the stairs.

“Are you here for the four o’clock interview?”

“Ye---Yes,” I stammered, interrupted in my reverie.

“Oh, good. I hope you know something about older music. All the kids we get now only know the current stuff. Me, I’m an oldster. You gotta know where you come from, before you know where you’re going, musically speaking. You know what I mean?”

I knew exactly what he meant and told him so. If I could have told him the truth without weirding him out, that I was rocked to sleep in my cradle while my Mom sang Roger Miller’s “England Swings,” and she talked about wearing his high school letterman jacket while they were dating, I would have. But in a rare instance for me, I couldn’t find the words.

That was okay, because Bruce Burch was the kind of man who never needed a response so much as someone to listen. He went on for about fifteen minutes, uninterrupted, regaling me with his opinion of the current state of the music business and what kind of future a young person could expect. At last, remembering I was there, he interrupted himself.

“So, who do you think is the best new Country artist out today?”



During Bruce's lecture, I had time to regain my wits and come back into job interview mode. Having anticipated this question and rehearsed several answers on my drive into town, I was prepared to give him a lecture of my own.

"Actually, I think that Julie Roberts is the best new artist working. She has a lot of genre versatility in her voice. She'd be able to do anything from traditional Country to crossovers in contemporary, rock, pop, or blues. Not to mention she's got a great back story, all that bit about driving to Nashville from the Carolinas with her Mom. It's *brilliant*, anybody would buy her record just for that story. Plus, she has a degree from Belmont, so she's educated in the business. Not very likely to throw everything away for a whim and run off to get married and waste everyone's time and effort after a big public relations campaign has been built around her. So, yeah. My money's on Julie all the way. She could be the next Reba McEntire for sure."

"Glad you think so," Bruce smiled. "And even gladder you think the PR campaign was *brilliant*. I built it. Wrote a lot for Reba too, although you may be too young to remember that. I'm managing Julie's song selection for her new album, and I think you just got hired."

"But, I haven't even interviewed yet?" I asked, confused.

"You might not think so, but you just did. Welcome to the music business, kid. It moves fast, so keep running. And stay honest. Or at least," he said, giving me a look that made it seem as if he suspected I had planned the whole thing, "make it seem like you are. That's what the Country fans want to hear. Completely manufactured genuineness." He cocked his head to one side in a fake-coquettish manner and batted his eyes, "Because

that's just the sweetest thing, darlin'. And Bless Your Heart! You'll never be able to tell which is which!"

Bruce broke from his Loretta Lynn impression to greet another man coming down the stairs. "Hey Gary, I just found your new intern! And get this...she thinks Julie's PR campaign is *brilliant*." Bruce grinned like a schoolboy waiting to be congratulated.

"Well, that's great! Saves me the trouble of interviewing her." I couldn't believe it, but Gary seemed to take Bruce seriously. Up to that point, I had walked up and down Music Row handing out resumes three times, and never made it beyond a receptionist's desk. Clearly, I thought, this was a town where luck, not effort, reigned. Instantly my mind fell back to an old saying of my Mom's about Nashville. *Never let them know you want it, or they'll never give it to you.*

However, I didn't have much time to ponder Mom's words of wisdom. As soon as Gary Overton, President of EMI, introduced himself to me, I was whisked upstairs to meet the rest of the staff. As I greeted each new person, I realized that no one seemed old. Even though Gary must have been at least fifty, with his Ken-doll hair, pastel Polo, tennis tan, and Topsiders, he looked more like a guy about to head out for Bloody Mary's at the Cottage Club than the chief executive of Nashville's largest publisher. Bruce, who I came to know as one of EMI's top writers, gave off a similar aura of arrested youth, only he tended to dress like a state-school Sigma Chi on picture day, complete with navy blazer and wrinkled khakis. Even my two youngest new co-workers, Stevie and Sarah, looked much younger than other professionals in their mid-twenties, opting for whimsical T-shirts, jersey skirts, and quirky flats instead of the "it-matches-black-slacks" ensembles I had come to expect from aspiring female attorneys.

The overall effect of my first hour in the music business was that it was an endless frat party, complete with a fully stocked bar. Lucky for me, being in a sorority was the one frivolity that I had allowed myself in undergraduate school. After three grueling years of law school and an abysmal clerkship, I felt ready to get the party started. However, nothing could have prepared me for the whirlwind of celebrities and drama that swirled endlessly about EMI's three floors.

Over the course of my six months working at EMI, I discovered that Nashville is a town that lives and dies by a set of carefully defined, yet unwritten, rules. Actually, they are more like Commandments. Those who choose not to obey the Commandments are banished to various levels of music industry purgatory, which range from being stuck as a club level musician to being ousted from the industry entirely and having to take a job at Guitar Center. Most people have to learn these rules by trial and error, but being an intern gave me the opportunity to see the consequences of upholding or breaking the Commandments, without having to go through the drama of personal experience. Knowing these Commandments, and living by them, is the best insurance anyone can have to stay working in Music City, and keep out of The Room Where Songs Go To Die.

The First Commandment of Nashville is "Thou Shalt Not Speak Ill of Anyone Else From Nashville." Music is a strange business. It attracts strange people. Strange people have strange lifestyles. Yet, people who want to work in Nashville must always remember that these strange habits should never be discussed.

What sort of behavior is off-limits for discussion? Basically, anything that could cause the general public to suppose that anyone in the industry is anything but a God-fearing Christian who loves their Momma, spouse, kids, conservative politics, small

towns, beer, guns, animals, and the Great American Way. The reason for this is that the target audience member for mainstream Country radio is a thirty-something-year-old, Southern Christian Caucasian female with children, pets, and a mortgage. In the legal world, this average citizen is called the RPP, or “reasonably prudent person,” but for illustrative purposes, we will just call the average Country listener Cindy Lou. As we will see, reasonableness has little to do with her.

Cindy Lou has a structured set of values. First is that men should never cheat on their wives or girlfriends. That’s why cheating songs are so popular in Country music. They give Cindy Lou an opportunity to engage in an almost Orwellian style of Three-Minute Hate toward offenders in their past every time they hear a cheating song. Additionally, Cindy Lou is to be kept from any inkling of information that suggests her favorite male stars are cheating, or worse, that her favorite female stars are “other women.”

This situation can pose a problem for music executives, since the natural thing among successful, attractive people is to try to “upgrade” to more satisfying sexual experiences and relationships. With male artists, the tactic is usually a flat denial. No, he is not sleeping with anyone else, yes he loves his wife...until the inevitable happens and a “surprising and shocking” divorce is filed. Female artists are a bit trickier to deal with, mostly because Cindy Lou has a paradoxical relationship of half-identification with, half-jealousy of the warblers of her favorite girl anthems. There are two approaches that a female artist’s PR team can take to perform damage control. In obedience of the First Commandment of Nashville, I have chosen to name each of these choices after the

hometowns of their most notable female musical exports, rather than using the artist's name to whom the remedy was applied.

The first option, which I will refer to as the “Star, Mississippi Solution” or SMS, works best when the artist in question is unmarried. In the most famous case of SMS application, the female artist had become notorious for hooking up with other male artists and record executives, while still married to her then-husband, a minor music industry executive. The last straw came when the executive, who had helped produce her debut record, had to present her with her first Number One award at a party to which she had invited her most recent conquest. The SMS girl's PR team knew that they had to act fast to save her career.

The solution that they came up with was twofold. First, they did a complete overhaul of her musical oeuvre. No longer was she pitched new songs like her first hits, which had to do with being wild, going to Vegas, or covering Janis Joplin. Instead, she was presented with more romantic ballads and female self-affirmation anthems. Also, she was put on tour with another of her label's problematic artists. After her divorce, she was encouraged to date him. To everyone's happiness, the bad boy and bad girl hit it off, and eventually married, providing their publicity teams with the excellent opportunity of producing a mega-show. Complete with a movable dual-heart stage and the first of a series of saccharine, lovelorn duets, the tour became the most profitable in Country music history. Several children later, the SMS girl's reputation was completely refurbished, and she was ready to appear in Cindy Lou's favorite magazine, *Ladies Home Journal*, with tips on child raising, cooking, and how to have a happy marriage.

The second option to re-polish the tarnished image of a female country star into a suitable product for Cindy Lou's consumption is the "Monticello, Georgia Solution," or MGS. The MGS operates best when the artist in question is not the type to flit from relationship to relationship, but instead engages in a long-term liaison with a married man. The original MGS was a powerful vocalist who had already outgrown two marriages when she hooked up with Country music's then-biggest male crossover star, after singing backup for him. When their affair became too obvious to ignore, their public relations teams finally relented, and began pitching their relationship as a merger of stars that were meant to align. Cindy Lou and her contingency were fed a steady stream of messages intended to depict the pair as Country's new super-couple. Simultaneously, the mere-mortal spouses of each star were faded into the background as quietly as possible. This star-crossed lovers approach serves Miss MGS to the present day, so that now she too is a proper cover subject for Cindy Lou's favorite periodicals.

Of course, the ultimate key to success for any eager-to-redeem-herself female star is a humble-pie album. This album should be released during the most dramatically visible year of her career, and above all else, should feature a leadoff single that shows the SMS or MGS girl has not forgotten her "roots." As such, the single should name-check the area of the South from which the star hails in the title and chorus, in order to prove to all her Cindy Lou fans that she has not forgotten where she came from. Ideally, this song should also provide an itemized listing of basic Country values to which the star claims to adhere, to show that success has not gone to her head. Following the single, the remainder of the album should contain a mixture of self-reflective songs that demonstrate how the tarnished star has learned her lessons from fame's school of hard knocks and has

come to the conclusion that she is no different from her Cindy Lou-style fans. In exchange for this *mea culpa* album and a carefully managed publicity plan regarding her personal life, the Cindy Lou's of her world will give the star what she really craves: immortality. All of this, because the star knew how to abide by Nashville's First Commandment.

The Second Commandment of Nashville is "Thou Shalt Always Stay Informed About Everyone From Nashville, Past and Present." To the Country music public, nothing is uglier than a person who forgets the past. This sentiment applies both to someone remembering personal origins, as well as the roots of Country music itself. Apply for any business-minded position in the Nashville music industry, and the interview subjects probably won't cover how many words a person can type per minute, but instead will concern how many Willie Nelson songs she knows by heart. For the faithful, Country music is a religion, and knowing its early gospels is a must for anyone seeking to remain in the Temple of Music Row.

Perhaps one of the reasons that Country music goes hand-in-hand with Christianity is that both religions emphasize veneration for their elders. If there was a Country Bible, it might begin something like this:

"In the beginning, God created Hank Williams and the hillbilly honky-tonk sound, and he saw that was Good. However, at the WWII era gave rise to the blue-collar class, on the second day, He saw fit to create Johnny Cash, and that was Good also. By the third day, which occurred sometime during the 1960s, God recognized America had reached a Great Cultural Divide, so He parted the Waters of Country music between the Nashville Countryopolitan and Bakersfield sounds. On the fourth day, as He saw America

drifting further and further away from the true musical faith, God permitted Rock to enter the Country genre, and the Outlaw movement arose out of the Promised Land of Texas, and He saw that this was still musically Good, but morally questionable. However, on the fifth day, a great darkness called Country Pop came over the land, luring many of Country's patron saints out of Nashville and into Hollywood. God saw that this was not Good at all, so He punished the urban cowboys of the world with poor quality music for many years. At last, on the sixth day Country's Messiah arrived in a color-blocked shirt to translate the gospel to the MTV generation. On the seventh day, after CMT was bought out by MTV, God gave up, and went home to his Mother Church (The Grand Old Opry at the Ryman), where He passes very little judgment now over the talented and those only pretending to be so."

Yet, it is possible to enter the Shrine of Sixteenth Avenue without such musical knowledge. Perhaps the most egregious deviation from the Second Commandment that I witnessed while I was an intern at EMI happened at RCA Nashville. I went to deliver some songs for a listening meeting and noticed a life-sized picture of the country group Alabama hanging behind the receptionist's desk. Since I had a friend who was currently playing on their Farewell Tour, I thought I would strike up a conversation about the group while I was waiting to be buzzed into the office. However, I was unprepared for the response that followed.

"So," I asked pointing to the picture hanging over her head, "do Randy and the guys ever come in? Are they working on any new projects?"

"Randy Who?"

"Randy Owen."



“Who’s Randy Owen?”

The look on her face told me that she wasn’t being sarcastic, which probably worried me more than if she had have been. I couldn’t believe that she worked at RCA Nashville and had no idea who Randy Owen was. But it was about to get worse.

“Randy Owen is the lead singer of Alabama. You know Alabama, right?”

“Eh, I’ve been through the state, but I don’t really care for the group.” She yawned and leaned back in her chair. “Which one is he? The fat one or the one with the beard. Oh, wait,” she giggled, “they all have beards. My bad.”

“The skinny one on the middle right. No sleeves,” I said, pointing again.

“Oh, he looks like my shady uncle.” She yawned again. “Yeah, I think I know who he is now. But old folks’ music, you know... I guess they still make records or do county fairs or something, but honestly, I don’t know why we still even have the picture up there. Like, no one cares anymore, right? I have no idea where they are. They should put up a Kenny Chesney poster or something.”

I winced. “They’re on their Farewell Tour right now, with more Number One hits than any other group in the history of Country music. Touring them in a Greatest Hits compilation. On RCA.” I couldn’t resist adding, “Right here...where you work.”

Apparently, that one made her think. She didn’t say another word for the remaining minutes before I went into the next office.

During my remaining months at EMI, I continued to come across people who worked in Country music, but who had no idea about the history of Country music. I started making it my mission when I ran errands each day to ask the front desk people what their opinion was of particularly well-known artists who had once recorded for their

labels. Although it happened at least once a week, it always surprised me to find people who had never heard of artists like Conway Twitty or Bobby Bare. However, I noticed a particular trend that, if an artist had ever appeared in a movie or television show, everyone always knew who they were. For example, those who had never heard a note of her music would remember Dolly Parton from *Steel Magnolias* or *9 to 5*, even though they might not have known that she had sung the title track. And of course everybody knew Waylon Jennings as the voice of *Dukes of Hazzard*. Regardless of whether they had not always been crazy about Country music, apparently knowledge of the film industry kept them from going insane. Too bad the fact that seeing someone work at a record label and not know its artists drove me crazy.

The Third Commandment of Nashville is “Thou Shalt Always Appear Humbler Than Thee Actually Is.” For some artists and business executives, this is an easy Commandment to follow. Most people who work in Country music grew up in the South or Midwest, and brought their natural down-home attitudes with them to Nashville. Perhaps the most interesting thing I noticed about this Commandment is that the more successful an artist is, the more likely he or she is to actually be humble and easy to get along with. The first time I noticed this was when I met Phil Vassar, who, on the first time I met him, not only took the time to stop and shake hands with an intern, but we had a real conversation about his upcoming album.

However, the time that I became really aware that success can equal humility was when I worked the Country Radio Convention in 2005. That day, I was assigned as the artist escort for Van Zant, the Lynyrd Skynyrd spinoff group formed by the two remaining Van Zant brothers, Donnie and Johnny. The purpose of an artist escort at a

radio convention is mostly to be a Sherpa for their artists, fetching them drinks, parking their cars, and generally catering to their whims.

Yet, the Van Zant brothers made me feel like I was just a friend hanging out with the band. When I arrived to pick them up outside the EMI office and drive them to the convention center, I found the two of them taking turns mugging for each other's cameras in front of the Number One banner for their recent single, "Get Right With the Man." The way that they were carrying on, you would think that they were frat boys on vacation taking pictures outside of the Welcome to Las Vegas sign instead of multi-platinum musicians. When I offered to take a picture of them, so that they wouldn't have to take turns, they seemed excited, putting on their best rock poses, like they were fans instead of icons.

Like practically everyone else I know from Alabama, at that time I had my cell phone's ringtone set to play "Sweet Home Alabama" anytime someone called me from back home. Just as we got out of the car, my phone rang, and as I answered the call, the guys went nuts.

"Holy shit!" Donnie said, as I hung up the phone, "Was that us?"

"Yeah..." I said, "I'm uh...all my friends like the song. I'm from Alabama."

"No shit!" replied Johnny, "Well, that's the first time I've ever heard of anybody with our song on their phone. Whaddya call that a...ringtone? Hey!" He yelled across the parking lot at their manager, "Are we getting paid for this? You didn't even tell me we had ringtones!"

I could tell he was joking, but his manager turned white as a sheet. Apparently, he had some reason for concealing the fact that Lynyrd Skynyrd's most well-loved song had

made it to cyberspace. From the look on the brothers' faces, I could tell that they knew their manager was trying to hide something from them. But to their credit, they chose to ignore it.

"Hell," Donnie said, "who cares, man? I mean, the fact that song is what...three decades old by now, and cute girls still want to make their phone ring to it?" He looked over at his brother, who chimed in.

"That's always been good enough for me," Johnny fired back. "Ain't that what we got into this business for anyway? To catch attention from girls?"

"Well, as you can see...it still works!" I replied, and we laughed about it while their manager slunk away.

For the rest of the day, I had my easiest time as an artist escort. The brothers were gentlemen of the sort that couldn't stand to let a girl get her own beer, let alone carry their gear around. Spending the day with the Van Zant brothers taught me that, no matter how successful people become, if they are good people, they will stay almost the same.

Yet even they paled in comparison to Dolly Parton, who was also at the convention that day. From the Van Zant booth across the conference hall, I watched as Dolly greeted the longest line of visitors, every one of whom was a fan she had never met before, with a bubbling smile. After twelve hours, she gave a full concert as the featured artist. As she performed her duet with Keith Urban, I wandered over to the front of house engineer, who seemed as impressed as I was.

"Dolly," he said shaking his head, "That gal's the real deal. She's the only singer, old or new school, I've worked with recently who doesn't use Autotune. Check it."

Autotune is a computer program that is both a blessing and a curse to the music business. It is a blessing to engineers, who can use it to correct notes that are off-pitch or tempo, in both recorded music and live performance settings. However, Autotune's magical ability to make bad vocals sound good allows many vocalists to rise to levels of success and celebrity that their meager talents cannot support. For this reason, Autotune is a curse to those who respect singers who work years to hone their craft, only to be passed over for younger, better looking entertainers, who often produce lower-quality music.

The engineer gestured at the board. It was true. Perfectly on pitch and in balance. Dolly used no Autotune, even after having spent the entire day talking nonstop. Simply Amazing.

But for every Dolly Parton, Lynyrd Skynyrd, or Phil Vassar, who reaffirm a person's faith that sometimes the music industry rewards the most deserving people with success, there is someone like Heidi Newfield. Few people have heard of Heidi. In the karma of the music business, those who fail to obey the Third Commandment are doomed to fall.

In the summer of 2005, Heidi was the lead singer of a group called Trick Pony. Granted, that year they had a single, "It's a Heartache," off their new album that made it to Number 4 on the Country charts. Still, without the rest of the group, Heidi was not a household name. However, the day she came trotting into EMI, she acted as if she were as well-known as June Carter. I was working the front desk when she came in to see Gary. When I told her that Gary was in a meeting with Josh Turner, she lost her temper.

“You can’t tell me I have to wait down here for Josh fucking Turner to get through with his damn meeting. Don’t you know who I am!” she screamed.

I knew perfectly well who she was, but I decided to mess with her.

“No. I have no idea who you are.”

“Well, I am Heidi Newfield, the biggest thing to hit this town since...” she stumbled to find someone worthy of comparison to herself.

“June Carter?” I volunteered.

“Bigger!” And off she stamped up the stairs in a huff, to rage at the upstairs receptionist. Although I never knew whether my smarmy remark had made an impression on her, I always wondered if the single off her next album, “Johnny and June,” was at least partly inspired by the little exchange.

That is not to say that every up-and-coming artist has a huge ego. In fact, some of them are almost uncomfortably congenial. When Carrie Underwood came to EMI for her first listening meeting to choose songs for her debut album, she went around shaking hands with everyone in the building, including me, asking the same question.

“Hey! I’m Carrie Underwood! I’m so excited to be here! Would you like my autograph?”

The effect was refreshing, in a way. After all, not every day do you see the most recent winner of American Idol acting like a kid who just stepped off the plane at Disney World, and volunteering her autograph. By the end of the day, Carrie finally calmed down enough to actually listen to the songs that were presented to her. Still, she was so agreeable to everything she heard, it was impossible to tell whether she really liked anything at all.

“You just tell me what to sing, and I’ll do it,” she said at the end of the meeting. “I like a challenge and you know the business better than I do. I’m open to anything.”

Little did she know it, but Carrie’s eager cheerleader attitude toward song selection made everyone in the building work harder for her than anyone else on the roster that year. Every plugger in the building dug out the songs that he or she had held onto for years, hoping to find that one artist who would not be too opinionated to give them a fighting chance. Because Carrie was so open to trying just about any kind of song, and was talented enough to sing everything well, her management team was able to create a great first album that made her career. From Carrie Underwood, I learned that an open mind is perhaps the best tool any artist can use to get other creative people to work hard for her, simply because they feel trusted and listened to.

Which brings me to The Fourth Commandment of Nashville: “Thou Shalt Always Work Harder Than Everyone Else, Especially At Making It Look Like Thee Are Not Working.” The artist who comes to mind every time I think about this Commandment is Jamey Johnson. A former Marine, Jamey worked hard after his days in the service making the rounds of Country bars around his hometown of Montgomery, Alabama, where he built up a respectable following. After attracting the attention of Tom Luteran, head song plugger at EMI, Jamey was invited up to play for record executives at EMI, in hopes of getting a writing deal, and also at BNA, for the big prize, a chance at signing as an artist.

The day he came in to audition, I could tell he was nervous but trying to hide it. I had met him while assisting in meetings with Tom over the past couple of months, and not once had I ever seen him shaven. Not only had he had shaved, but he still had the

untanned shadow of where a five o'clock shadow had been, which to me is always a sign of a laid-back guy who is trying to get shined up to look his best. Plus, he was all duded up in traditional Country garb, Western shirt, Wranglers, and new, but not too new, cowboy boots. Still, from the moment he opened his mouth that day, like every day, I knew he was going to be a sensation. In speaking and singing voice, he sounded just like a young George Jones, only smoother. Yet, despite his down-home, laidback demeanor, Jamey didn't waste a moment of practice time. He continued to tune his guitar and test lyrics up to the moment he set foot in the audition room.

Not surprisingly, Jamey didn't make it through his first song, "Honkytonk Badonkadonk" before I could tell from the sparkle in everyone's eyes that they thought he had it. Minutes later, he and Tom were headed down the hall to lay down some quick scratch tracks that would signify his first official action as an EMI writer. Jamey was so relieved when he burst out of the room that I thought he would explode.

"We did it Bama! We got out of the trailer park!" He exclaimed, swinging me around in a circle. Apparently, the move out of the trailer park made an impression on Jamey, because he named his own production company Trailer Park a few weeks later.

Although Jamey did well during his first deal penning hits for other artists, his debut album failed to move CDs, and he was dropped from BNA. However, Jamey kept working, and drawing inspiration out of struggling through a divorce in 2006, self-produced an album on his own that he released on the Internet. This second major album, *That Lonesome Song*, regained Nashville's attention, and Jamey got a second record deal with Mercury, who re-released the album in physical form and helped it sell to Gold



status. The top single from that album, “In Color,” won Song of the Year, and at last cemented Jamey’s career on Music Row.

One of the reasons Jamey earned my respect is that he wrote all of his own songs. However, it is possible to be a diligent performer who does not generate his own material. In many ways, this is more difficult, because it requires the artist to fight others for the best material. This is hard to do for an artist who hasn’t had a hit in a while, because song pluggers at publishing companies are much more likely to call a hot artist than a stale one when they hear a great new tune.

By far and away, the hardest working non-writing performer I encountered while working at EMI was Trace Adkins. Although Trace writes some of his material, most of his notable hits have come from other writers. In 2005, Trace was desperate for a hit on his upcoming album, *Songs About Me*. Knowing that he was in danger of getting cut from his label if he couldn’t produce a charting single, Trace called EMI every day, trying to hear the new writer demos that came in before anyone else did. Jamey’s new song, “Honkytonk Badonkadonk” immediately caught his eye. However, as soon as Jamey had laid down tracks, Tim McGraw’s manager had immediately put the tune on hold. Tim, who thought the song was silly, was stalling around trying to avoid cutting it. Yet, Trace could see its potential. For several weeks, every time I answered his phone calls, I had the same discussion with Trace.

“Has Tim let go his hold on “Badonkadonk” yet?”

“No, Mr. Adkins, not yet. But as soon as he does, I promise I’ll call you. Sorry.”

“Candy, I just have to have that song. I know it’s goofy, but it’s a hit, I can feel it. And I need that hit to keep my deal. I mean, I’ve got a housefull of daughters to keep up, ya know?”

And I did know. Even as he was trying to laugh it off, I knew that Trace knew it too. The week before he cut Jamey’s ode to shapely badonkadonks, I sat in on a label meeting in which his production team laid out their strategy for Trace to exit the Nashville scene gracefully. But, the Nashville muses that inspired the Roundabout must have had a different destiny in store for Trace, because that week, Tim finally let go of his hold on the song. After I called him, Trace was in the office and on to the studio to lay down tracks within an hour.

For his part, Jamey was excited too. When I called to let him know that Trace was cutting his song, I caught him off guard.

“Hold on, darlin’. I cain’t take good news nekkid. Let me get a towel on, I just got out of the shower,” he said, as I fought back the urge to laugh. I was happy to know that I had a small part in helping two of the hardest working musicians at the company get together to produce a tune which saved both of their careers. Trace went on to cover two more of Jamey’s songs on his next album, one of which, “Ladies Love Country Boys,” was his first number one, and the music video for the other, “I Got My Game On,” landed Trace a spot on Donald Trump’s *Celebrity Apprentice*. Today, neither of them have any trouble maintaining their daughters.

Unfortunately, for every hard working writer or artist who struggles before eventually making it to the top, there are dozens of stories about talent, young and old, who simply give up and give in to the temptations that surround life in the music

business. One young female writer, whom I will call Melody\*, came to EMI with a promising career. However, at barely twenty-one, she began a relationship with a much older writer who was somehow able to continuously produce hits, despite having a fairly sizable drug habit. After moving in with him, Melody also began using heavily, and her song production reflected it. No longer producing the hit-quality tunes that she had when originally signed, Melody showed up to her writer's sessions stoned and churned out songs that were, quite literally, about shit.

One, a ninety-second ditty which she called "Doo Doo Brown," became the joke of the office as the worst thing any of us had ever heard, but she turned it in anyway as part of her song requirement for the year. Eventually, her high tolerance-level boyfriend started doubling up on his sessions, fulfilling Melody's contracts as she became unable, because he felt responsible for leading her astray. At last, her would-be record label had enough, and dropped her, giving the songs that were supposed to have comprised her first album to Carrie Underwood for her debut. The song that was to have been Melody's lead-off single became Underwood's fourth major hit. Even though she continues to write, Melody has become a cautionary tale in the music community showing what can happen when someone has the talent, but not the discipline or self-restraint, to make it in Nashville. What I learned from the Fourth Commandment is that, to make it on Music Row, a person has to behave something like a duck, staying cool on the surface, but paddling like hell underneath the water.

The Fifth Commandment of Nashville is "Thou Shalt Know When to Walk Away From Nashville." Of course, obeying this Commandment is easy when an artist begins to lose market share and the public interest turns away. The natural thing to do in that

situation is to leave with dignity before the only places left to play have Bar and Grill in their names. The situation becomes more complicated when the artist continues to be commercially viable, but at some point becomes more of an institution than a creative force. This usually happens around the time that the artist releases a Greatest Hits album. However, it can happen much earlier in a career, even after the first album, if that album is an unequivocal success. It all has to do with something called recoupment.

When artists begin recording their first albums, they are given an advance, usually around \$50,000, to tide them over until the record is completed and put to market, which usually takes about a year. This money is effectively a no-interest, no-repayment loan. Only after the album has sold enough copies for the record label to earn back, or “recoup” this initial investment from the artist’s share of royalties will the artist ever be paid more money. Since the artist only receives a small portion of the proceeds from each album, usually around \$1.08 per CD sold, and now even less on downloads, he or she rarely becomes fully recouped on the first album. In fact, the average major label debut album has to sell 380,000 copies before the artist will ever receive a dime over the advance. This begins a cycle of pre-payment and recoupment that, for Country artists, usually lasts a full business-plan cycle of five albums over the course of ten years. The last of these albums is usually a Greatest Hits compilation, after which the artist is released from the contract.

Songwriters go through this same process, only for a much lower advance of around \$25,000 for a year’s time, during which he or she is required to produce twelve commercial viable songs. By commercially viable, the publishing company means that the songs are able to be pitched and placed with commercially successful artists.

However, because their up-front advance is lower, writers usually begin making money on royalties much more quickly than artists, but still at about the same rate per cut per album.

The problem arises when the artist or writer recoups money too quickly, by being too commercially successful right away. Record label and publishing executives have a much higher incentive to promote artists who have not been a good return on their investment than those who have. This means that the greater amount of publicity will be lavished upon the second album of a less successful, non-recouped artist than one who is already in the black. Of course, this sets up a situation in which many strong acts, who put out a dynamite first album, flounder on their sophomore attempt. Lulled into a false sense of security, song pluggers no longer pitch these artists the best material, and record label publicity departments fail to work as hard to create new, unique media campaigns for artists whom they consider to be sure sells. Then, when the second album flops, everyone blames the artists.

This isn't a good situation to be in for songwriters, either. The same thing happens to them. Once they get a few solid hits in a year and become fully recouped, the publishing company's pluggers shift their attention to lesser writers, figuring that the more successful ones have had their luck and made their money for the year. As a result, many of the best songwriters' work is put directly into back catalog, and never pitched to anyone.

The most business-savvy writers and artists recognize this pattern and go out on their own, to self-produce, pitch, and market their own material. Willie Nelson's career followed this path. After penning dozens of hits for other artists, but having no success on

his own, Willie went to Texas and cut three concept albums on his own money, which he then took to major companies for distribution only. This broke the cycle of pre-payment and recoupment for him, and allowed Willie to launch his own career on his own terms, which is still successful today.

But most creative people are not the businessmen and women that Willie Nelson is. The worst example of this that I dealt with when I was interning at EMI happened as I was helping to put together listening meeting CDs for Bo Diddley's debut album. Bo was a tough fit for the regular Nashville treatment of American Idol artists, because he had a very definite neo-Southern Rock sound. Yet, I felt like I knew exactly what to do with him. I dug into the back catalog of Dickie Betts' material and found a really strong rock ballad that sounded very much like a blend of Betts' previous hit, "In Memory of Elizabeth Reed," in instrumentation and scope, but with the lyrical sensibility of another Allman Brothers' tune, "Melissa." However, when I tried to pitch the song for Bo's listening meeting, I was quickly met with a universal "no."

"Why?" I asked. "I think it's a perfect fit for him. And Mr. Betts would be thrilled to have a hit out of his older material like this."

"Of course it's a perfect fit. Bo Diddley is like the long lost love child of the Allman Brothers anyway. But Betts is fully recouped. Has been for years. Plus, he isn't on a current songwriter's contract anymore. There is absolutely no reason why we should pitch any more of his material to anyone, anytime. Find something else by someone from our current roster."

From that moment onward, I began to realize that in the music business, it was the business that counted, much more than the music. Needless to say, Betts didn't get the

cut, and as a result of his reluctance to accept material that didn't fit his style, Bo's record flopped. And at the end of that summer, even though I was offered a job to stay on, I quit EMI.

\* \* \*

When my mother talked about the end of her music career, she would always end with the same statement.

“Music didn't leave me. I left music.”

On my last day at EMI, I returned to The Room Where Songs Go To Die. There, amidst the cobwebs of almost a century of forgotten dreams, I found the master recordings of the album that my Mom had never released. The one that could have changed her life, if she hadn't been dropped from Mercury Records. The one that could have changed my life forever.

When I opened the box and took out the reel, I could tell that it would not be playable. As I painstakingly unwound the outermost layer of tape, it crumbled in my hands. Clearly, if I was to accomplish my mission that day, I wasn't going to be able to do it from those old reels.

I went back into the office and pulled up every music sharing website I knew, and downloaded as many of my Mom's singles as I could find into the EMI database. Maybe someday, another intern like me, who was sent to scour the back catalog for vintage tunes would run across these relics of her past, and some new artist would like the songs enough to record them. And just maybe, they would wonder enough about the original artist to look her up. It was the closest thing I could give my Mom to what she always craved most: artistic immortality.

When I called my Mom that evening, I could tell without even asking that she was doing what she did every evening of her life since I had been in high school. Sitting around the kitchen table with a water glass full of whiskey and Coke, she drank and called anyone who would listen to talk about music. That day, I was the one who had news for her.

“Hey Mom, I was finishing up my work on the catalog today, and I noticed they still had some of your songs in there.”

“Really, well, I’m not surprised.” I could tell she was getting ready to preen in full Gloria Swanson mode. The signal was her perennial opening line.

“Music never left me, you know. I left music.”

“Yeah, Mom, I know. They still miss you up here.”

It was the best lie I ever told my Mother.

\* \* \*

For several years after she died, I thought that line about never leaving music was just a maxim to ward off feelings of rejection. After working on Music Row, I discovered that this was only half the truth. Music, or the want of being a Star in the music business, was a cancerous sort of spirit that grew in the silence of regret until nothing remained of the soul that loved her. In the end, I knew that if I didn’t want the joy of music to leave me, I had to leave the music business.



### “Cruise of the Rolling Adjunct”

Southeastern Career College was on the top floor of what used to be the Hundred Oaks Mall in Nashville - five floors higher than Guitar Center, two floors above Alan Dysert’s Acting Studio and one floor over Ronnie Millsap Productions. Considering the elaborate song-and-dance routine that my career as an adjunct college instructor became, I consider this an auspicious beginning.

“Are you here for new student registration?” The receptionist asked as I stepped off the elevator and into the lobby.

“No. I am here to interview for a position as the new paralegal instructor.” This was the first of many times that I, then twenty-four, would be mistaken for a student.

“Oh, wonderful!” gasped the receptionist, looking relieved. “Ms. Smith\* will be out in a minute. She’s um,” the receptionist faltered for the words, “she’s teaching the classes that might be yours right now.”

Although I thought it was a little unconventional that the Dean of the school was teaching a paralegal class, I didn’t think much of it at the time. I knew that Southeastern was a for-profit college and that it was very understaffed. Also, I knew that I had been called in to interview as a midseason replacement for an instructor who had quit in the middle of the semester.

When Mrs. Smith came in the room, she sized me up instantly. I was glad that I had worn my best suit.

“Yes, you’ll do. I just wanted to get a look at you before I offered you the job. You never can tell until you meet someone in person whether or not their resume is a lie. So, when can you start?”

I was prepared to be brought up to speed fast, considering the circumstances, but I was unprepared to be hired without answering any questions. “Mrs. Smith, no offense but don’t you want to know if I have any experience or anything like that?”

“Well, I suppose sooo,” she sighed, dragging out the last word as if the thought of actually having to go through the interview was an exceptionally heavy burden. She assumed a pseudo-official air and, cocking her head to one side asked, “Have you ever taught before?”

“No.”

“Do you have any idea what is entailed in the day-to-day business of education?”

“Not really,” I replied. “All I know is from the student end of things. I’ve been in school pretty much my whole life, from kindergarten through college and then law school.”

“Well, good then.” Mrs. Smith got up to put away some files. Apparently, she was used to multi-tasking her way through interviews. “At least you have no pretensions about making a difference or changing anyone’s lives. Education is a customer service business Miss...” she faltered to remember my name, scanning her desk for my application.

“Grissom,” I volunteered. “Candace Grissom.”

“Thank you,” she replied, as if every word was costing her time and money. “Miss Grissom, and you are the frontline customer service agent. Our business here at Southeastern is to sell education, and with it, opportunity. Most of our students barely finished high school. They are not here to improve their minds or be stimulated intellectually. They are here to learn a new job skill that will hopefully help them put

food on the table for their families. Most of them have led fairly difficult lives and they will resent the fact that you are young, single, and seem to them to have had everything handed to you. My best advice is to stick to the basics, and be firm without bullshit, and hope they come to think of you as a friend, because they won't respect you until you are at least a decade older. Got that?"

"Yes," I said. "Loud and clear."

"Good, see you Monday." Mrs. Smith turned to begin gathering books into a totebag. Clearly, her mind was already on her next class.

"Um, Mrs. Smith, I have one more question."

"Whaaat?" she exhaled, exasperatedly.

"I need to know what classes I am teaching and maybe get some textbooks."

"Oh, Maria\* will take care of all that. Just see her on your way out." And with that, Mrs. Smith stalked out of the room with an armful of paperwork.

In the lobby, Maria fixed me up with a schedule and the books I had asked for, along with a list of responsibilities and a class roster for each. Five different classes, all in different areas of law: criminal, family, estates, business, and real property. Looking at the mountain of reading before me, I was overwhelmed.

"Maria," I said tentatively, looking at my list of requirements, "forgive me but I don't know if I can get all of this read by Monday, let alone get five syllabi done."

"Oh, don't worry about that," she said, gesturing dismissively at the sheet. "We're just happy to have a warm body with a law license who is willing to show up. Last guy quit two weeks ago. Just walked into the classroom with a garbage bag full of ungraded papers, dumped them on the floor, told his students how stupid they were, and walked

out. Anything you can do at this point to save as many students as possible from dropping out by the end of the semester and the school's having to provide them with refunds would make us happy.”

I stood there shaking my head up and down, taking it all in. Well, at least I can't screw this one up any worse than the other guy, I thought.

“I'll do my best,” I said, as I waved her goodbye through the closing elevator door.

\* \* \*

Tom Ott was the reason I wanted to be a college professor. Dr. Ott taught Latin American History at the University of North Alabama, where I took my undergrad degree. His father had been an ambassador to Argentina, and he had grown up travelling around the globe before coming to rest in Florence, Alabama. In the summers, he sojourned over the world with that year's gorgeous, much-younger girlfriend. During the school year he lived in a beautiful Victorian home in the historic district of town. He also had a Chihuahua named Buttercup that he brought to class with him almost every day. After class he adjourned to the Yacht Club for Bloody Marys. Instead of teaching about Latin America from textbooks, he taught it from the novels and memoirs of writers from the region because, as he said, “that is where you find the soul of a civilization.” At the end of every semester, in lieu of exams, he invited his classes over to his house, cooked them dinner, showed off his Lionel train collection, and served homemade wine, while we discussed the current state of Latin America. In his research, he chose an eclectic mix of topics, and was a specialist in Caribbean voodoo rituals. In other words, he lived what was to me the perfect life.

“Always choose a field of study that will take you where you want to travel,” he said, “then you will never get bored in your academic life.” Taking this advice to heart years later led me to become a Hemingway scholar, mostly because I figured that Ernest always chose the best vacation spots. Consequentially, it was likely that conferences about Hemingway would be in intriguing places. So far, Dr. Ott’s advice on this point has proven correct.

However, my journey toward becoming a college instructor has followed a much more winding path. Although I had toyed with the idea since undergrad, my first real venture into teaching was a snap decision. I needed a job quickly after quitting my first clerkship out of law school, and I had spotted an ad at a local career college looking for a paralegal studies instructor. The pay was \$29 per classroom hour, which I didn’t consider too bad at first, since my per-hour pay as a law clerk was only \$8. At the time, I did not know that for every hour an instructor spends in the classroom, she spends at least two more hours outside of class preparing, grading, and holding office hours. So, in actuality, being paid \$29 per classroom hour translates to \$9.66 in real time spent to complete the job. For this reason, most full-time instructors are not assigned more than 4-5 classes per semester, which equals out to 36-45 hours per week. As I figured up my first paycheck, I learned that only tenured professors could afford world travel.

Still, on my first day at Southeastern, I was determined to be prepared. I studied my new textbooks all weekend, and had all of my syllabi and assignment sheets completed in time for my Monday start day, along with an activity handout for each class. I even arrived an hour early, so that I could present my classes with fresh materials,

still warm from the copier. However, when I went into the copy room, I was in for a surprise.

The faculty copier was coin-operated.

“Isn’t there a code or something that will allow me to run my copies for class?”

“No,” said Maria. “We don’t have it in the budget for handouts. You have to pay for copies out-of-pocket.”

That day in class, I explained my syllabi from the overhead projector. That evening, I bought my first copy machine. Yet, the copier debacle was not my biggest surprise of the day. Midway through reading my first syllabus, a female student dressed in what looked like eighties punk gear, complete with variegated pink-and-black dyed hair, blurted out from the back row.

“Just how old are you?”

I stopped for a quick second and stared at her. I had been in college for seven years by that point, and at no time had anyone ever called out a professor on her age. I figured if she was going to be this disrespectful, then I would just dish it right back at her.

“Old enough to have passed two state bar exams. How old are you?”

“Old enough to have two ex-husbands and three kids,” she snapped back, bobbing her pink locks side to side for emphasis. “Look, I just want to know whether I am wasting my time here. I mean, the last little pompous jackass who got up in front of the class didn’t teach us a damn thing and then came in here and dumped all our papers in the floor, and told us we were a bunch of stupid, low-class tramps who should just go back to working at Waffle House because we would never be paralegals. So I just wanted to know up front whether you had the same silver spoon jammed up your ass or not. I mean,

I ain't interested in paying good money to have some private school pansy tell me how stupid I am. I can go home and get my old man to tell me that for free. Been doin' it all my life."

Riot Girl\* settled back in her chair with a snap of her fingers, looking pleased with herself, as the rest of the class erupted in appreciative whoops of laughter. Scanning the room, I saw that the demographic was skewed pretty heavily against me. Every one of the twenty-four females in the room looked older than me, and the one guy...well, I really couldn't tell what was going on with him. He had spent the first fifteen minutes of our acquaintance chewing his cuticles until they bled and avoiding eye contact while sitting in the middle of the front row.

I turned off the projector and decided that it was time for a different approach.

"Okay, so let's set this stuff aside for a moment and get to know each other a little better first, shall we?" No one moved or spoke, but I continued on. "Please let me see a show of hands. How many of you graduated from high school?" A small smattering of hands went up. "Okay," I continued, "how many of you are married?" Another small assortment of hands raised, some the same and some different from the first. "All right, last question. How many of you have children?" Every female hand in the room went up. Bingo, I thought. Here is my problem.

Right away, I could feel that what Mrs. Smith had told me was right. Most of the students at Southeastern were there because they felt that they had no other choice. Many of them had dropped out of high school, been disappointed by a guy, and ended up raising a child on her own. Unless I wanted to catch Hell all semester, I had to find a way

to make this group of women able to relate to me. They must have thought I looked like Hermoine Grainger, minus the cute factor.

So, I told them the story of my family. How I was not only the first college graduate, but the first high school graduate that the Grissom clan had ever produced. How my grandparents on one side had been a seamstress and a mechanic, and on the other a gambler and a nanny. How my parents had started their own small business with a loan against their mother-in-law's house, and from there had made themselves into millionaires by working twenty-five years with no vacation, until my Mom had become an alcoholic and she begged me to write their divorce. How the only reason I was here in this job was because I had quit the only clerkship I could find because my boss was a jerk who had basically hired me to decorate his office. By the time I finished my little autobiographical spiel, I could feel the level of hostility in the room waning.

“So,” I asked. “Does anyone have any more questions for me, before we get on with learning shit today?”

“Yeah,” said a bleached-blonde woman in a neon tank top sitting next to Riot Girl. “Are you a lesbian?”

“No, why? Do you think I look like one?”

“Nah, not really,” said Blondie, “but you didn't say nothin' about a man in your life or kids or nothin' like that. I figured by your age, if you hadn't got any of that, you must be a lesbian.”

“Well, I don't have any kids because I am kind of a selfish bitch and don't want any,” I replied. “And as for dudes, I have been seeing the same guy for almost four years now, but he's a musician and won't get off his lazy ass to get a job to buy me an



engagement ring. I would dump him, but nothing better has come along yet, so here I am.”

Blondie\* nodded, and for the first time, smiled, “You’re all right. And you’re right. You shouldn’t marry a dude you’d have to keep up. That’s smart. You got some sense. Maybe this class will be worth a damn after all.”

“Glad you think so,” I replied, and pulled the syllabus back up on my projector. For the rest of the class, and for the rest of the semester, I had no more grief from my students at Southeastern. At the end of the year, when I left for a higher paying job with benefits at another school, they even threw me a going away party with cupcakes. Riot Girl led the singing.

\* \* \*

My next teaching job, at another for-profit, Draughons Junior College in Murfreesboro, was much less hostile, but still retained many of the same challenges. My average student was still a year to five older than me, and supporting one or more children on her own while trying to go to school. However, the class sizes were smaller, usually fewer than a dozen students, so I had more time to work with students individually. Being one of only two paralegal studies instructors at the school, I got to know many of my students well. Over half of them had gone to high school together, at the Murfreesboro school specially orchestrated for teenaged moms, so that their children could attend daycare on campus while their moms attended class. One thing that I found out about my students is that sharing this common experience, of struggling through being a single mom while still in high school, made them bond more closely with each other than in any classroom situation I have encountered since then.

This circumstance was never more apparent than the night that one student, Audrey\*, came to class in tears. Although she was trying to stop crying so that she could finish typing her documents to turn in by the end of class, everyone in the room could tell she was having trouble. I looked around the room, which was sparsely attended by only three other students that night, Gina\*, Rochelle\*, and Melanie\*, all of whom I knew from other classes were her friends. Finally, after we came back from the break, I had to say something.

“I’m pregnant again,” Audrey whispered, as we as pulled in chairs, “And Derrick\* says he doesn’t want it. I know we can’t afford it, but I just can’t have an abortion. I don’t know what to do.”

From what I knew about Audrey, she really couldn’t afford another child. She worked at Sonic to support her son and Derrick, her perpetually unemployed, off-again/on-again boyfriend/husband since high school.

“Why don’t you put the baby up for adoption?” asked Melanie. One of my few happily married students, Melanie’s husband was a police officer, ten years older, who doted on her. She had a decent job at a local bakery and a nice home in the county.

“Are you kidding me? Who around here would want another kid? Everyone I know is always trying to get rid of the ones they have.”

“Maybe me,” replied Melanie, softly. “Gary\* and I have been trying for years now, and he is over forty. It ain’t real likely that it’s going to happen now.”

“Are you serious?” Audrey asked, amazed. She looked at me. “I’m sorry Mrs. Grissom, I don’t mean no disrespect or nothing, but would you mind if Margaret and I go

out to talk about this? I mean, my mind just won't be on my work tonight, and I can take the zero and the absence."

I looked over at the remaining half of my class. I could tell little work was going to be accomplished by them that night. They were just as wrapped up in wanting to help Audrey talk things out as I was.

"Well girls," I said, "Ironically enough, this is family law class." A little sarcastic chuckle went up among us. "So I think we can take the night off to see if we can do a little bit to solve what we have right in front of us. Any objections?"

"Nope, in fact," said Gina, spinning back in her seat and shutting off her computer. "I think I've got a lot to say to Audrey about this too, given my situation." We all knew what Gina's situation was. At almost fifty, she was the oldest in the class. A mother of three adult children, all of whom she had to leave in the care of a sister in order to flee from an abusive husband and recover from an alcohol addiction, I knew that Gina would have a lot of insight on what it meant to cope with circumstances that would not allow a woman to raise her own children.

"And I think I've got a pretty good bit to say about things from the other end, if you're interested," offered Rochelle. Having grown up first in foster care and then as an adopted child, to become a single mom herself, Rochelle would be able to tell Audrey how things would feel from the perspective of the child. During past discussions in class, Rochelle had talked about meeting her birth mother, and the oddly dual sense of connection and disconnection that she felt from the experience. Rochelle had maintained a relationship with both her adoptive parents and her biological mother that seemed amicable.

Sitting there listening to them talk that evening, I realized for the first time what they understood that I, as an attorney, could only have the most basic appreciation of. I had studied family law for a semester and taught it for two years. These women had lived it. I could write an adoption, but I had never had a child, let alone had to experience the pain of realizing I couldn't provide for one. My own childhood hadn't been perfect, but at least I had never had to wonder who my Mom was. From that point on, I knew that for me, the cliché had come true. My students had just as much to teach me as I could teach them.

A year later, when my own Mom died during final exam week, I leaned on this same group of students just as much as they did on me that night. When I had to make the choice between attending my Mom's funeral and losing my job because the school wouldn't give me the day off during finals week, those four stepped up, proctored the exams, and took my rolls in the classes that met that day. And when I graded the exams, not one of the students in either of those classes cheated. They didn't have to. I gave them all A's anyway.

\* \* \*

After teaching at for-profit junior colleges for two years, I decided that I wanted to make a career out of education. The only problem was that I knew that I would not be able to do that with a law degree, since in order to teach law, most colleges and universities required many years of actual practice experience before a person is allowed to set foot in the classroom as a professor. I wanted something more immediate. Yet, I knew that I would have to remain close to my hometown of Cullman for the time being, in order to take care of my grandmother who had cancer. Looking at the schools within

commuting distance, the only graduate field of study that interested me was literature, so I decided to become an English professor.

I attended the University of Alabama in Huntsville mostly at night, while operating my own law practice during the day. After a year and a half, I had a Master's degree in English, writing my thesis on Shakespeare. Although my grandmother died away while I was studying for my Master's, I decided to stay relatively close to home once again for my PhD, so that I could be near my boyfriend whom I had met at UAH. Even though I had almost a 4.0, I wasn't offered an assistantship, so I chose the least expensive option, which was MTSU.

My time as a graduate assistant began like every other job I had since high school, by pure coincidence. I was taking a summer class in teaching methods with Dr. Adams\* when she found out that one of her graduate teaching assistants was not coming back for the fall because she was going to have a baby. When I showed up at class the next day, Dr. Adams had all of my paperwork filled out. All I had to do was sign.

Teaching as a GTA was easy. For the first time, I found myself teaching students who were actually younger than me. Two classes per semester was the smallest course load I had ever taught, and the traditionally-aged kids at MTSU were much less of a disciplinary challenge. The only thing that made being a GTA difficult was the concern with how and what to teach.

I had learned to be a classroom instructor on the fly. Never once had I given a thought to pedagogy. Still, every semester, I managed to receive above-average evaluations from students, and most of them seemed to get something out of my classes. Having to stop to think and justify the reasons why I chose one methodology over

another seemed like a waste of time to me. Instead, I thought it would be simpler to live by what I considered the Golden Rule of Teaching: Do unto your students what you would have liked for your professors to have done unto you.

However, founded in 1911 as Middle Tennessee State Normal School, MTSU was steeped in the pedagogical tradition. Building upon this tradition, it has one of the most highly regulated GTA training systems that I have encountered. Rather than having week or so of orientation and then putting their GTAs into the classroom, sink-or-swim fashion, at MTSU becoming a classroom educator is normally an arduous and bureaucratic journey. Under normal circumstances, a graduate student must spend a year in the writing center before entering the classroom. The second semester of this year, she shadows another GTA and must keep a weekly log about everything that goes on in the classroom, in addition to taking a class on teaching methodology that, among other things, stresses how to create daily lesson plans and teach equally to a wide ethnic and economic demographic. This tutelage is also accompanied by two or three peer group meetings a week, in which aspiring assistants talk about what went on in their classrooms or writing center sessions. Last, the potential GTA has a final evaluation with the Director and a panel of Peer Mentors, who decide whether she is ready to teach two classes the next year.

Of course, all of this is helpful for those new to the profession. However, it can seem a bit overdone to teachers who have already been in the classroom for years, and are simply returning to school for a terminal degree. Fortunately, I managed to fall between the cracks because MTSU needed an immediate stand-in for the semester I started, and was able to go straight to the classroom.

For the first time at MTSU, I found myself teaching traditional college students, or “high-school-seniors-plus-a-semester.” Because I could relate to the mix of slackers and overachievers that so closely mirrored my own undergraduate experience, I found that I enjoyed this demographic even more than my older junior college students. Still, as with every work experience, it was the individuals that made an impact.

One thing that I figured out early on was that, instead of my students teaching me something new that made me mature a bit emotionally every day, I found myself wanting to share my experiences in order to prevent students from making the same mistakes that I had seen during my undergraduate days. Whereas junior college teaching had made me grow older every day, being at a four-year university made me reconnect with the youthful side of myself that, in own my workaholic college days, I had missed.

First, I learned that young people who are young at heart have absolutely no interest in defining what makes their generation unique. They are simply too busy living their lives to analyze what might be going on in everyone else’s. For example, I decided during my first semester as a GTA that I was going to try a themed Freshman Composition class based around “Voices of a Generation.” This idea, born out of reading too many texts about student-centered teaching pedagogy, was supposed to make students look back at texts and styles of writing that had been the touchstones of previous youth cultures. I wanted to create a sense of cultural awareness about their own generation. Books about the teaching of writing almost always stress self-awareness through the use of the “I-Paper,” so I thought I would have my students grapple with the idea of what that meant. Actually, I wasn’t quite sure myself. Instead, I would have been better off obeying

the first rule of courtroom procedure: never ask a witness a question to which you don't already know the answer.

In the first essay, I asked my students to define what it meant to be "authentic."

"It's one of those things you should just know, like, you should be able to feel it, not talk about it," was the most common response I received. Pressing a bit, I asked them to talk about something in popular culture that felt authentic. We talked about reality television and its manufactured sense of authenticity, about talk shows in which celebrities tried to act like normal people, and novels that claimed to capture the sentiments of a generation. Still, even my best students could not come up with a clearly defined answer. As a last resort, because time for rough drafts to be due was approaching, I asked them to choose a movie or book that they thought most closely captured the current era, that scholars could look back on decades later and say, "Yes, this is what the millennial decade was like."

Not surprisingly, not a single one chose a book, even though there were several die-hard Twihards in the class.

However, what was surprising was the movie over three-fourths of my students that semester chose: *Crash*.

As I read over their essays, almost every one said the same contradictory things.

"*Crash* is the movie of our generation because it is so random."

"*Crash* defines the millennium because it shows how fate can't be changed."

"*Crash* describes the world today because it shows how racist people still are."

"*Crash* is an important movie because it shows that men are still sexist."



“*Crash* is the best movie of our time because it shows how money controls everything.”

“*Crash* is important because it demonstrates how money can’t buy happiness.”

And then, perhaps the one that summed it up best: “*Crash* is the most authentic movie out today because it shows everything and nothing at the same time.” To me, this thesis summed up the millennial decade, because it is, in colloquial terms, the definition of the postmodern era, where there is so much information and so many opportunities available that no young person can choose the best, and so they often end up choosing nothing at all.

“So in other words, we’re not lazy, we’re just overwhelmed,” said my ROTC student.

“Exactly,” I replied.

“Great, so does that mean we can go early? I’m feeling a bit...overwhelmed.”

Giggles all around.

“Keep that up, Preston\*, and you’ll make it into politics from the military someday,” I replied. Preston lived for this kind of exchange, and I was always happy to “make his day.”

“Or maybe we’re underwhelmed,” ventured another student, Kimberly\*, a theater major. “I mean, what if you look at absolutely everything the world has to offer and you just go, eh...maybe not. Like, if you don’t have access to everything, there’s always that little bit of mystery that maybe there’s something better, but when you see everything, and you know that you don’t really care about any of it, it’s like your last

little reason for living, that unknown element, is gone. And then you really have nothing to hope for.”

“So does that mean that it’s intrigue or curiosity that keeps society going?” I loved playing Devil’s advocate with my 8 o’clock group. Any set of 19-year-olds that was still coming to class on time regularly a month into the semester was bound to be the best of the crop.

“Yeah,” said Sean\*, a basketball player. “I mean, it’s like with girls. Once you have them all figured out, and it’s like, not a challenge anymore, then you gotta move on.”

“Player!” shot Mona\*, a sorority girl who sat across the room and spent a great deal of her time pretending that I couldn’t see her texting under the desk.

“No seriously, I think you may be onto something here, both of you,” I said, feeling the need to step in. “Could it be that the reason Generation Y craves authenticity so much is that, after being given the Internet, which is supposedly the Hub of All True and Free Knowledge, and finding that it still contains the same repeatedly filtered and sanitized information, that the only thing people come back to trust is that moment of surprise discovery. Where it is still possible to get a real reaction from somebody before they put their guard up and begin censoring themselves again? Is this why we watch reality television? To get a glimpse of it, if just for a minute?”

Silence. Good Silence. I could tell they were thinking.

“Yeah,” said Preston, after a bit, “I think so. Because anytime you give people time enough to analyze things, it all turns to bullshit anyway.”

“Which is, of course, exactly why we all have to learn to be so analytical, and write papers, and get a liberal arts education. So that we can become well-adjusted bullshit generators,” replied Gerald\*, sarcastically. He was my future English teacher.

“Yes, that’s right,” I said looking in his general direction, “You’re all onto it now. But let this be a lesson to you. Always stay aware of when you’re telling the truth, and when you’re generating BS, because when you can’t tell the difference is when you should know that you’ve lost yourself. But really, you won’t. And there’s the real tragedy.”

“No, the real tragedy is that we already know all of this, yet we still have to write these papers,” added Preston, trying one last time to weasel out of the assignment.

“Alas, it is true,” I shrugged, “But what can we do? It’s my job and you’re paying to hear it. Until one of you brilliant young scholars comes up with something better, it’s all we’ve got. So, I’ll be expecting final drafts of this particular brand of BS on Monday. That’s all folks!”

The thing I loved most about teaching at a major university was being tested like this, and having to think on my feet to keep up with people whose perceptions of the world still hadn’t been dulled by disappointment and experience. Hearing their backhanded comments everyday made me search for the authenticity in myself, behind the pedagogy. It’s the reason I still want to teach, in spite of the ever-increasing bureaucracy in education that stifles the sentiments that its methodology purports to foster.

\* \* \*

Which brings me to the last leg of my teaching journey so far... a year of my life that I refer to as “The Cruise of the Rolling Adjunct.” When I finished my coursework for the PhD, I thought it would be a good idea to try to adjunct in my home area. After all, the market for new professors was terrible and I thought that the sooner I could get my foot in the door anywhere that I might have connections would start my career. Little did I know that going home to adjunct during my dissertation year would almost ruin my love of teaching, by showing me what I have come to call the “Walmartization of Education,” where the bottom line is making M-O-N-E-Y.

On my graduate assistantship at MTSU, I made \$14,000 to teach four classes and to have four classes paid for by the University. Although it doesn’t seem like much money, I quickly found out that, in the adjunct world, I would have to teach an average of ten classes a year to make the same money, and I still had to pay for my dissertation hours. Still, I thought that the extra work would be worth it, for the insurance of making connections that could possibly earn me a full-time, non-tenured instructor position while I waited out the new faculty hiring slump during the economic downturn.

I applied to four schools within driving distance of the rental house that I lived in for free because it belonged to my family’s real estate company. All four schools hired me. Yet, I soon found out that even within the State of Alabama public college system, salaries and conditions of employment varied widely.

The first school at which I gained employment was Wallace State Community College. The head of the English department had been a friend of my Mother’s, and she remembered me from childhood. However, because Wallace was so close to home, it presented other challenges.

“Comma Crazy Candy!” shrieked my ninth grade English teacher, Mrs. Hayes\*, as I walked into my first faculty meeting of the semester. Mrs. Hayes was one of those secondary teachers who never forgot a student’s name, face, or mistakes they made on a paper. And now, she was the head new faculty advisor at Wallace, which made her my boss.

“Have you mastered the art of omitting unnecessary commas?” she bubbled. Not only was Mrs. Hayes known all over Cullman for her fantastic memory, but she was also a grade-A busybody who had been the hub of gossip at Cullman High School. When I was a teenager, she had spent her weekends terrorizing students by cruising up and down Highway 31 trying to catch teenagers making out or smoking pot in cars. If she caught them, she called their mothers and got them in trouble. Mrs. Hayes was the number one reason why I never cruised The Strip while in high school, and never went parking until college.

“I believe so. I mean, I am on my dissertation year in English. I should hope I have by now,” I returned, glancing around the room at the other teachers, all of whom were watching this little exchange too closely for my comfort. To my surprise, almost everyone in the room was a retired teacher from Cullman High School, from which I graduated in 1997. I had heard that Wallace was where all of Cullman’s finest went out to pasture, but I hadn’t expected this many.

“Well, it’s a good thing you didn’t take your doctorate in elocution,” Mrs. Hayes beamed again, in her way of frowning a smile that I had come to dread in high school. “Because I see that you still have that... charming accent.” Mrs. Hayes had once told me in high school that I would never amount to anything if I didn’t lose my Southern accent.

I had told her that Randy Travis seemed to have done well with his. It was a testy subject between us.

“Well, I’m just surprised she didn’t get her PhD in history. She always made straight A’s in my class. And I still have that hundred page book she made on the history of the Mafia in America.” She swirled to face the rest of the room. “I assigned a ten-page paper on a recurring social problem in America, and I got a book from her!”

I thought I recognized the voice, and turned around to see that my defender was Mrs. Reece\*, my tenth grade history teacher. I decided at that moment, there was a special place in Heaven for Mrs. Reece, because her remarks seemed to turn the tide of commentary in favor. Almost everyone in the room had taught me, and each person felt the need to put in his or her two cents worth about my abilities as a student, and how that might possibly bear on my career as an educator. This dialog took half of my first faculty meeting as an adjunct at Wallace.

Other than it being a veritable minefield of the Ghosts of My High School Past, Wallace was a fairly pleasant teaching experience. The students, most of whom were from the Cullman County school systems, were well-behaved and motivated, which was probably because Cullman had a reputation as one of the academically toughest public school districts in the state. It made me smile everyday to see students with the same writing quirks that I picked up during my time in school there.

Nevertheless, Wallace was far and away the cheapest school at which I taught that year. The heat pump did not work in either of my classrooms, so my students and I had to dress in layers of clothes from November to March. This situation was blamed on the fact that Wallace did not have a school-wide janitorial or maintenance service. Instead, each

department hired its own private contractors, which might not be in the budget following each year's cuts. What resulted was that many routine maintenance tasks necessary to keep up the buildings were left undone. Additionally, I was paid only \$1,250 per class, per semester.

Probably the worst example of this situation that I experienced was in my classroom in the Poultry Science building. "The Coop," as Shelby\*, the only other teacher who used the building, and I referred to it, was on the back side of campus and was mostly used for toxicological examinations on dead chickens and cows. Also, tucked in next to the Germ Lab, The Coop had two classrooms where the unluckiest English instructors were often assigned to serve time in first-year adjunct Purgatory. Not only did The Coop lack normal heating and cooling, but after heavy rains in November, the roof sprung several sizable leaks that could fill garbage cans with water between the beginning of my eight o'clock and noon classes. However, because The Coop had no budget for roof repair, my students and I simply slogged and sogged our way to the end of the semester. The Coop was closed in January, and then mostly destroyed by a tornado that eradicated half the campus in April, resolving any future maintenance issues.

Nevertheless, one of the best teaching experiences of my career so far as an educator started in The Coop. My noon class was filled with the same assortment of slackers and smart-but-needing-to-stay-close-to-home students that one normally expects from a junior college group, yet one girl stood out. Normally, when students are introducing themselves on the first day, I can figure out a great deal about their personalities. For example, students who sit in the back row tend to be jokers and cutups. They can't resist opening the semester by trying to milk a laugh out of their introduction.

Having been one of these kinds of students myself, I can always spot them. In contrast, front row students are the ones who almost always have the answers and can't wait to show how smart they are. Then, there are students like Morgan.\*

“Speak up a bit, please, I can't hear you,” I told her, even though she was sitting on the front row.

“Morgan,” she whispered, in a sweet little girl voice. “Morgan Moss, and I went to Faith Christian Academy in Moulton.”

Knowing that the private Christian schools in the area were pricey, I was curious to know why Morgan's family had decided to send her to a junior college that cost a third less per semester than her high school.

“And what brings you to Wallace, Morgan?” I asked. “What do you want to do?”

“I want to be a psychiatrist who helps troubled teenagers. I am a psychology major right now,” she whispered again. “And I came to Wallace because my parents thought that Knoxville was too dangerous. But I wanted to go to UT – Go Vols!” she mouthed, in the softest cheer I have ever heard.

As the semester went on, I learned a lot more about Morgan. Mostly that she was the bright, only child of extremely overprotective parents, who had been afraid for her ever since she had gone through a cutting phase in her teens. Traces were left on her arms. One day, as we were talking after class (she was the only student I had who ever came by during office hours at Wallace) curiosity overcame me and I asked why she had been a cutter.

“Well,” she whispered, “I'm a romantically-minded person, but I got really down on myself, because I knew that I probably would never have a boyfriend.” When I asked



her why, her answer was simple. “Because, well look at me. I’m fat. I tried to fix that too, but uh...it ended up not working and just became something else to talk about in counseling. But I am okay about it now. That’s why I want to become a psychiatrist.” Morgan said.

Clearly, Morgan was the sort of girl who could smile at anything. My heart went out to her, mostly because I remembered being a chunky girl who compensated by being overnice and overachieving as a teenager. As we kept talking, the topic came up about how much Morgan loved the Twilight series.

“And I’ve even started writing a paper about it too,” she said. “I was wondering if I could use it for my topic on the pop culture paper, since you said that we could design our own topic if you approved it?”

“Sure, let me see what you have,” I replied. To my surprise, Morgan hauled out of her backpack an enormous glitter-decorated binder filled with every possible piece of Stephenie Meyer-related paraphernalia and a heart-encircled picture of Taylor Lautner on the cover. Interviews with the author and stars of the series copied from their websites and torn from magazines, reviews of the Twilight books and movies, and even, to my surprise, a few semi-scholarly articles photocopied from journals and downloaded from the internet about *Jane Eyre* and several other literary classics that I knew Meyer claimed to have inspired the series.

“I’m sort of, like, obsessed with Twilight,” Morgan said, blushing. “Here is the paper I have so far.” She handed me twenty-four pages of double-spaced work that she had done. I flipped through it quickly, and determined that what Morgan was trying to argue was that Bella was sort of a neo-feminist character. One who, because she was

written by a Christian author, stood for the new Generation Y's choice of returning to traditional marriage. Immediately, I saw that she had done her homework on the historical part of the argument too, comparing the modern Bella to the other young females in the series. Since most of those women were vampires from various stages of women's liberation over the course of the twentieth century, Morgan was arguing that Meyer deliberately made Bella return to traditional feminism to show the positive side of protective maleness, in contrast to the other females, who had been more independent, had been isolated and victimized.

The only difference between various other arguments that I had seen in graduate level papers on feminism and *Twilight* and Morgan's paper was that those papers used literary and psychological jargon. Seeing; however, that the arguments were otherwise written in the same style, I decided to try an experiment.

"Morgan, have you ever been to a literary conference?"

"No," she replied. "Isn't that where English teachers all go to sit around and talk about books?"

"Pretty much," I replied, "Although many college students present papers too. Morgan, I think what you have here is the beginning of a very good counter-argument about fourth-wave feminism and *Twilight*. All it needs is a bit more research, and I think you will be able to turn it into a conference-quality paper. What would you say to waiving the last two papers of the semester and working on this as your final project? It can count for two essay grades, and then you can try to submit it to the Pop Culture Association of the South conference in New Orleans this year. I'm going too, and I've heard they have a *Twilight* panel."

Morgan was excited. For over an hour, we talked about what presenting at a literary conference was like, and of course, all about *Twilight* and the different waves of feminism. I made a list of books for Morgan to examine, and we agreed to meet every week to check on the progress of her project. Far from being overwhelmed, she seemed energized by the prospect of getting to write about something she loved in a professional way.

“Just out of curiosity,” I asked as Morgan got up to leave, “How did you get so interested in *Twilight*?”

“Well, it’s kind of silly, really, but I’ve always been in love with Jacob Black. And Taylor Lautner, now that he is Jacob Black. I’ve never had a boyfriend, so I sort of started studying the way he thinks, so that maybe if I meet someone like him on day, we will really hit it off because it will be like I know him already. Do you think that’s too weird?”

“A crush on a fictional character and a movie star leading a girl to scholarship?” I replied. “No, I don’t think that’s weird at all. One time, a girl I knew wrote a hundred pages on the American Mafia just because she liked watching mob movies and fell in love with Bob DeNiro.”

“Who’s Bob DeNiro?”

I sighed, feeling a kindred spirit from another generation pass me by.

“Robert DeNiro. He’s an actor. *Goodfellas*. *Casino*. *Godfather II*. Seen them?”

“No, sorry.”

“That’s okay,” I said, and then thinking about it, added, “He’s what Taylor Lautner could be in a few years, if he can keep things going after he’s no longer a werewolf.”

“Oh, cool,” said Morgan, whom I could tell now had someone new to look up.

A few months later, Morgan and I both presented papers in rooms across the hall from one another at the PCAS conference in New Orleans. Although I was afraid her shyness might make things awkward, I could see Morgan was really enjoying herself as she chaired the Twilight panel. She fielded questions like she had been doing it for years. Perhaps most surprising was that both of her parents attended the lecture, and seemed to enjoy themselves as they heard their nineteen-year-old daughter lecture to a room full of scholars about vampires and feminism. It was, without question, my proudest moment so far as a teacher.

\* \* \*

The rest of my tour year as a rolling adjunct at three other schools did not go as smoothly as at Wallace. At the University of Alabama in Huntsville, my old Master’s school, I ran into an unexpected problem. Although most former military students are stereotyped as being extremely hard-working, I found out that at UAH they were allowed to get away with anything in the classroom, even academic dishonesty. After a student told me, point-blank, in front of the entire class, that he had paid his sister-in-law, who was an English teacher, to write his paper, so he “better get an A,” I reported him to the head of the Freshman Writing program. Instead of pursuing disciplinary action, she told me that “military students are treated specially at UAH,” and just to give him a B or above and let him go on, so that he could keep his scholarship. Even though I loved my

time there as a graduate student, that incident made me decide that UAH was not somewhere that I wanted to teach Freshman Composition.

Even worse was an incident that happened at Calhoun Community College. Calhoun has what I consider to be a dangerous policy of open enrollment, which apparently admits students without a diploma or GED, and even if they have a criminal background of harassing teachers. Before class one day, I was having a casual conversation with one of my students who had gone to Hartselle High School, and knew a friend of mine who was the band director there. Suddenly, another student, whom I will call Blake\*, interrupted us.

“You mean, you’re friends with that faggot?” Blake yelled. The whole classroom turned to watch. “You tell that little bastard he better run like the scared bitch he is from me. I showed him what I thought of his bullshit once, and I ain’t scared to show any teacher who tries to push me around that the same thing will happen to them.” Blake looked directly at me. “Understand?”

Since I taught there during night school, there was no one to whom I could send Blake in order to seek disciplinary action for his outburst. Turns out, I didn’t have long to worry about it, because Blake spent the first half of class that night texting and muttering under his breath, before leaving at the break and never coming back to class again. When I spoke to my teaching friend, John\*, whom Blake claimed to have “put in his place,” my friend told me the rest of the story.

“Wow, I can’t believe he ever got into a college,” said John, obviously surprised that anyone had allowed Blake’s academic career to progress that far. “What happened is I caught him and some friends of his smoking pot out behind the band room one day.

When I told them to stop, Blake mouthed off at me, so I kicked him out of the band and reported them to the principal. Well, Blake decided he wanted to get even in some way, so he and his little crew made a website using gay porn pictures with the heads of several male teachers at the school Photoshopped onto the bodies, and then sent links of it to everyone in the school database. Because the principal and superintendent wanted to keep it hushed up, they reported it to the police, but didn't kick them out of school or suspend them or anything. I think they took a plea in juvenile court, got some sort of probation, and then went on their merry way."

"That's all?" I asked, astonished. "Nothing else ever happened to them? No fines, jail time, or anything?"

"Not a thing," said John, sounding disgusted. "That's the problem with education nowadays. We've become student-centered to a fault. I mean, as teachers we can even be falsely defamed in public and no one cares, because they think it might harm the school's reputation. And of course, a place like Calhoun thrives on dollars, not scholars. Why else to you think they've gone to completely open enrollment? They're the fastest growing junior college in the state because they're taking students who are turned down everywhere else. Higher education at public schools today is all about the bottom line: M-O-N-E-Y. Whoever can recruit the biggest freshman classes gets the most funding, regardless of how many kids they actually graduate."

Going back to my class at Calhoun the next evening, I could tell that John was right. I did an informal show of hands poll on the number of students who were high school graduates or who had passed the GED. About half had completed one or the other. And interestingly enough, only about half of both of my classes at Calhoun passed from

the first half of Freshman Composition to the second semester. Glancing over the roster on Christmas Break and thinking back to which students had not raised their hands, the result of my informal poll was not surprising. Almost every student who had been admitted on open enrollment had failed Freshmen Composition, simply because they were not prepared to take the class.

Of course, I thought, that does not necessarily mean that they will drop out of college. In all likelihood, a number of them will end up returning for a remedial, or in politically correct terms, “developmental” writing course. Then, they will stay there for a couple of semesters, only to have to retake the same Freshman Comp class again a year later. All that time, they will be accruing more debt on student loans, as they stagger slowly toward an Associate’s degree that may not get them a job that will pay enough for them to meet their loan obligations.

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Oddly enough, the last weekly stop on my Cruise of the Rolling Adjunct was back at the University of North Alabama, where I began my collegiate career. In a bizarre twist of fate, I was assigned to Dr. Ott’s old room to teach a Tuesday night literature class. My last class with Dr. Ott, the one in which I had decided to become a professor, had been on the same day, at the same time, in the same room. The only difference was that, instead of being in my usual seat in the back of the second row, I was at the podium.

Both of my classes at UNA passed uneventfully, which in my world means that they went well. Although both were over-enrolled, forty instead of the allegedly-capped number of thirty-five, the two halves of World Literature, from Gilgamesh to Hemingway, were read, discussed, and digested completely without incident, either

positive or negative. This circumstance itself was a marvel. My year as a rolling adjunct was my fifth as a classroom educator, yet I had never taught a single class, let alone two in consecutive semesters at the same school, in which not a single student stood out as exceptional or dreadful. In fact, the only unusual things about teaching at UNA were both pleasant and pertained only to me. For the first time in my teaching career, I had my own office and all the technology in my room worked perfectly. As an adjunct, I considered this a miracle. I decided that, in returning to my old alma mater, I had reached a Zen state in my career as an educator, in which I had served my time and was at last allowed to reach Enlightenment. The final sign of this was that at UNA, I reached my peak pay as an adjunct: \$1,800 per class, plus my first and only weekly gas stipend, a sign of adjunct Nirvana if ever there was one.

Although my experiences at UNA and Wallace had been enjoyable, by the end of school year I realized that with only two classes at each campus per semester, I would not be able to maintain even a scant living. In the end, I realized I had two choices: quit adjuncting and find another full-time job or go bankrupt. Although I received superior reviews at both schools, my supervisors at each college told me the same thing. They could not afford to hire full-time instructors, especially considering the higher pay scale I would qualify for after completing my PhD. If I had stayed at just the Master's degree, I might actually have had a better chance at full-time employment. However, as soon-to-be Doctor of English, I could only be offered everything or nothing, which meant a full-time, tenured professorship or part-time adjunct work.

So, I decided to swing for the fences.



At the end of the school year, I quit adjuncting. Since then, I have only applied for full-time teaching positions.

A risky choice in the current job market, but I've always been a gambler.

As I wandered around Dr. Ott's old classroom on my last night at UNA, I couldn't resist sitting in my old seat at the end of the second row. Looking at the world from the perspective of my twenty-year-old self, I thought about what I had been through, and all the jobs that I had up to that point, only to find myself sitting in exactly the same place on the same day one decade later. I thought about calling Dr. Ott, and asking to meet him for a drink, to ask if he had ever felt the same way. But then I thought better of it. He wasn't sentimental.

As I turned out the light, I realized that I wasn't either.