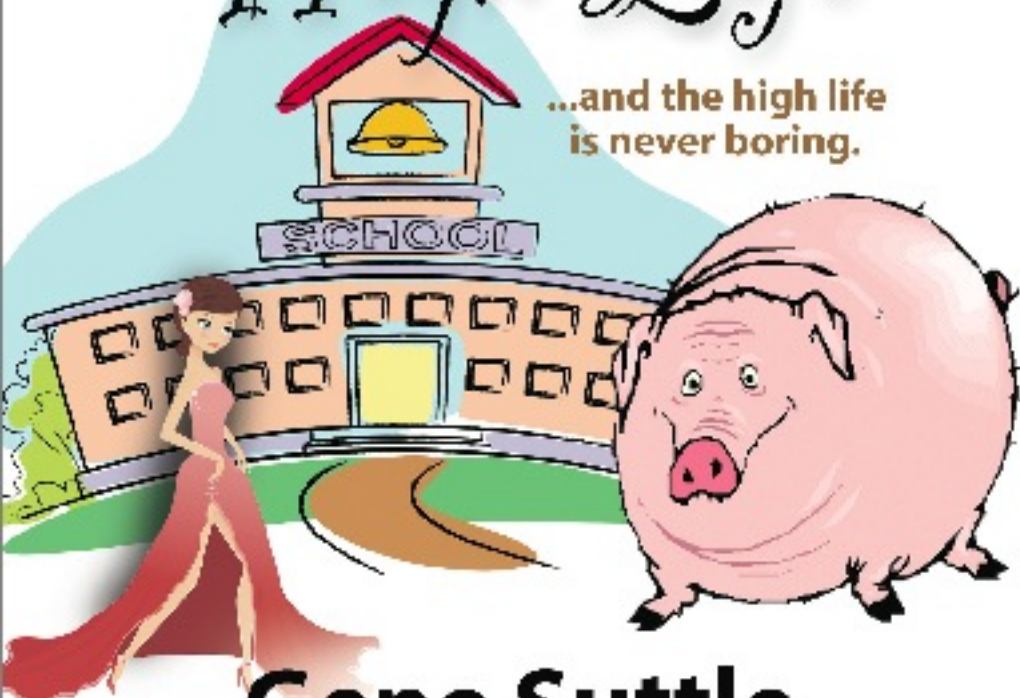
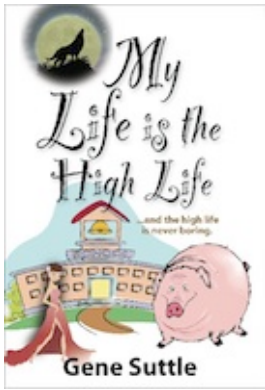


My Life is the High Life

...and the high life
is never boring.



Gene Suttle



My Life is the High Life continues the saga of beleaguered high school principal William Robert Masters that we first met in *My Way is the Highway*. Having barely survived the near naked cheerleader car wash the previous fall, Masters struggles to bring the school year to an end. Prom provides all kinds of possible disasters, from wardrobe malfunctions to spiked punch bowls, to distract William as he continues to strive for the perfect graduation.

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ISBN 978-1-61434-732-3

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Published in the United States by Booklocker.com, Inc., Bangor, Maine.

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

Booklocker.com, Inc.
2011

First Edition

Dos Mondays

- 1 -

"You big prick!" The words echoing off the back wall of the office indicated to me the lady on the opposite side of the counter was not happy. The flared nostrils, red face, and bony finger tapping on my chest convinced me.

I knew better. I was a highly trained administrator and the best way to diffuse a situation was to listen and let the steam bleed off, but damn it, it was Monday morning, my head hurt, and it wasn't even 8:30 yet. Plus, it was just too good of an opening to pass up. She had thrown me a high looping curve ball that my grandmother could have knocked out of the park.

"Mrs. Fisher," I said calmly, "I know you have seen a lot of pricks and are probably an expert. I also appreciate the rating you have given mine. It's not often women use the words big and prick around meat the same time, but you have, and I'm grateful. But even with all your flattery, I still can't excuse little Layton's absence!"

I had never seen the shade of red Mrs. Fisher's face was turning. I thought it looked close to magenta on the color wheel. She was gasping for air, and I honestly thought she might have a seizure. Calling on my exceptional decision making skills and having assessed the situation, it appeared that my best course of action was to dismiss myself before she was able to regain her composure, so I calmly walked back into my office and sat down. As I swallowed aspirin #7 and #8 since I woke up this morning, I heard the office door

slam loud enough to break windows in the gym. I knew better. I also knew this wasn't over.

As the ringing continued in my ears from the yelling and slamming, I closed my eyes and rubbed my temples. When I opened them again a few seconds later, Ms. Shelly was standing in the doorway with her arms folded and the hint of smile on her face. It was hard to tell if she was happy, amused, or astonished. Having known Ms. Shelly now for twelve years and having had some very intimate personal experiences with her over that time, I guessed she was wondering if I was really that stupid or did I have seizure of my own.

"You do know that Abigail Fisher is Super Dan's niece right?" Ms. Shelly asked in the calmest voice. She already knew the answer, but was making a point. Super Dan was the superintendent, former championship football coach, and had lived in Shasta for sixty plus years. He had spent the last thirty in the superintendent's office.

"Yes ma'am, I am aware of that connection," I responded, not making eye contact, "There are just some times when enough is enough and I guess I didn't have any political correctness left this morning, Ms. Shelly," I explained very lamely.

"Do you have leads on a new job I don't know about?" sarcasm dripped from her every word. See, Ms. Shelly and I'd had this discussion last fall when I almost got myself fired over the 'near naked' cheerleader car wash down on Main Street. The fact they wore their bikinis and used some suggestive advertisement to drum up business was bad enough, but they also chose to do it on a Sunday afternoon right after church. In this town, that was as close to Satan coming to visit as anyone could imagine. As principal of

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Shasta High School, most everyone felt I should have been the one sacrificed on the altar to atone for the sins of the school and spare the town from certain destruction. Fortunately, with a little luck and some blackmail, I had saved my job, but had been given a clear warning. Not by the school board or the superintendent, but by Ms. Shelly who'd had more than her share of losers cross her path. She had encouraged me to grow up and start acting my age and get rid of some of the self-destructive behaviors I seemed to cling to. I cared about a lot of things, but nothing compared to the way I cared about Ms. Shelly, so I had really cleaned up my act.... up until about five minutes ago. Then I fell off the wagon.

"I'm going to walk down the hall and I'll be back in a minute. When Super Dan calls, tell him I'm dealing with something or other, and I'll get back to him shortly. I'll figure something out by then, O.K.?" I asked as a question, but mostly I was just talking to myself since I was the one that needed convincing.

As I walked by Ms. Shelly, she touched my hand in passing and said, "I know you try hard, but at times you just have to be you. There was just no way around it. And to be honest, Mrs. Fisher didn't give you much of a choice. If you must know, I giggled behind the folder I had in my hand. That was quite funny. I guess I'm just drawn to the unruly ones, the bad boys. It must be my fate, and I need to learn to live with it," she finished with a wink and a smile, which made me feel a whole lot better than I did a few minutes ago.

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My name's William Robert Masters, and I had been the principal of Shasta High School for the last twelve years. My parents had named me for dignity and success, but society had decided Billy Bob suited me better, so I answered to any and all variations. Bill and Billy prevailed among my friends, and, as you have seen, my detractors used many other names including prick.

Shasta was a small town about an hour outside Fort Worth and about two hours south of Oklahoma City. Our closest Wal-Mart was in Decatur, but no true Shasta citizen would step foot in that store, so we had to travel to Wichita Falls to get discounted groceries or buy our necessities down at Mayfield's on Main Street. It seemed Shasta and Decatur both had made bids for that Wal-Mart store, and rumor had it that Decatur stole the store with a last-minute cash offering made to the selection committee under the table. The official press release from Bentonville, Arkansas identified the location right on a major highway as the key deciding factor, but nobody in Shasta believed it.

Dan Cochran, the superintendent, commonly known as Super Dan, had hired me away from a high school in the panhandle of Texas to come in and raise the level of achievement and to bring Shasta High School up to a standard that the town could be proud of. Every state-level education based indicator showed that had been accomplished beyond expectation. However, the folks in Shasta had their own measuring stick, and a few still felt like I didn't measure up.

My first problem was my hair, which was a little longer than they liked around here. Of course, anything longer than

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a buzz cut would fall into that category. I also had an attitude problem. My attitude was seen as too liberal, and I gave the students way too much latitude at school. Considering the conservative nature of the townsfolk that had lived here for generations, the only way I could have measured up would have been to run the school more like a reformatory with uniforms and formations. That, in my opinion, was archaic, and I said so many times. 'Liberal damn hippie' had been used so often in conversations down at the coffee shop that many of the citizens didn't know my real name. So it was not surprising that a few times each year I had been called to task in front of the school board about one issue or another in hopes that the board would run me off. I guess my greatest accomplishment was that I still had a job after twelve years. I did have to admit that last fall I thought my streak had run out, but I had survived...until now.

Ms. Shelly was right. Mrs. Fisher was Super Dan's niece. She actually was related on his wife Thelma's side, which made it worse since Thelma hated me with a passion. Abigail Fisher was the only daughter of Thelma's baby sister and this would definitely be trouble. Ms. Shelly, of course, was always right and that was why I was glad to have her running the office. That, and the fact she smelled good, felt good, and came over to my house every Thursday night for supper. We spent those evenings cooking at home, catching up on our TV shows, and occasionally baring our souls and bodies. The first person I hired when I got to Shasta was Ms. Shelly, who was a single mother of two needing a job to pay back some debts run up by a former lowlife husband. We hit it off right away. We made a great team at work, but over time we had developed a personal relationship that was as

close as you could get to marriage without actually living together, which we didn't.

'Friends with benefits' was too cheap and shallow to describe Ms. Shelly and me. We were lovers, both of whom had gone through two failed marriages, that wanted someone in our lives, but weren't quite ready to pull the trigger again. My marital problems were the result of spending way too much time away from home, so that my exes had to find other ways to entertain themselves. Ms. Shelly had a heart for lost causes and stray animals. She was one of those that were too kind hearted and always wound up with the worst possible men. I was thinking that was how I had managed to make my way into her heart. She saw a lost cause and thought she could save me. I had to admit, she had done one hell of a job, so far. I just didn't want to hurt her like the rest had. It had been the right fit for both of us, but I knew it came down to me. She was mine to have, if I didn't screw it up.

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When I walked out of the office door, I had no particular place to go. I had thought about walking around the building for a while or maybe out to the field house. Mainly, I needed a few minutes to figure out how to handle Super Dan when he called. I knew he would have no wiggle room whatsoever with Thelma squeezing his balls until *I* screamed.

I really was a good principal and over the last twenty years had led three campuses to outstanding achievement by following the basic principles of leadership I had adopted. I called them the three N's-Instinct, Energy, and Enthusiasm. Now, I had read the books and been to the trainings, but when the rubber met the road, when a principal was in the trenches making decisions at a rapid fire pace, there wasn't time for any of that group decision making stuff everyone was so proud of and state educators touted as the way to go. That was bullshit. I had never once seen a group decision-making team standing beside me in front of the board when I was getting a butt chewing. I never expected they would.

That was why when decisions needed to be made, I made them, and if the shit hit the fan, well I made the mess, and I would clean it up. As far as group decision-making, we practiced it regularly. I wrote up the reports, and the group got to decide if they wanted to sign it or not. No one complained because I took good care of my teachers, and they would only turn on me if they felt their jobs were threatened, so it was important to keep the faculty feeling secure and happy.

I had good instincts, people knew where to find me, and I honestly was excited about my job most of the time. I liked

my school, and being around the kids kept me young. When I fully utilized all these skills, things went well, except.... Well have you ever seen a railroad crossing that had the crossing arms with the flashing lights that warned you when a train was coming? Have you ever seen someone dash around the arms ahead of the train because they were in too big a hurry to stop? Ever heard of someone failing to heed the warning signs and getting smashed? When I got into trouble was when my instincts threw up the crossing arms, flashing lights, and warnings.... but I barreled right on through. This morning was like that. I knew who I was dealing with. My gut said just excuse the kid's absence and let it go, but self-destructive behavior reared its ugly head in my life occasionally, according to Ms. Shelly. I seemed to have a death wish or a desire to tempt fate. Either way was not good. So there I was. I needed to fix this one and fast. After I gave it a little thought, of course, and what better place to think than in the gym watching Coach Connelly's volleyball workout? So, I turned around and headed to the gym.

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When I looked in the gym, I was surprised to see a large number of guys when I had expected to see the volleyball girls going through off-season drills or something. Curious, I stepped inside and saw Debbie Connelly by the far wall chatting with a few girls while the guys clustered around the bleachers on the south side. It appeared more like a before school chat time than first period off-season volleyball. When Debbie saw me, she smiled and began to make her way across the gym. To watch her long legs move was one of the main reasons I liked to come to the gym. It was quite the sight.

Debbie was in her second year as head girls coach at Shasta High after starring on the University of Nebraska's championship volleyball team for three years. Looking at her head full of red hair that curled and flew in all directions, as well as the freckles that were sprinkled around her face and neck, made me start humming *When Irish Eyes are Smiling* subconsciously every time she came into view. The crazy thing was that if you closed your eyes and only heard her talk, you would picture Mint Juleps, Southern Mansions, and parasols. Being from the South, she had a voice as smooth and syrupy as warm molasses.

I had taken it upon myself to mentor Debbie when she first arrived and that mostly meant chatting her up every chance I got. She was good-natured about it, and the flirting was mostly for my benefit and ego. She laughed at the right times and gave back as good as I dished out. In the back of my mind, of course, I imagined another scenario but was smart enough to realize that innocent flirting would be the extent of our involvement. A guy could dream though, right?

"Hey Debbie," I said as she walked up beside me and playfully punched me on the shoulder. It was a little intimidating to talk face to chest with a woman, which I had to do with Debbie when she wore her three-inch heels. With her chest though, I figured I would be a man and face up to it. Normally, she had on tennis shoes and I could stand up straight and at least be close to the same height, but she was all dressed up for a Monday with no game on the schedule. "Wow, don't you look good this morning? Is that a new outfit?" I said as I admired her new dress, "I guess I didn't realize we had a game somewhere today. Surely you aren't wearing that to a softball game."

"No silly, there's no game. I just thought I would actually wear clothes to school today instead of warm ups," she said as she did a model twirl and displayed a dress that clung to all the right spots and accented her fiery red hair.

"HMMMMM HMMMMM Hmmm Hmmm Hm," was all that came out of my mouth as my brain locked up with an overload of emotions and signals it was getting and sending out. Total shutdown.

Debbie smiled at the effect she had and said, "I take it that you approve? Should I dress up more often?"

Finally, regaining control of my tongue, I was able to respond, "As nice as that would be, I am afraid it would cause complete chaos at the school, and we would get nothing done. As you can see, half of the male population of this school is already down here in the gym instead of being in class on a Monday morning. It would be that way every day. I assume they all heard about your dress."

Turning to look towards the other end of the gym, she laughed and said, "Billy, those boys aren't here for me. They came to see Demarcus."

"Demarcus?" I asked. I didn't remember having any student or faculty by that name.

"Demarcus Latham. The football player? All-American at Nebraska? NFL Rookie of the Year for Tampa Bay?" she kept giving me hints until I nodded that I recognized the name.

"So Demarcus Latham is in our gym?" I asked still unsure what she was telling me.

"Yea, he's right down there talking to the guys and signing autographs," she responded, smiling a different kind of smile this time.

"Is this some sort of outreach program you set up and I knew about that slipped my mind?" I asked confused by the whole setting.

"Oh no!" she laughed, "Demarcus is here to see me and I thought the kids would get a kick out of seeing him. He came to take me to dinner," she added with a very unassuming air.

"So you know Demarcus? You two know each other well enough to go out to dinner?" I asked starting to put the pieces together, but still not sure where it was going.

"Billy! Demarcus is my fiancé. He and I have been dating since we were freshmen at Nebraska. He proposed last year on the night he was drafted. We are going to get married in June. I will want you to be there okay?" she asked as she took both my hands and was jumping up in down in three inch heels excited as a schoolgirl. Normally, with a face full of bouncing breasts, I would have only one train of thought, but what she had just said overrode even those emotions.

"Wait!" I said with a little more urgency than was required, "does he know we are lovers?" I asked, hoping to conjure up a reason for her not to marry this guy. I knew if she did, he would probably want her to move to where the hell ever he had some 15,000 square foot mansion built,

probably on a beach with an infinity pool off the patio. Damn Damn Damn.

"I would say that you stopping by the gym to look at my legs and make suggestive comments would hardly qualify us as lovers!" she laughed and brushed it off with the flip of her long red hair.

Feigning deep hurt and feeling some real hurt, I said, "I guess maybe you haven't taken this relationship quite as seriously as I have. That's really disappointing to find out now after I've invested two years of my life with you."

"Billy, you know I will always love you, but Demarcus is the one I'm going to marry, and it's probably best he doesn't hear you say anything about us being lovers even if you are joking. He's pretty big and very jealous!" she warned, slightly above a whisper.

"So all this time we've spent together you've simply seen as folly? A way to get your entertainment, and then you toss me aside for the first bum that comes along with a fast car and a big diamond?" I was rolling now. I hadn't played this much drama since high school.

She was laughing full force and thought my act was great. Unfortunately, it wasn't all an act. I was so convincing because I did care a lot about Coach Connelly and would miss her when she was gone, and if she married Demarcus she would soon be gone.

"Come on, I'll introduce you. I've talked a lot about you, and he wanted to meet you," she said as she took one hand leading me across the gym.

"You've talked about me, but you didn't mention we were lovers? What did you say? What does he know and do I want to get close to him?" I asked in rapid fire as we walked closer to the crowd of boys.

"I told him you have been like a father figure to me. Someone that's looked after me and made sure I was taken care of," she said softly and with a smile. "He really appreciates that, by the way."

"Father figure? Oh jeez. Father figure? Oh crap. Seriously? Father figure? Couldn't you have said crazy uncle or something like that? The guy at reunions that everyone laughs at even when he pinches the ladies butts and talks dirty?" I asked pleadingly. "Father figure means I have to go erase all those beach volleyball tournaments of yours I have taped and then wash my mind out with soap!"

She stopped halfway across the gym, and this time she spoke softly, "Look, I have appreciated all you have done for me, and you have been a great friend these past two years. I am so glad you have Ms. Shelly because y'all make a great couple." At that, my eyes must have widened, because she added, "Yes, I know you've been cheating on me," she winked as she said it, "and so does everyone else that lives in this town and is still breathing. It's not like we can't see when you two look at each other. Don't worry, everyone thinks it's great and only wonders why you haven't already gotten married."

I could tell this was important to her, and she didn't need anymore adolescent bullshit. It was time to quit playing games and to be mature about the whole thing. I was going to miss her, but I looked at her and smiled, and, with all sincerity, I congratulated her on her upcoming wedding and made her promise to invite Ms. Shelly and me. We then pushed our way through the guys clustered around Demarcus.

"Hey Demarcus!" Debbie yelled, "I have someone for you to meet."

As he rose from his seat, I had time to be grateful several times that he saw me as Debbie's father and not her lover. He had to be the biggest man I had ever seen, and, by the time he stood up straight, he blocked out most of the light on one end of the gym. He reached out the hand that head-slapped offensive tackles as he rushed past them to crush quarterbacks into the ground. As his hand enveloped mine, I swore his fingers overlapped his thumb so he could grip my hand.

"Demarcus, this is William Robert Masters, my principal. We call him Billy usually though. Billy, Demarcus Latham, my fiancé." Debbie did the introductions with class and pride all the way around.

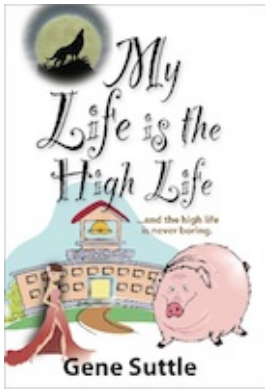
"Billy, I can't tell you how nice it is to meet you. Debbie has told me so much about you and how you helped her get her program started here and all. Thank you for looking after her." His voice was a very low bass that sounded confident and at ease. He also was very sincere, which made me feel kind of like a creep for my impure thoughts about his fiancé over the course of the past two years. Since I had been promoted to father figure there was not a chance those would be happening again guaranteed! For all my shortcomings, being a pervert was not one of them.

"Demarcus! It's an honor to have you here at Shasta High. Wow, who would have thought? I know you made our football players' day and I appreciate that. You are getting a great gal in Debbie, and I hope you two have a very happy life together," I said with honesty and sincerity this time.

After a few more minutes of pleasantries and a warning to the guys to at least check in with their first period teachers before the bell rang, I slipped back into the hall. It occurred to me I was in the gym because I had a problem

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and was supposed to be finding a solution. Finding out Debbie had a boyfriend was a surprise. Finding out her boyfriend was Demarcus Latham and they were getting married had stunned me like a Taser. I needed a way to clear my head and refocus, so I headed for the auditorium where it was dark and quiet. Many days, I came here and sat in dark as I pondered a lot of things, while kids snuck across the stage or giggled behind the curtain never knowing the principal was seated in the audience.



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