

Take a Sad Song

by

Michael Dean Martin

This book is dedicated to our nation's veterans and to all who struggle to find a measure of peace in their lives.

Forward

It is a tremendous relief to finally get to the "forward" part of the book writing experience. What you are reading as the introduction to my book, was for me, the last task of the process, and I have run out of steam so I will keep it short.

Writing a novel was a long time dream of mine and it took me years to summon the energy. I am glad to have done it and can now cross it off my bucket list and move on to the next item which is to learn to dance (I mean *real* dancing- where I don't have to drink 6 beers just to end up looking like I'm being attacked by hornets on the dance floor).

I have many people to thank.

First, a big hug to my wife, Bonnie, who has put up with my psychopathology for years and who supported this project from the start and allowed me plenty of time and space to do what I needed to do. Without her love and understanding, this book would not have been possible.

Second, a giant thank you to all who read my original draft and submitted commentary. In particular, I thank Bonnie, Sharon Parker, Melissa Mathews, and (Melissa's sister) whose feedback resulted in major changes to the original manuscript.

Third, a massive thanks to Jan Copes whose insightful and meticulous editing turned this work from an amateurish effort into a professional piece of literature. I'd like to think of myself as the creative genius who doesn't have time for the minor matters of punctuation and grammatical correctness, but the truth is I apparently slept through some very important lectures in my English composition class in college, plus I am inherently lazy when it comes to detail work. I handed Jan a mess and she polished it up beautifully. I now realize that I can't get away with using just one comma in a 200+ page work and that it is important to pay attention to established writing conventions.

That's it for the forward. I hope you enjoy "Take a Sad Song." If you don't, I'd rather not hear about it, and no, you can't have your money back. Over and out. Mike M.

Prologue

I grabbed my cup of house blend and, turning from the counter, did a double take as I found myself face to neck with a tall ponytailed fellow wearing a Jimi Hendrix tee shirt. For a nanosecond I thought it was Charlie, but of course that was impossible. It was just my brain doing a number on me.

I excused myself and scooted around the line of folks waiting to place their orders as I made my way to the mall-side door of the Starbucks. I attempted a small sip of my coffee as I walked but caught my foot on a chair and stumbled, with the result that I burned the hell out of my tongue and spilled blistering hot coffee on my chest. “Shit,” I hissed, as I pulled my shirt away from my chest wall with my free hand while wiggling my scalded tongue against the roof of my mouth. My slapstick routine captured the attention of a pretty lady seated near the exit, and she looked up from her iPhone and smiled. Years ago I would have felt uncomfortably self-conscious about drawing attention to myself through a clumsy act, perhaps even ruminating about it for hours, but now I simply gave her a return grin. My winsome smile went unnoticed, however, as she was already back in her iPhone world. I reflected momentarily on how different I was from the teenager who had roamed this shopping center some 40 years prior. Approaching the exit door, I transferred my coffee to my left hand and pushed out into the mall.

It was only 11 AM but hordes of shoppers were already filling the place, which was awash with sounds of chatter and merriment. I paused a few feet from the Starbucks as I took in the scene around me, momentarily disoriented by the ambient noise and the complete absence of the familiar landmarks of my youth. Gone were the Woolworth’s dime store, Kinney Shoes, Mize Bakery and the diner whose name I couldn’t recall. The old businesses were replaced by

Gap Kids, Old Navy, Foot Locker, and various other chain stores. My reality check was abrupt, and I had a sudden sinking feeling as I realized it was unlikely that the National Shirt Shop had survived the decades of transformation that my brain was working to grasp.

After a few seconds I regrouped and set off in search of a mall directory, which I located in short order. Sipping my coffee gingerly, I scanned the directory hopefully for a National Shirt Shop listing. Not surprisingly, there was none. I knew it was ridiculous that I had expected a little no-name store that sold cheap, knock-off menswear to be in business still, yet my disappointment was profound. I started to turn away, but a listing under the "O's" caught my eye. Incredibly, the Organ Exchange was still in existence. It was a curious name for a music store, and one which had provided endless joke fodder in my youth, but I was interested in the Organ Exchange at that moment because it had been situated catty-corner to the shirt shop, which meant I could at least check out the old location. I set off excitedly and moments later found the Organ Exchange. Sure enough, across the intersection on the opposite corner was the old shirt shop space, now occupied by a bookstore. Wistfulness rose up in my chest, and I shuffled over to a nearby fountain as I pondered what I was feeling.

It wasn't as if I really missed the old shop. I never went back to buy clothes or visit once I moved on in my life, and I was only there that day because I was in Houston for a medical class reunion with some time to kill and an urge to take a spin down memory lane. But the National Shirt Shop at Gulfcoast Mall had provided me with my first job, and now it was gone, and I was feeling melancholy.

A 30-something man and his young daughter walked up beside me as I stood at the edge of the fountain. The dad offered her a coin.

"Make a wish, honey, but don't say what it is." He held his pointer finger to his puckered lips.

The little girl grabbed the coin from his hand and hurled it into the water in one motion. Then she leaned over the low wall of the fountain and pushed herself up with both hands to look at the multitude of shiny wishes cast by others.

I put my hand in my pocket and felt about for the change from my coffee purchase. I knew what I would wish for right then, but it was 40 years too late. Wishing wells were about the future, not the past. I held out a dime to the little girl and asked if she would like to make another wish. She moved away shyly and grabbed hold of her dad's leg. Her father accepted the coin from me.

"What do you say, honey?" She buried her head in his leg. "Thanks. She's a little shy."

I smiled and nodded understanding as I moved towards a bench situated across from the bookstore. It was unoccupied, and I sat down and stared at the big display windows, once populated by smartly dressed mannequins and now filled with copies of the latest bestsellers.

Working at the Shirt Shop had exposed me to a world that was much larger and more complicated than I had previously known, and the experience had been life shaping. It had been a time of great awakening for me, but my enlightenment had not come without pain. I sat on the bench reminiscing, and it was not long before my thoughts drifted back to Charlie as a crowd of giggling schoolgirls passed in front of me.

Chapter 1

“He’s a well respected man about town, doing the best things so conservatively.”

The Kinks (1965)

January, 1971 - The United States begins its second decade of involvement in Vietnam even as President Richard Nixon signs a bill repealing the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.

All in the Family debuts.

I was straightening a stack of shirts on a low shelf when the whistle came. I had strategically positioned my rolling stool so I could see most of Candy’s left leg projecting from beneath her tight knit skirt, one row up and across the aisle where she was arranging some neckties on a revolving tie rack. The piercing blast jolted me from my fanciful reverie, and it took me a couple of seconds to get my bearings. As I reoriented, I became aware that I was at work at the shirt shop and was being called to the morning sales staff meeting. I also noted that I had a rather prominent erection that would be hard to conceal on standing. I stalled, fussing with my pile of shirts and trying desperately to think of something gruesome to make my problem go away. Unfortunately my teenage hormones were strong, and it didn’t help that it was 1971 and very short skirts were in fashion. Female legs were everywhere and didn’t have to be particularly shapely to disrupt my normal cerebral operations. Candace Shepard’s legs were most definitely shapely, however, exquisitely sculpted, lusciously long and smooth, and attached to the most beautiful girl I had ever been in the same room with. One look at her would generate an instant reading of ten on my penometer. I had only been working at the store for three weeks but was hopelessly smitten with her, and she was all I could think about when I was around her. I arose self-consciously, aware that the rest of the morning crew was already gathered around the sales counter at the back of the store. Envisioning a naked Mrs. Kowalski (the store's elderly alterations lady) had helped my bulge issue slightly, but then Candy smiled at me and set things back again. I hurried to stand close to the counter and prayed that no one had noticed.

Unfortunately, Lance Lewis *had* noticed and was quick to call attention.

“Hey, Malone, I think I saw a spot on your pant leg. Step back so I can have a look.”

"I'm fine, Lance. There's no spot on my leg."

"No, seriously, it looked like you might have spilled some coffee on your pants. Let's have a quick look see." He was standing next to me and leaned over towards me and gave me a gentle backwards push at the waist.

My ears felt like glowing embers. "I don't drink coffee, Lance. I said I'm fine." I hugged tight to the counter and stood my ground.

"All right, knock it off you mullets. One more word out of either of you and I'll have both of you drop and give me 20." Richard (Rick) Cameron Jr. had heard enough, and for once I was glad to hear his voice. He was the assistant manager of the store and was in charge for the morning. The guy was a total jerk and was universally disliked.

Lance flashed him the peace sign which allowed him to have "one more word" without actually saying anything. Rick glared back without further response.

Rick stood directly across from me at the table-like counter centered in the rear of the store. He was in his early 30s and wore a crew cut and short sideburns at a time when nearly every other male in the world was sporting long hair. He was no-nonsense to the max. A coach's whistle dangled from his neck, incongruously superimposed on his perfectly Windsor-knotted one-hundred-percent-acetate National Shirt Shop tie. I had been enlightened by Lance that Rick was a former standout high school basketball player who went on to play junior college ball but whose short stature kept him from going higher. He carried a large chip on his shoulder along with a persistent jock's mindset, and he managed his "team" like a coach (hence the whistle and constant threats to have employees drop and give him 20). He was also a physical fitness nut with extremely meticulous habits. Lance, who had been working at the store for a year, despised him and hypothesized that his toilet training had come too early in life. He had privately christened Rick *el camarón* (Spanish for "the shrimp") and for variety would occasionally refer to him as "aardvark" in reference to Rick's prominent nose.

"OK, listen up clowns," came *el camarón's* next command. The "clowns" consisted of me, Lance, Candace, and Leonard Roland, a minister's son whom I was just getting to know. Leonard was affable with a good sense of humor, and I liked him. Unfortunately he was mesomorphic and didn't seem very athletic, which made him a natural target for the coach.

"We're still getting Christmas returns. Remember, no refunds without a sales receipt, and if they do have a receipt, don't automatically give them money back. Try to work the return into

a merchandise exchange. It's getting near the end of winter, and I want to move what's left of our jackets. They're all 20 percent off, so let's make sure our customers know that. Remember to ask about socks and underwear with every purchase. It'll probably be slow for the first couple of hours, so we'll play man on man till it gets busy and then we'll switch to zone coverage. I'll give the word when to switch. Malone, you'll take left front (which was dress shirts), Lewis take right front (sport shirts), Rolo underwear, socks and jeans, and I'll be in the backcourt. Shepard, you stay at the register and back me up if I need help." Translation: until the place got busy, we would stay with whatever customer we were waiting on throughout the store, providing full service till checkout. When things got busy, we would wait on customers in our designated areas only and pass them along to another salesperson if they needed an item in another region of the store. "In the backcourt" was Rick's jargon for the suit and dress slacks area in the rear of the store. This was the most profitable spot for a salesman on commission, and of the five of us, only Rick was selling on commission.

"Any questions?" The tone was crisp.

Lance's hand shot up, but Rick wasn't biting. He checked his watch.

"It's 8:55 now. I'm going to get some coffee and I'll be back in 15. Shepard, I noticed we're low on ones. Take a \$20 out of the register and go down to the bank and have them change it for you. Doors open at 9 sharp, gentlemen. You've got a few more minutes to finish straightening up."

Rick headed for the door, pocketing his whistle as he walked, while Leonard followed to lock the door behind him. Lance gave Rick a *seig heil* salute to his back.

Candy opened the cash register with a ca-ching, plucked out a \$20 bill between the long red nails of her left thumb and forefinger, and then proceeded to fold the note in half and tuck it into her brassiere for safe keeping. I watched the proceedings closely but quickly looked away as her head came up from her task, at which time I realized I was staring. She swished by me with a little smile, and I caught a faint whiff of her perfume. An abrupt diversion of blood flow away from my brain caused me to feel suddenly woozy. Leonard followed to let her out.

"Snap out of it, Muldoon." The words came from Lance, who was observing my dazed state and waving his hand in front of my face. Muldoon was a nickname he had bestowed on me. Snap I did as I moved to grab him. "Hey, dick sucker, what's up with trying to embarrass me like that? You are a major asshole."

I had known Lance since fifth grade, and although I was the better athlete, he had catlike reflexes and was always quicker than I. He deftly evaded me and moved to the other side of the sales counter with a laugh.

“Look, flagpole, you ought to be thanking me. Women take big boners as a compliment. I was only trying to help you out.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it.” I was back in the real world now, and I was pissed. I lunged at him again from across the counter, but it was an exercise in futility as he backed away laughing.

“Break it up, guys.” It was Len speaking now. He didn’t care for controversy and was not comfortable with the exchange taking place. “I guarantee she didn’t notice anything, so there’s no harm done.”

I was not convinced, but before I could reply there was the sound of a key unlocking the front door of the store, and we all turned to see Charlie coming in.

Charlie Benson was the stock boy who worked in the basement and had an office there. He was a loner and a bit of a mystery to me. He was a few years older than I, and I knew from Lance that he had been to Vietnam. To date our encounters had been limited to superficial conversations while he helped me locate merchandise in the stockroom. I wasn’t very comfortable with him in one-on-one situations but held him in high regard for his long hair and rebellious attitude.

Lance and I attended high school in a repressive suburban school district and were confined by a strict dress and hair code. I was by nature a compliant teenager, fearful of authority figures and not one to challenge the rules. Lance, on the other hand, had a wild streak but was pragmatic and could be Eddie Haskell-like when necessary. He enjoyed pushing rules to the limit but never to the point of open confrontation. He smoked Marlboro cigarettes, drank alcohol on a regular basis and indulged in a little pot, although he was very careful about the latter. Possession of even tiny amounts of marijuana was a felony offense in Texas in 1971. He was often called down at school for wearing his hair too long but would always get it trimmed back when asked. But Charlie was openly defiant of authority, seemingly unconcerned with the consequences of breaking rules. He often came to work stoned and made no attempt to hide his disdain for Rick. He had, however, been hired by the store manager Mr. Baggett, who was exceedingly tolerant of his behavior. As such Charlie was untouchable by Rick, who knew it and so tried to avoid him, although open conflict had occurred on several occasions in the short

time I had been working at the shop.

Charlie locked the door behind him, gave us all a little wave and removed his well worn leather motorcycle jacket (he also rode a motorcycle, which added to his hero status for me). Unlike most of the store employees, he rarely wore shirt shop attire and today was dressed in a black Led Zeppelin tee shirt and faded Levi's bell bottom jeans. He sported mirror shades which he frequently wore indoors, presumably to hide his often bloodshot eyes, and his wavy brown hair was tied back in a pony tail. He was about six feet tall and lean, with the face of a grown-up boy. He reminded me a bit of Jim Morrison, the lead singer for the Doors, and once I had overheard Candy refer to him as "dreamy." Today he was wearing a big goofy grin, which told me he was probably loaded, and indeed as he approached us in the back of the store I noticed he reeked of pot. I had never actually smoked any of the stuff, being fearful that I would be caught, which would in turn end my dreams of dental school. I had, however, been to rock concerts where I was next to smokers so I was familiar with the smell, which I found pleasantly fragrant.

"Morning, comrades," came Charlie's standard morning stoned greeting (I had noticed that on the rare days when he was not stoned, he tended to be nonverbal). "Are all the workers groovin'?"

"Oh, you know we're groovin', CB," replied Lance as Len and I offered up a "Hey, Charlie." "We're just enjoying a few minutes of freedom till dickface gets back from his coffee."

"That's insubordination, mister. You drop and give me 20," said "CB." Lance laughed and dropped to the floor with a couple of mock pushups as Charlie headed for the basement.

"Don't take any crap from that little twerp, and that's an order," were Charlie's parting words as he headed downstairs with the basement door squeaking closed behind him. The three of us turned back towards each other, the recent skirmish all but forgotten with the diversion of our attention to Charlie. There was a moment of silence before Lance spoke. "Man, is he wasted. I really don't know how he can work when he's fucked up like that."

"He smokes so much, maybe he has built up a tolerance," offered Len.

"You're showing your ignorance, Leonard," replied Lance. "You really should try a few tokes sometime when Jesus isn't looking. One does not build up a tolerance to weed. With experience, you can learn to have a little snap when you're high, but even that isn't possible when you're stoned out of your gourd."

“I’m not sure how much work he really does in the mornings,” was my observation. “I think he goes into his office, closes the door, turns on his eight track, and listens to music for an hour or so before he even makes an attempt to do any work. The real question is why Baggett puts up with him.”

Lance, who had been working at the store for almost a year and seemed to know everything about everybody, had a theory about this. “Baggett is a World War II combat veteran. Rick told me that the limp he has is from a war injury of some sort, and I think he identifies with Charlie. Besides which, the old man apparently has a couple of sons that he hasn’t seen for years, so maybe Charlie is like a replacement kid.”

“Why doesn’t he see his sons?” wondered Len.

“Something to do with a divorce and an alcohol problem, I think. I’m pretty sure I’ve smelled booze on his breath a few times here at the shop.”

We were interrupted again by a knock at the front door. It was Candy returning with the change. Len moved to let her in.

“Just leave the doors open.” said Lance. “Its 9:03 and we are now officially receiving customers. Man your positions, everyone.”

Chapter 2

“Wait until the war is over And we’re both a little older”

The Doors (The Unknown Soldier, 1968)

January, 2006 - Hugh Thompson, former U.S. Army helicopter pilot and rescuer of Vietnamese civilians during the 1968 My Lai Massacre, dies at age 63.

I glanced at my watch as I grabbed the chart off the door. Forty minutes behind schedule and it was a new patient.

“Great, that’ll set me back even further,” I thought. I prayed that he was a healthy guy with no complaints as I entered the exam room. He looked to be in his late 50s or early 60s, likely a Vietnam era vet, dressed in well-pressed slacks and a short sleeve sport shirt. He extended a firm handshake as I introduced myself.

“Hi, I’m Mitch Malone,” I said. “I’m sorry I kept you waiting.”

“Not a problem. I’m Cale Allen,” he replied. I looked him over, scanning for clues about his health. His smile was friendly, although it faded quickly. Perhaps he was annoyed at my tardiness but more likely guarding a bit or nervous. His clean-shaven face looked like it had seen a lot of sun. He appeared physically fit, a favorable sign, I thought.

“New to Austin or just new to the VA?” I asked.”

He cocked his left ear slightly towards me as I spoke.

“I’ve lived in Austin for 20 years,” he said, “New to the VA.”

“Well sir, what brings you in, and what can I do for you today?”

“I’m losing my hearing. I’ve had ringing in my ears since I was in the military, but my hearing has been getting really bad in the past few years. I got a ten 10 percent disability rating for the ringing when I got out of the army in 1971, and a friend of mine who comes here told me I qualify for a hearing aid. When I came to check into it, they scheduled this appointment. I’m pretty healthy otherwise. I have medical insurance through my business and just had a

checkup with my primary doctor last month. I don't take any medications or anything. I'm just here today because they said I had to see you to get an appointment with the audiologist."

This was music to my ears, a healthy guy with a private doctor and no problems except hearing loss. Considering the 45 minutes allotted for new patients, I could probably get this knocked out in 15 minutes tops and make up some time on my schedule.

"Welcome to the VA. I'll be glad to help you in any way I can," I offered with a smile. "We just need to go through a few questions and do a quick exam and then we'll get you an appointment with the audiologist."

I pulled my keyboard tray from under the desk and typed in my password.

Chapter 3

“Eighteen, I just don’t know what to say”

Alice Cooper 1968

February, 1971 - South Vietnamese ground forces, backed by American airpower, invade Laos in Operation Lam Son.

The Nixon administration requests that Congress authorize a two-year extension of the draft.

Alan Shepard hits a golf ball on the moon.

Oh! Calcutta! opens.

Saturday February 13 was my 18th birthday. I was at work and the day was going well. It was one PM and things were slow at the store. Rick was off and Mr. Baggett was taking a long lunch break. Candy was working, which was always a plus, and I was getting off at six o'clock for a brief birthday celebration with my family. Then I had plans to ride go carts with Lance and a group of friends.

Candy was on break, leaving me and Andre as the only ones on the floor. We stood side by side, leaning over a display case while facing the front entrance watching for customers. Wallace Andreas Delgado was four years older than I, double majoring in history and psychology at the University of Houston with his sights set on law school. Andre was dark-haired and handsome, the product of a Puerto Rican father and a Canadian mother. His father was quite wealthy, and Andre had gone to private schools in his youth, traveled the world, and become accustomed to the finer things in life. His parents divorced when he was 15, however, and he stayed with his mother and became estranged from his father. As a result, his lifestyle changed dramatically. He was forced to go to work while living at home and had to forgo his plans to attend an Ivy League school. He still wore expensive shirts with his initials “WAD” monogrammed on the pockets, and Lance, with his penchant for nicknaming, feasted on this and dubbed him "odd wad." Once, while Andre was distracted on the phone, Lance had managed to stick a piece of tape with the word "odd" written on it onto Andre's shirt to the right of his monogrammed pocket. Andre walked around for hours with "odd WAD" on his chest until he finally passed in front of the dressing mirror and noticed it. A couple of weeks later, he got Lance back by sticking a sign which read "Help me and others like me and give to the Micropenis Foundation" on the back of Lance's sport jacket. After that they declared a truce. Once in a while Lance called Andre by his first name or occasionally "Wally" if he really wanted to rile him up. Andre detested his first name and Lance knew this. Andre was third in line at the store, and it was he who had shown me how to tie a necktie when I began working at the shop. I had always worn clip-on ties, and he had informed me that this showed a serious lack of class. The knot he taught me was the Pratt (later known as the Shelby), a little-

known method where one started with the tie in a backwards position. He was urbane and a bit of a snob but had a quick wit and was a fun and nimble conversationalist.

“Congratulations on surviving to your 18th birthday,” said Andre. “Have you accomplished all the goals you hoped to achieve at this juncture?”

“For the most part,” I replied thoughtfully. “I landed the lead role in my second grade school play and got all the way to Webelos in Cub Scouts.” I paused as my mind scrolled. “OK, I also made the Little League all stars when I was 12, I’ve gotten straight A’s in conduct all through school, and I stopped masturbating for a whole week once. Oh, and now I have this great job earning a buck 60 an hour.”

“An impressive resume, to be sure, and portending big things to come. But tell me, what have you NOT accomplished on your 'to do' list?”

“Well,” I pondered, “I always wanted to go to bed with Raquel Welch.”

“And that hasn’t happened?”

“Sad to say it has not. Matter of fact, I am still working on getting ANYONE to go to bed with me.”

“Plenty of time for that, my boy. You’re still within one standard deviation of the mean if you get laid in the next year. Personally, however, I lost my virginity at the age of 11.”

“Right.”

“Lancelot tells me you’re rather sweet on Miss Shepard.”

“Lance has quite a mouth.”

“She is indeed pulchritudinous and has enticing qualities. What’s holding you back?”

“Are you kidding? She’s so far out of my league it’s not funny.”

“Nonsense. You’re an attractive guy, good sense of humor, intelligent and with a bright future.”

“She’s 20 and I’m 18.”

“I don’t see that as a major issue. You’re intellectually mature beyond your years. Frankly, although she is unquestionably physically attractive and sweet natured, I don’t find her very bright. Lance and I were discussing evolution last week and she weighed in with her opinion, and I quote (he spoke in a high falsetto), “I just can’t accept that humans came from monkeys.” We tried to explain that evolutionary theory postulates that man and other primates merely descended from a common ancestor, which is not to say that we came from monkeys. She totally could not grasp this.”

“So she’s not a scientist. She also has a boyfriend.”

“That does pose an additional challenge but is not insurmountable. Your job is to convince her that you are the better man.”

“How do I do that when I can barely talk to her without freezing up?”

“Perhaps you are too fearful of making a fool out of yourself with the opposite sex. You’re a golfer, so how about a golf metaphor. No doubt you are familiar with the phrase ‘never up, never in.’ Do you see how this advice for the putting green applies to your love life?”

“I get it, but it’s not that easy. Getting my putts to the hole is a lot easier than making conversation with women.”

“Because you practice putting. How about practicing the art of male-female dialogue on a smaller scale with women you are comfortable with. Hone your skills under a lower pressure situation. Who knows -- it might even lead directly to a relationship. That would have an additional advantage for you when you are ready to move up the dating ladder. Remember the cardinal rule of getting poontang, my boy. It’s similar to getting credit. It’s easier to obtain if you already have it.”

“You lost me.”

“Your appeal factor goes up if you are already attached to another.”

“I see. So I use some poor girl to get to Candy.”

“Not necessarily. My point is that you have to have girl *friends* before you can have a

girlfriend. It's an evolutionary process."

"You just told me Candy doesn't believe in evolution."

"Amusing, but I believe you get my point."

"I have friends who lack Y chromosomes."

"Do you really? Can you tell them your secrets, and vice versa? Do you know what their favorite colors are, what kind of perfume they like best, what they dream about?"

"You want me to be a homo?"

Andre gave me a frown and continued. "When you can relate to a girl on that level, then you are truly friends. As you cultivate such friendships, you may also discover that looks are not everything. When you have not really gotten close to women, you have only physical appearance driving your attraction. You follow your sex organ around like it's a divining rod."

He was being truthful. I had met his latest love interest, an Asian studies major from Rice. I found her moderately attractive, but Andre got a lot of second looks from women, and she was not a girl who would turn heads.

He went on, "Your first girlfriend will undoubtedly not be your last because you will find your tastes changing over time and ultimately will want to experience something different. Having established that first real relationship will make it easier to move to a new one from a confidence perspective. If it also happens to enhance your stature in the eyes of the next girl who catches your fancy, so be it."

He paused, sensing that he was overwhelming me with advice. "You know what? We're probably over thinking the whole woman thing. The last thing we want to do is induce paralysis by over analysis, as they say."

"Maybe. All the more reason for us to drop this discussion. I'm sorry I ever mentioned my feelings for Raquel. Perhaps if I could parade *her* through the store, then Candy would see me in a different light."

He gave a short laugh. "Well, I'm glad you have grasped the essence of my argument. But why not forget women for the moment and look on the bright side of life. You are now 18 and in the

next few months we should have a new constitutional amendment giving you the right to cast a vote against Dick the Prick Nixon in next year's election. You can also get a felony conviction for smoking marijuana and go to *adult* prison, where you will be corn holed. And best of all, you can get drafted and go to Vietnam and fight communists and possibly have the honor of dying for your country and for the future of the capitalist way of life."

Truthfully, I had not given much thought to the connection of turning 18 and thus being subject to the draft. My political naiveté was exceeded only by my ineptness at scoring with women, so the latter was my primary extracurricular focus. I was against the war but seldom watched or read news accounts of the conflict despite constant media coverage. My anti-war sentiment was based more on peer influence than on factual knowledge. I identified vaguely with the counterculture movement, swayed by high-profile college campus protests and events such as the shooting at Kent State the year prior. On the other hand, as I have already mentioned, I was pathologically respectful of authority and was conflicted about going against anything my government said was necessary and right. I did know of a couple of older guys from my neighborhood who had reportedly fled to Canada but considered this dishonorable, and in my rare moments of reflection on the issue, had thought that if I was somehow called to serve, I would probably do so. I did not want to be a "draft dodger." I was, however, headed for college and assumed that I would get a student deferment, so I hadn't lost much sleep over the matter of selective service.

"I'm going to college next year, Andre, so I'll get a student exemption from the draft."

"So you think. There's talk about ending that, you know. I'm very happy to have my deferment, but the Selective Service Act in its present form is inherently unfair to minorities and the poor who can't afford higher education. Congress is considering amending the rules to make the draft more egalitarian."

This was something of which I was unaware, and the news gave me pause.

"President Nixon has promised to end the draft and the war," I said, trying to comfort myself.

"President Nixon is a liar."

"Great. I'm going to die a virgin in the jungles of Southeast Asia. Thanks for the birthday pep talk, and remind me not to call you if I ever need cheering up. You'll have me out on the ledge of a tall building in 10 minutes."

As I said this, Candy rounded the corner of the front show window and bounced through the store entrance with a gift-wrapped package in her left hand.

“Happy birthday, Mitchell,” she said with a smile.

I had a gigantic head rush as Candy approached and held out her gift. This was unbelievable. A moment before, I had been contemplating the depressing possibility of military induction, and now a birthday present from the girl of my dreams.

“Is this for me?” I said stupidly as I looked inquiringly into her green eyes. I could only hold her gaze for about a nanosecond, however, before shyness forced my attention downward to the package I was accepting.

“It’s nothing major, but I think you’ll like it,” she said.

“Thank you so much,” I replied as I tore off the wrapping.

“Oh my gosh, it’s a book of elephant jokes,” I exclaimed, showing it to Andre.

“Nice. I love adult humor,” “Wallace” remarked dryly. He was not impressed.

Candy and I had worked together one evening the week prior and, with Len as the intermediary, had actually had a conversation wherein we discovered our mutual fancy for elephant jokes.

I opened the book to the middle and read aloud: “Why do elephants have flat feet?”

“Because flat feet proved to be an evolutionary advantage?” offered Andre.

I frowned at him. “From jumping out of tall trees,” I replied.

Candy giggled and I had a fleeting feeling of intoxication.

“Try another one,” she said excitedly.

“OK, why do elephants wear red tennis shoes?”

Andre had no response this time, and from Candy, “I give up, why?”

“So they can hide in a strawberry patch.” More giggling and again the momentary sense of intoxication.

At that point a customer entered the store. Andre took off to render assistance, leaving me and Candy to ourselves. I faced her enchanting green eyes again, the model’s face and lengthy dark hair inviting a long look. I was able to hold her gaze for perhaps a millisecond longer this time and thanked her profusely for remembering my birthday with such a thoughtful gift. At that point I was completely out of talking material and so excused myself to take my book downstairs for safekeeping till quitting time.

I was filled with a mixture of happiness and self-deprecation as I descended to the basement. Why could I not relax and talk to a girl who seemed to be showing an interest in me? Why did my hands get all sweaty and my heart race and my brain go dead? Truthfully, I had to admit, the problem was a much bigger one, as I had similar feelings with strangers, with public speaking, and in unfamiliar social settings, but my sense of inadequacy was more acute when I was unable to engage in dialogue with women. How could I possibly get a grip on this problem? These were my thoughts as I got the bottom of the stairs where I bumped into Charlie, who was unpacking some boxes.

“Hey, M and M,” he said. He was obviously stoned.

“How you doing, Charlie?” I returned. As I started for my locker, I paused as my mind went back to my discussion with Andre on the draft. I was hesitant about bringing up the subject with Charlie, but he must have sensed my need to talk and he provided me with an opening.

“What’s on your mind, Mitch?”

“You were in Vietnam, weren’t you, Charlie?”

“For 13 months,” he answered. “United States Navy, Third Battalion, Third Marine Regiment.”

“Do you mind if I ask how you ended up there?”

“You mean how I got in the navy?”

“Yeah. I mean, were you drafted or did you enlist?”

"I enlisted. I was not a great student in high school, and I got a job in a gas station after I graduated. I figured I was a sure bet to get drafted, and I sure as hell didn't want to go into the army. I knew a guy from my school who got his legs blown off in Vietnam, so I decided to play it safe and enlist in the navy. A lot of good that did me." His voice seemed a little tense.

I wondered how he wound up in the Third Marine Regiment when he enlisted in the navy. "Is it OK to talk about this?"

"Some days yes and some days no. This feels like a 'no' day."

"I'm sorry. I just turned 18 today and I was thinking about the draft."

"Happy birthday, man. Enjoy being 18. Trust me, life can turn on you pretty fast. Well, I'm guessing you're heading for college somewhere, so you should be exempt from doing Uncle Sam's dirty work. So don't get any fucked-up ideas about enlisting, because Vietnam is not a war worth fighting, and the cause, whatever it is, is sure as hell not worth dying for. And if somehow you do get drafted, you join the Coast Guard or the National Guard or you head for Canada because Vietnam will change you in ways you never imagined, and the world will never look the same again." He made a hard slash across the top of a large box with his cutting blade, then checked himself and with deliberation placed the knife on the concrete floor. I noticed that his hand was trembling slightly and his breathing rate had increased. "Not to be rude," he said, "but I've got to go down to the loading dock and have a smoke."

"That's cool. I'm sorry if I upset you."

"Don't worry about it. It's not your fault, but I have to go now."

"I'll see you later, Charlie," I said, as he headed into the tunnel which led to the loading dock. He didn't turn around but gave me a little backhand wave. I watched him walk for a few seconds and then made my way towards my employee locker to stow my new book.

Chapter 4

“Well come on all of you big strong men Uncle Sam needs your help again” Country Joe and the Fish (1967)

My computer was sluggish and the sign-in process was taking longer than usual. I drummed my fingers on the desk impatiently while Cale stared at an anatomy chart on the wall. I swiveled my rolling chair towards him.

“So, what line of work are you in, Cale?”

“I’m a landscape architect,” he replied. “I have my own business. I never had much luck working for other people.”

I put a mental flag on the latter statement but ignored it for the time being. It might or might not be important, but I didn’t want to delve into anything that might be heavy at this point in our relationship.

“You’re my hero already,” I said. “I’m an amateur horticulturist with a thing for native Texas plants. I love what I do here, but some days I’d give just about anything to have a job outdoors.”

“I enjoy my work too,” he said, “but there are plenty of days when I wonder why I keep at it. You get customers bitching at you or not wanting to pay you, and you’ve also got to keep your employees happy and busy, not to mention the worries that come when times are slow and the bills keep coming. I’m not complaining, though. I make a decent living, and on the whole it’s pretty satisfying.”

“So how did you get into the landscaping business?” I inquired.

“Well, when I got back from Nam in 1971, I didn’t know what to do with myself. I enrolled at UT as a business major but just couldn’t seem to focus on studying and making the grades, so I quit after one semester. Then I kicked around at various jobs for a few years, mostly labor work, but didn’t last too long at any of them. I was drinking a lot in those days and smoking a lot of pot and frankly had an attitude problem that kept getting me fired. Finally I got a job with a commercial landscaper who was a fellow Vietnam veteran, and he was pretty tolerant and understanding. I guess you could say he took me under his wing. I loved the work and after a

couple of years decided to go back to school at Texas A & M and get a formal education in the business. Am I taking up too much time with this story, doc? I know you have other patients to see.”

“I have plenty of time,” I said. “Besides which, I asked the question.”

There was a brief pause. “Did you ever serve in the military, doc?”

I had answered this question many times, and my reply never felt adequate.

“Actually, I did not. I was born in 1953 and was in the lottery in 1972, but they ended the draft before my group was called. I had a pretty good number in the 200’s anyway, so I wasn’t too worried. I had my sights set on school and definitely did not want to go to Vietnam, so I was happy not to be drafted.”

“No shame there. I was dumb enough to enlist, if you can believe that. Vietnam sure screwed me up for a while. But no need to get into that. I just need to get my hearing checked.”

Chapter 5

“I am woman hear me roar”

Helen Reddy

March, 1971- The Weather Underground bombs the U.S. Capitol building in protest of the U.S. involvement in Laos.

The Senate approves an amendment to lower the voting age to 18.

CBS airs the final broadcast of The Ed Sullivan Show.

Army Lt. William Calley Jr. is convicted of murdering at least 22 Vietnamese civilians in the 1968 My Lai Massacre.

It was Saturday March 6, and we were gathered at the shop's front entrance listening to Rick blather about the new electric eye bell system he had installed to alert us the moment a customer entered the store.

Rick had an audience of four, including me, Lance, Candy and Mr. Baggett, who was standing behind him looking remarkably detached from the proceedings. I knew Lance was hung over, and he was leaning against a counter, leafing through a *Sports Illustrated* magazine he had found somewhere while Candy filed her nails.

Rick seemed oblivious to our boredom and proceeded to a demonstration of the system by waving his hand at knee level across the store entrance to break the light beam. He appeared pleased as a very annoying bell tone resulted. I saw Lance grimace at the sound, but he kept quiet. Hawley Dobbs Baggett gave no hint of any emotion as he quietly and smoked what was probably his fourth or fifth cigarette of the day. The nicotine-stained fingers of his right hand and a red nose contrasted strikingly with the otherwise pale skin of a man who apparently had spent most of his life indoors under fluorescent lights. Considering that he was the store manager, he was anything but a commanding presence. Rarely was he observed to wait on customers, and he left most of the “managing” of the store to Rick. Occasionally he was jovial and would tell a joke or two, but generally he didn't talk much, so very little was known about him. He was a 20-year company man (there was a plaque on display in his basement office

documenting this) who I could only guess had risen through the ranks of the Shirt Shop organization by sheer endurance combined with a lack of initiative to do more with his life. He was over six feet tall with broad but rounded shoulders and a full head of thick gray hair that he wore somewhat longish for his age. Candy was of the opinion that he had been handsome in his younger days, but it was hard to imagine, given his W.C Field's nose, trembly hands and sunken eyes. He stubbed out his cigarette in the sand-filled ashtray by the front door as Rick finished his presentation, then cleared his throat for about the 20th time, thanked Rick in his growly voice for the good work, and suggested the two of them go to the diner for some coffee. Rick, who was a coffee freak, agreed and, looking at his watch, advised us to leave the doors open since it was 8:57 AM with store opening due in just three short minutes. We would all have been happy to have three minutes of decompression time, but we agreed and then watched as the stoop-shouldered big man exited beside Rick. The alert bell rang as they crossed the threshold of the front door. Mr. Baggett, who had a bad right leg, bobbed as he walked in contrast to Rick, whose gait was swaggering and whose posture was ramrod straight.

"Malone, I want you to just kill me if I get like either one of those two when I get old," observed Lance.

"Gladly," was my reply. "I'll do it now if you like."

Candy giggled softly and I suddenly felt very witty.

"Actually, I don't why I'm asking a pussy like you. I'm better off asking Candy. You won't even step on a spider."

"I happen to abhor killing innocent creatures. There have been plenty of times I felt like killing you, though."

This produced another giggle from Candy, and now I was exhilarated.

"It didn't seem like you wanted to kill me last night when you were blowing me." Lance often insinuated that I was gay, which he knew was very annoying to me.

"OK, well now I do feel like killing you. Is death by choking OK with you?"

"Putting a choke hold on my penis is OK with me," was the comeback.

"You are so sophomoric" I replied. "And did you forget that there is a lady present?"

Candy smiled, "Thank you, Mitchell."

More exhilaration. "You're welcome." I smiled at her and bowed slightly in her direction.

"Hey, speaking of ladies," said Lance, moving on quickly, "have you met the new hire? I worked with her on Tuesday. Her name is Rosalind and she's a real trip."

"I met her on Thursday night," said Candy. "She is sorta different."

"A real trip and sorta different," I interjected. "Does she have three boobs or something?"

Candy laughed again. I was really on a roll this morning.

"Are boobs all you ever think about?" replied Lance. (Ironic, since that was practically all he ever thought about). "No, she's just some sort of women's lib type. Not militant or anything but she doesn't wear makeup or try to make herself look attractive in any way. I didn't get a chance to check out her armpits, but I'm guessing they're hairy."

Candy found this conjecture humorous but seemed embarrassed by the thought as she suppressed a laugh. I felt irrationally jealous that she was amused by Lance's commentary.

"Call me old-fashioned, but I like my women clean shaven," I said.

"Right, you're such a cockster," countered Lance. "A regular James Bond with the ladies. With all the action you've been getting lately, you better not be too particular, Malone. Anything with a pulse and a vagina should be up for your consideration, hairy pits or otherwise."

My ears burned and my brain froze in embarrassment. I had no retort, but to my amazement and relief, Candy stepped up in my defense.

"Mitchell is just a little shy," she said. "He's sweet and very cute and any girl would be lucky to have him."

I felt for a moment like I might swoon but quickly bounced back. "And Lance, may I remind again you to watch your language in the presence of a lady?"

"See what I mean about sweet, Lance?" said Candy. "You could learn something from

Mitchell.”

Most everyone except my mother and Candy called me Mitch. I loved hearing Candy say my name.

Lance started to reply but was interrupted by the annoying front door alert bell. We turned to see a pretty young lady with two small boys in tow. The oldest of the little fellows, who was about six, had made the connection between entering and triggering the bell sound. He walked back out and then in again, sounding the alarm twice. Lance winced as the boy began waving his hand back and forth at the door, setting off a series of “bongs.”

“Jacob, stop that,” said the mother as Lance walked to the wall outlet and unplugged the bell. “I’m so sorry,” she said as the little boy ran to her side.

“Not to worry,” said Lance. “I just had a little too much fun last night, and there is a little man inside my head punishing me with a sledgehammer.”

“Ooh, that is rough,” said attractive mom, smiling at Lance. “Do you feel up to waiting on me?”

“Absolutely,” replied Lance as he turned on the charm. “Hangover or not, I’m always available to help out a lady in need. How may I assist you?”

“Well, I’m looking for a birthday gift for my dad. I saw a shirt in the window that I think would be perfect.” She walked to the left front display window with her youngest son and pointed to a blue striped shirt lying with two other shirts in their packages in a small fan-like arrangement at the far end of the window.

“I like your taste,” said Lance. “I actually have that shirt myself,” he lied. He could be quite a bullshitter. “What size do you need? And what’s your name by the way? I’m Lance.”

“I’m Susan,” she replied with a smile. “Nice to meet you, Lance.” She was probably in her mid-20s but seemed to be enjoying Lance’s flirting. “And Dad wears a medium. Jacob, don’t climb on the counter, honey.”

“Follow me,” instructed Lance, as he headed to the shelving section on the right wall of the store and quickly located a stack of the blue striped shirts. “Looks like we have four left here. Now let’s find you a medium.”

He pawed through the stack. "Small, small, large, large. No mediums here, but we're not done. Let me check downstairs in the stock room."

"Thank you," said Susan hopefully. Her sons were getting pretty squirmy.

Lance took off for the basement only to return a couple of minutes later with empty hands.

"I'm really sorry, but we do not have that shirt in a medium. Let me call our downtown store and see if they have one." I had seldom seen him work so hard for a sale.

"Oh, that would be super," said Susan.

Lance made the call, but downtown had no mediums either. "I'm sorry," he said ruefully. "Maybe we can find your dad another shirt."

Susan was agreeable, but after several minutes of searching, nothing suitable turned up.

"I'm sorry to be so difficult," she said honestly, "but I guess I just really like the one in the window. Wait, what size is the one on display?"

"They always put mediums in the window," said Lance, "but we're not allowed to go into the window for merchandise."

This was true. In the past it had been common practice and was even considered good customer service, but apparently Lance had been on a particularly tough mission to the outer range of the display case a few months prior and had knocked over a mannequin, which cracked the front window. After this, Rick had outlawed the practice and threatened to fire anyone who broke the rule. Lance was always on thin ice with Rick so had adhered to policy.

Susan looked crestfallen. "I understand. That shirt was just the perfect color, but I've got a few days before dad's birthday, and I can do some more looking if I can get someone to stay with the boys. They're already shopped out as you can see."

"You know what," said Lance, "the boss is on break, and I can get in and out of that window in a few minutes with that shirt. He'll never know."

"No, I don't want to get you in trouble," said Susan.

Lance started to protest but I interrupted him. "I'll do it," I said. "You can't take a chance, Lance. If you get caught you're dead. I'm new and Rick probably wouldn't fire me.

Lance looked at me in surprise. He didn't say anything but gave me a cocked-head, raised-eyebrows expression that said "Have you gone mad?" This was completely out of character for me and contrary to my cautious nature, but he knew I was right.

"Are you sure?" asked Susan sweetly. "I don't think this is worth anyone getting fired.

"No one is going to get fired," I said with temerity. I suppose I was overcome by the opportunity to show off in front of Candy.

"Can I go in the window and get the shirt?" asked Jacob, who had suddenly become interested in the proceedings.

"No, sweetie. It's too dangerous."

Jacob looked disappointed but didn't argue.

I began to remove my shoes. I had never been in the window but figured I could maneuver better without them. "I'll need a lookout," I said, "someone to watch for Rick coming back from coffee."

"I'll be your lookout, Mitchell," volunteered Candy. This was going swimmingly. The girl of my dreams was partnering with me in my daring venture.

Lance handed me one of the large size blue striped shirts to replace the one I was removing. "Rick probably has that display window memorized," he explained. "Even one missing shirt will get his attention."

As I headed for the window, in walked Charlie, late as usual and high as a kite. "Morning, comrades," he smiled. "What's up?"

"Mitchell's going into the window to get a shirt for this lady," explained Candy. "Rick is on break so he has to go fast."

"I'm in for that," said Charlie enthusiastically. "Don't let me hold you up. I'll just hang out and

watch.”

I stepped up into the window and maneuvered carefully around the mannequins, making my way to the outer reaches where the shirt lay. I got there without a hitch, swapped the medium for the large, and began the final leg of the trip.

Suddenly Candy, who was stationed at the corner of the entrance, gave an alert. “Rick's coming,” she said with urgency. “Hurry.”

My heart began to pound as I tried to pick up the pace, but I was fearful of knocking something over so I couldn't go too fast. Candy was making excited circles with her hand, signaling me to be quicker. I was almost out when, as luck would have it, I bumped the chest of a mannequin sporting a blue blazer with a pink shirt and a pink and grey tie. I tried to grab him but I was in an awkward position and couldn't make the move fast enough. Fortunately, he did not go forward into the window but tumbled into the back wall of the display case. By now Candy was back inside the store to avoid attracting attention from the approaching Rick. I turned to try and stand up Mr. Blue Blazer, but everyone was hissing at me to get out of the window. I climbed out in the nick of time and slipped on my shoes while handing the shirt to Susan. Rick appeared with Mr. Baggett bobbing at his side, and the expression on his face told us he had noticed the changes in the display window.

“OK, who unplugged the bell and who was in the window?” His tone was clipped and angry. He looked straight at Lance, automatically putting him at the top of the suspect list.

We had forgotten about the bell, but of course Rick noticed immediately that it was disabled. No one said anything, and there were a couple of seconds of uncomfortable silence before Charlie spoke up.

“I went into the window. This lady wanted a shirt and we didn't have the size she needed in stock.” That was it, just a simple confession without a lot of details. He looked Rick directly in the eyes, awaiting his response.

I know we were all praying that the kid would keep his mouth shut, which fortunately he did. No doubt he sensed Rick's anger, and his instinct and experience told him to keep quiet around a pissed-off adult.

Rick didn't believe for one moment that Charlie had gone into the window. The guy barely came out of his dungeon and almost never had any interaction with customers. Nevertheless,

he was stuck. He had a confession and knew that at this point no one would have any reason to come forward with the truth. He also knew that Charlie was untouchable, particularly with his benefactor Mr. Baggett standing quietly a few feet away.

“Let me reiterate the rules. Nobody and I mean nobody goes into the window. Is that clear?” This was the best he could do to exert his authority under the circumstances. All nodded except Charlie, of course. He just kept staring at Rick, who then went on to the bell issue. “Did you unplug the bell too, Charlie?” he said sarcastically.

This time it was Susan who came through for us. “I’m sorry, sir. My little boy was playing with it, and I asked them to unplug it because it was giving me a headache. I didn’t know it would get anyone in trouble.”

Once again we all prayed that Jacob would keep quiet, which again he did, and once again Rick was unable to go on the offense.

“No one is in trouble since it was unplugged for a good reason,” said Rick. He wasn’t sure whether to buy this story or not but obviously couldn’t challenge the lady. He was fuming but kept his composure. “All right, people, let’s get back to work. Malone, get in the window and get that mannequin upright, and Lewis, get that bell plugged in again. Can we do anything else to help you, ma’am? A tie to go with the shirt or some socks or underwear?”

“No, I’ll just pay for the shirt,” said Susan, who at that point just wanted to get the hell out of the place. She had exposed her little guys to quite enough rules breaking, lying and deceit for one day. It might take years for Jacob’s moral development to get back on track after witnessing out little show.

Candy took the shirt from her and walked her back to the register. Lance and I went to take care of our respective assignments, while Charlie headed for the basement. Mr. Baggett lit another cigarette.

I got blue Blazer back on his feet with Rick standing at the edge of the window “supervising.” I was feeling really guilty about letting Charlie take the rap for my misdeed and wondered about his motivation. It was true that he was unlikely to face any discipline, given his seemingly untouchable status as long as Baggett was around. But why would he take the blame for me, a guy he barely knew? Maybe he was just looking to challenge Rick. That seemed like the most logical explanation. I excused myself to go downstairs and wash mannequin dust on my hands, and Rick said OK.

I found Charlie in his small office in the rear of the basement. He was leafing through some papers on his desk, and a Jefferson Airplane tape was blaring on his eight track. The door was open, but I gave a little knock as I entered.

“Thanks, man. I really owe you one,” I said.

He looked up, reached to his eight track and turned down “Somebody to Love” and then leaned back in his chair, locking his hands behind his head. “Buy me a beer sometime and we’ll call it square.”

“That sounds good.” I hesitated. “Do you mind if I ask you why you took the fall?”

He stared at me for a couple of seconds, and I couldn’t tell if he was pissed or considering his answer. Suddenly I felt a bit uncomfortable.

Finally he inhaled deeply, exhaled and responded, “Rick enjoys throwing his weight around. He’s a huge prick in my book, and nobody should have to put up with his crap.”

He hadn’t really answered my question, but his mood didn’t seem too good, and I didn’t want to push it.

“He’s a jerk all right,” I agreed. Since he apparently wasn’t up for a talk, I decided to close out the conversation. “Well, I guess I better get back upstairs or Happy Boy will have me doing pushups.” He gave a faint smile. “Anyway, thanks again, Charlie, and I’ll be happy to buy you a beer anytime, only you’ll have to make the purchase since I’m just 18.”

“Eighteen,” he reflected ruefully. It seemed for a moment that he had forgotten I was present, and then he said, “Don’t worry, I’ll get the beer.”

I had the feeling he might actually be interested in getting together sometime, but he was hard to read. He turned his attention back to his papers and turned up the music as I backed out of the small office and headed upstairs.

Later that day, I had occasion to meet the “new hire,” who was coming in at five PM as I was getting off work. Rosalind Gold walked up to me and introduced herself, extending a firm hand with a solid shake as one might expect from a man. She was attired in a faded denim skirt with a sleeveless shirt, and I was pleased to see that she had no underarm hair. Her dress extended

to her ankles and completely covered her lower extremities, however, so I found myself wondering about the possibility of unshaven legs.

“I’m Rosalind Gold,” she said with a tone that was friendly and confident. I returned her shake, standing dumbly without replying to her introduction. I suppose her assertiveness had unsettled me. I craved attention from women but then had no idea how to deal with it when I got it. A girl smiling at me always made me feel like my fly was unzipped. “And you are?” she queried?

“Oh, uh, Mitch Malone,” I said with an embarrassed smile, and then added a perfunctory “nice to meet you.” I often wished my parents had avoided name alliteration when they chose to call me Mitchell. It was a little hard to say my name without running the words together and sounding like I had a mouthful of “m’s.”

“Very nice to meet you, Mr. Malone. Do you have a middle name?”

An odd question and further unsettling to me, as I got kidded a lot about my middle name and hated it. I answered nevertheless. “Duwayne,” I replied softly. “Why do you ask?”

“Middle names tell stories,” she said. “I’ll bet there’s a good story behind your middle name.”

“Well, there is a story but I don’t know how good it is. My dad’s father’s name was Dustin and my other grandfather was named Wayne. My parents combined the two names to get my middle name. I’ve never cared much for it.”

“I think it’s a great name. Is it spelled D-U-A-N-E- or D-W-A-Y-N-E?”

“D-U-W-A-Y-N-E,” I replied. “I never really thought that was fair. One grandfather only got two letters of his name used and the other grandfather got his whole name included. I guess I should be glad, though. They could have made my middle name Dusway or Waystin.”

She gave a small laugh. “Mitchell Duwayne Malone. It’s poetic. My middle name is Anya. It’s Russian and was my grandmother’s name. My dad’s Jewish and his family came from Russia. His mom died when he was young so I never knew her. Rosalind was my mom’s grandmother’s name. Most people call me Roz, by the way.”

“Well, I’m looking forward to working with you, ‘Roz by the way,’” I replied.

She smiled at my lame joke. Her skin was olive and her hair was long, dark and untamed. She wore no makeup, although truthfully I might not have noticed this had not Lance called attention to it earlier, with the result that I was sizing her up with a bit more scrutiny than I might otherwise. She was attractive, although she did not have Candy's Barbie Doll features. Her facial features were more angular, and her lips weren't full and inviting like Candy's. Her eyes drew my attention, however. Candy's eyes were soft and alluring, but this girl had what my mother called "smart eyes," wide open to everything in her surroundings but sharply focused at the same time. One could sense that there was a lot going on behind those brown eyes. She made no attempt to accentuate or conceal any facets of her looks and was the kind of girl whom boys would scarcely notice in high school but who would get quite a bit of attention at the 20-year class reunion. In her left hand was a purse, and I noticed that it had two buttons attached, one of which said "End the War" and another with the letters "NOW" in bold print.

"What is NOW?" I asked.

"National Organization for Women," she answered matter-of-factly, "founded to bring women into equal partnership with men."

Move over, Jane Fonda; she was Hanoi Jane and Cat Ballou rolled into one. A feeling of intimidation was creeping over me. "Do you shave your legs?" I blurted out inexplicably.

She gave me a "you're pathetic" look and answered, "Yes. Do you shave yours?" as she hiked her dress up above her knees quickly, giving me a brief glimpse of a pair of curvaceous, clean shaven, silky legs and added, "You like what you see, penis brain?"

Gloria Steinem, step over there with Jane. Despite my humiliation, I felt an erection brewing.

"I'm sorry," I said humbly, "that was a really stupid question and I'm not sure why I asked it."

"Let me take a guess. Because you're a male and you see women as sex objects, maybe? Look, Mitchell Duwayne Malone, I appreciate that men and women are different, and I have nothing against men, but women should be recognized and respected for more than just their looks. And now I have to get to work because statistics show that I am more likely than you to get fired if I am perceived as not doing my job correctly." She extended her hand and gave me another firm shake that said "I'm pissed and you're a moron but I'll probably give you another chance." Class was dismissed, but school for me was just beginning.

I worked with Lance a few nights after my encounter with Rosalind and filled him in on all the details. It was getting close to closing, and he and Len and I were straightening some shirts near the front of the store while Rick was doing the books back at the register table. Lance was, of course, amused by my account.

“You’re such a dildo, Malone. Well, at least you got a free look at her legs, which gives you something you can jack-off to.”

Leonard was more sympathetic. “That must have been embarrassing. She wore a long dress when I worked with her last week also, and I wondered about the leg thing but just didn’t have the courage to ask.”

You mean you didn’t have the stupidity to ask,” interjected Lance. I knew Leonard’s story wasn’t true, but I appreciated his attempt to make me feel better.

“Hey,” said Lance excitedly, “so her initials are RAG. As in ‘one who rags’. Seems to fit pretty well for the lady who is angry about her status in society. OK, so her new nickname is Ragger. He laughed at his play on words with her monogram. “You know she never asked my middle name when I worked for her,” he reflected.

“She’s a pretty good judge of character,” I said. “Probably realized you weren’t worth getting to know.”

“She did ask my middle name,” volunteered Leonard.

“That would seem to prove my point,” I replied. “What is your middle name, by the way?”

“Samson,” said Len matter-of-factly and without hesitation, as if there were nothing unusual about this.

“Samson,” said Lance, falling back against the counter in hysterical laughter. Obviously the name was just a biblical choice from his religious parents but so unfitting for the chubby Leonard that it was rather funny. “This is too good. I love this middle name thing. Don’t you agree, Duwayne? Hey, Len, knock knock.”

“Who’s there,” answered Len.

“Duwayne.”

“Duwayne who?”

I groaned, having heard this many times before.

Lance grinned at me. “Duwayne the bathtub before I ddown.”

“So funny I forgot to laugh,” I said dryly.

“Hey, knock off the chatter,” said Rick sternly. “It’s nine o’clock, so let’s get the doors closed. Lance, you’ve got vacuuming duty tonight.”

“Oh, that vacuum cleaner is so heavy and hard to push,” said Lance dramatically. “I think I’ll ask Samson to do it for me.”

“I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, Lewis, but if I don’t see your butt behind that vacuum cleaner in 30 seconds, you’re fired.”

“Yes, sir,” replied Lance, still chuckling as he walked to the closet to get the vacuum.