



Incinerator Boy

Part I

By Richard Miller

“Old loves never die, they simply occupy a quieter
part of the heart.”

- The incinerator boy

Chapter 1

On any other day, it would have been a 'beautiful Autumn afternoon'. But not today. Today, pleasant descriptors simply don't apply.

It's not that kind of day.

'Overcast and gloomy' would be more appropriate, like 'rain at a funeral' appropriate.

And maybe that's what this trip is all about, a funeral of sorts, a formal burying of memories best forgotten and left in the past. Memories you wish you'd never had to begin with.

But that's not how life works, now is it? You don't forget 'unforgettable'. It's ingrained in your very being forever, and your only hope of relief is to find a way to come to terms with it.

To find peace somehow.

... 'somehow'.

What a word. A funny word at that. You add it to a sentence, and it causes you to believe that something is possible, that it's simply a matter of finding out 'how'. Like, 'I have to somehow go back in time and correct all the wrongs in my life'.

Like I said, it's a funny word.

Meanwhile, the bike roars down the road, and with every revolution of the engine, the distance between where I am and where I will be grows shorter.

And I wonder... Is that why I'm doing this? To go back and try to correct the wrongs? Or is it simply that I need something to feel bad about, like there isn't enough of that in my life already?

It reminds me of a song I once heard...

I hurt myself today

to see if I still feel;

I focus on the pain

The only thing that's real.

And maybe that's it. Maybe I've quit feeling, having gone numb to life itself, and I need something - anything - to jump start me and make me feel again. Something to convince me I'm not really dead. Not really, and maybe feeling pain is better than feeling nothing at all. After all, isn't that what separates the living from the dead? That the living can feel, and we, the dead, lost that ability at some point?

But at what point? When, exactly, was it that I died?

I don't know. I don't remember. Didn't exactly mark it on the calendar, obviously.

And worse yet? I can't ever remember having had them, feelings. But surely, I must have had them at some point. How do I know? Easy. Because every woman I've ever been in a relationship with, in the end, made me wish I didn't have them. That's how I know.

But I haven't been in a relationship in a long time. A very long time. And this makes sense because, as far as I know, the dead don't date.

I take that back, about the dead not dating. There is this one exception. The sexually dead. They date sometimes. Again, how do I know? I married one. That's how. And isn't that just like me, my brand of luck? The one and only time I decided to try marriage?

But you know what the upside to my life is? It can only get better. I mean, it's got nowhere else to go. So, there you have it. I've got something to look forward to.

Or not.

* * * * *

I once read that art - true art - comes from pain and is something I wholeheartedly agree with. Why pain? Because, while love and warm, fuzzy feelings are all fine and good, never are you more alive, or, feelings so intense, as when you are in the throes of severe emotional hell. Pain so bad that you wish you were dead. The kind of pain that makes you ball up into a fetal position on the floor and stare at the murderously slow hands of the wall clock. You watch the clock because you know that it's your only salvation; that your only pathetic hope for the pain to stop lies with the passage of time. Simply put, you have to spend the requisite time with it, the pain, and there is no circumventing this fact of life.

And, when you're in pain, that kind of pain, time passes slowly, if at all.

And I would know.

The really sad thing is that for some people, the truly unfortunate, not even time works. The pain simply refuses to go away. In which case, they're left with only one option.

Just one.

Which, I guess, was the case with Eric, my best friend in high school. He exercised that option by driving his motorcycle headlong into an overpass's concrete support column. The pain, I suppose, was just a little too much.

And isn't that the same as saying his life had become too much? That it's possible to experience too much life? So much so that you just want out?

(sigh)

And Eric was strong.

So, what kind of pain does it take to motivate a person, someone strong, like Eric, to do that? To make that one final decision in life?

My own personal answer to that question would be this: the kind of pain Sandy inflicted on my life when she walked out of it and left me for dead.

That kind of pain

I say she left me for dead, but realistically, at that time in my life, dead would have been an upgrade, a big – no, HUGE - improvement. But in my mind, to my way of thinking, the death option is only for the lucky souls who don't have the strength or character to endure that kind of hell. And unfortunately, I did. I had both. And I have the emotional scars to prove it.

Jesus. Poor Eric. The memory is as painful today as it was back then.

The thing about the personal loss of a loved one is this: it doesn't get easier with each successive occurrence. You don't get any credit for having gone through that kind of desolation in the past, like 'been there, done that, so move on already'. It doesn't work that way, and each new incident is every bit as devastating as the first, if not worse.

Eric was my second such loss, but he would not be my last. Many more would follow.

Too many, in fact.

Thinking of Eric, more of the song drifts into my head...

What have I become,

my sweetest friend;

Everyone I know,

goes away in the end;

And you can have it all,

my empire of dirt;

I will let you down,

I will make you hurt.

It's a horribly haunting song. A song that, once you hear it, you can never shake free from. It stays with you somehow. It was written by one of the most enigmatic, dark, and disturbed recording artists to ever live. I saw him once in an interview, and in it, he said he wrote the song while locked in a dark closet for three straight days. A closet located, no less, in the Manson murder home on Cielo Drive in Hollywood, his home at the time.

Oddly enough, the song was also recorded by country music legend Johnny Cash; his last hit song, in fact, recorded shortly before his death.

Really? A country music legend recording a Nine Inch Nails song?

Yeah, that's what I said. At first, anyway. Then I thought about it, knowing the Cash story, and it made sense. Johnny simply identified with the song. And why not? It pretty much sums up his life with his lifelong true love, June Carter. Sums it up perfectly. In fact, when I think about it, I'm surprised Cash didn't write it first.

So, my question is: How sad does your life have to be? How bad does the pain have to hurt for someone to identify with a song like that?

Answer: As sad and painful as mine.

Chapter 2

Whatever my motive for the trip, one thing's for certain - the journey itself, at least the physical part, is nearing its end. I know this because my stomach seems to know it as it begins to twist itself in some very troubling, if not disturbing, knots. In fact, I see the buildings emerging from the scenery on the right, so I slow the bike and begin my approach. I move to the right-hand shoulder of the road, slow even more, and begin looking for 'the spot'.

But I don't have to look for it. My entire being goes into a kind of autopilot mode, and muscle memory takes over. I could find the thing blindfolded.

I jump the curve, pull the bike up onto the sidewalk, and park it - park it in the very same spot I once did so long ago. Incredible. Incredible because I found my old parking spot without even thinking about it, without even trying, as if not a single day had passed since then.

I kill the engine, lean the bike onto its stand, and begin to unbuckle my way out of the helmet. The helmet slips off, and without the dark tinted visor to obscure my view, things quickly come into focus, and I'm instantly overwhelmed by the sight of it all.

It's been what, thirty-four years? And nothing's changed?

No. Nothing. Nothing has changed. Not one damn thing, unfortunately.

I say 'unfortunately' - not because the place isn't every bit as beautiful and picturesque as I remember it, it is. Maybe even more so than I remember. I say that because I'm certain that it serves the same dismal purpose today as it did back then. A purpose as noble as any can be, but at the same time, as sad in nature as any will ever be.

Which brings me back to the two rules of life:

Rule #1: Life is never what it should be or what you want it to be.

Rule #2: You can't change rule #1.

I hang my helmet on a rearview mirror and make my way to the nearest bench. As I do, the flood of memories comes rushing back. All of them. And each one as vivid in my mind as if they had happened this morning, causing the knots in my stomach to twist even tighter. As if that was even possible.

I have indeed arrived.

The journey is over.

Not really. It's just beginning, only I don't know it.

Not yet.

You know, there are days when I feel as if maybe I've lived too long, and other days, I know I have.

This is one of those days.

I lower myself onto the bench, the one I once knew so well, and take a deep breath as I look up at the ancient oak branches above me, all of them old friends of mine. I look, and what I see is a beautiful blue sky looking back, peering at me through the gaps and holes, almost as if wanting to see for itself that I have indeed returned.

And I'm wondering if it, the sky, is happy to see me, or if it's simply trying to figure out, like me, why I have come back.

I don't know.

So anyway, I sit here for a while, in the peace and comfort of the shade, and gaze out over the grounds in front of me. Grounds I know only too well. So well, I don't even have to look at them to see them, so I close my eyes instead. I close them and simply listen to the sounds - birds singing, leaves rustling in the breeze, a choir singing somewhere off in the distance...

And then, for a moment - just for a moment - I thought I heard them again, the children, those wonderful, adorable kids with all their laughter and giggles, and their innocent, youthful frolicking. Still too young and innocent to understand the hardships of their life now or in the days to come. Too insulated from the world at large to know just how cold and cruel the outside world can be. And that's true for anyone, but especially for the children who call this place home.

And I hear them. Every one of them. But when I open my eyes, I see that I'm alone. There's nothing there. Nothing but the memories, and with the memories, the feelings they bring with them like ghosts from the past. My ghosts. Ghosts that haunt me to this day,

I try not to think about it all, any of it, but that's a losing proposition. The memories return and spin inside my head anyway, whether I want them to or not. It's a fight I can't win and one that causes me to suddenly feel old. Old and weak, and ancient. My entire being begins to slump, and I can feel my eyes start to swell as they fight back the tears. And I'm not sure, but I think I've aged ten years since I parked the bike. Maybe more.

Definitely more.

And I keep thinking the same thing over and over...I don't want to be here.

So why am I? Why did I even come? What good could possibly result from my being here today? From this... this...returning? Especially after so many years. After all, what's done is done, and maybe I should have just left it at that. Nothing's changed, nor will it ever, and my being here doesn't make a difference one way or another. It's all history now.

You know, I say 'nothing' has changed, but that's not exactly true. The bike is new, and I am old, and growing older by the minute. A far cry from the vibrant sixteen-year-old that once sat in the very spot I'm sitting in now.

I look around me.

Amazing. Still amazing, even after all this time.

The place is somewhat surrealistic. With its perfectly manicured grounds and regal Victorian-style buildings, it reminds me of a scene from a movie, but I'm at a loss as to which one. Surely, an English one. But movies are all about illusion, and, to that end, this place fits right in. It is not what it seems to be. Not at all. It's just an illusion.

...an illusion.

And adding to the illusion are the park benches, like the one I'm sitting on now, giving someone the impression that maybe good things actually happen here. Like a young couple in love sitting next to one another, holding hands, taking in the beauty of it all, and contemplating their future together. And who knows, get married and live happily ever after. After all, isn't that how movies work?

But that's not what this place is about: lofty love affairs and happy endings.

Not here.

Not in this place.

This 'place', of course, being Madonna Manor, a catholic paid-for and run facility for orphans and other children. Children society doesn't seem to have a use for. In other words, an orphanage. A dumping ground for social garbage. Garbage, in this case, of the human type. Garbage, that is, as seen through the eyes of society, not me. That's not how I see it at all. But then, I know better. I know things that a purposely blind society, a society that doesn't want to see the heartbreaking results of the things they do, will never know.

And for the life of me, I wish that wasn't true. I could have lived my entire life without having that particular advantage over society. Because the cost of knowing what I know now, and how I came to know it, has been far too steep. And, it's a cost from which I have never truly recovered. One that, in a way, completely changed my life, and not necessarily for the better.

Of course, I'm talking about all the time I spent visiting the orphanage and getting to know the children. Whether that experience has made me a better or worse person is something I have debated with myself every day of my life since I was last here. And, the fact of the matter is, I still don't know.

And maybe that's why I've come here today, to try and find out. To look for answers to questions I can't make go away. Not until I give them what they want, the answers. Answers, like so many other things in my life, I simply don't have.

The year is 2009, but it may as well be 1975 all over again.

I lean forward and rest my forearms on my knees, hands clasped, and stare at the ground below me. And I'm sitting here thinking that maybe...just maybe...if I stare at the dirt long enough, I'll understand it all; that the answers to life will suddenly rise, like magic, from the earth beneath my feet.

But of course, they don't.

They never do.

So, instead, I let out a long sigh and just sit and stare. And as I stare, I think. And as I think, I remember.

Yeah. I remember.

Who would ever guess that you could learn so much about life from an incinerator, of all things?

An incinerator.

Let me explain...

Chapter 3

Before there were Walmarts, Targets, and K-Mart blue light specials, there were the TG&Ys, McCrorys, and Woolcos, a category of retail outlets otherwise known as discount department stores. And like their successors, these early versions received goods in pretty much the same fashion – in large eighteen-wheelers stuffed with pallets of boxes. The trucks are unloaded, the pallets emptied, the boxes opened, and the shelves restocked. It's the never-ending cycle of life inside a large retail outlet. Day in and day out. It never ends, and it never differs.

But, unlike their successors, where the sea of cardboard boxes and other trash is compacted, strapped, and then shipped off to a recycling center, the predecessors, the original stores, did things a little differently. They simply burned everything - and I do mean everything - in large, in-store incinerators. The refuse was fed into these infernos a piece or a box at a time, and usually, by some minimally paid high school student of legal working age.

I should know.

Because that's where I enter the story, the lowly paid teenager still in high school who was lucky enough to land a first job. A first job that not only funded my drug consumption, but also, my appetite for dating some disapproving father's teenage daughter as well.

The incinerator boy. That's me.

I was initially hired as part of the Christmas season's temporary increase in workforce, but did well enough to be kept on once the holidays were over, and I was made a regular, full-time employee.

Now, as far as first jobs go, it wasn't that bad. I could have done worse, I suppose, like my friend, Moon Dog, who was hired on shortly after I was as the buggy boy. And being the buggy boy meant poor Moon froze in the winter, melted in the summer, and stayed drenched and miserable when it rained.

But he didn't seem to care. Nothing *ever* seemed to faze 'Moon Man' (as I called him), a fact I attribute to his chronic and excessive use of drugs. Not that I have room to talk, mind you, but it has been my own personal experience that there is no problem that life can straddle you with that enough drugs can't make go away, or, at a minimum, seem very unimportant. And make no mistake, there was no shortage of problems in Moon Dog's life. I mean, c'mon. What kind of parents name their kid 'Moon Dog', for Christ's sake?

Jus' kiddin' That's the name we gave him, which only makes the facts of his life even worse when you consider what kind of friends you must have that would do something like that—name you 'Moon Dog'. If it were your parents, you could always blame it on the LSD epidemic of the sixties, but when it's your good friends that do something like that, you gotta wonder if these aren't the same kind of people who would let you get high and drive.

And sadly enough, we were. In fact, that was the expectation.

Looking back, I sometimes wonder how any of us ever made it to adulthood. But then I remember that some of us didn't.

But back to Moon Dog...

Chapter 4

Now, as far as best friends go, Moon was the best. I loved this guy. Still, like the rest of us, he was no stranger to faults and shortcomings. Maybe a little more so than the rest of us. Ok, a lot more.

He was much too scrawny, anemic in appearance, and was one of those kids who had a bad complexion from acne that had run amok. You know the kind: red face with the texture of a lunar landscape? Which, I guess, is where he got the first part of his name, Moon. The second part, Dog, I can only imagine was added because of his hair - golden yellow, straight as a board, and very, very coarse. To the point that it resembled straw, almost. And always greasy. It was the kind of hair I would ordinarily consider comb-resistant, but the guy managed to keep it groomed somehow. How, I have no idea. Also, he wore his hair just long enough to where it resembled a WWII Nazi helmet. It had about the same shape.

Anyway, I think it's fair to say that Moon's hair was not one of his better features. In fact, it looked so bad I often wondered if he wouldn't have been better off shaving his head. But he'd never hear that from me. Not sober, anyway.

So, in view of the facts, I imagine that being Mark Kadowitz (Moon's real name) required substantial use of drugs, and, in significant quantities. Which, in all honesty, was probably the only reason he needed a job - to cover costs.

You have to understand that before hiring on at Woolco, Moon's previous occupation, or 'goal' in life, rather, was to sell more drugs than he consumed. But that was a losing proposition from the start, and that failure led him to me. And I, in turn, led him to Woolco's personnel manager, who promptly hired him - hired him based on my recommendation, no less.

Yeah, that's what I said. But what was I gonna do? Moon was my friend. One of ill repute, maybe, but back then, weren't we all?

So anyway, on a more positive note, I always viewed Moon working for Woolco as his way of turning legit. Something I considered a definite improvement to an otherwise delinquent life, a life I all too often saw as devoid of any hope for the future - or present, for that matter. But the really good thing about Moon working at Woolco is that with him around, I was always guaranteed to have a friend to talk to during breaks. And these breaks with Moon usually proved to be the highlight of my day.

You see, Mark was not without redeeming qualities. Mostly, but not completely. For one thing, Moon Dog always had - or had 'access' to - the best drugs. Big bonus. Really big. But more importantly, he was the most naturally funny person I'd ever met, or for that matter, have since known. The guy was hilarious. So much so that you'd always have to be careful when drinking liquids around him. To do so would be to run the risk of shooting it out through your nose as a result of some off-the-wall remark he would unexpectedly make. Like the time Lisa Nunez asked him if he would take her to the upcoming ZZ Top concert. It went something like this...

“Whoa! That was kinda unexpected, Lisa. I dunno. I had something planned for that evening”.

“Oh yeah, like what?”

She manages to say this between loud, obnoxious gum smacks. Moon replies...

“Well, I was planning on pulling my eyelids off with a pair of pliers that night. How cool would that be?!”

He pulls his eyelids up with his index fingers as if to preview the look for her...

“You’re such an asshole!”

She belts this out as that suitcase she calls a purse comes around and plants itself firmly on the side of Moon’s head...

“I suggest you learn to suck your own dick, Zit-head!”

And with that, she spins on her heels and bolts down the school corridor at a very, very insulted pace.

Ouch. Even I, standing at a safe distance, felt that one. But Moon wasn’t done. He fires his next salvo...

“Aww, c’mon, Lisa! I was just kiddin’! It was *your* eyelids I was gonna pull off!”

But her only reaction was to extend an arm upward and flip him off as the clicking sound of her heels faded down the school corridor.

But Moon, being the kinda guy he is, wasn’t taking this lying down. Male pride was at stake here...

“And another thing! Not *my* fault you don’t need birth control! Try hanging some of those little pine tree air fresheners on your panties. You can put them next to the fly strips!”

But it was too late. She was well out of range of Moon’s verbal assault, as well as his dating options for good.

I can’t believe this guy sometimes. I tell him...

“Damn, she’s right! You can be a real asshole sometimes, Moon. Was that really necessary?”

“C’mon! You’re not going to tell me you bought into all that?”

“Bought into what, for Christ’s sake?”

“Look, Lisa is like the ugliest girl in school, is she not?”

“Yeah, I guess. So, what’s your point?”

“The point is this, my naïve friend. She’s a fug (fucking ugly), which means her life is a done deal. She’s got ‘future trailer trash’ written all over her, and because misery loves company, she’s wanting to take someone with her down that road of no hope. So why me? What did I ever do to that big-headed, Gumby-looking bitch?”

“Dude, a blow job is a blow job. You’re not thinking about this with the right head!”.

I feed change into a nearby drink machine and press Dr. Pepper, my favorite, while Moon tries to explain his social retardation to me...

“No, man, you just don’t get it.”

“Get what?”

“I have the future of my poor, low-mileage penis to consider.”

“Jesus, Moon! What the hell are you talking about?”

I pop the top and take a swig from the ice-cold, twelve-ounce can. Moon continues...

“OK, this is how it works. If so much as one person finds out I did Lisa, then not even the second ugliest girl at school will lower her standards to date me. And, because I’m already feeding from the bottom of the pussy pool, I have no place to go. I might as well date my right hand.”

“Yeah, so what’s the big deal? You do that already.”, I said as I drew in another large gulp...

“Well, I did. Until I caught it cheating on me.”

That did it. He got me again. Three ounces of ice-cold Dr. Pepper through my nose. Fuck!

“Damn it, Moon! Look what you made me do!”

I began wiping my face with my shirttail and continued the complaint...

“I shoulda known better! You’d think I’d learn by now! Fuck!”

And then something occurred to me...

“Wait. How would anyone find out? I mean, I wouldn’t tell, and I know for *damn* sure you wouldn’t, so how does that happen?”

“Sheez. You need to get out more. Lisa, she tells.”

“Huh?”

“Yeah. She tells. Not directly. That’d be too trashy, even for her. No, she leaks it out. Makes it look like an accident.”

“How?”

“Easy. She forges a love note from me to her, saying how crazy I am about her, and what a great piece of ass I think she is. That kind of thing. Then, she folds it up all nice, neat, and small, and drops it on the girl’s bathroom floor at school. Best way to make something public knowledge. Better than jungle drums. Better than CNN, even.”

“But why would she do that?”

“Simple. It ups her stock value. Nothing helps the selling price of a used car like another potential buyer, someone else interested in it.”

“Hmmm. Clever girl. Butt ugly, but clever.”

“Yeah. Look, don’t get me wrong. She’s gonna make some abusive, alcoholic, welfare loser a good wife one day, but it ain’t gonna be me. I have my standards, you know.”

“Standards? Since when do you have standards?”

“Don’t look at me like that! I’ve got ‘em! Just because they’re really low doesn’t mean I don’t have any!”

He pauses, then...

”Sheez! Who died and made *you* Mr. Manners, anyway?”

Got to admit, you couldn’t argue with the guy’s logic. Still, at sixteen, a warm, wet, lipstick-lined mouth on the end of your erection is a nice thing to have going for you.

“You’re a better man than me, Gunga Din”, I said as we began to make our way home, me still wiping Dr. Pepper off my face. Moon replies...

“Look, you get through your awkward teenage years your way, and I’ll get through mine...well, somehow. You’ll see, fucking Manner Man. Jeez!”

And with that, we began the long walk home together, side by side. All the while, Moon doing that eyelid thing as if he was seriously considering it.

And he probably was.

* * * * *

And that was my friend, Moon Dog.

For better or worse.

Either way, he was my friend.

...and the world continues to spin, and tomorrow is a brand-new day.

Chapter 5

(sigh)

As entertaining as he was, Moon Dog's tenure at Woolco was simply not to be. Seems that some people simply don't have the appreciation for his humor and drug use that I do – or did. One such person being Mr. Robinson, the store manager. A person Moon once described as 'Porky-the-Pig with hair', not realizing that the man was standing directly behind him when he made the remark. But, as uncanny as Moon Dog's description of the boss was, that's not what got him fired. Not at all. What did the Moon Man in was one of the Christmas season's hottest commodities – Mattel's 'Legends of the West' action figure dolls. In particular, the Jane West doll, to be exact.

Here's what happened...

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It was the height of the Christmas season, and I couldn't burn boxes fast enough. I would eliminate one mountain of boxes, and two more would take its place, or so it seemed.

The majority of boxes were empty, but a few contained merchandise that had been deemed unsuitable for sale. These were items that fell into the retail business category of 'breakage': items damaged during shipping; demo units that no longer functioned; or items returned by the customer, and the department manager was simply too lazy to return them to the manufacturer for a refund. Basically, the store's garbage. The things no longer wanted or cared about. And to these items, I represented the end of the line. When a broken toaster or a rocking horse with only three legs saw me, they knew their end was at hand and that their time in this world had finally run out. So, if you were a broken toy or appliance, I was the one guy you never wanted to meet. I was, after all, the incinerator boy, boss of Toy Hell.

And they all knew who I was, the broken toys, the appliances, defective or irregular clothing items, and they had all heard the stories. At some point, they had all seen the boxes containing their friends carted off. So yeah, they knew the score, and no matter how hard they tried to stand on the floor, or sit on the shelf and pretend to be like all the other stuff, the stuff that did work, stuff people actually wanted, they knew they were different. They knew that it was just a matter of time before they, too, were found out and would take that one final trip through the big, double-swinging doors, the ones that say 'Employees Only', on their way to their appointment with...

...me.

They would shudder in fear, they would, in the darkness, until the box flaps would open and my cold, emotionless face would peer down upon them, staring each one in the eye as I pass final judgment on their crimes against the consuming public. And, all of this happening, no less, to the terrifying background roar of the incinerator's inferno, them knowing all the while that it was their next stop

For them, this was it. The end. Sure, they would beg for mercy or ask for a second chance and stuff, but the fact was, their fate was a forgone conclusion. The verdict was rendered the instant the department manager put them in a box and brought them to me. So, my hands were tied here. All I could do was carry out the sentence. After all, it's my job. It's what I get paid for.

And that's what they don't understand – that once they reached the incinerator room, it was pretty much a done deal. Game over. That there would be no appeals here today, no last-minute pardons granted. Because here, in Toy Hell, there are no innocent souls. No one gets out of here alive, and for sure, no one goes to Heaven.

Not on my watch.

* * * * *

Today, it's a plastic Playskool bowling pin set for children ages six through twelve that retails for ten dollars and ninety-nine cents, aisle thirteen. It's marked for incineration due to the fact that it's missing two pins, the green and the orange. And I find this odd. Couldn't be shoplifting. What would some kid do with only two pins? And even if it was someone who wanted to practice juggling, wouldn't he at least need three?

No. There was something else at play here, something else to this mystery. Something deeper, like, maybe it was a young pin couple shunned by the rest of the set who found inter-color relationships unacceptable in their little bowling society. Maybe that's it. Would make sense - that the two ran away, thinking perhaps they could make it to another store whose bowling sets had more liberal views.

Who knows what the real story is?

But this bothered me, the missing pins. To the point that I would keep a constant watch for the two as I made my way through the store, sensing all the while that they were somehow still here. Still in the store, hiding and relocating as necessary. Moving only at night and wearing black socks with eye holes cut out. I would imagine them watching me, peering at me as I pass, from beneath a sofa in the furniture department, maybe...

"Get back, Delores! It's him, for god's sake. The Incinerator Boy!"

"Oh my! Such an evil man! What did we ever do to him?"

"It's not like that. It's nothing personal. It's his job."

"He could quit and find another!"

"No, he can't. He's a teenage drug user, which means that his judgment is impaired, and is therefore incapable of making decisions that would remove him from an environment he finds comfortable and feels secure in. The devil you know versus the devil you don't. I read that somewhere when we were living in the Book and Magazine aisle. Some self-help book."

"Oh, Ralph! You're so smart!"

He grins and gives her a wink...

“Yep, us green pins always are.”

They kiss and cuddle as I walk past them, completely unaware of their presence, as well as the green pin’s assessment of me.

And I can understand their fear, I can. In fact, I sometimes wonder what it must be like from their perspective. Suddenly landing in a bed of red-hot embers, my cold, indifferent face bathed in an orange glow being the last thing they see as the massive iron door of the incinerator closes with a final, heavy thud, their fate sealed as they are forever removed from the world of the still-wanted and useful.

Maybe I should feel bad about what I do. Maybe, but I don’t. I’ve grown numb to it all, I suppose. Maybe in the same way EMTs become numb to grizzly car accident scenes. Something like that.

(sigh)

In time, it all becomes just part of the job.

Chapter 6

Like I was saying...

It was the height of the Christmas season, and the hoard of shoppers in the store had all managed to brave the twenty-four-degree weather in order to get their holiday shopping done. Or, at a minimum, make a dent in it.

While not as cold as it was outside, the incinerator room was chilly just the same, and I could not stuff boxes in the blazing inferno fast enough. It was the only thing keeping me warm. But more importantly, I had a date with Stephanie that night, the perfume counter girl, and I did not want to work overtime. Not tonight.

Because Stephanie was hot.

And Moon Dog was not.

Yet, there he was, standing between me and the hellish hole in the wall, about to light a joint...

"What are you doing!?!"

"I'm improving my work ethic. What does it look like I'm doing?"

"Trying to get me fired!"

"On the contrary, my friend. I am here to adjust your attitude and renew your enthusiasm for life. Because really, dude, it looks like you could use it."

He lights up and begins puffing on the joint. He tries to pass it to me, but I just wave it off, so he continues his drug consumption without my help. Never a problem for this guy.

"What I could use is a new life, Moon. I don't see this one taking me down the Rock-N-Roll Hall of Fame anytime soon."

"Agreed, sssoooo..."

He begins rummaging through the pile of boxes.

"...what we need here is a pair of ruby slippers."

He exhales a billowing cloud of smoke that is instantly sucked into the incinerator. It's the way the furnace is designed to work in order to keep the store smoke-free, making the incinerator room the perfect place to take a smoke break, regardless of the exact substance being smoked.

Moon Dog is still searching boxes for magic slippers when his focus freezes on the contents of one box in particular. One from the toy department, no less. He reaches in and grabs a single item of interest, one of Mattel's hottest selling products this season, a Jane West action figure doll.

Roughly the same dimensions as a Barbie, the two differed in one significant way - Jane's clothes were molded onto her, whereas Barbie's were separate items. You could dress Barbie, or, as Moon would say, 'undress' her. But

Jane's outfit, on the other hand, was pretty much a done deal. And this meant that if you didn't like Mattel's taste in Western clothing, too bad. Deal with it.

The other difference between the dolls was the accessories each one came with. While Barbie had her high heels, purse, sun hat, and whatnot, Jane's stuff was a little more practical, more utilitarian in nature. Like 'gotta have' items if you were to survive the frontier life of the Wild West. Her accessories consisted of a Winchester rifle, a Colt .45 pistol and holster, two cowboy hats of varying styles, a lasso, a buffalo skinning knife, and a compact.

Just kidding about the compact. I threw that in just to see if you were paying attention. Actually, it was a box of tampons.

Moon Dog holds the doll in front of his face and gives it a good once-over, holding it this way and that until he comes to a conclusion...

"Damn, her clothes don't come off, so she's useless."

And with that, he tosses the doll into the furnace. But it's not a clean shot. She ricochets off the edge of the iron door and lands face down near the incinerator's opening, almost outside the reach of the flames. Almost, but not quite. As a result, Jane's arm quickly ignites and catches fire.

And this is where the story gets weird – or weirder, I should say.

Read on...

* * * * *

Now, I admit, I don't know a whole hell of a lot about toy manufacturing and construction, and far be it for me to suggest that inanimate things like toys somehow have souls, but what happened next defies any and all explanation I could ever offer.

Back in the incinerator, something was happening with Jane.

By this time, flames had engulfed her right arm, and I guess the heat was deforming the plastic in a way that made the limb lift and then slam back down over and over as if flailing from intense pain. Her back soon caught fire as well and began to arch in a hideous way as blue and green flames caused it to sizzle and pop like a fire log. Her right leg was now ablaze and began kicking wildly as if it were attempting to extinguish the flames. But instead of helping the situation, it actually made matters even worse. The boot, which was now a wad of flaming, bubbling goo, started dripping away and then eventually fell off altogether. At the same time, the heat began to deform her face in a way that caused her mouth to open and close, almost as if she were trying to form words. Like maybe she was pleading for help...

“Hhheeeellppp me! Please! Someone! ANYONE! Please hheellpp mmmeeee!! I’m burning!! I’m burning!! Hhheeeellpppp!!”

And then I notice something else, the left arm. It reaches forward as if to grab onto something and maybe pull the rest of the burning carcass to safety, but the effort isn’t working. The arm is moving forward, alright. Only, it’s not dragging Jane with it. Instead, it’s stretching like pizza cheese and leaving the rest of the flaming doll behind. Like, it’s every limb for itself now.

Now, maybe it was the result of an overactive teenage imagination, mine, or maybe it was Moon’s second-hand weed smoke, I don’t know. But whatever it was, this was freaky. Like Twilight Zone freaky, and was starting to really weird me out. I mean, it was like watching a low-budget horror movie, except that this was no movie. This was real life. And it was real life that was happening in front of my very eyes.

I look over at Moon and see that he’s frozen stiff like a deer, like a photograph, with the joint still smoldering a mere inch from his lips. His mouth was gaped open, and like me, was staring on at the morbid scene in front of him in utter disbelief.

By this time, Jane’s head had caved in and looked something like a roman candle. It lifted and began twisting side to side - left, right, left, right - like a windshield wiper or something. The mouth was now a horrid grimace of pain and suffering, and the jaw was molten enough to begin stretching down to her chest, which, by this time, had also caught fire, causing her breasts to resemble a couple of Bic lighters. The left leg was only moments away from igniting, as well, and was kicking violently in an effort to keep the flames at bay. But, of course, the effort was in vain, and the leg, like the rest of the toy, soon succumbed to its fate.

In all, the entire body was twisting, contorting, and thrashing about like someone in a WWII movie who had just been torched by a flamethrower. The scene was horrifying. It was more than I ever wanted my innocent, sixteen-year-old sensibilities subjected to, and as such, I knew one thing: this had to stop. Something had to be done.

I turn to Moon...

“Jesus, Moon! This is freaking me out, man! Do something, for god’s sake!”

He hears me and snaps out of his trance...

“Uh... yeah, OK.”

He grabs a nearby broomstick and, with it, begins poking the mass of flames and burning plastic...

“Wake up, Jane! Wake up! It’s only a bad dream! For God’s sake, woman! Save yourself while there’s still time! Wake up! Wake up, I say!!”

Moon’s effort was in earnest, and he meant well, but it was too late. By this time, Jane was quickly being reduced to a hissing, popping, flaming goo, and all we could do at this point was to watch on as the last of her bubbled and boiled away. The end of her left arm was still somewhat intact from the elbow down and still flayed a little, but did so very weakly. It became obvious to Moon and me that we were losing her. The hand moved up and down a few last times, almost as if to wave goodbye, and then, it, too, was gone as it sank into the pool of molten toy sludge as if it were quicksand.

I waved back. So did Moon.

And that was it. We had lost her. Jane - or 'JW' as we now called her - was gone. And oddly enough, we were sad to see her go. In some strange way, we would miss her. I'm sorry, but you simply can't share an intense moment like that without some type of bond being formed.

Moon was rambling on like an idiot, saying something about if we had only acted sooner, when something else caught my attention just outside my peripheral vision. It was the boss, Mr. Robinson, standing there with his arms crossed in his famous 'asshole school principal' pose and staring holes into Moon Dog, who was still puffing on the joint and completely oblivious to the fact. As it turns out, Mr. Robison had been standing there and watching the entire time, and I could tell by his expression that he was not at all amused. Not in the least.

And so it was, Moon Dog's employment with Woolco had come to an end.

I was on my own now.

Chapter 7

With Moon Dog gone, work quickly became the doldrums, and fast. The only break I would ever get from it all, from the sheer drudgery, would be the few chance encounters I would have with Stephanie over the course of the day. For example, running into each other at the restrooms, or the few times she brought boxes to the back for me to burn. Sharing a lunch break together was out of the question because she always ate with her mom, the sporting goods manager. Also, taking her home after work was out because I rode a motorcycle and didn't have an extra helmet. But even if I did, there was no way any father in his right mind was going to let his sixteen-year-old daughter climb on the back of a motorcycle with the likes of me. Because basically, I wasn't very parent-friendly back in those days. A fact that didn't change much over the years, I'm afraid.

But, despite all of this, the few brief encounters Stephanie and I did have at work would linger, almost like a drug buzz. Unfortunately, the buzz would never last long enough to see me through to the next encounter. At some point, I would sober up and, again, return to the dismal grind of my day.

I missed having Moon around.

That is, until Stephanie would show up, and then suddenly, I couldn't even remember the guy's name.

Amazing, the effect a girl can have on a guy.

* * * * *

Stephanie and I were each other's 'first'. Both sixteen, the two of us were at that stage in life where we were just learning about the magic and enchantment members of the opposite sex can have on one another. I guess you could call her my first girlfriend, I'm not sure. She was definitely my first something, but at that age, everything to do with the opposite sex was new and unknown territory. And making matters worse is that with hormones raging, it's hard to keep a clear head about anything. Rational, logical thinking simply plays no part in any of it. And seeing how no one issued us a manual explaining how things work, it was all very experimental, and as such, one thing was guaranteed – you were going to get it wrong.

And the worst part of it is that me, being the guy, am the one who's supposed to be driving the bus. Like, what do I know about buses? And all of this at a time I stayed so high I could barely drive my own motorcycle, not to mention a bus. Besides, what do I know about girls other than I really like them?

Well, one of them, anyway.

But at the tender age of sixteen, I knew nothing about the mechanics and workings of the whole boyfriend/girlfriend thing. It's like being blind and trying to walk without the benefit of a cane. The best you can hope to do is to hold your hands out in front of you and grope your way through it all.

And with Stephanie, this worked out just fine. I think the girl enjoyed being groped even more than I enjoyed groping her. And, I have to tell you, Steph had all kinds of wonderful things to grope. Fun things. Things that, as I

would soon find out, were in desperate need of attention. My attention. Things that needed rubbing, squeezing, caressing, exploring, tasting, and eventually, seeing, my favorite. My favorite because seeing, my friends is believing, and Stephanie made a believer out of me. The thing is, I never could figure out whether the girl simply hated clothes that much, or, she just loved being naked. Dunno. The way I always preferred to think about it was that I simply have that effect on women. Well, girls, anyway. At least one of them, thank God.

Whatever the case, the result was always the same. The clothes came off every chance she got, and every time they did, I had but one thought - you are ssooo my kinda girl. I was such a sucker for her beautiful, firm, flawless, naked body, and she knew it.

So, even though there was no formal declaration, per se, the assumption between Stephanie and I was that she was my girl, that she belonged to me, and likewise, I was her guy. And this notion was based on the fact that she was the only girl I dated and vice versa.

But whatever label you choose to put on it, and whatever definition you wish to apply, it was nice. And the two of us enjoyed it very much.

And life was good.

To really appreciate all of this, however, you have to keep the time frame in mind. This all happened at a time in life when everyone's interests were beginning to change, and biology began to run its course. And, unless you were somehow defective, you simply got swept away in the tide. No choice.

For us guys, it meant that our attention began to shift from things with two wheels to things with two breasts. And even though we had seen plenty of them in magazines, it was now time for the real deal.

And for the girls, it was the same thing, just a different role. We were the hunters, and they were the prey. So, for them, it was a matter of shoring up their 'assets', so to speak, and putting them out there, like bait, to catch the eye of every guy they could, knowing that the more guys they attracted, the better their dating options became. For example, what kind of car you want to be seen driven off in on date night.

The car thing. How funny is that?

You learn about it at an early age, and once you do, it never changes. It only escalates over the years, and this is how it works: a girl assesses her own value according to the car her date drives. For example, the girl peeling herself out of a fully loaded, late model Camaro has a much higher stock value than, say, the girl who stumbles out of some ratty Ford Fiesta.

I never understood it, the car thing, but then I drive a motorcycle.

But that's the way it was back then: hot rods, tight jeans, and short shorts. We were all simply trying to get our share, and without the help of a manual, it wasn't an easy thing to do. Stephanie and I got lucky, is all. Most of our friends didn't even have regular dates, if they had any at all.

But, if Stephanie and I got it right, it was completely by accident, I assure you. Because neither of us really knew what we were doing. Still, we were crazy about one another, and together, we somehow worked our way through the clumsy awkwardness of it all. And, without so much as an instruction sheet to go by, it was up to Steph and I to

make the rules up as we went, a responsibility that would end up falling on my shoulders, me being the driver of the bus, and all. And I was so OK with that, like when I came up with our first rule, Rule #1:

Rule #1: My hands must be constantly attached to Stephanie's breasts and crotch every time we are alone.

At the time, it was the only rule we had, but it quickly became our favorite. In fact, it worked so well that we didn't even need a number two. Number one worked just fine. That is, until Stephanie blessed me with my first blowjob, and that changed everything. More rules would be needed.

Rule #2: I must receive a blowjob every time the opportunity presents itself.

Rule #2 rivaled Rule #1 for popularity, and with it, we had another winner. It seemed that Stephanie and I were getting pretty good at this rule stuff, and we were fairly elated with the tiny but effective set we had fashioned for ourselves. In fact, the two rule thing worked really well until I finally bought a car and parked for the first time, which produced Rule #3.

Rule #3: We must have sex every time we park.

But this rule was kind of senseless since sex was a given if we parked at all. So, I pinned Rule #4.

Rule #4: We must park a lot.

So, there we were, the three of us – Stephanie, myself, and our four golden rules. And I have to tell you, life has never been better. But it wasn't just about the making out and sex. There was more to it.

Much more.

Not only was Stephanie officially my lover now, but she was also my friend. She was probably my best friend, now that I think about it. I say this because hanging out with Stephanie was every bit as fun as hanging out with the guys, only more so. The big - and it's an awfully big 'big' - difference being, of course, is that with Stephanie, sex was always an option.

Always.

And the girl was game for anything. Anytime and anywhere. And she and I did it all: concerts, midnight movies, Mardi Gras, festivals, Bourbon Street, the lakefront...everything. And so funny. Steph was hilarious. Especially when

she was high, which was pretty much all the time - part of my bad influence on her, I'm afraid. But you'd never hear her complain. In fact, the girl was a regular drug pig. Like I said, sssoooo my type a gal.

And while I'm at it, I really have to give Stephanie her due. Because, while I may have been the one driving the bus, I assure you she was fast at my side, shifting gears when needed. For example, the blowjob thing. If left up to me, I still wouldn't know what that's like. Not a clue. I mean, without a manual to tell you how exactly to go about getting one, how does that happen? Do you just pull the thing out and say, "Here, can you do something with this?"

But with Stephanie, we never once faltered that way. No thanks to me, mind you, because really, I wasn't very good at the dating thing. On the other hand, Stephanie was a natural, a real pro. So much so that it was only because of her that the relationship ever progressed.

And progressed, it did.

And as it did, things got better and better between us. And really, I don't believe either of us ever once saw an end in sight.

Which brings up another point of interest...

Even though we never actually talked about it, and, of course, I can only speak for myself, but I always got the sense that when I looked at Stephanie, I was looking at my future wife. And I'm almost sure the same was probably true for her as well – that she always felt she was looking at her future husband-to-be.

But I don't know this for a fact. Like I said, we never really talked about it.

* * * * *

Now, as much as the two of us enjoyed the relationship, there was a downside to it all. I was losing my friends. Slowly, but surely.

Because I wanted to spend all my time with Stephanie, I was constantly turning down opportunities to go out and have fun with the guys the way I did before dating. And after a while, after I had told them 'no' enough times, they simply gave up and quit inviting me altogether. I mean, what was the point? They knew the answer even before they asked, so why even bother?

And, in time, they didn't. They quit bothering to even ask.

(sigh)

And I felt bad about this, the thing with my friends. But the fact of the matter was that I now had a steady girlfriend, and they didn't, meaning I was having sex all the time, and they weren't.

And I have to tell you. At that age, sex trumps everything. Even drugs.

OK, maybe not drugs. But aside from that, aside from drugs, sex tops the list. And that's just the way it is. Look, I don't make the rules up; I just take advantage of them.

OK, so I do make the rules. Everyone is just going to have to deal with it, is all I have to say.

A sad footnote about losing my friends, though. Truth be told, I never really missed them – another thing I felt bad about, but in principle only. Realistically, I wouldn't have changed a single thing about my life if it meant interfering with mine and Stephanie's time together. I had Stephanie, and as long as I had her, it seemed that there was nothing else I ever needed.

Well, and drugs. Stephanie and drugs. But aside from that, I was good. And so was Stephanie.

Chapter 8

About that time, I changed jobs. I went to work as a painter for an apartment complex. A really big one. The new job not only paid better, but I also got a free apartment out of the deal as well. Of course, I wasn't old enough to move out on my own, not yet, but what it meant for me and Stephanie was that we didn't have to park anymore. We had our own place now. And what's more, it cost almost nothing to furnish.

You see, when you work for an apartment complex, furniture is all too easy to come by. A lot of people move out and leave just about everything behind. Why, I'm not sure. But what this meant for me was that not only did I furnish my apartment for free, but I had my choice of everything: sofas, beds, recliners, tables...you name it. And when I found something better than what I had, I simply upgraded.

Now, how cool is that?

Yeah. Pretty cool.

And with a new place, of course, came a new rule. Rule #5...

Rule #5: Stephanie must always be naked while at my apartment. Clothes are not allowed.

I added this rule simply for the sake of adding it. Because really, like all the other rules, it simply wasn't needed. It's just how we were together, her and I. Doing the things we did, in the way we did them, rules or no rules. But it had been a while since we had added a new rule, so I penned it for no other reason than to reaffirm my status as the driver of the bus.

But with Stephanie, as always, Rule #5 was unnecessary, seeing how 'nature girl' was allergic to clothes anyway and could never get out of them fast enough. In fact, they started falling off her even before I had the apartment door unlocked and opened.

I said it once, and I'll say it again – my kinda girl.

I've got to stop for a moment and mention a few things. Things I learned during that time with Stephanie. First, the sex:

Sex with Stephanie was better than fantastic. Not really, but we were too young and inexperienced to know this. Besides, at that age, there is no such thing as 'bad' sex.

But poor Steph. When it came to having an orgasm, she was on her own. Simply put, she had to fend for herself because, frankly, I didn't have a clue as to how to give her one. Oh sure, maybe a few times, but only by accident. You have to understand that female plumbing was new to me then, and I'm not so sure I understand it any better today.

Again, that 'manual' thing.

The other thing I learned is this: when it comes to body part count, women got the short end of the stick, for sure. They, by far, have many more body parts to enjoy than us guys.

But actually, it all works out in the end, and here's why...

It's simply the basic differences between the sexes. You see, by their nature, girls are tender, loving, nurturing life forms that need to be loved, that need to be tended and serviced, and otherwise taken care of. And, they love having a guy do things to them. The kinda things guys tend to wanna do to girls. And for the most part, this arrangement works out just fine because, in contrast, we, the guys, love doing things to them. It's just our nature. Just the way we are. We are the 'doers' of the world, the scientists, the explorers, generals, astronauts...it's just how we're wired. We're the ones who design the stuff, build the stuff, and then blow the stuff up that we design and build. We declare war on stuff and kill the stuff we declare war on, but mostly, we have sex with stuff. Namely girls. And to that end, we guys, with our unlimited imagination and creativity, find all kinds of things to do with (and to) a woman's many protrusions, appendages, and orifices. In fact, we run out of stuff to do stuff to and wish we had more.

So, yeah. In the end, it all works out.

And lastly (and sadly), the hardest lesson I was to learn from that time in my life is that you never fully appreciate just how wonderful your first girlfriend is. That is, until it's too late. The reason being is that you have nothing to compare her to. No frame of reference of any kind. So, the assumption is that all girlfriends are incredible like Stephanie. Only, some are better looking and have bigger tits.

Oh yeah - and blonde hair. Some have blonde hair.

And it was this very sad fact that would lead to the only other rules Stephanie and I would add to our beloved list. But for now, life was still good, and we very much enjoyed our little rule book. The book she and I wrote together. Our book. Five golden rules that kept Steph and I quite happy and content, and made life a wonderful thing to share with one another.

Five rules. That's all.

Guess I overestimated the difficulty in sorting through the whole boyfriend/girlfriend thing.

But that's a lie.

A devastating one at that.

It seems there were all *kinds* of rules that needed to be written, but never were. A sad fact of life that led to the last two rules Stephanie and I were to ever add to our list...

Rule #6: Your first love will never be your last. They are a temporary introduction only.

Rule #7: Learn to say goodbye without crying.

Of the seven rules Stephanie and I would pen together, the last one, #7, would be the only one I would carry with me for the remainder of my days. Mainly because I could never separate it from all the wonderful memories this incredible girl gave me to take along on my journey through life. A journey, as it turned out, that I would make without her.

But I did. I did take Stephanie with me...in a way. I did it by always keeping her memories close to my heart. Memories that became part of who I am today. And likewise, I will take those memories, the ones she so generously gave me, to my grave.

I think about her every now and then and the time we had together, and when I do, when I recall the memories, I smile. Even through the flood of tears I can never avoid, she still makes me smile.

I never did get Rule #7 right.

And neither did she.

And since that last rule, I have added one other. One she doesn't know about, but one I'm sure she abides by just the same...

Rule #8: Old loves never die, they simply occupy a quieter part of the heart.

Chapter 9

As amazing and wonderful as girlfriends are - not to mention necessary - they simply can't replace a best friend. A friend, yes, but a 'best' friend exists on a whole other level. That's just how it is. At some point, a guy needs to hang out with another guy. And for me, that meant spending time with Moon Dog when I wasn't preoccupied with Stephanie. Which, sadly enough, was slowly becoming the standard now due to her father's ever-increasing restrictions. It seemed that the more time the two of us spent together, the more restrictive he became.

And I was receiving that message loud and clear. And, frankly, I was getting tired of it.

So, what happened is that I ended up spending more and more time with Moon, which didn't exactly do my arrest record a whole lot of good since, well, boys will be boys.

But as it turned out, I was grateful to have that time with the 'Dog'. It was bad enough that he got fired from Woolco and I lost my only friend at work, but he was to exit my life a second time, and in a more permanent way.

In fact, he found a way to exit everyone's life.

Moon died.

* * * * *

A few weeks after he departed Woolco, Moon Dog's dad, a career military man, received transfer orders for a facility near Tampa, Florida. Two weeks later, the house was empty, and there was a 'For Sale' sign in the front yard.

Moon was gone.

Gone, but certainly not forgotten.

He and I stayed in touch, though, Moon and I did. Mainly through letters he would write when he found the time, which was fairly often. About two a week. Sometimes three, depending. And, of course, I would always reply the same day I received them. Always.

In addition to the letters, we always seemed to manage a once-a-month phone call somehow and caught up that way, too. Either I would call him, or he would call me. One or the other. It came down to who would scrape up the money first since the calls were always pricey. Pricey because we'd always talk for so long. Seems there was always so much to tell one another. That, or maybe it was simply too hard to hang up, I'm not sure which. Either way, the calls were always nice. It was always so very good to hear Moon's voice, and every time I did, it would remind me of just how big the hole was that he left in my life.

I really missed him. I missed my friend, Moon.

Anyway, Moon Dog seemed to be doing fairly well for himself in his new Floridian life, and I was genuinely happy for him. He had gotten a job as a busboy at a popular seafood restaurant there and was even saving up money for a car, having ruled a motorcycle out because of his chronic drug use - a decision I wholeheartedly agreed with.

He even managed to find himself a steady girlfriend and sent me a photo of the two of them together at the beach. And I have to admit, she was cute. Really cute. Like Stephanie cute. And why wouldn't she be? There was a lot to like about the guy. The fact is, everyone loved Moon Dog, including me.

Especially me.

Then, a whole week went by, and I didn't hear from him. Nothing. Not a word. What's more is, we were way overdue for our monthly phone call as well. Red flags went up everywhere. Something was wrong, and I didn't know what, but one thing was for sure - there was nothing in Moon's life that would prevent him from writing to me.

So, I called.

His mom answered...

"Hello?"

"Hi, Mrs. Kadowitz, it's me, Rick. Is Mark around?"

She instantly breaks down into hysterics, crying uncontrollably in deep, heaving sobs. I hear the clank of the phone as it's set down on a tabletop but not hung up. Because she didn't hang up on me, I stayed on the line and, of course, had no choice but to listen to her as she desperately tried to collect herself. Trying, but not having much success, and hearing her struggle that way, so distraught and destroyed, began making my stomach tie itself into horrible knots. It wasn't hard to read the writing on the wall, to the point, even, I could have simply hung up the phone.

But I didn't. I didn't hang up. I needed to hear it. I needed her to tell me what I didn't want to hear. Besides, maybe I was wrong, jumping to conclusions and thinking the worst. But deep down inside, I knew I wasn't. But, because there was at least a chance I was wrong, I stayed on the line, and after a while, Moon's mom managed to regain enough composure to speak to me. She spoke to me, but the words were difficult for her to get out...

"I'm so sorry, Rick. I really am. I wanted to call you, but couldn't find your number."

She holds a hand over the mouthpiece while she struggles to subdue another overwhelming outburst. Hearing her in so much pain was tearing my heart apart. Maybe I should have just hung up, but I didn't. I couldn't. No matter what, I needed to know. I needed to hear whatever it was she could tell me, in spite of how much I didn't want to hear it.

Her voice still wavering and trembling, she continues...

"I'm so sorry, Rick. This is hard for me, to have to tell you..."

"I understand, but please, just tell me. I need to know."

She pauses for a moment as if to work up enough courage, then suddenly just belts it out, somehow punching the words through the pain...

Mark died, Rick. Last week, in a car accident.”

No.

NO!

NNNNNNNOOOOOOOOOOOO !!!

Oh, Jesus. Jesus Christ! I didn't know what to say. I couldn't speak, and even if I could, I had no words to say or offer. My mind was too busy trying to reject news that, in my heart, I knew was true. Moon's gone. He's really gone.

His mom gives me a number to call. It's Moon's girlfriend, Debbie...

“She knows as much as I do. It's just hard for me to talk right now.”

“I understand, Mrs. Kadowitz, and I'm so very sorry.”

“Me too.”

And with that, she hangs up.

I then dialed the number she gave me. A girl answers. It's Debbie, Moon's girlfriend. I explain to her who I am, and she proceeds to tell me the story...

Moon died on a Thursday night, a night he would have ordinarily been working. But what happened is, instead of working, he traded days off with one of the other busboys. Seems as if a friend of his had just bought a car, his first. A hot rod, no less, and the idea was that they were going to spend the evening partying and celebrating. Unfortunately, the celebration didn't last very long. It ended abruptly when the hot rod ran a red light at a busy intersection and broadsided another car. A family car. One with a mother, a father, and two children inside. Every occupant in both vehicles died. Besides Moon Dog, there were three others in the hot rod - two boys and a girl. Everyone was pronounced DOA, dead on arrival.

She pauses for a moment, and then...

“There's something else.”

I still can't speak. Still have nothing to say, so she continues...

“My dad has a friend in the coroner's office. He told my dad that Moon Dog was already dead. He died before the collision. Said he'd OD'd on barbiturates. That's why he wasn't bleeding from the injuries. He'd been sitting in the back seat and wasn't wearing a seat belt, so the force of the impact ejected him through the rear window and he ended up in a parking lot. The coroner listed the official cause of death as a broken neck - you know, for the family's sake. His mom doesn't know.”

Again, I had no words, and after all these years, still don't. So, like his mom, I thanked her, told her I was sorry, and hung up.

That was it.

Moon was gone.

He was really gone.

Rule #9: Sometimes people you love die, and when they do, it hurts. More than you can ever imagine.

To be continued...