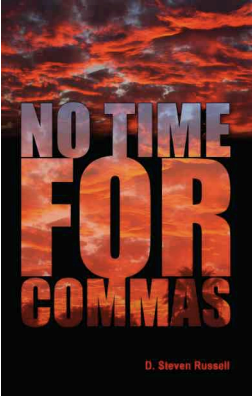




**NO TIME  
FOR  
COMMAS**

**D. Steven Russell**



*Rich in poetic metaphor, No Time for Commas carries its reader into the human heart. Humor, darkness, eclectic characters, rich dialogue, nostalgic reflection, and battles with addiction mask a stark examination of human nature and unveil a living mirror.*

# No Time for Commas

by

D. Steven Russell

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*No Time For Commas*

*No **Time***

*for*

*Commas*

D. Steven Russell

*D. Steven Russell*

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## Prologue

*Three small figures sat along the cortex of their changing world, sharing ideas of reality, and knowing that they might again soon be thrust into a structure, a sea, a sky, or a desert of uncontrollable dreams.*

*None spoke their common fear as each night's opening doorway nudged a shared oblivion closer toward the final sleep of infinity's indiscernible beginning and end. If they prayed, it was likely selfishly symbiotic and hidden from honesty; they probably prayed only for the dreamer's continued existence...for his heartbeats and breath.*

*A fourth man sat calmly nearby, with an unfiltered cigarette drooped loosely between his left thumb and index finger, looking at growing flashes of blue and purple lightning approaching. His legs dangled over the edge of a pink rocky cliff, and a canyon of rolling valleys and hills unfolded before him. Storms were building in the distance and a moist breeze rose from the valley to make his cigarette glow orange and to warn of the dreamer's deepening slumber.*

*The middle being became nostalgic. "Remember how he used to roll over a bale of hay before he would pick it up, because he was afraid a live rattlesnake might be baled into it?" He chuckled and shook his arm dramatically, as though a snake had bitten him, looking to the others for approval. They ignored his performance, and so, he blushed.*

*It was this sort of careless chatter that attracted the dreamer's boundless rakish compass.*

*"Yeah," continued the tallest of the group, "He acquired that behavior after seeing only one bale with a live snake in it—a harmless blue racer garden snake. He hauled thousands and thousands of bales and I don't think we ever saw a baled rattlesnake. Yet, after the blue racer snapped at him, he would never pick-up a bale of hay without looking at all sides of it first. It is amazing how*

*delusional fear alters a boy...and ultimately, a man. He wasted a lot of time looking for boogie snakes, but given the possibility, WAS it irrational behavior...or just inefficient prudence?" He winked to underscore his dangling riddle.*

*"Ever stop to think that women affected him the same way," mused the wiry looking man? "Think about it...he managed relationships based on false learning and fear. Hell, if I weren't here to guide him, he would have likely been stuck with the same woman his whole damn life. We would have missed all that other adventure, including this one. Now THAT'S scary!"*

*Thunder rumbled, and then cracked like a gunshot, as lightning arched across the multicolored, layered canyon walls below. It was getting closer and darker.*

*"What do you think a bullet would do to our universe," queried the man who had started the snake dialogue? "HE thought about that until it made him sick, and he has yet to find an answer. Would it destroy us, or simply place us all in eternal sleep? Would we all make it, none of us, or just the dreamer? You know what I'm asking." He squirmed uncomfortably. He could never leave the tough questions alone, and failed to see the rough ride he would put his mates through if that thought became a flashing arch...and so it would.*

*Lightning hit where the three had been engaged in discourse and, so, they were blasted into a blended drama of memory, reality, and dream; they became players: One a father, one a dying son, one a spinning bullet and the deluge of pain unleashed beyond its target.*

*The fourth man took a final puff of his cigarette, arose slowly and willed himself into the dream to guide only the dreamer.*

*As he tossed his cigarette, he became light, then lightning...first, he flashed to a future dream, and from there, into the dreamer's awakening now.*

*He knew that genius was not the essence of learning, but rather, timing, repetition, and context.*

*Unlike the others, each time he entered the dreamer's drama, he acted as a secret farmer and seeded lessons worth keeping. Each lesson was deliberately guided by divine caring and each caring was to make the dreamer believe himself less, while loving himself more. It was a slow growing process, invisible to all but one.*

*Waking and sleeping would eventually reverse roles and, with a final heartbeat and breath, would spark as the blue and purple lightning that takes all of our dreams and realities to the final incarnate and windless comma of appointed knowing.*

*D. Steven Russell*



## Chapter 1

### Violet awakening

*A destined kiss blew from eternity* and Doug awoke as though he had been whispered to by the New Orleans' night. It was 3:11 and he was keenly aware of the small, warm, gently curved, and beautiful woman beside him; he even knew that he loved her, though they had first touched only five days ago.

Doug wrestled to recall a fading dream, but could only remember that it dealt with violence...with children...with...Oh, God, he remembered it all.

He felt great pain, which surged an obligatory compulsion to recapture and rejoin the dream, but he yielded instead to embracing a sensory salve of the simple awakening *now*.

His mind spent a minute capturing random events and hours of telephone calls and laughter that led to this moment, and he felt a strained duplicity that was now welcomed as out of control.

Doug had only wanted to have a fling with her at a conference eight months ago and go home with detached memories. He knew he wouldn't; it was pure fantasy and by nature, he was shy and insecure.

Now, here they were, best friends and passionate lovers in a motel room near the French Quarter. Doug couldn't get enough of Violet's blue-green eyes, brilliant laughter, crisp mind, warm skin, thin neck, or designer-highlighted hair as they went about the town and then made love with impassioned "fit."

They laughed playfully each time they inventoried their clothing and found it strewn in mixed-gender about the room. Colorful twists of garments mapped the fury of their thoughtless heat and left a forensic trail of lovemaking.

Violet truly seemed to enjoy his company and gave herself so innocently to his touch. He had never known such emotional safety or openness before; not like this. It frightened him with adult

vulnerability, yet also made him feel childlike and hopeful. Even now, however, his mind tried to tell him, “She’s too good for you.” He knew this to be the fatal end of all relationships for him, so, out of innocent hope and reckless fear, he ignored the warning.

He watched her sleeping and savored the warm, moist and sweet-smelling scent of her breath and her perfume as her black, silky camisole moved, predestined for this moment with the rhythmic patterns of her breathing in the room’s filtered light. “Vivienne Westwood,” he remembered. “*Boudoir*.”

He realized that this moment was something made possible only by the body’s incredible gift of hearing, sight, taste, smell, and touch...without all of it, the moment would lack something and become two, or even one, dimensional. He could almost taste her.

Without her breathing added, even the perfume would be cold and alone, as when found on a test strip or on the wrist of a pale-faced, doll-like, cardboard-smelling sales lady. It was magical, so alive—Jesus, last year he was lucky to shake her hand and couldn’t remember if he had even been allowed to do that.

As Doug’s eyes studied the blue, gold, yellow and tarnished geometry of the old motel room, he could refocus his filters and smell living and long-dead elements of a 300-year old city. He could hear the random sounds of its energy being ground, kneaded, baked, and released into the starry night.

He ran his eyes along large cables and rusty bolts intermixed with peach and green refracted light and followed them to brush-painted yellow beams, where he realized the beauty of craftsmen holding together the past and the future with such temporal things. Any piece of it could unravel the whole in an instant and—even undisturbed—none of it would last forever. A great wind or rushing water from the nearby sea would leave it in ruins, or time, without effort, breeze, or dripping would eventually turn it to dust and another’s lost memories would haunt this fading space.

But tonight it all existed and offered a refuse from the world's lonely ticking.

He felt full and eternal and, despite the *sin* of this existence, knew that, for the first time, he was being truly honest with himself and with his feelings. He loved this woman and her city—amazing for a farm boy. Amazing. If only the darkness would leave him alone.

Doug flinched and burned mentally as his auto-reminder mind told him: “BING: This is the morning that you will board a plane, return home, see your 2<sup>nd</sup> wife, take the yoke of your 11<sup>th</sup> job, resume a dozen AA meetings a week, and smile at the phony pretension that is now your chosen life.

How could it all get so off course, and take so long to get there? How could he find a renewal of spirit in a town that, a year ago, he wouldn't have spent a dime or a minute to visit? But, this city touched him.

“Life is a strange and curved little path, and in some way is bigger than our choices,” he thought. “Perhaps there is indeed some higher plan that eludes our finest decisions, and, letting-go is the essence of seeing blind choice and of finally embracing grace. Perhaps it will find me now that I am broken and teachable. There are kind spirits and people who have always bridged the void.”

As he gently sat-up in bed to avoid waking her, his mind generated memories and visions as though he were in a waking dream.

Suddenly and clearly, he saw and felt himself 200 yards from the finish line, exhausted and gasping for air, with a slight taste of blood in his throat, painfully thirsty, nearly done, and with the student body cheering.

On that day, he again drew a red ribbon, yet felt the glory of being popular for his ability to run. His time for this mile was 4-minutes, 49-seconds. He was second. He would shave-off another ten seconds, but never in a race that counted and never enough to be first.

Little Freddy Britton had crossed the line at least 20 seconds ahead and there were boys even faster in tiny towns with peeling nameplates just down the road.

But, in a young man's glory, the race was the cheering and not the ribbon. The student body liked him and, somehow, that filled the hole of his nameless shame. Doug was not popular, not invited to most parties, but was accepted...good enough for high school dorks and the shit-covered children of simple farmers.

Doug's cousin, Curt, was popular, and helped drag him into the popular crowd, though Doug knew he didn't belong there.

Curt watched over him like a brother. It was Curt who got him elected MYF President. It was Curt who got him invited to parties. It was Curt who helped him hang out with popular kids and cheerleaders as he and Curt endlessly trolled and *dragged Main in a '63 Chevy*.

Doug remembered Curt so fondly and vividly. Curt was solid, focused, athletic, taller, more confident, and likely smarter, yet always kept his 1<sup>st</sup> cousin close with love.

They were born only thirteen days apart and had been commonly perceived as twins until puberty began its alterations and each branched toward his destined paternal genetics, one a Thomas, and one a Russell. A mutation amplified as they went to college, joined the same fraternity, and began playing with alcohol. One would remain undefiled; one would become a powerless thrall.

Doug reflected that he had learned to put on faces, humor, and bullshit to keep people from looking too deep or too long. He did not want them to look, lest they see the shallowness of his being. The speed and brain of a youth can generate that sort of mask—quick answers, cute sayings, stories and tales, distraction, mania, car talk, girl watches, mirrored reflections, subtle nose-picking, nut scratching, and hormonal lies. This was how he kept them away while he found the strength to believe that he was good enough to be real, and someday, might be both good and real enough to be lovable. He

falsely believed that this was an adolescent mask, not a distorted tumor with its own primeval staying power.

And, so, before New Orleans, he couldn't keep up, as the mask continued to outrun him.

It got thicker and even grew into his flesh as though it were a living part of him. The mask eventually *became* him, and fear of its removal left it growing with an intuitive life of its own.

He finally resolved that the mask would take care of him, and, when it didn't, he would leave the relationship or the job to avoid the shame of blank exposure. He was, after all, a runner, and it had served him well. Somehow, though, he knew that even now, this joined the ancient motel's brushwork as a temporal lie.

Sitting in the middle of the night, Doug's mind grabbed 40 years of experience and yielded an epiphany of the knower:

He was a B-student, a second-place miler, a third-place high jumper, and a person who couldn't pass IQ tests, yet, for some reason, he had lived his life as though he were brilliant, would finally win the blue, and might someday even fly.

He had likely convinced some people that he was blue-ribbon material—perhaps even this woman—but in the middle of the night, with pure and crystal thought and recollection, he knew the truth. He was a white-ribbon jumper and a red-ribbon runner trying to jump and operate in an A-student world...and he was tired. He could jump no higher and run no more.

Clarity was his for the moment, an acceptance and an awakening forever...humbling, yet freeing.

His life, as he had lived it, was over. He would play an A-student no more. He was done. He was exhausted by illusion and lie.

He prayed for a lasting quick fix, and hoped that revelation could undo his ruptured horror. He feared that residual, time released, damage might occur, but he prayed that it would not—to patch it.

"If anyone can love the undiscovered me, it is this woman, Violet," he assured himself. "She may just love me *for me*, and I may

not even need to know who I *am* for her to discover me. Then, she'll share who I am with me and I'll *know* who I am. I am safe with this woman. She loves me deeply, so in that depth, I will find myself also for the first time in half a century. Damn, I'm sleeping with a cheerleader and she's too good for me, but I have to try. Perhaps I'm real...at least real enough to be loved by this blue ribbon woman for awhile longer, maybe even *forever*."

"Ironically," Doug pondered, "it was death and trouble that opened this awakening and this place of vulnerability. In the presence of bland acceptance as a learned displacement for great pain, I intended, yet pretended, to be a Christian and a father, a husband, a lover, a leader. But I could not lead and I could not love. I gave so that they would like me and think me good. I created so that they would think me smart. But, I was a phony and I know it now for some umbilical reason in the quiet morning of a New Orleans pause."

He continued the logic. "My brother and his son gave me the gift of deep pain and from that has grown the inductive knowledge that I *can* love, because I loved them. From Bill's story, I can truly say that I understand the gift of life, for he had life and I watched it come full circle through Hell's shadow and Heaven's light."

The conclusion was simple. "I will take this gift and hang on to it with all my might. The season for hiding and lying is over for now, and I will seize life and live as long as God allows my existence. When I'm out of breath, I will simply end the race—this time without a ribbon at all—but having run as I must to keep up with this Violet awakening."

He breathed a silent prayer into the still night and floated again into her warm breathing, scent of *Boudoir*, then slumber.

The city crescendoed its groaning movements as they slept, dreamed of things beyond their control, and breathed separately mating layers of conscious existence.

Love offered a new hope, and a new day was about to dawn in New Orleans, where Violet would put Doug on an airplane and he

would return to the golden-stubbed aftermath of wheat fields now harvested.

She would return to her world and they would resume secret telephone calls totaling 200 hours a month—filled with machine-timed disconnections, friendship, love, laughter, and boundless conversation. They would again shop for movies, laugh, read books, do laundry, and share the most intimate of loves across 726 miles.

Doug did not know that in a few hours he would feel pain as real as death's grieving, as he touched the spiritual tearing and ripping of her farewell hug. He would know then that this could not be over. Grace would be put to her benevolent test...a forgiveness that happens when man has done his best, but his path is no longer true.

Doug had experienced a moment of purity in the night, and no daylight, job, or marriage could drive that from his hope or his knowing. He might misunderstand its essence and source, but his course would have to change.

"Screw her and go home with the warmth of pleasure's moment," he reflectively smiled. How he would have cheated his heart with a conference fantasy.

Doug loved this woman and would do whatever it took to keep him on this path of the journey. The mask had suddenly vanished and he slept sweetly in spiritual nakedness, dreaming of the honesty in red ribbons and Violet's eyes.

## Chapter 2

### life's simple stage: a-long-and-three-shorts

It was one of those rare, windless days in western Kansas as Dollar came barking from the field. He caught something and played with it for a while, like a cat, but then hungered for some human companionship. His lop-ears flopped as his mix of mutant hound dog black, brown, tan, and white blended with the dust, weeds, shadows, and light, to seem like more than one being approaching.

Hank and Patsy were floating from the kitchen window into the yellow sun-baked yard, mixed only with butter churning, distant tractors, dusty summer morning smells, and meadowlark songs.

Billie was in the corral being tossed again and again from his Shetland pony, Willie, into the scented dust of fresh and crusting cow shit; yet, each time, he would defiantly beat the beige midget and jump back on, cussing: Billie and Willie. He was seven.

Dollar lay down by the front porch and Mommy threw some old chicken bones out for him to eat.

He ignored her and looked sideways down the snotty foam of his speckled nose at the chicken's thigh as though it were beneath him, but she knew he would eat it before the cats did and that he was just being predominate hound-dog coy.

Billie came and put his head on Dollar's belly and the two of them dozed from exhaustion in the late morning shade. Elm trees swayed gently to a gathering breeze, drowning-out *'This Ole House'*...Windless in Kansas was a passing lull, subject to nature's fickle patterns blowing north, south, west, and sometimes even east to west as a gulf breeze touched and stirred Louisiana or Canada into the prairies.

We didn't have TV or air conditioning yet, and our telephone was a party line comprised of ringing a long-and-three-shorts. The phone hung on our west wall like a carved wooden breadbox with a little black metal right-handed crank.



Bernita Selfridge listened to every call to find gossip, but in an area that small, it was a matter of time before everyone knew what she had stolen anyhow:

Lynette Thomas is “going away,” the little Martersdale boy is queer, Joey Deerslaw stole some gas from the Hartman farm, that good looking Bobbie Cardin is half-Mexican, and of course, Gerald Cartmaker is going to go *crazy* when he finds out—doctor or not—that his daughter is marrying a *nigger*.

“He’s a doctor, sure, but...well, you know. She’ll never be able to come home again and isn’t that a horrible price to pay *just for love*—giving up one’s family and all? She’s so smart too...top of her class. I wonder if she’s *thought* about what she’s doing? And their children...why they’ll be strangers to both *types* of people. They sure can’t live down south. Why, those people are so prejudiced and all. And, speaking of doctors, isn’t it a shame that we can’t get another one here? Doctor V is going to get old eventually...”

These were our first impressions of life—simple, predictable, and without experience to measure its pain, correctness, or gratitude. Life was what one was told and what one did, nothing more. Irony was saved for consequence.

There was no stock market penetrating this farmer’s world. There were no foreign cars, only trinkets in *Cracker Jacks* boxes, and a county fair with a pig roast every July.

Mental health was a secret if one lacked it, and those who needed it went “*to Larned*” to get “*the cure*” from pills or alcohol. Addictions and deep abuse were plentiful, but no one thought anything of it, and these were *private* things, spoken only in secret and shared on the party line.

Planes passed so high as to never be heard and one could usually count their white streaks against the crystal blue sky on two hands a day, with fingers to spare.

FM, what was that? Only two meaningful radio stations could be heard—Country music from KFRM in Cloud County, Kansas and

KOMA in Oklahoma City for rock-n-roll at night. There was some shit station from Garden City that one could hear when it decided to pierce the air, and of course KXXX in Colby, Kansas, with weatherman Snyder. Whenever he would say that the weather was gonna be fine in the winter, the ole man would say, "Let's bring in the cattle, put down straw and feed 'em. It's gonna blizzard." And, he was usually right. Snow it did.

I remember waking up one morning in late 1957 or early '58 to find that the house was *under* a snowdrift. Mommy and Daddy dug us out of the front door somehow and we went on a white-glacial search for cows and pigs. The pigs had simply walked over the fence on snowdrifts. We lured them back with food and dug out their fences to be a wall on the inside, trapping them in a giant white box, with rippled drifts sloping away into now hidden pastures.

We couldn't find the milk cows, and after some fretting, hot chocolate, coffee, hand-warming, and cold deduction, the ole man concluded that they might have gathered in a three-sided lean-to shed next to the barn.

Sure enough, we dug and dug and dug on the open side and suddenly a small deep toned hissing vacuum of air went past us. There were the cows! Their legs were wobbly, their eyes were spinning strangely, and they were gasping for breath. We had found them just in time.

The next two days were some of the greatest times of our youth.

We went up the drift that covered the barn and sled-rode down to its bottom, hundreds of yards away. For a normally flat geography, this was like discovering a new mountain in one's back yard. And explore it we did!

We built igloos half way down, threw snowballs, rode the sled, rode the washer lid, rode the grain-shovel, rolled down, rolled Billie down, carried Billie up, slid Billie down, beat each other up, drank hot chocolate, warmed on the open-grate floor furnace, and did it all again. We were exhausted at night, drinking a mixed hot toddy of

lemon juice, a tablespoon of honey, and a shot of Jack Daniels to stop our coughing.

When a neighbor drove by the wonderland on his tractor, asking if he might get us something from town, we knew that all was well. I remember having a warm feeling about everything that day—nature, cows, family, God, and neighbors. It all seemed so good, cold, new, odorless, natural, unending, and interconnected by the white-induced, rare, farmer's vacation.

It was magical, but then it melted as if it were a vaporous memory that had never taken form. This somehow gave me a view that magical things do happen, that people create memories of God, and that God creates memories of snow. My faith was strengthened by this soon invisible pool of spiritual warmth coming from silent crystals of bitter cold.

This was the backdrop for the earliest memories of Billie. It seemed then that we would live forever and that life might threaten, but would never kill. We were those who killed.

We hunted sometimes, with cousins visiting for bonding sport, but ate what we killed and we killed our fatted friends, the livestock, for food. Nothing seemed incongruous. It was nature and we were its trusting servants.

Yes, we named our cows and then we killed them, but we would never die. Daddy would protect us, and we were *farmers*, cut from the earth and its chaotic cycles. We were a part of nature, and as long as we put back, the earth would give, including our lives.

It never occurred to us that life had a life of its own, that the smallest thing could harm us, or that we could die of our own hidden chemistries or from the earth that lived within.

Billie was walking in the yard one day and a rooster attacked him. He kicked at it, but slipped and fell on the rocks, whereupon the rooster viciously clawed into his head and began pecking at his eyes and forehead as he sat there screaming, waving his little hands at it

and bleeding. I knocked the bird off and we got iodine and bacon for his wounds.

As we were having supper that night, our sister commented that the chicken tasted tough but the ole man growled, "Eat the fuckin' thing, it's not as tough as Billie." We were eating the attack chicken! *Farmer 100*: Don't fuck with the ole man and don't fuck with his family!

Milk came from two or three cows every day, morning and night. The milk was *separated* by turning a large cast-iron, wooden-handled, machine crank and gravity-feeding fresh cow-warmed milk from a formed chrome basin-pot on top onto a series of shiny inlaid funnels, where it was "separated."

The milk drained from a cast-iron spout into five-gallon buckets, while the cream was dribbled by another spout into a wide-mouthed gallon jar. The cream could be taken from the pump-house refrigerator and turned upside down the following morning without a *drop* of spillage. It just hung, thick as butter, upside down in the jar.

City cousins would visit, head straight from the car to the pump house, and gorge themselves with tablespoons of pure cream as a dairy luxury food.

I hated the taste of thick cream, but hated more drinking milk cooled with melting ice cubes, because it was lukewarm from our kitchen's refrigerator. Our pump house had the better refrigerator—a business decision.

We made buttermilk sometimes from sour milk and it was nasty. Butter churned from cream, and shaped with a wooden paddle, however, was delicious. I loved carving patterns onto the top of fresh butter after hand churning it. A churned cube of fresh yellow butter was the size of a soccer ball cut in half, though we had never heard of a soccer ball.

After *separating*, several gallons of milk were carried to the chickens and the pigs with some saved for the family and the cats.

The barn was about 120 child-paces from the pump-house and was the shit-filled staging area for white raw materials two times a day. It amassed, stored, and grew contempt.

The pump-house was a simple, gray, 10' square, flat-roofed concrete block building with a concrete floor that had a refrigerator, a sink for washing the separator's parts after each use, a small gas stove, a round metal tub for scalding water to remove chicken feathers, the milk *separator*, and a pile of farmer's shit for fixing unnamable strings of farmer's things. It was a place for beatings or solitude depending on the ole man's whereabouts and mood. I worked, always muttering to myself, and prayed to be alone.

I forcibly set my internal clock to the endless toil of morning and evening chores:

Milk the cows, feed the cows, make sure the cows had water, break 3" thick ice from the stock tank in the winter so the cows could drink, separate the milk, feed the cats, feed the chickens, feed the pigs, wash the separator, put the cream in the refrigerator in one-gallon glass jars, fill the metal *cream can* to be taken to the train station (each time five jars were filled), then get ready for school or play, study, and go to bed by nine. It seemed like a lot at the time.

Ironically, this churning of chores birthed both my type "A" work ethic and a conflicted hunger for laziness that could never be quenched. I looked for things that do nothing and learned from them—A storage tank sits for water as a manager sits for pay.

Somehow, nearly unnoticed, there was a huge round steel tank on top of the cube-looking pump-house that gravity-fed our house's plumbing. It was hooked to a 30' windmill tower which pumped clear, crisp, cold, perfect water year-around. A large garden was planted to the south of it each spring and the rest of its surroundings were a rural stockpile of dirt, prairie grass, scraggly trees, weeds, and rocks ... suitable for throwing.

The warm weather pump-house chirped with crickets. It smelled musty by summer, smelled like fresh milk twice a day, and wafted the inefficient, but welcomed flames of its cheap, open flame, propane gas stove by winter. If anything spoke to the simplicity of a farmer's core, it was this ugly, life-giving, concrete cube.

The storage tank didn't freeze in winter because of its mass and because of rising heat from the building beneath. But, sometimes the well itself froze from bitter cold nights of no wind (and therefore no pumping or *moving* of water). It, thus, broke a pipe beneath the ground, directly under the windmill tower. This was a chance to learn pain from the ole man. We would climb high above the ground, cling to the frozen windmill, pull pipes from the ground with log-chains and "wire-pullers," and "*pull*" the well from winter's grip to find and replace both its broken pipe and its deeply seated pumping *leathers*.

By then, a freezing north wind was off blowing hard. There is no way to describe the synergy of Kansas "wind-chill," frozen metal, ice, and water's ability to accelerate cold—or to define one's deepest gratitude for pauses of warmth from the little propane stove in the pump-house—yet even I understood the role of water in keeping us alive.

Fixing the windmill could never wait. Cows swelled with milk yet died of thirst, so the farmer kept it all balanced. The well house was the life-blood, heart, and veins of our farm and the farmer's hand was the soul that drove itself as the keeper and physician of the precious blood.

Warm milk and stupid cows became a balance of cold justice and white judgment for me. I found that I hated milking cows, but became accidentally enchained to it when I was seven.

I meant well, but was incarcerated for the next eight years by one foolish act of early grandiosity, powered by an insecure need for daddy's unmerited approval.

I had watched the ole man milk cows every day for a couple of years, and had even tried my “hand” at the mechanics of milking, so I knew that I could accomplish it.

I thought spontaneously one night that I would “surprise” him and arise so early that the milking would be done before he arose. A dozen things could have gone wrong to foil my grandiose design, but they didn’t. Sadly, as one of life’s bitter lessons, I carried out my plan. I had them milked and was separating the milk when he got up. He came to the pump house and “caught” me succeeding.

In my fantasy, he would have hugged me, tossed me on his shoulders, and carried me into the house to tell Mommy and my sister, Dallas, what a good and wonderful child I was. He would have cried with joy and told me that he loved me for doing this amazing thing--and he would have known that it WAS an amazing thing—but that was not what happened.

He did seem unsmilingly pleased, but concluded quickly that if I could do it once, I could do it every day.

I don’t know if he slept late, fucked the ole lady, or what, but he didn’t milk the cows anymore. I did. This was part of my conflicted learning and I just never relearned “learning” properly.

On the one hand, I learned that, with vision, I could accomplish about anything on a given day...on the other hand, I learned to become innately and deliberately lazy and to seek out every chance in life to loaf. These luxuries were on hold for an eight-year decade now.

The milking process was simple, twice a day, every day, year-around: Put grain in the trough, call-in the cow. The cow was happy to have the food, so she would walk into the barn, put her head in the stall and begin eating. I would lock her head in by closing the wooden V-shaped stall, I would place a blue colored set of chain “kickers” around her back legs, just above the knees, to keep her from kicking me *too* hard, clean the dried wet and crusty shit off of her tits (routinely a wintertime job after she and her friends would shit a

dinner plate sized runny pile and lay in it overnight to stay warm), spray her for bugs *if it was summer*, sit beneath her on a one-legged, crudely nailed, “T” shaped milk stool, with the bucket between my knees, and milk H-E-R with a boring, hand-strengthening, squeezing motion. When done, I would do the same to one, and some years, two more cows.

Sometimes I varied the boring sound and traded work efficiency for risky entertainment effectiveness. (If daddy caught me, I was in trouble. He demanded *only* efficiency).

Anyway, I liked the musical tones of milk hitting an empty bucket and, then, the muted, deep rippling tone of milk pinging and splashing in a bucket as it was filling. Each tone became duller and deeper as the bucket filled, so I could vary the tones by squirting the sides, the center, anywhere on the white liquid drumhead of steaming milk...or even the ground or the wall.

I likely was accidentally practicing some primitive form of white boy, milk barn, reggae-rap when one stirred my ensemble of milking tones together with the random sounds of slapping the cow for hitting me in the face with her tail and with endless cussing and muttering to myself in whole and broken persecuted low tones and syllables.

If the wind rattled the barn roof or door with its passing, that also joined the building chorus and the cow’s giant nasal breathing and rhythmic chomping added a natural wooden trough background percussion sound. A moo was music lagniappe, though I did not yet know that word. It was all oddly beautiful, but definitely not top-40 material.

Different cows milked differently and had different personalities. The Jersey cow was brown, petit, had beautiful sad eyes and was amazingly attractive (farm boy issues aside). The Holstein was **gigantic**, black and white, coldly impersonal and could have served in Hitler’s army as a Rommel tank ace, or even perhaps, as a tank. She was a milk-producing machine. Even with multiple stomachs, she must have pumped iron and worked overtime creating milk.



There were gallons and gallons per milking from this *single* four-digit, deliberate, mooing mammary machine. We were only business associates, never friends. She never kicked me, but pissed on me several times and refused to join my songs.

The cows would stand compliant for the milking, committed to the eating. It was symbiosis at its best, though I didn't yet know that word either. For context, I didn't really know many words, wasn't a good student, didn't listen well, and cussed a lot. I was ADD, if they had diagnosed it then. I chewed off the ends of my shirt collars in school, bit my nails to the quick, and hadn't a *clue* what was going on around me most of the time. Given these afflictions, I was caught by surprise, frequently, by normal acts of man or beast.

Sometimes, for whatever unstated reason, cow participants would kick me enough to spill the milk, whereupon I would cuss them loudly and beat them with the milk stool.

When they pissed, it was like a large garden hose of warm golden piss splattering on me, and it gave me firsthand knowledge of the farmer saying, "*It's rainin' like a cow pissin' on a flat rock.*" They rarely splattered shit on me, though it happened. It was stuporous and dully disciplined, so one had to find things to like about it...and so, I did.

Inside the captive fool is a dreamer, and so I recall learning that while milking in warm weather, I could squirt flies on the barn wall, ten or twelve feet away. I got so good at it that the wall became covered with flies and the more flies there were, the more targets I had. The more targets I had, the more I sprayed, and so on. The ole man beheld the white, dried forensics and beat me without mercy.

"That's not the GODDAMN bucket," he roared! "Quit it, you stupid little fucker." Damned if I know completely why, but I *just couldn't stop*. I have theories.

I actually loved TWO things about milking, and they were both warm weather sports:

One, I loved squirting flies on the wall...and after all, there were gallons of milk left over, beatings aside.

Intermittent reinforcement is most dangerous for me, and my dual reinforcement was that I normally only got a beating when he caught me with fresh WET milk on the wall; when he didn't catch me in time, it dried and became a part of the runny white splatter marks that were already there...and that only led to an ass chewing and a rare beating. A couple of times, though, he beat me when I had not been squirting flies, so I quickly reasoned that if it didn't matter, I might as well have some fun.

Herein was the duel reinforcement. That became my kind of logic, and it likely generalized to damage other normal learning.

Two, I *loved* filling the shiny blue sprayer with DDT and spraying the cows and the flies on the wall to watch bugs walk in circles and then fall to the floor...there were plenty of flies left over for squirting; the barn door was open...plus, I LOVED the smell of the spray, and I loved spraying from the hissing canister. I liked the sound of it!

Perhaps a frequent, joyful inhalation of DDT slightly tainted my logic regarding spraying other flies on the wall with milk, but I don't think so. Perhaps DDT also damaged my learning in other areas, though I am more akin to believe that it gave me some hidden, and yet to be revealed, super powers.

The sprayer was a sideways-turned, horizontal bean can looking thing with a long metal tube that had a wooden pump handle coming out of its back end and a spray nozzle on its front that sprayed vaporous clouds of perfumed death. It was, basically, a bicycle pump with a can of chemicals attached. Hell, its raw description is inadequate for its actual fun. It was simply a GAS!

A decade of hard time passed quickly, taking only eight years, with me marking the walls and hardening with each spring and summer that I spent in the joint. Several cows dried or died, but I got to know each bovine as we shared a cell under the warden's cruel

spacing and unpredictable oversight of our daily milking. Solitary bovinement had its solitude.

Year around, a rusty fry pan with a broken handle sat outside the well-house door for our cats to get their milk. The cat herd swelled to around two-dozen each summer and then died-off to four or five as *nature* took her portion. Coyotes, runny-eye disease, fights, passing cars, hawks, snakes, territorialism, and harsh weather thinned them out.

Balancing two five-gallon buckets nearly full of milk made each easier to carry as one first fed the cats, then took a pig's portion to the pigpen 30-yards south of the garden. Carrying a lighter portion to the chickens 100-yards north of the pump-house gave time to look at the glistening starry sky or perhaps drift momentarily into the stirred golden and yellowing pinks and purples of a blue autumn or Easter Bunny sunset.

The ticking of the farm was so deliberate that only the sun was more constant, and even it lagged the farmer in its rising.

"Why was I born into this hard daily toil," I thought, back then, "when so many fortunate people are born warm, workless, and happy, in the city?"

My brother shared the farm with insufficient age to work. His nature helped me discover the farm's nature.

Yes...Billie was bouncing, constantly bouncing. He didn't move fast—in fact he moved slow—but was always moving towards something new.

We caught toads, turtles, and lightning bugs, fished with cane poles, and threw rocks at chickens and light poles. Occasionally, we would go to a 50-cent movie in town, eat pool-hall hamburgers, or hang out at the bowling alley. Three bucks would last all night.

Days were spent milking the cows before school or milking the cows and then going round and round a field on a tractor, looking for dust devils, and chasing, but rarely catching, an occasional rabbit that found itself frightened and exposed in the now-barren field.

Dust devils meant rain and rain meant a day off, so I looked for dust devils with the hope of a parched galley slave.

Rarely did they come, but sometimes the wind would blow from the east, fueling nature with a moist gulf breeze and—in the midst of a swinging pendulum of changing air—over several hours, *whirlwinds* would form. When they did, dust spiraled to heaven and magically grew rain.

When it rained, we always went to town. Town meant other people. Other people meant safety while daddy drank beer. Beer meant fun when daddy drank in those days...extra change, sacks of candy, no accountability.

On one of these summer sagas, I somehow found the nerve to ask a girl named Carla to go out with me, but I was so shy that it took me five months of steady dating to kiss her.

She was a petit brunette with sweet brown eyes, like the center of two nearly ripe sunflowers, and she had a spatula-sized blond bang where her cousin had bleached her hair while she was sleeping. I thought that she was beautiful.

We dated—usually double dated—with Ken and Virgie because Ken had a '64 Chevy Corvair.

I got to know Carla, and them, like no one I had known. We loved in some innocent way. We laughed at stupid things, played "*Down In the Boondocks*" era radio music in star-lit hayfields, and breathed heavily until I routinely went home with a 50-cent sized wet spot that smelled like Clorox on my jeans, from hot youthful passions.

Yet, for some insecure reason, I was afraid to intimately run my hands under her soft, firm bra and touch her bare flesh.

It was fear and not morality, so when I finally found the nerve, her breast was warmer to my fingers than anything I had ever imagined. My mind spun with euphoria and happiness.

Consequently, the day after, in the back seat of her brother's '53 Chevy, I wiggled my fingers gently into the pant leg of her cut-off shorts. Her brother played the radio, talked loudly about himself, and

drove us home. The sound and moist warmth of this touch was unknowable beyond words and left me spinning, physically weak, and mentally floating. Boys normally built on this adventure.

But, the next day, Carla went off with the “harvest” and some sick, fear-filled forming jealous detachment inflicted me.

I wrote her a letter and told her that it was over. Then I sunk into the comfort of empty darkness and sensual life unknown. This was the beginning of my *mask of a blending countenance*. It suffocated and protected me with an involuntary and unnaturally shaped companionship in years to come, like evil clouds that resemble gods and beings.

I hurt me by not hurting them, and somehow felt like a hero because of it. This became a hard script to play-out as life went on, but I kept it subliminally sharpened, ready, and cloaked, nonetheless.

At first, I willed it into being. It gave me control over relationships and a door to exit them at any time. The deeper and faster I dove in, the more and faster I could save a woman from my unexplainable instability by leaving her just in time.

In some *sick* way, this made the same sense as shooting a cow in the head for food after you had named it and talked to it each day. It had a natural cycle to it and kept life distant, detached, physical, patterned, and fresh. Thank God for the refining of a man’s path and for reshaping of his pathways.

*This was unfolding as Billie turned eight—Farming, adolescence, surety, rain. It all happened as it must and life unveiled as it chose. We were along for the ride—I working and learning slowly about flesh, Billie bouncing from thing to thing, still cussing and beating his defiant little horse.*

Then it happened.

Our daddy had a heart attack—his second in six years—and the family felt truly vulnerable for the first time.

Billie was afraid for his Daddy, but I laughed and told him that the ole bastard was too mean to die. 30 hours later, while I was out

with a girl, my sister flagged us down and simply said, "Daddy is dead." This powerful, dangerous, roaring god, who injected, yet protected me with and from life's true responsibility, was dead. Just like that.

I have three clear recollections about the matter:

1) My brother crying and saying, "I want my daddy. I want my daddy. I want my daddy." 2) My mother falling helplessly into a deep and long-lasting pit of self-loathing darkness, and 3) Standing on the top of an irrigation dam at 3:11 in the morning, listening to a mile of invisible blowing leaves of growing grain, and thinking, "Who will take care of this land?"

I felt empty and afraid of life while for the first time, knowing that I was now comparing that not so much to death as to living without experienced power.

Just like that, I was powerless, beaten by something non-human. But, I intuitively sensed that this loss was mixed-up and overshadowed with the deliverance of being simultaneously humbled and free. God had granted the hidden evil of my unspoken prayers and spared me from the unquenchable growing anger of this violent man. I loved him, yet I was glad that he was dead.

I flashed back to the pre-dawn beating that he gave me in the pump house shortly after I had turned 15, perhaps six months before he died.

Something pissed him off; I never recalled what. He struck me with his fist and I fell into the pile of "farmer's shit" that fixes things. I recall a crystal moment of hate-filled resolve overcoming my reflexive fear, whereupon I yelled at him, "You can beat me to death, you son of a bitch, but I'll *never* fear you again. I *HATE* you! I hate you with complete hate! Go ahead...beat me some more, you chicken-shit ole fuck!" I braced for the beating. It didn't come.

He stepped back, red-faced and stunned. He looked as though I had landed a heavyweight cross to his jaw. He stared at me with deeply emotional flashing and piercing green eyes that first

murdered, then forgave, and ultimately *perhaps* even respected me. He looked somehow broken. He turned without speaking and walked out. He became gentler. He never struck me again in his last living months on the Earth.

I knew that hour, but didn't yet realize, that he had given me the curse of defiance and the gift of never crawling again. My response to fear would relearn and seek out other methods of expressing itself, distorted methods...but never crawling. I loved and hated him with simultaneous fervor. He gave me so much energy.

I also recalled vividly, standing in the dark with his tender growing plants, seeing a black and white photograph that my mind took in color, of Daddy holding my baby sister, Mary Ellen, and looking so proud and so in love...she looking trusting, a complete and total daddy's girl. It was an eternal snapshot and the only pure love I ever saw in his eyes.

With female innocence, she accidentally gave what I deliberately never could and, from it, she would harvest his power without his rage, becoming beautiful, brilliant, focused, and wonderful.

Crops would grow, looking exactly like 100 fields before, but baby sister would be only five and thus unable to understand that, without warning, she was still photographed, but held by her Daddy no more.

## Chapter 14

### as in water face answers to face, so the heart of man to man

I used to think this proverb meant that one found the truth in another's wise counsel. It doesn't. That is found in other places like, "*In the counsel of many make thy war.*"

I see now that the band created music, but indeed, music created the band.

Music, like wisdom, patience, and understanding, has a female persona of its own and we are but beings with butterfly nets to chase and catch its elusive, charming, eternal, and fleeting beauty. To proclaim *the writing* of a great song is as vain as believing one created a child.

You cannot WILL yourself to find them, and I see now, through the eyes of music, that a soul mate can only be seen when you see *his* or *her* countenance as you look in a mirror. One's heart sees its own reflection.

When spirit-filled hearts reflect, you *may* win. When wanting hearts reflect, you will lose. That's what this scripture meant. I saw it in a hotel room window one night when I was lonely, drunk, tired, far from home, looking at myself in the dark window's reflection, and wanting in heart.

I was always looking for something in the eyes of another, for some life-altering direction, simple approval, or respect that I *thought* I needed or deserved. I was always writing poems only to find that they were blind prophecies or music only to find that it had simply re-bent a poem.

I could not find the truth, but by reflection, and that truth came with a time-released remorse and pain that was not what I had envisioned, but rather became a truth that was deceptive "fact-truth," as when someone tells you that you are fat, that you are stupid, or



that you are ugly, arrogantly proclaiming it as “*truth*.” Whispered in one’s own voice it becomes so believable.

Past loves seduce this truth, looking better or worse with reflection. This truth is but a Chinese finger cuff.

Truth, I now see, is God’s business. He hides it where He hides music, children, love, and vision.

I looked only for myself in others and found only chasms of loneliness and personal distortions in my desire to then bend myself and love them. Time unfolded a puzzle that was not my vision, yet proved to be so much more in its revealing of other people as angels in watery mirrors.

Each piece of the puzzle interplays, it seems, with other unseen pieces to intersect lives, to *blend* what would have been an individual’s time and space and, thereby, to spontaneously begin and end journeys shared by this hidden mixing—no matter what our plan.

Only an unseen Power knew the unfolding of it as we wrung our hands and played our hopeful roles.

What was seemingly cruel was sometimes ultimately healing and what felt like healing was sometimes healing, but was sometimes only a restful pause caused by human exhaustion—God’s favorite meeting place.

Character and its defects are perhaps one and the same, like a crowbar that is used for prying—and prying used for good or evil—yet the tugging itself is un-chartable energy for propelling life forward.

Pain often seems unbearable, purposeless, and endless, but it pries unyielding until the being within releases those hostage captives that were held so crowded, and once, so well meaning dear.

How the stirring human batter of past loves became so collectively over-leaven and galumph eludes our best thought, knowing, and prayer. When one is stilled, fresh eyes are offered vision—yet again.

No relationship was wasted. Soul mates do exist. They exist perfectly *ONCE* in the delicate balance of flesh and spirit, good and

evil, right and wrong, hope and hopelessness, shared values, principles, differences, similarities, debris, pause, and the simplest actions *or inactions*. They are neither created nor discovered; they are both, formed in finite and infinite brokenness.

We ultimately see one day as we stare into someone's eyes, reflections from a pool of tear-laden spirit, and want only to drink of them, but would die of thirst if the other thirsted less or more.

The mirror of living water tells us that we do not know, that we never knew, and that it did not, and will not, matter.

We only know fully now that we are not alone and that we are reflecting, for the first and final time, the image of a caring God who pressed us sore with his guiding hand and then patiently waited.

<<<<<<>>>>>>>

She sat...beautiful, small, and silent in the dimly lit meeting hall.  
She always arrived late and left early.

Her hands were clasped in her lap and, though she tried to sit deceptively and proudly erect, her head tilted slightly downward, conveying brokenness. She was sad and angry, hurt and in pain—that was clear from her countenance and from a deliberate lack of human contact. She interacted with no one, looked at no one, listened with random teary eyes and detached sadness, and then abruptly left.

She had long light-brown-to-blond hair with innumerable waves and curls that refracted what little light was in the room, as sunlight dancing on a stilling-evening pond. She had a smooth, sad, and angelic face that made her seem somewhere between 32 and 35 years old.

She finally opened her mouth one night and (I thought) said that she was, "Lisa, alcoholic," had, "a couple of 24s," and was, "going through some relationship and job problems right now."

She quickly said nearly everything and nothing in about as few words as I have ever not heard. I was amazed at her minimalist painting with the unspoken.

I wondered who she was and I couldn't stop thinking about her.

My relationship with Violet was over and, for once, I was serene just to be angry and bitter, alone, chain-smoking, and needing nothing today to fill me up. I had taken the sled ride to hell without apparent answer, yet it settled inexplicably in my soul now as calmness.

I surmised that this woman was an aerobics instructor or an avid swimmer because she arrived each night in pink or salmon colored sweat pants with wet hair or hair in a ponytail clipped to the top of her head.

She had the most perfect body I had ever seen: Size 2, perhaps 2-petit, but strangely, I was not attracted to her beauty, but to her presence. Surprisingly, I didn't want to fuck her, I simply wanted to *spea*k with her.

I know now that no words can describe a soul mate and that accidentally finding a flawless diamond covered with garbled flakes of coal dust is likely akin to one's first sighting of that person. I know now that one's soul mate may be described by another friend as a person "with a lot of problems."

And yet, honesty, brokenness, and God's perfectly timed grace becomes the dirt-and-pressure-based, dried, molten crushing that makes that person's character, pain, and problems fit perfectly with another's character *defects* and with an accidentally shared repentant readiness caused by the crowbar of life's separate and rutted prying and scraping of spiritual rivers—bending and twisting until they meet and share their ruptured banks, in a debris-filled, muddy birth, and *then* are slowly blended into calm sunshine and sparkling diamond waters.

Two souls could not fit until they were thus hurled, swollen, twisted pure, and basted by life's painful destinies.

The absence of torrential tearing by this unseen *nature* would leave only riverbeds of polished stones and mountains of un-pressed coal—not living water, not diamonds, not eternally mated souls.

Two young and undefiled souls cannot mate until they have endured the seeming earthly hell of a Refiner's fire, and any Godly preacher will affirm that the refiner's gold is not pure until it has been fired and strained, melted and refined, removed of impurity, finally reflecting its beholder. THAT is the reflection one truly seeks. Young souls may be destined to meet, but they will endure the fire to mate.

I watched her come and go in meetings for a couple of months and then, one night, as she sat behind me, I asked to borrow her pen.

She looked at me the way professor Youngman had when I was accused of subversion and then, with a karate-like jerk, handed me a green-inked pen. I pulled out one of my business cards and wrote this note on the back:

*"...I don't know if you are in a relationship, or interested, but I keep thinking about you and would like to take you to dinner, AYC? (Sorry for the timing)"*

I had never felt more self-centeredly paranoid or obvious in an AA room. I felt as though the entire room was aware of, and misjudging, my honorable, clandestine advances.

The room seemed unusually well lit tonight, like the sun was shining from a ceiling fan.

I sweated as I shook and wrote the note with the card wobbling on my right knee. I didn't want to be conspicuous so I sat nodding and *apparently* obviously listening to people share, with my completed "appeal" in green on the back of my card and the card now slid under her ink pen's silver pocket clip, waiting for delivery.

I sat, tapped the pen, and sweated...tapped and sweated.

I debated giving only her pen back; she would be none the wiser and I would not be vulnerable but, instead, I suffered and thought more.

No, I would give it to her, note and all! But, nonetheless, I would wait until the entire room was not watching ME, as I knew they certainly were.

Suddenly she tapped me on the shoulder and said with piercing eyes, a disdain for my existence, and the unspoken word “NOW”... “Can I have my pen back, *please?*”

I turned super-mechanically RED, and handed it to her...pen, card, and shaky green appeal...*sublimely* and with casual movement so that none would suspect my subtle affront. I waited sweating and feeling stupid forever, and for ever trying to know her.

“What an idiot. Jesus, what were you thinking?! Stupid fucking dolt!”

Then I thought better, “No, you’re not a stupid fucking dolt...that took courage.”

I sought God, quieted daddy, and calmed some, reverting to wet-light red, then a drier pink, then pink, and slowly back to flesh colored again. I did not turn around to look at her. My heart thumped noticeably; I feared that she and others could hear it like Poe’s Tell Tale Heart.

She always left early, but not tonight. She stayed and held my hand as we closed with the AA circle Lord’s Prayer. Then she turned and faced me, smiled—the first time I had seen that—and said, “I’m truly flattered. Thank you. But, I am trying to work out a relationship right now, so I’m not available.”

“If you find later that something has changed, please feel free to call me,” I responded unconfidently, and completely surprised by the words.

“Thank you, again,” she said. She then hugged me, and I felt clumsy, but absolved of fear, as she walked away.

I knew that I had done the right thing for some reason, perhaps only to let her know that I found her desirable in this, her time of struggle and pain, perhaps only for me.

I had faced my fear, and that was what really mattered right now. For me, a few green words and a borrowed pen were akin to scaling a mountain, fighting a battle, or standing up tall to the ole man tonight. I thanked God for giving me the courage to act *at all* and hoped that it wasn't over, but knew logically, that it was. I felt good for trying.

I didn't see her again in a meeting for awhile, and concluded that, on reflection, I had made her uneasy with my inappropriately timed appeal, and had thereby driven her off to another meeting hall where she could be wounded, heal, and be left alone. I again felt stupid.

It was nearing Easter weekend when my phone rang one night as I drove to a meeting. I did not recognize the number, or frankly, want to put energy into *any* conversation; I let it go to voice mail. When I returned, I was instantly filled with a fluttering stomach to hear this message:

*"Hi...umm...this is Lisette, from the Solutions Club...and, umm...if you're still interested in taking me to dinner, or a movie, or something, umm...I'm available, so...Ok, feel free to give me a call."*

I was shocked and blown-away. I replayed the voice mail several dozen times listening carefully for spoken and unspoken meanings.

People who lived in the mental high-rise of my brain began to look out windows and lean over railings as I...umm, WE...listened to the message again and again and again, dissecting, dissecting: 37 words, pauses, inflections, punctuation.

First, her name was Lisette, not Lisa...What a beautiful name...no doubt French to go with her petite and soft appearance.

"Second, weeks later she is calling *US!* Yessss," Jumped in the poet!

"Me," I corrected.

My heart leapt for joy, but then calmed itself, shut up the poet, awakened the analytical for cooler counsel, and we all listened together for the meaning of each sound and word.

Mental neighbors listened-in too...nobby bastards, but they also lived between my ears, so no hiding most things from them. It was times like this when I wondered if my program was working. It still seemed that too many people communed in my head.

“Oh, well, it may take us all and we seem to be getting along tonight so, let’s analyze,” I thought.

The “umm” word several times told us that she was not comfortable calling and that likely this was not normal behavior for her. The words, “dinner or a movie or something,” said that she liked movies and might not like dinner because my card had only mentioned dinner, not “dinner *or a movie or something*.”

The poet in me jumped around like a waiter at Petunias and said, “I wonder what ‘*or something*’ means. I wonder if she likes things that *I* like? Maybe she likes just watching movies at home or vegging. Maybe she likes...Oh, GOD, but what if she likes daaancing!!? Oh, NOooo!”

The analytical quickly shut the poet up and commanded, “Listen carefully; let’s play it again; don’t assume or surmise. This is a critical point in a relationship, being sensitive to her needs and wants when you call her back. Let’s learn all that we can now.”

Another voice added, “Don’t sell God’s role short by trying to figure everything out.” It was the chain-smoking little sponsor.

Yet another said, “Random inertia...there *is* no relationship yet and may not be. Random events. She’s just fishing you as one option, that’s all; you’re just one option for a good time since her relationship ended.” The sociopath.

Another said, “Why are you so worried about figuring her out, about wanting to know what she likes and dislikes? Wanting to put on a mask and act yourself into another three-year slow-death lie, are you?” I didn’t recognize this voice, and it rang true.

Sociopath concluded, “Hey, asshole, she may be using you to make her boyfriend jealous as a ploy to fix the relationship...you may not even be relevant.” That stung.

“Oh, yeah,” I retorted, embarrassed, “Then why would she say, ‘Feel free to give me a call’?!”

“Because when the phone rings and it’s you, she *wants* her boyfriend to hear the conversation, to make him jealous, Asshole. That’s the point. Damn, you’re thick sometimes.”

Sociopath, A-student prick. God, I hate that guy, what a fucking know-it-all, and he just loves embarrassing me.

“Stop! Jesus, call the woman back,” said the little sponsor, puffing on a filterless cigarette. “You are not a healthy group of people to be solving this, number one. Number two, you’re second-guessing life, and three, you’re second-guessing God. All that comes from this bullshit is fear of the unknown and *action* is the only way to address it. You may all be right, who knows. Let’s call her and see what unfolds. Let life be what it is sometimes, ok?”

I dialed the phone.

“Hello,” said Lisette too quickly for me to concoct a debonair speech or even breathe.

“Shit!” I thought. “Why can’t I draw on the smoothest talkers in my head when I need them? The fuckers are always there giving me advice, but never there when the pressure’s on.”

Now it gets foggy, but I basically said something about, “Thanks for calling me back, and I was calling you back to see if you were still interested in going to dinner or a movie or something...” or something like that.

“Well, I’m on my way as we speak to an Al-Anon convention in Houma this weekend,” she said confidently, “But let me call you when I get back to town and we’ll hook-up, ok?”

This was not the voice of the broken woman I had watched weeks earlier. This was a self-aware woman with boundaries, confidence, and clarity of thought.



I felt both relieved and rejected by life's events. I wanted her tone to say that now was the moment she had waited for all her life, and how about tonight or tomorrow for dinner and a movie? Let's get together as soon and as often as we can and live happily ever after—both AA people, healed, whole, delivered from lies, and now fulfilled by fate's wonderful prying and turning of our lives together.

I heard some disharmonious mix of *As the World Turns*, *Taps*, and the *Jeopardy* theme playing in my head. I could hear the submarine commander in me honking the piercing horn and yelling, "Dive! Dive!" I could hear Ice Man shouting "Engage, Mav, Engage!" Fear and anxiety gripped me. I began sweating profusely. Hopefully she couldn't sense it.

"Ok," I finally responded. "Nice talking with you. Catch you later."

"Ok, bye," she said, quicker than a gunslinger, and hung up. Gone. Just like that. Gees.

The group of neighbors in my head stood stunned. Dead silence. None were so sure or wise now; even the sociopath was derailed. "Ok, bye, click." Hardly room for a comma.

"Autopsy, anyone?" I appealed.

"Well," said Grandma Rua, "You're still in the game. She said she'd call and 'we'll hook-up', right?"

"You're fucked," retorted the sociopath. "She's just being nice." Others began to murmur their thoughts and feelings. I was tired...Hungry, lonely and tired.

"Eat and go to bed," said the little sponsor.

And so I did. I did not know what this event would lead to. Hope sank. I had never called anything correctly yet, despite my best wishes and plans. Besides, I had told Violet that I would never love anyone more, only *better*. What I meant was determined to both protect a new love and to honor love now gone.

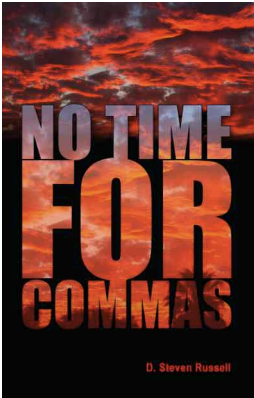
I would not allow myself to fall in love as deeply again and would thereby control my passions and emotions to treat any future lover

with a more deliberate and detached kindness. It made so much sense to me that I actually believed it.

“We’ll hook-up,” I heard in my head as I drifted-off to sleep. “We’ll hook-up...I’ll love better, not more...We’ll hook-up...Better, not more...*If a phone rings in the forest and no one answers, did it ring?* We’ll hook-up...Better not...”

I could hear water softly and rhythmically dripping into a pan in my sink as I floated...“dripping, ring, hook-up...dripping, ring, hook-up...dripping...ripples...a violet stone...water rings...a-long-and-three-shorts...water rings...a stony well...ripples...*her face...heart of man to man.*”

*D. Steven Russell*



*Rich in poetic metaphor, No Time for Commas carries its reader into the human heart. Humor, darkness, eclectic characters, rich dialogue, nostalgic reflection, and battles with addiction mask a stark examination of human nature and unveil a living mirror.*

# No Time for Commas

by

D. Steven Russell

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