

Striking Out

It was late February, albeit early in the morning, when Wil set off from his house walking with an armful of books and a sack lunch toward his new high school. His well trodden route usually took about half an hour, a little longer if it was raining. This morning however, the weather was clear, the air cool and fresh, and the suburban neighborhood streets quiet and traffic free. Bedroom communities don't have rush hours, not unless you're sleeping in someone else's bed; then it can quickly become The Suburban Shuffle, The Short Jump, or the Great American Quickie. Getting caught in another's crosshairs is one thing, just hope like hell they're not mounted on a 30.06 at 2980 ft/lbs. per second impact velocity. That's a little too much rush hour and not enough happy hour.

Wil had established a gait to his walk that coincided with his long legs and slender frame. He liked the exercise and he was well practiced at walking to schools under all weather conditions. He was in his eleventh year at his eleventh school in almost as many states on the road to academic attendance that he hoped would eventually lead to graduation. He wasn't sure about college yet, but one thing he was certain of: wherever he decided to go in the near future, he'd stay put for the duration.

He'd had it with all the moving from place to place. A new state or city every year and never making any real friends, or playing any real sports except as a backup stringer sidelined or benched while the teams made do without him. And then never dating any girls because nobody noticed you, or knew about you, until it was time to move on again to another school. You'd think being a straight-A student on the honor roll and making the Dean's list would get a guy a little well deserved whompum, or a short stroke to his piston, but like everything else in life Wil made do with manual labor.

His parents were usually away on business or pleasure trips spending only a few weeks at home throughout the year before flying off to destinations unmentioned to meet with people unknown. Wil's step-father was one of those secretive characters whose deal-making reputation couldn't be discerned or defined from any business card or yellow page listing. The only thing Wil knew was that his mother went along on these trips as a confidential secretary to her husband's business affairs, recorded the negotiations in shorthand, and typed the requisite documents that memorialized deals into

dollars. Once a month an envelope filled with cash would arrive by special delivery from his mother that he used to pay the monthly bills. It seemed there was some prejudice against banks, bankers, or perhaps a mistrust of both, that made cash and carry a more viable option for making routine payments. At any rate, not everything that might seem to be suspect was sinister in fact, unless it could be proven otherwise.

As he was walking down Brine Street, the roar of an engine advancing from behind interrupted the early calm and quiet of the neighborhood until it raced by in a haze of blue exhaust fumes. Wil didn't see the driver or make of car, only a streak of blurred white as it thundered down the street and disappeared. A few minutes later it came back around, this time slowing until it crept along paralleling the forward stride of his footsteps.

"Jump in, I'll give you a ride," invited the driver, her tempting smile offering with delicious risk.

"No thanks, I'll walk," replied Wil, embarrassed at the idea of being picked up by a strange female, and mortified at his abrupt modesty.

"It's alright, I'm a student at the high school too," she said, still smiling at him as she maneuvered the little convertible two-seater to keep up with his walking. He glanced briefly at the smooth shimmer of her shaved legs, and then noticed that her right hand was slowly and erotically massaging the white ball atop the stick shift. He also noticed that she noticed him noticing. Music from the car radio was playing a song from The Chilis called, "Oh, Girl."

"Thanks, but it's only another block," he said, pointing ahead toward the school and feeling so uncomfortable that any attempt at smiling would likely reveal his true feeling of bashfulness.

"What's your name?" Oh my God, he thought, she's going to blab all over school what a chicken-livered fraidy-cat he was for not accepting a ride, that he was a spineless coward with cold feet, a mama's boy. He could feel the blood rushing to his face as his heartbeat pounded in his ears. He wanted to vomit, but instead opened his mouth and said a little too loudly, "WIL."

"See you at school, Wil," she said softly, jerking the shifter back into another gear and easing it down the street in a slow crawl toward the neighborhood high school.

Wil walked the remaining distance still flushed with embarrassment and thought how wonderful it would be if a car accidentally struck him while crossing the street. Then he'd be the poor injured, the walking wounded, an innocent pedestrian damaged and dinged; a traffic statistic. He'd be safe in a hospital. People would visit bringing candy, flowers, books and sympathetic cards; maybe, just maybe, with a decent limp or a rakish looking facial scar, he might score a little nooky. He needed to score badly. His life was literally hanging in the balance. But in the recesses of his mind all he could hear was the call – STIRRRR-IKE!

The day passed and Wil returned home in a state of befuddlement. His sines and cosines in trigonometry were indistinguishable and he was at a loss conjugating nouns and verbs into sensible predicates. He even forgot his jock strap during basketball practice until it was made painfully known during a jump shot against a defender he failed to see in time. Lunch was also a disaster as he wore the remains of spaghetti and meatballs to his afternoon classes, but never once did he see the girl who tried to pick him up that morning. He felt lost in a strange continuum of substance and soul; he felt he had become, as his science teacher once described, a pulsating black hole.

Every morning now he expected the girl to zoom past on his way to school, intently listening for the slightest sound of an engine, but nothing happened. The days passed, then a week, and still he walked to school and home again without any sight or sound of the little white car. Maybe, just maybe, it had all been a dream.

The bell rang signaling the end of second period as students flooded the hallways from classrooms, slamming locker doors, exchanging books or a secret note here and there, all migrating to their next class in a tonsillar symphony of chit chat. Wil threaded his way through the melee of bodies like a disturbance of Brownian motion, until the random process suddenly and inexplicably metamorphosised in front of Miss Lafleur's French class in the form of the bobbed brunette. It was evident from her piercing green eyes, and her still tempting smile, that she had been watching him. He instinctively gulped for air.

"I told you I'd see you at school," she said, standing graceful and petite.

"So you did, but you didn't tell me your name."

"Darla."

“Well, Darla...”

“The bell is about to ring, I’ll see you around sometime,” she said, and then disappeared into Miss Lafleur’s classroom, the door slowly closing behind her as the bell rang throughout the emptying corridors, splitting the reverie of the moment into another defeating reality call - STIRRRR-IKE!!

She was waiting for him that afternoon as he came through the side door of the south entrance, between the gym and student center, opposite the parking lot. This time he got into the little MG without invitation. Ever since their morning encounter in the hallway he resolved to improve on his audaciousness.

They roared off down Brine Street, crossed the railroad tracks away from Wil’s house, and headed full speed down the farm-to-market highway of open fields and tall rusting silos that stood erect against the horizon. The little car could sure eat up a lot of road, he observed, but the brisk cool air felt good on his face as he glanced over at Darla’s firm and capable legs working the clutch pedal. Her cotton print skirt rode high above the knees revealing the toned muscles of her thigh, yet that old modesty slapped his wandering eyes back toward the road. A few miles out of town, past the Sunoco, she pulled off the road and stopped alongside an abandoned fireworks stand. She turned the key and killed the engine.

“I like it out here,” she said, stretching her limbs and heaving her chest. “I like watching the wind blow free across the fields as it scatters the seeds of new life. And I like you, Wil. You said no when anybody else would’ve said yes to me.”

“I didn’t know I was being so polite.”

“You were being what you are, what I wished, but never quite found.” A brief sadness flashed across her face, but then she smiled, looking directly at him.

“I don’t understand,” he said, and he didn’t.

“It’s not important,” she offered, her left hand still gripping the steering wheel while her right hand rubbed and twisted the little ball atop the stick shift. He met her gaze, but knew her mind was far away.

“Would you like to go out some time, maybe to a movie,” he asked.

“If you’ll kiss me first, here and now,” she said softly.

“For real?”

“For a real kiss,” she whispered, bending toward him and moving her right hand from the stick shift to his left leg. Their lips met softly, longingly, until they embraced completely. He wasn’t going to turn into stone after all, he thought, although he was getting hard.

Perhaps it would be an easy inning after all.

The late winter blossomed into an early spring, albeit a wet one. Wil found himself riding more often to school than walking, yet they concealed their friendship from everyone. They were intentionally careful because Darla was a senior nearing graduation while Wil was a junior, and a new transfer. They would drive out of town for an ice cream soda, or take in a drive-in movie on weekends. Sometimes they would drive for miles and park off the highway, then walk holding hands down an old dusty road together sharing their thoughts and dreams. It was a time of new beginnings.

Early one Saturday evening as the clouds darkened and the sky threatened Darla arrived at Wil’s house. It was a long single story façade with a kidney shaped pool nestled into an alcove of overgrown trees and hanging vines that would soon perfume the air with ripe Carolina jasmine and prickly pyracantha. Wil considered, and then dismissed, an urge to skinny dip with Darla, but the weather scotched his plan.

NBC Saturday Night at the Movies was broadcasting the movie Titanic starring Barbara Stanwyck and Clifton Webb, so they settled down in the TV room. It was a tragic love story amid a tragedy at sea, of heartbreaking loss and sinking fortunes that pulled the heartstrings at every fathom during the long slow slide to beneath the waves. Darla responded by moving ever closer to Wil, resting her head on his chest while her left hand found his smooth stomach. They clung together like survivors adrift in a lifeboat listening to the distant quartet play ‘Nearer, My God, to Thee’ while thunder and lightening broadcast the storm playing outside. The big liner was arching higher above the water when Darla’s hand, sliding deep below Wil’s waist, found his rapidly growing vessel and positioned it for greater height. In the final moments of the ship plunging toward the depths, she too went all the way down until all that remained splashed silently and forever in the souls of those who were there. Then the lights went out.

Their young bodies coupled often, tenderly at first, then savagely; they consumed each other every way possible, sometimes violently, but always satisfying the hungry need possessed between them. By early dawn the storms spent themselves into slumber as light once more regained the day.

In the weeks that followed there were lapses in their continuity brought about by appointments with dentist, doctor, and preparations for final exams. The frequency of their mating began to decline. During one of their last encounters, Wil conveyed his feelings to Darla that cast a pall of denouement on the relationship.

"I love you," he said, supporting his head with one hand while caressing her breasts with the other.

"I don't want you to love me, just need me," she stated, her eyes locked on the ceiling as though it was beyond infinity.

"But it's my love that needs you."

"I know, I'm sorry," she whispered.

They lay there quiet for a long time, anticipating words they did not know, nor could find to satisfy their deepest thoughts.

"Don't you feel any love for me," he asked, almost afraid of the answer. Then she turned toward him, her eyes spilling their tears as she moved closer seeking comfort in his embrace.

"You won't understand this, but to love is to die, and I'm already dead."

"You're very much alive," he emphasized quickly, "and you give me all the life and love I'll ever need or want. Can't you understand that?"

"None of us can know what the other understands, not really. That's what separates us, makes us strangers, and makes us need before we can know." She reached up and kissed him softly, then whispered on his lips, "need me now."

Walking to school became a routine again, an exercise in distance and time that relieved both stress and distress. The term was nearing its end and concentration on the important issues of study helped to push out the debris of his relationship with Darla in the hopes that something lost might result in something found, or understood. It was an effort he labored not to dwell on too smartly lest he be flooded and overwhelmed by all

the nouns and verbs that never seemed to predicate into a complete, or at least sensible, sentence. The best equation in science or life is still an abstraction in search of meaning.

A few days before the end of classes, before graduation ceremonies and newly minted diplomas conferred wings on another group of promising futures, Wil began to notice that Darla was conspicuously absent from school. She wasn't present for any of the graduation practices, cap and gown fittings, and the class photograph that was posted on the bulletin boards throughout the hallways, including the local newspaper which normally published the seniors grouped together for all the proud parents to cut and save for family albums. When he decided to phone her a recording said that the number was no longer in service, so he visited the admissions office after his last class one afternoon.

Miss Crumby, the school's official registrar, librarian, and personal secretary to the principal, Mr. Charles Bolten, was about as old as the Dewey Decimal System and still refused to speak in contractions saying that it corrupted both the English language and precise speaking. Proper elocution induces proper thinking in the well mannered, she would moralize, and a 'yes, ma'am' was immediately expected afterwards. Wil approached her with all the deference due a matronly monarch in charge of beheadings.

Before he had an opportunity to open his mouth and speak precisely however, Mr. Bolten came out of his office and, noticing Wil, commanded in a loud voice, "Young man, I'd like to see you in my office." Everyone, including Miss Crumby, stopped and stared at Wil as imaginations fluttered their muffled feathers. Once inside the door closed with an audible thud as Mr. Bolten motioned that sitting was now required.

"Wil, by all manner of proper speaking, I'm sure you'll agree that this should be left entirely to your parents; after all, it is a family issue." The short buzz cut of his receding hairline contrasted with his meaty jowls and pug nose, giving the impression that he must have been on the receiving end of fisticuffs as a contentious youth, or a tight end in college football. Then again, there was the war to be considered. He leaned forward across his desk and looked directly at him. "However, young man, let me be the first to say, congratulations."

"Thank you, sir."

“I received a telegram this morning from your mother; it was, by the way, sent from Chicago, saying that you’ll be with us again next year as a graduating alumnus of this school. You’ve proven to be an exceptional student here and I am proud that in the future you’ll represent us by an accomplished and successful career some day.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir,” Wil said, yet his interests lay elsewhere. “But I wonder if you could give me some information.”

“Why of course, my boy,” Mr. Bolten said, beaming at the recognition of his own authority in providing manly guidance when so called upon.

“Well, sir, it’s probably nothing, but I noticed that Darla Mills hasn’t been around school lately, and she’s not even in the photo of graduating seniors posted on all the bulletin boards. Did she get sick or something?”

The burley little principal seemed to squat inside his shoulders for a long moment before leaning back into his swivel chair. He inspected the palm of his right hand, found it still attached and working in good order, then asked without looking, “Do you have an interest in the Mills girl?”

“No, sir, I mean not really. It’s just that I loaned her a library book I was reading and I need to return it before school’s out, only I haven’t seen her and I don’t know how to contact her. I thought maybe you could help.” Wil felt a sense of apprehension hanging in the air.

Mr. Bolten sat contemplating, then said rather slowly, “I see, yes,” and turned to face him looking downward. “Well then, I wouldn’t worry too much about the book, I’m sure it’ll turn up soon enough. However, to answer your question, the Mills girl was graduated early with the consent of the school board, and at the request of her husband,” he said, clearing a nest of frogs from his throat. “There were some extenuating circumstances that allowed for such consideration, and everyone agreed that, quite frankly, it would be in the best interests of all concerned if the matter was favorably and quickly resolved.”

“Her husband?”

“Oh, yes, ah Randy, Randall Mills, fine boy. Graduated a few years ago and left to enlist in the army. Apparently he’d been assigned to some little country in Southeast Asia and planned to settle his wife down near his folks in Florida.”

“Have they been married long?”

“Oh, I’d guess maybe a year or more. She would’ve graduated last year, but then she lost that baby, terrible ordeal, what with decent doctors performing indecent acts and then complicating matters worse by that strange suicide. Awful business, just awful,” and there seemed not one iota of compassion in conveying the story other than affirming its public offensiveness to the moral fiber of the local bedroom community.

“Thank you, sir,” said Wil, standing up to leave in solemn bewilderment.

“Not at all, my boy, not at all, my door is always open,” and managed to wink at Wil as though a cigarette had been shared by two buddies in the school lavatory.

All eyes, which were mostly shifty sidelong glances, followed him as he made his shuffling departure out of the admissions office and into the hallway. It was empty of students now, almost hollow-like with the distant sounds of footsteps echoing somewhere down the long corridors of learning. A locker door clanged shut a thousand miles behind him, and a referee called out from a distant beyond - STIRRRR-IKE!!!

Four days after graduation the local newspaper reported a fatal accident that happened one night a few miles outside of town on a farm-to-market highway between a gasoline tanker truck and what appeared to have been a small sports car. The truck driver was quoted as saying that a high rate of speed was the probable cause before the car lost control and slammed into the big rig igniting the explosive cargo. Both bodies were burned beyond recognition, but state officials recovered the charred remains of a license plate and hoped to trace the vehicle’s owner. It remained unclear who the occupants might have been, even their gender was in doubt.

Six weeks later Wil received an envelope in the mail addressed to him from the school library. Miss Crumby notified him that he owed \$1.15 in outstanding dues for a book he checked out, but had yet to return. It was a small book by the French novelist Albert Camus entitled, ‘The Stranger.’

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