

Jell-O wrestling... a near naked cheerleader carwash... casino night... well meaning neighbors just wanting to help... local politics... My Way is the High Way is satire at its best. A cast of characters right out of the local grocery store provides nonstop laughs while at the same time a realization you've met them somewhere before. William Robert Masters has been a principal long enough to know better. He has seen it all...just about.

My Way is the High Way

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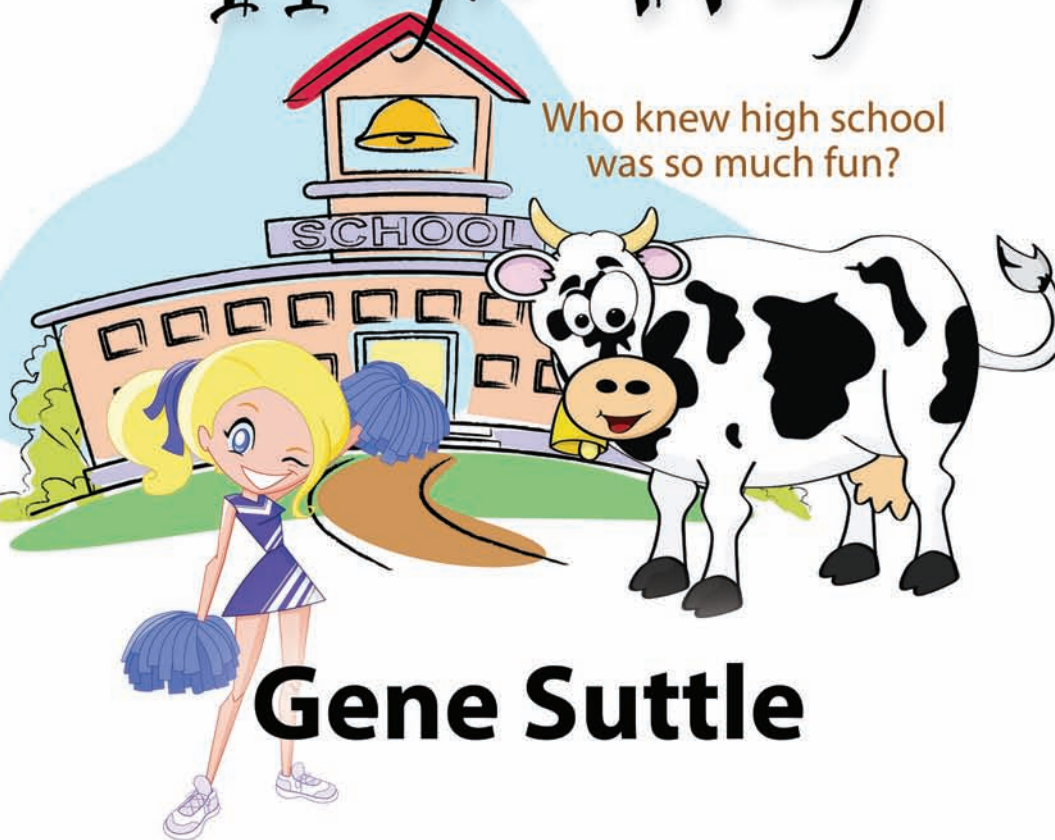
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My Way is the High Way

Who knew high school
was so much fun?



Gene Suttle

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Over the course of 32 years, working at nine schools in six different districts, I met many people and saw many things, but this book is fiction. The characters are figments of my imagination, and any similarities to people you might know is merely a coincidence. Shasta is a fictional town with a fictional high school. Texas is real. Read for fun, even you English teachers.

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First Edition

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Monday

I.

Graduation- my favorite day of the year. The last day of every school year and the beginning of summer! The first 24 hours after the last graduate walked across the stage were the most euphoric and satisfying of my life. Some principals had gone so far as to say it was better than sex, but I wouldn't go quite that far. Sustained euphoria? Yeah. The feeling did last longer. Unfortunately, graduation was not today, and if Ms. Shelly was right, we still had a good 8 months to go until I could even think of satisfaction or euphoria. And Ms. Shelly was always right. Since this school year had barely started, my thoughts about graduation were nothing more than daydreaming and wishful thinking. Outside my door I heard the voices of students getting tardy slips, parents arguing about attendance letters, and my Monday morning hangover was still outracing four aspirins.

My name is William Robert Masters, and I'm a high school principal. My mom and dad chose that name because they were middle class blue-collar folks, and it sounded dignified. They felt it pretty much assured me a more successful life as a banker or lawyer. Their farsightedness did not include the overnight star power of the Blue Collar Comedians and the rising popularity of the redneck. Since then, my friends, and most assuredly my enemies, had known me as Billy Bob. My high school students had managed to mangle my last name and turn it into a number

of descriptive titles I didn't wish to repeat. Regardless, my staff referred to me as Boss mostly, occasionally Billy, Bob, BB, Hey, and Seriously. I didn't mind what they called me as long as they showed up, kept their kids in class, and didn't give any parent a reason to schedule a conference. However, I couldn't remember a day when all three of those things happened.

"Good morning, Ms. Shelly. How was the weekend?" I asked in as cheerful a manner as I could muster. Ms. Shelly and I had been together for twelve years and she ran the office and in turn, the school. There were a lot of people who wouldn't mind trying to whip me, but nobody was willing to cross Ms. Shelly. She protected me from all harm, and was the perfect combination of saint and sinner, knowing exactly when to be one or the other and to what degree. My day didn't officially start until Ms. Shelly came in and went through her list, which is why she was standing in front of my desk with her yellow legal pad and a pen.

"Morning William." Ms. Shelly said with more enthusiasm than I had mustered, and her eyes registered a mixture of concern and amusement

Ms. Shelly was the only person on Earth, other than my mother, who called me William. I believed she did it earnestly and saw it as being respectful and professional. Although it sounded formal, it was the last shred of respect that I got out this job from all those around and quite honestly it made me feel good.

After having made her appraisal, Ms. Shelly continued, "It appears the weekend was not so kind to you again."

"No ma'am, Ms. Shelly. I hit the jackpot this weekend. The Cowboys played like a bunch of girls, and Jack Daniels came over to my house last night and treated me most

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unkind." I said trying to make my confession sound less damaging than it was.

Ms. Shelly's amusement turned more to concern, "William, you need to quit drinking and running around like you do. You're not as young as you use to be. You need a good woman to settle you down before it's too late."

There was a hint of a smile at the corner of her mouth. Ms. Shelly liked to kid me about getting old. Even though we're the same age, she reminded me women live seven years longer than men, so she's at least seven years younger than me. She usually adds "At the rate you're going, you'll be dead before I'm fifty in man years."

"Ms. Shelly, you know the only woman I love is you, and if you really want to help me, you'll marry me today. We can run off to Reno and leave all our troubles behind. Just you and me! Whadda you say?"

With the slightest shake of her head to show her disappointment/disapproval, Ms. Shelly got us back on track, "I say Super Dan called while you were in the cafeteria and wanted to know what kind of new volleyball uniforms our team is wearing. Seems that was the topic of the Sunday school lesson in the ladies class down at the First Baptist Church. I told him you would call him back."

"So Reno's out?" I took one last stab at lightening the mood and to avoid the start of another week, but to no avail.

I couldn't help but admire the lady as I watched her stride out of the office to take control of the chaos going on outside. My success and survival over the past twelve years had a lot to do with Ms. Shelly, plus she had a nice 'stride'. Thinking about Ms. Shelly in any context didn't solve my immediate problem, although it was much more pleasant.

Super Dan needed answers and I had them, just not the ones he wanted.

Super Dan, as he was known about town, is our Superintendent, Dan Cochran. He went straight from winning the state football championship to the superintendent's office and had stayed there the past thirty years. The fact he knew nothing about education and probably never taught a class hadn't held him back. In Texas, more people knew their son's football coach than his English teacher. Who you know might get you a job, but winning championships guaranteed it. Win a gold ball and write your own ticket. It didn't matter that most of the citizens that put him in office were dead and their kids long gone. What mattered was the only state championship trophy Shasta High School had ever won had his name on it and sat in his office. It was displayed on the corner of his desk to make clear who was in charge and how he got there.

Shasta Coyotes 17 Willard Wildcats 14.

Head Coach Dan Cochran.

When I returned the call to the honorable Super Dan, he wanted to know about our new volleyball uniforms. Word at church service yesterday was that our girls were playing in what looked like their underwear. What that meant was his wife Thelma had gotten word, as head of the ladies auxiliary down at the First Baptist Church, and had come home and unloaded on Super Dan. Anyone with a problem knew the best way to solve it was to bring it up in the ladies adult Sunday school class. Thelma Cochran was the director of the ladies class, the ladies auxiliary, and most anything that happened in the church or community that involved ladies. Any complaints about the school reflected on her and made it appear she was unable to control her man, which

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brought into question her ability to be leader of the lady pack of Shasta. All this of course was in her own head, because no woman in her right mind would challenge Thelma Cochran. It was easier to manipulate her. Thelma kept Super Dan on a taut short leash and yanked it on a regular basis. When she yanked, he barked, and sometimes tried his best to bite whomever was causing him grief.

Super Dan's methods and means brought most of the grief he endured on himself. I had often thought I cared enough about him to piss on him if he was on fire just so long as I didn't have to walk across the road to do it. Thelma Cochran was a woman that even caused me to pity Super Dan at times. She radiated the piety of Mother Mary on Sundays and spent the rest of the week terrorizing those that might think different than her, or Heaven forbid, insult or embarrass her. She was known to spend at least two nights a week in the casinos across the river and she didn't waste time on the quarter slots. Thelma also spent enough on liquor that one store over in Nocona would send a boy with a load of gin and rum to meet her halfway whenever she called. The delivery boy would have brought it straight to her house except people would have recognized him from their visits and that just would not do. Knowing and seeing were two very big and very different things. On more than one occasion I had embarrassed her with something school related, which made it Dan related, which meant it related to Thelma. It appeared I was the cause of Thelma's discontent again. She had better hope she never catches on fire around me even on my side of the road. I wouldn't care if she were on fire and holding a thousand dollar bill.

"What on Earth were you thinking?" That was Super Dan's start to most conversations, at least with me. After

explaining for the thousandth time I wasn't the athletic director, which did no good, I described for Super Dan what a "skin" was, that it was standard wear for volleyball teams now a days, and all the rage from here to Austin, Texas. He didn't really give a damn about those hippie chicks down in Austin, our girls here, especially Kelsey and Kneisha, shouldn't be wearing anything that emphasized their bottoms in any way. Kelsey and Kneisha were two of our larger girls in school; larger in the sense that in biblical terms they would have been described as having ample asses.

Now I could see the point of concern for both Dan and the ladies, which was a way of saying I understood why Thelma was all fired up this time. At the same time I didn't know how to tell our two starting seniors they couldn't wear their skins because they were large and people got afraid when they saw Spandex stretched that far. After listening for a while I agreed to see what could be done, hung up, and took two more aspirins. I figured I would wander down to the gym later this morning if for no other reason than to check in on Coach Connelly.

Debbie Connelly was starting her second year as head girl's coach at Shasta High. She took over the girls athletic program from Coach Elmira Johnson, a fierce woman who had coached alongside Super Dan back in the day. Elmira still believed in 6-man basketball and had the volleyball team wearing their basketball uniforms to save money. She finally retired after forty-three years much to the relief of most of the town. Every woman in Shasta, Texas, between the ages of twelve and sixty-one had felt the wrath of Elmira. The first thing Coach Connelly asked to do when she had unpacked was update the volleyball uniforms. After

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explaining I wasn't the athletic director, I assured her we were all for moving into the 21st century, and if new uniforms helped, I'd see that she got them. Some would say she's attractive, and I would agree if you go for the slender, 6-foot tall, legs that went all the way to the ground look. She had a mass of striking red hair and green eyes that could have only come straight from Ireland. That, and the freckles on her nose, had nothing do with her being hired or getting skins for her volleyball team. After all, she had played at Nebraska when volleyball was winning more championships than their football team. Either way I was going to have to go to the gym and see what we could work out before the next home game.

II.

As you have probably figured out by now, Shasta, Texas, was a fairly conservative town. We did things one way and that's the way they had always been done. Change was a four-letter word, and most folks were happy just to keep things like they were. Shasta residents that had been here for generations, or the ones that had taken their kids down to the courthouse to climb on the statues for a history lesson, knew that Shasta was named after General Eustace G. Shasta. Eustace Shasta was a Confederate General during the Civil War and fought in most of the major battles from Tennessee to Georgia and down into the Carolinas. He lost a hand at Chickamauga, and the statue down at the county courthouse had him astride his dapple-grey stallion saluting with just a cuff. People that don't know the story assumed vandals stole his hand.

When the first school in Shasta was started over a century ago, the natural inclination was to choose Rebels as the mascot. It fit nicely, had a nice ring, and of course was historically correct. The Shasta High School Rebels. They managed just fine until late in the 1970's when the first concerns were voiced. The concerns did not come from folks here in Shasta, of course, but from some of the schools where Shasta High chose to play. It seemed the football team running out on the field led by the Stars and Bars of the confederacy and whooping the Rebel yell offended some of their townsfolk or students. The community's enthusiastic support of the Shasta Rebels made people think the folks in Shasta still had beliefs similar to the Old South and slavery.

Truthfully, no one in Shasta gave much thought to the Civil War, slavery, or to Blacks in general. The War was over, there wasn't a cotton farm for miles, and there were only three black families in town all together and they were nice enough. What got the citizens from Shasta all riled up was the idea that someone on the outside wanted to change their tradition. Rebels had been the Shasta mascot for over a hundred years, and the town folks liked the idea of keeping it. Everyone's letter jackets, annuals, and class rings had the Rebel on it and to change mascots would mean more than just the name. It would mean changing everyone's legacy for gosh sakes. The protest went on through the 80's and got almost ugly a few times. Over in Paris the team bus got painted with pictures of white sheets and words like 'Klan' and 'redneck'. Down in Commerce, a coyote was tied to the mirror. Fortunately it was already dead. No one was sure if that was just meanness or if someone was trying to send a

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message. If it was a message, no one in Shasta got it, so the messenger wasted their timeand a coyote.

The Shasta Board of Trustees finally got together and decided that in the interest of the student athletes and all those involved, it would be best to change the name to something more modern and reflective of the current community. As magnanimous as that sounded, it turned out that three of the members had business connections in Fort Worth with companies that did not take kindly to the idea of racism or the Old South. Keeping business connections became more important than some old tradition. So, with the best politically correct language and a citywide contest, the Shasta Rebels became the Shasta Coyotes. Maybe the coyote hung on the bus over in Commerce stuck in people's minds. Maybe that was the message. For whatever reason Coyotes was the top vote getter and new mascot.

As it turned out Super Dan, who was head football coach at the time, used the community's anger and frustration as motivation. Before every game that season he had the team wear Rebel T-shirts under their Coyote jerseys and told his players, "These are the sorry sons of bitches that stole your mascot! You're a Rebel at heart. Now go out there and run through those dogs like Sherman through Georgia." The fact that he aligned his team with the wrong side of the war didn't matter since the kids didn't know the difference. It certainly didn't keep them from cutting a swath through their opponents right on to the state finals. In the end Super Dan rode the Rebels right into Central Office like Eustace Shasta at Chickamauga.

III.

"William?" Ms. Shelly's voice came through the intercom and interrupted my mid morning reverie. I knew I needed to get started on my long list of things to do, but my biggest decision had been whether to get another cup of coffee or to go ahead and switch to Diet Dr. Pepper. I had yet to decide.

"Yes ma'am?"

"William, Mrs. Perkins down at the tax office was driving by and wondered if we knew our flag was flying upside down." I checked the clock and noticed Mrs. Perkins was a few minutes early this morning. She must have skipped her stop at the donut shop. Either that or her eagerness to make sure I was on my toes motivated her.

"Did she believe we would have known that and just left it?" I asked Ms. Shelly with a little sarcasm and a lot of headache, but got no response.

"I'll take care of it. Thank you, Ms. Shelly."

"You're welcome, William. Do you want another cup of coffee?" She asked with some sarcasm of her own.

Ms. Shelly didn't bring me coffee, but that was her way of telling me nicely to get off my ass and get busy. This school didn't run itself, and if I wanted to drink Jack Daniels on Sunday night, I was a big boy and could. But on Monday morning I had better come ready to work and not sit at my desk with my head in my hands. We had been together long enough, that I knew when Ms. Shelly offered coffee, I had better get busy. I got the message.

One thing about working in a small town is that everyone is more than happy to help you do your job. I grabbed my radio, "Boomer!"

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Now Boomer was my assistant principal. He was a whole story all by himself.

"Boomer!" I repeated with force as if it might actually come through louder on the other end.

He responded, "Yes, Boss?"

"Who put up the flags this morning?" I asked since we let different students handle that chore as a way of instilling school pride.

I heard Boomer checking his calendar before he responded, "Boss, that would be Mr. Townsend's FFA boys"

I felt more hung over than irritated, but I was sure my voice didn't differentiate as I asked, "Would you remind Mr. Townsend that if he's going to teach community service and patriotism, he might want to start by explaining to them boys which side of the flag is up. Get them back out there and fix the flag before the sheriff shows up thinking it's a distress signal!"

"Yes sir, Boss," Boomer assured me having already started walking.

This seemed like as good a time as any to head down to the gym to talk to Coach Connelly about those volleyball skins. I grabbed the radio and struggled out of the office on stiff knees and with a pounding head. Boomer was already out the other door on the way to the Ag shop.

IV.

Corliss Prescott Skinner. That's the name that you will find on Boomer's service record and teacher certificate. It's the name his mother gave him at birth, but no one including his mother, had ever called him Corliss. If you think he might have been teased as a kid, think again. Boomer is 6'7"

and weighed well over of 300 pounds. From what I gathered he had been that large most of his life and what was muscle in his younger days now resided closer to his middle, but make no mistake about it, Boomer was a big man.

Boomer grew up out in West Texas. He lived on a ranch and learned how to work at a very early age. He had the size to do manual labor and most folks thought he'd take up ranching as he got older. Boomer, however, was an athlete like no one had ever seen especially in a 1A school. His letter jacket had more letters than jacket and scholarship offers started pouring in when he was still a junior.

Boomer had his heart set on playing for the Aggies of Texas A&M. He wasn't sure exactly when his devotion for the Aggies began, since everyone in town was a die-hard Red Raider fan. All the townsfolk expected him to go to Texas Tech so they could drive over and watch him play. It never really mattered because when Boomer went to take his SAT exam it was discovered he should have been spending more time studying and less time throwing a ball or riding his horse. He could have flipped a coin and scored higher.

Now Boomer is not ignorant or even unintelligent. He just never really saw the need to worry about lessons out of books about things he didn't care for. He never had any problem getting passing grades all through high school. None of his teachers were going to keep Boomer off the field on Friday night so they designed lessons he could pass. His SATs were a bitter disappointment for the Aggie coaching staff as well as Boomer and his family. Everyone agreed he'd enroll down at Blinn Junior College long enough to get his grades up to passing and complete some remedial classes.

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The Aggie coaches promised to have a maroon jersey waiting for him in College Station when that happened.

Boomer worked hard and found that he like reading after all, and his classes became easier as he spent time with his tutors. It seemed the plan to get him in Aggie maroon was well conceived and right on track until the homecoming game against Cisco. A chop block during the 3rd quarter by the right guard and center, turned Boomer's left knee into pasta. By the time he had healed and rehabbed his knee, A&M had found ten more recruits with whole bodies and high SATs. Honestly, Boomer wasn't all that dejected. He found that he actually liked learning and all the practice time was cutting into his studies. He went back to Lubbock and enrolled at Tech to become a teacher and coach.

I hired Boomer as an assistant principal years later when he had gotten his fill of spending Saturdays watching film and washing dirty jockstraps. He and I had been working together ever since. I had taught him what I knew and he'd kept the peace. Boomer was a loyal and devoted friend and more than once I'd designated him my driver and he had always gotten me home safe. Boomer would have a couple of Ag boys out at the flagpole going over the ups and downs of flag raising before I got back and Mrs. Perkins could rest easy for another day.

When I got to the gym, Coach Connelly was right in the middle of explaining the very detailed rules of indoor kickball. She was covering the consequences for kicking out a gym light and explaining why all the students needed to play instead of walking in circles around the gym. I didn't want to break the students' attention span, which doesn't really take a whole lot, so I stood at the door and admired Coach Connelly's teaching style....as well as her long athletic

legs. Beach volleyball evidently was great way of staying in shape. I figured if I stood there and watched a few minutes, I could also count that as part of her observation. Evaluating teachers was not something I'm really fond of doing, so I tried to work it in as I went and now seemed as good a time as any. If I wrote something up about her lesson it would also help in case she ever decided to file a sexual harassment suit against me. Not that she would. So far she hadn't minded me spending extra time in the gym, catching a few glances in the name of supervision. She mostly humored me knowing I was harmless. I was harmless, but I wasn't dead.

When the instructions were over and the red vest team took the field, Coach Connelly strolled over with her clipboard. I remembered when shirts and skins were the designations for teams, but with the introduction of co-ed PE, the stock in vest making companies went up dramatically.

"Morning Bill. Good to see you down at this end of the building. To what do I owe the pleasure?" Debbie's heritage may have been from Ireland, but her roots were strictly from the South. There was no Irish lilt when she talked, but there was a drawl as smooth and smoky as aged bourbon.

"Debbie, you know I can't go an entire day without stopping by to admire those gorgeous legs of yours. You also know I mean that in the most complimentary non harassing way don't you?"

Her smile and rolling eyes always perked me up and made my day just a little better. Fortunately she was not married, but no one seemed to know if she was dating anyone. There were some in town that suggested her being

single and from Mississippi, she might have a girlfriend. That had never been validated. As far as I was concerned, she was great to look at, and in my mind I was the love of her life until she told me different or filed a lawsuit.

"Debbie, did I ever see you on TV playing volleyball? I try to follow the ladies beach competition as closely as I can. I'm a big fan."

"Seriously, you follow beach volleyball?" Doubt was evident in Debbie's voice.

"Sure. I am a fan of athletes in general, and the ladies playing beach volleyball are great athletes. I can't help but admire the way the girls move around in the heat and then dive into the sand. Must take a lot of training." I explained with as much sincerity as I could muster.

"Even though I know your motivation has nothing to do with the athletic skill, beach volleyball is very difficult and takes a lot of conditioning. Yes, I did play the circuit for a couple of years until my partner hurt her knee. We were getting more competitive and actually placed in the money a few times." Still not sure about how serious I was, she offered the last bit of information with pride.

"I knew I had seen you before! Didn't you wear that green bikini with the yellow stripes, and have a butterfly tattooed on your lower back. I believe you also have a rose tattooed on your shoulder? I never forget a face!" My enthusiasm didn't have to be mustered that time.

"Face? Can you even tell me what my face looked like?" She asked laughing.

"Sure, you wore black flak jacket glasses and licked your lips a lot. Hey does that sand get inside your swimsuit and chafe? I always wondered about that. You were great, especially at the net."

Just as I was about to find out the secret to keeping sand out of your shorts, the kickball slammed into the wall just above our heads. Coach Connelly caught it on the rebound and walked back to her class for further instructions, this time given in a louder voice. As she walked away all I could see was that light green bikini bottom with yellow stripes.....

“William?” Boomer’s voice crackled on the radio.

“Yes, Boom?” I answered.

“The cafeteria ladies wanted you to know they are having Sloppy Joes today and did you want them to save you some? Also the kids have been taking the ketchup packets and popping them on the sidewalk again. What should I tell them?” Boomer had made his daily cafeteria run to fill up on carbohydrates and was now making his daily cafeteria report.

I kept my reply civil since Boomer was only the messenger, “Tell the lunch ladies thanks, but I’ll pass on the Sloppy Joes, and for them to quit putting the ketchup packets out for the kids to get. For gosh sake, if the kids can’t handle the ketchup they won’t get any ketchup on their Sloppy Joe. Maybe they’ll figure it out or rat out the few knot heads that keep messing things up for everyone else.”

“Got it, boss,” was Boomer’s calm reply.

I never did get around to the volleyball uniforms, but I could come back later and seeing Coach Connelly more than once a day was a bonus for sure. For some reason the beach was all I could think about. As I walked back towards the office, I decided I had better run down to the Dairy Whiz and grab a burger basket while things seemed to be quiet.

V.

My rule for eating out in this town was never go during rush hour, which started at 11:00 and ran till about 1:15. Then you had to be finished before 2:45 when the first group of afternoon coffee drinkers started coming in. If you missed your window of opportunity, you ran into who knows what group of individuals that wanted to discuss everything from this year's football team to why were we letting the kids wear their hair so long. It always ended up with exasperation at how this generation was going to Hell in a hand basket, and why couldn't we go back to the day when they were in school and things were done right?

Of course the only response I had was to agree and nod a lot. To argue with them would have been fruitless, because they could only remember how it was in the most idealistic terms. Many failed to remember how they hated school and half their class dropped out. The good ole days were seldom as good as we remembered them.

The football team hadn't helped me any in these downtown conversations either. Shasta hadn't won more than three games a year for the last eight years and had been through three head coaches since I'd been the principal. Super Dan was determined to bring football glory back to Shasta and just knew this new coach was the one to do it. Super Dan could hire new coaches, but his biggest problem is he couldn't hire new players. Our demographics had changed dramatically over the years and most folks couldn't grasp the fact that our Mexican kids were more interested in playing soccer than football. Those that did come out for football tried hard, but the difference in getting tackled by a 5'7" 169 pound Mexican linebacker as opposed

to a 6'4" 254 pound German- heritage-grew-up-on-a-farm-bucking-hay-linebacker was the difference in winning three games a year and the state championship.

On the bright side, our cross-country teams and soccer teams were winning lights out. Those wins just didn't set as well with the old guard that guarded the corner booth in the afternoon at the Dairy Whiz. How could you talk about a race where runners disappear down a hill and didn't come back for fifteen minutes? Even soccer had a ball, but what kind of game lasted ninety minutes and no one scored. Why play if you're not going to score or have a winner? This was Texas, and football was the national game of Texas, end of discussion! Those kinds of questions were what I would have to answer if the coffee club cornered me here at the Dairy Whiz. That's why I needed to get my burger basket, cut the onions, hold the mayo, and an extra side of fries eaten before they showed up here in about 30 minutes.

I had spent my whole life in small towns and wouldn't trade them for the bright lights of the city for any amount of money. With one high school, everyone in town was an alumni or supporter, which produced great crowds that stayed until we got behind and came every Friday until we lost for the second time. Most of the town would turn out for the Decatur game no matter what either team's record was. If the football team went 1-9 and beat Decatur, most folks were happy. Shasta and Decatur had always been a rivalry, but when Decatur got the Wal-Mart instead of Shasta, that was the final straw. Feelings between the two towns went way deeper than the kids at school. In fact, it was more likely town leaders than my high school kids that burned the Decatur bonfire two years ago. Members of the Chamber of Commerce swear that Decatur's city council offered under

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the table bribes along with their tax incentives to lure Sam Walton's outfit to Decatur. No one at Walton's office would comment of course, other than to say it was in the best interest of the company to locate on a major highway. "What's a major highway have to do with it anyway" was a comment made by one of our councilmen as the businessmen licked their wounds and vowed never to forget. People from Shasta would drive over to the Wal-Mart in Wichita Falls before they entered the door of the one in Decatur. The extra fifty miles was a small price to pay for thumbing one's nose at someone or shootin' em the finger.

During the twelve years I had been principal at Shasta High, I'd managed to keep scores up, dropouts down, and the school off the front page of the Fort Worth Star-Telegram. There was no tenure in Texas, but those things would keep a principal's job anywhere. My success and longevity had made me the second most recognizable face in town right after Super Dan. Being recognizable was a blessing and a curse. You got a lot of fudge and chocolate covered pretzels at Christmas, but you also got an earful in the paper towel and toilet paper aisle down at Mayfield's grocery store. Mayfield's was the only grocery store in town and where folks shopped for the basics until their list was long enough to justify a trip over to Wichita Falls.

I quickly dipped my last fry in ketchup, drained my Diet Dr. Pepper, and headed back to the school just ahead of the 3 o'clock coffee club.

Back in the office with a few minutes to spare, I started signing bus requests and purchase orders that had stacked up on my desk for the last week.

"William?" Ms. Shelly's voice came over the intercom.

"Yes, Ms. Shelly?"

"Mrs. Rojas is here selling tamales. Do you want to order any? They'll be here Wednesday."

"Yes ma'am. I love Mrs. Rojas' tamales. Tell her I want a dozen beef and a dozen chicken. That should take care of at least two meals this next week."

Shelly came back on the intercom to repeat Mrs. Rojas' response, "She says, 'gracias Mister Masters. You are always a good customer since you are not married. That'll be \$20 on Wednesday'."

"Gracias back to Mrs. Rojas. Ask her if she will marry me and make me tamales everyday." As I passed this comment back to Ms. Shelly, I could picture Mrs. Rojas' laugh. She was a large woman and her whole body shook when she talked and even more so when she laughed. If she had been my wife, I would never have been hungry or cold I was sure.

As I listened over the speaker I heard Mrs. Rojas laughing as she told Ms. Shelly she was already married, and then added that Ms. Shelly needed to marry me and make me tamales everyday. It would make us both happier people she added.

"William, she said thanks for the offer, but no." Ms. Shelly's translation just hit the high points. I couldn't help smiling thinking about Ms. Shelly making me tamales on a daily basis. There were worse things in life, but not many better.

As I dumped the pile of signed papers into Ms. Shelly's basket, I heard Boomer's voice on the radio sending the last bus off officially ending the school day. A high school was rarely empty. There were always a couple of teachers that seemed to live in their rooms. I guess they cooked in the lounge and might even nap in the nurse's office. For some reason they either had nothing better at home, or they were

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completely incapable of getting their work done. Either way we had keys so people could come and go as they needed to, and I could leave when my work was done. Usually I tried to answer emails and finished paper work until things quieted down. I also tried to stay for a respectable amount of time so it didn't look like I was racing the kids out of the parking lot. That never looked good. The sign of a good leader was someone that at least knew when to be at school and when to leave. Looking at my watch and knowing it was Monday night, as a good leader, I determined it was time to leave.

VI.

I've had a hard time with marriage. I tried it twice and both times it had ended up the same. I really didn't know if my taste in women was bad or if I was just a lousy husband or lover. Either way, I figured the majority of the fault was mine and carried no ill feelings for the two ladies that had tried to settle down with me. I really felt both times we had a good thing going, but the fact I spent anywhere from 12-18 hours a day at work or chasing after other people's kids, made it hard to build a very strong relationship. Women don't usually get married to spend their nights alone, especially Friday nights. They also didn't consider a hot dog at the concession stand a date or a night out. When it became obvious each time that they were finding company elsewhere, it was painful, but not surprising. Not a glutton for punishment, I had been single now going on thirteen years and had pretty well decided I would die that way.

I tried dating a couple of times during my first few years in Shasta, but when I looked around I found that most of the available women were the mothers of my students. The

other women I probably could have spent some evenings with were married to the men that paid my salary. They were hot enough and easy enough, but I never met a woman good enough in bed to risk my job for.

The girls at school were definitely attractive, but in Texas you'd be better off robbing a liquor store or shooting someone rather than even thinking about messing with a student. I figured as luscious and mature as they might look, I preferred to be on this side of prison bars, even if it meant lonely nights and cold sheets.

I flirted with my teachers from time to time, especially Coach Connelly, but there was no way I could date them. I might have had to fire them and I would have felt real guilty having slept with them first. Ladies that found themselves without a job might even have gotten upset enough to mention our physical relationship during their exit interview. They could even have suggested I fired them to end our relationship. I've read legal journals and there were a lot more ways to screw yourself than to screw your teachers. Mainly it just wouldn't look good.

Because I was single, at 6 o'clock on Monday evening my Ford pick up was headed to Fort Worth where I had a standing date with Candi. It wasn't really anything formal, more of a mutual agreement. Candi worked at Hooters in Fort Worth, and every Monday night I went there for chicken wings, Monday Night Football, and Candi.

I first met Candi when she was a freshman at Shasta High School. She was a skinny little thing and quite shy. She played on the volleyball team because she was tall, but other than that she really wasn't noticeable. Over the next four years an amazing transformation took place. Candi began to develop in a way that impressed just about everyone that

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saw her. By the time she was a senior someone had whispered in her ear, "Candi, you ought to go on over to Fort Worth and get a job at Hooters. You are more than qualified and the pay is great."

Now I don't know who told her that, but that type of career counseling was something that everyone of our students could benefit from. Hooters was made for Candi and Candi was made for Hooters.

Now when Candi and I first met at Hooters, it was quite surprising for both of us. The Fort Worth vice squad had shut down my previous watering hole, and I thought it prudent to find a place that was a little more upstanding as well as out of the way. The fact that Hooters had hot wings as well as liquor made it a logical choice. It seemed Candi had been working this particular location for about two years.

"Hey! Mr. Masters, remember me? It's Candi Carson. I went to your school!"

This of course was shouted across a rather quiet room. I'm sure my face turned more than one shade of red as I wondered who else was here from Shasta or whose brother in-law or cousin was sitting at the bar. I smiled and assured her that I most definitely remembered her and had dropped by to see how she was doing. She thought that was so sweet and brought me an extra bowl of dipping sauce. I had been checking on Candi once a week now for the past five years. She always saved me the table in corner.

Over the years we had become pretty comfortable with each other. Candi knew I came here to get away from work and to look at her boobs. She liked to take a break and sit and talk about Shasta, the school, and people she hadn't seen in a while. Candi was a really sharp young lady that had

Gene Suttle

a long-term goal she wouldn't have any trouble reaching. What most people didn't know was she attended TCU during the day and paid for it with cash. Being a private school with private school tuition, her take in tips had to be record setting. After that, she planned on going to law school. As her former principal, I felt an obligation to help her further her education as much as I could so I dropped by often and tipped heavily. We shared a lot of laughs, and I knew who I planned to call when I needed a good lawyer.

After taking a beating from Jack Daniels the night before, I went easy on the liquor. The Saints jumped all over the Falcons early, and after a kiss on the cheek from Candi, I headed home to bed.

Jell-O wrestling... a near naked cheerleader carwash... casino night... well meaning neighbors just wanting to help... local politics... My Way is the High Way is satire at its best. A cast of characters right out of the local grocery store provides nonstop laughs while at the same time a realization you've met them somewhere before. William Robert Masters has been a principal long enough to know better. He has seen it all...just about.

My Way is the High Way

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