

Life is more complicated than we can know and things seem to happen for a reason. Jack and Sarah are destined to meet and, eventually, fall in love. There are many hurdles and both are badly wounded romantically before they meet.

Puddles in the Rain

by Joe A. Wilson

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Chapter Five

It was now mid-June of 1970, nearly three years after that terrible day when Jack found out about his dad being killed at work. Today was a Thursday afternoon and Jack was driving through Lakewood on his way back from work. His mother was out of town with Aunt Margaret, Uncle Michael, and his little sister was visiting his older sister Pam who just had her first baby. He had nothing to eat at home, so he was looking for something easy. As he was driving through downtown, he saw Cosmo's Diner and thought to himself that, in the three years he had lived in the area, he had never stopped in there for a bite to eat.

He decided to find a parking spot and check it out. He had heard good things about the diner, both about the food and about the service. As he got out of his car and walked toward the diner, he thought about the last three years that got him to this moment.

The summer of 1967 had been a waking nightmare. Gordon was walking the plant on his rounds at around seven-thirty that evening. There was the usual hustle and bustle of the industrial work going on all around him. A crane was lifting several large twelve-foot section, four-foot diameter galvanized iron pipes secured by a heavy chain. As the Universe saw fit, there was a perfectly placed flaw in one of the links of the chain. As the crane lifted the set of pipes into the air and swung them overhead, the chain gave way, and the pipes broke free.

Gordon happened to be in the path of these pipes as they rolled and tumbled along the ground and one of them crushed him against a building. There is no need to go into the details of how gruesome industrial accident injuries and deaths are. When dealing with the sheer magnitude of the mass and scale of these objects in motion versus the frailty of a human body, the human body doesn't stand a chance.

For the couple of weeks after Aunt Margaret told Jack about Gordon being killed at work, Jack's little sister Amanda went to stay with Jack's older sister Pam. Jack stayed at home to help Uncle Michael go through all the things around the house and garage to dispose of junk and get everything else that they weren't keeping ready for the estate sale.

Samantha was nearly catatonic after finding out about Gordon's death, and Aunt Margaret did her best to comfort and console Samantha through the worst of it. Eventually, Samantha came around and knew there was work to be done and helped get everything ready for the estate sale. Given how Bond Hill had changed since Gordon bought that home, the home sold for well more than Gordon had paid for it. Combined with the rest of the money made from the estate sale and the rather large insurance settlement from the accident, Samantha was well set to start a new life. She decided that she, Jack, and Amanda would be moving to Glencoe, Kentucky to be near Margaret.

This made Amanda happy since her cousin was only a year older than she was, so she had someone she already knew to help her get acquainted with everything there. Samantha had Margaret and Michael to keep her company and to help her

establish a new social circle. The only one who had no one – again – was Jack.

Samantha was able to buy a nice three-bedroom home in Glencoe for a very affordable price, well less than what something like that would cost in the city. She found work in Lakewood as a secretary for a local accountant. Margaret was able to help Samantha get all of this taken care of before school started in August.

Amanda was enrolled into Lakewood Junior High School and Jack was enrolled into Lakewood High School; these schools served the whole county. Jack took full-year courses in Wood Shop, Metal Shop, Automotive Technology, regular General Math (Algebra and Geometry obviously weren't for him), World History, and a first-semester course in Driver's Ed instead of Phys. Ed. He wasn't excited about much of anything at this point, but he was OK with going to the hands-on classes. At least in those classes, he got to do stuff that made time pass more quickly. He also daydreamed about his independence once he got his driver's license when he turned sixteen.

Jack kept to himself, at least mostly. The only people he ended up interacting with were other shop rats. And, even then, only the worst of the shop rats; you know the ones, the ones with the worst attitudes towards school and life. He kept a low profile and didn't want to be seen by anyone. He had had enough pain in the last two years to last him for quite a while. *When you're low, though, it is the real rats that can smell it and come preying.*

Since Jack rode the bus into Lakewood from Glencoe, it wasn't like he was able to hang out with anyone much either before or

after school. The bus didn't get to school too much before classes started and he had to go directly to the bus after the last class of the day to get his ride home. He only interacted with the shop rats during the classes and took on their identity of 'life sucks', which wasn't far from where he already was.

Billy, Randy, and David had already been friends for a long time. They fell together naturally since their situations in life made them kind of outcasts among the idyllic setting that Lakewood preferred to display. Their fathers were of simpler means, often 'between jobs' or working jobs that didn't pay much. This meant that they lived lives very similar to the one which Jack remembered well from his early youth.

It started out slowly enough, but as these other kids saw that Jack was fairly talented with his hands, they thought he was worthy of being in the classes with them. The shop classes are always a mix of sophomore- through senior-level students working on various projects under the supervision of the shop teacher. There is plenty of time for the students to interact and get to know each other as they are working on their projects.

At first, Jack just wanted to ignore them. He didn't need any new 'friends'; friends only betrayed him or abandoned him. But they persisted and eventually, they were able to get into his space. After all, others' negativity has a way of connecting to, and meshing with, another one's negativity fairly easily.

Jack got to know the guys a little better but kept his own life pretty much to himself. He found out that David was a junior, that Billy was a sophomore like him, and that Randy was sophomore, but should be senior. He was held back two grades over the years because he had some mild mental retardation.

Not enough to be sent to special classes, but enough to put him in regular classes and be abandoned to work through it all on his own. Billy and David made jokes at Randy's expense, but they all knew it was kidding around and they protected Randy from everyone else.

They all had the same classes and lunch period, so it was easy for Jack to end up hanging out with them throughout the day. Since being negative is easier than being positive, they spent most of their time talking about how much things 'sucked'. They never really talked about how much they liked anything, it was always just how much this sucked or that sucked. They never even complimented each other's work in the shop. They sometimes made backhanded compliments such as "that's not the worst thing you've made", but nothing was ever said in a positive way.

At home, Jack mostly stayed in his room at first. He was miserable and completely back into his shell asking the same old question of "what had he done to deserve this?". Songs like *A Whiter Shade of Pale* by Procol Harum and *Reflections* by Diana Ross and The Supremes were constantly playing in his head during that late summer. As bright and hot as it was, he just felt cold and empty inside.

Eventually, he began to ride his bike around Glencoe, exploring the small town to see what was around. Being a very small town of only a couple hundred people, there wasn't much. It seemed that there were more churches than anything else. Mostly, it was just rural countryside, otherwise. At least there were train tracks through the middle of town and a nice

creek southeast of town that provided some interest in exploration.

Jack found an out of the way spot on the side of the creek where he could be alone with his thoughts. He watched nature and found that, because he had studied and remembered more of the Biology class than he thought, he was able to take in quite a bit of what was going on around him. He saw much more detail than he would have otherwise. He saw frogs zapping insects out of the air, he saw a tiny mushroom growing out of a dead ant, he saw a cocooned prey in the corner of a spiderweb, and he saw a split tree that, presumably, had been struck by lightning in the recent past.

Jack also learned to skip stones across the water of the creek. No one had ever shown him how to do this; he had only seen it done on TV shows. The first few stones he threw simply went *plunk!* into the water. He eventually got the hang of using a sidearm approach to using flatter stones to get them to skip across the water at least a few times before sinking below the surface. He watched the patterns of ripples blend into each other from each of the skips.

The nagging question of “what had he done to deserve this?” still dogged him while he sat there on each of his visits over that first month or so while the weather was still really nice. Between that nagging question and all his observations, a picture began to emerge in his mind. *What had the fly done to deserve being zapped out of the air by the frog? What had the bug done to deserve to be caught and cocooned by the spider? What had the tree done to deserve to be struck by lightning?*

Jack then remembered a time back at Woodward when Don caught a fly in his hands. He had proceeded to tear the wings off the fly and make it walk around on a desk for a while until he got bored with it. Then he flicked it off somewhere into oblivion with his fingers, completely forgotten. Jack remembered being utterly repulsed by what had just happened, but now he realized on a much deeper level just how awful that incident was: “what had that fly done to deserve such a horrific fate?”.

There were also the times Jack now thought about back at home after rain showers in the spring. There were always puddles in the streets in the potholes made by the ice in the winter. Amanda loved to go out and splash in them. He thought about puddles that had been there for a few days. Those puddles, he knew from Biology class, would have been teeming with life. He now imagined Amanda coming along and splashing into one of those puddles, just having fun.

The millions of organisms in that puddle were just living their lives until, suddenly, they weren't. Their entire existence was upended without explanation, without mercy, without just cause. The force that caused it even, wasn't even aware that they did it. That force just went on about their business, never knowing that anything even happened to millions of other lives. But the question remained for those millions of lives: “what did they do to deserve that fate?”.

The next time Jack saw a spiderweb with a cocooned prey in it, he decided he wasn't going to let the spider “win”. He grabbed a stick and destroyed the spiderweb, ensuring that the cocooned prey was completely lost. *It is ironic that Jack never*

realized that he just did to the spider what he railed against in his own existence...

At least Driver's Ed. class that fall semester went well. The class consisted of a lecture portion that everyone was required to take – whether you were going to drive or not. Then, a group of three students plus the teacher, Mr. Dixon, would drive around during a period of the day. The students would take turns at the wheel while Mr. Dixon sat in the passenger seat giving directions, making notes, and offering suggestions. In the evenings and on the weekends, when Samantha wasn't too tired, she would take Jack out driving so he could get in more practice behind the wheel to become better at it before he took the driving test after he turned sixteen.

Samantha made it very clear to him, though, that if she bought him a vehicle, he damn well was taking Amanda to school and bringing her home also. Jack understood and agreed. After all, it wasn't like he wanted to stick around there anyway. Jack was surprised that Samantha wasn't making him use his saved money from his allowance to put toward the purchase of a car – not that he was complaining.

It was obvious that one of the other kids in Jack's group of Driver's Ed. wasn't going to pass his driving test when the time came. When it was that kid's turn to drive, he would hesitate and second-guess every single thing he did or was told to do.

“Let's make a left turn at this next stop sign,” Mr. Dixon told him one day.

The kid came to a stop at the stop sign, turned on his left turn signal, and waited.

Eventually, Mr. Dixon asked. “Are you going to make the left turn before I decide to retire?”

“There’s someone coming,” the kid replied.

“They have to stop for the stop sign themselves,” Mr. Dixon replied.

“But what if they don’t stop for the stop sign?” the kid countered.

“They are more than three-hundred yards down the road! You have plenty of time to make your turn before they even reach the intersection!” Mr. Dixon again replied, this time with exasperation in his voice.

“But what if they speed up?” the kid asked.

Mr. Dixon told him to make his left-hand turn and then pull over. He told the kid his driving shift was over for the day and then got out of the car and paced for a while to calm down before the lesson resumed.

The holidays were particularly rough that first year after Gordon was killed and the family moved to Glencoe. Samantha, Jack, and Amanda were invited to Margaret and Michael’s house for Thanksgiving. Samantha didn’t do very well and had to excuse herself several times throughout the dinner. Amanda also didn’t do very well as she was taking cues from Samantha. Jack just didn’t really say anything or look at

anyone the whole evening. Overall, it was an entirely uncomfortable experience for everyone.

As the Christmas season began to kick in, Jack actually kind of missed hearing Gordon grumble about how terrible the holidays were with all the beatings that the wives and children were going to get from the drunken husbands who couldn't afford to give their families a nice Christmas. For all his faults, Jack did respect Gordon and knew what a great man he had been. Gordon stuck to his values and never wavered about who he was. For the first time since Gordon's death, Jack mourned tears for the loss of his father.

That Christmas morning was also very somber. Since both Jack and Amanda were older, the magic of Christmas morning was long gone anyway, but this one, for obvious reasons, may as well have not happened. Samantha, however, still tried her best. Even though she looked exhausted and both Jack and Amanda knew she had cried most of the night, she still had presents for them.

Along with the usual necessities presents were the usual one special present. For Amanda, it was a particular necklace that she had been talking about a lot lately. Amanda thanked her mom and gave her a big hug and a kiss on the cheek. Jack then opened his gift; it was Gordon's pocketknife. Gordon had that pocketknife since he was a teenager and used it extensively. It came in handy for so many tasks and was something he held dear. Samantha thought Jack should have it now. Jack stared at it and then burst into tears. Samantha got up and came over and gave Jack a hug. Jack hugged her back fiercely and told her how much he loved her, and he would take good care of it.

Late December and early January were bitterly cold, but then it moderated some. It was still pretty cold in February, and it even snowed a few inches during the week before Jack's birthday. He wasn't able to get his driver's license until after his sixteenth birthday since it was on a Sunday that year. His birthday present that year was a red 1965 Chevy Malibu SS. It was in really good shape with not too many miles on it. Someone Samantha knew from work, knew someone else who was selling it for a good deal because they couldn't drive anymore.

During that first winter into spring, the only times that Samantha wouldn't let Jack drive was when there was snow on the ground or if it was raining hard. If there was snow on the ground, or if snow was predicted for that day, Jack and Amanda had to take the bus to school. Jack grumbled about these restrictions, but he knew there wasn't much point in protesting too much, lest he lose more than just not driving when it was wet outside.

One of the perks of a school having an Automotive Shop program is that the program was always in need of cars to work on. Yes, the program had a couple of donated cars that were dedicated to the program, but there was no replacement for having a variety of makes and models of vehicles with unique problems for students who wanted to become mechanics to get experience with before they graduated and got jobs in the field. The shop always took in cars that needed simple maintenance, such as oil changes, fluid changes, or simple diagnostic work; nothing too complicated. Other teachers were the primary

sources for these cars. The services were free, the car owner just had to pay for the oil or fluids or parts (such as filters) – and have the understanding that these were students working on their cars.

In the wood and metal shop classes, the assigned projects were more complicated, requiring more skill to make. Jack possessed the skill to make the projects as it turned out he was rather gifted with his hands. He was adequate in the auto shop, but not quite gifted. He understood the concepts of how engines worked, but he was not a talented diagnostician. However, he could change the oil and fluids and do the mechanical work fine. It seemed that some of the Lakewood kids weren't pleased with Jack's talents, though.

There were days that Jack would show up to his various shop classes and his wood project would have a scrape across it or gouge out of it, or his metal project would have new, sloppy welds on it that he didn't do or dents in it, or the car he was working on would suddenly have issues that it didn't have before. This was very frustrating for Jack, as he would essentially have to start over on the piece of affected wood or metal. As for the auto shop, the teacher was losing faith in him, not believing that someone else was "sabotaging" the car. The teacher just assumed Jack didn't know what he was doing and was screwing up. Eventually, Jack was assigned as a "buddy" to someone else instead of working on his own vehicle. This was a huge embarrassment to him and the ones to whom he was assigned didn't appreciate having him assigned to them. His grade in auto shop was commensurately affected by this turn of events. His grades in wood shop and metal shop also

suffered due to the sabotage since he was not able to finish those projects before their deadlines.

What was worse still was that none of Billy, Randy, or David had anything to say about any of the sabotage of his projects. None of their projects were ever damaged when they came in; only his were. None of them ever seemed to shy away from or slink away from him like they thought that ‘they might be next’ for being sabotaged either. It was all very confusing to Jack. He didn’t suspect that any of them were doing the sabotaging of his projects, but they also didn’t seem to care much about who was sabotaging his projects and weren’t about to get involved in any way.

The last straw for Jack and his school career came during finals week in May. When it came time to present his final project in Wood Shop, it was discovered that someone had spray painted the word “Loser” across the top of the table he made. It was a very nice table that would have earned him a grade of ‘A’ for the course otherwise. The teacher showed absolutely no mercy and deemed the project a failure despite Jack having no control over his project being ruined by a saboteur. Jack quit high school that day.

Samantha was livid when she found out what had happened. She was livid at Jack for not having told her about all the events throughout the year and for quitting before taking the rest of his final exams. She was also livid at the Wood Shop teacher for obviously being so callous about the situation and failing Jack for what was so obviously out of his control; if anything, that teacher should be penalized for not having control over his classroom! Finally, she was livid at how other students could

treat someone so badly. What could make them go out of their way to make someone else's life worse? Had Jack done anything to provoke them? Even if he had, this still fell on the teacher to resolve before those students could retaliate in this manner.

Samantha contacted the school to set up a meeting with the Principal. She had to lose a day of work for this meeting, and she was not pleased. The Wood Shop teacher was called into the meeting where everything was discussed, accusations were thrown, defensive postures were assumed, and overall tones were not friendly. In the end, it was agreed that Jack would be allowed to refinish the surface of the table he made to remove the word "Loser" and resubmit it for grading. He would also be allowed to make up all missed final exams due to his walking out.

Samantha had done this without telling Jack. When she did tell Jack, he wanted no part of it. His mind was made up. He was done with school and there was no way he was going back ever again. He and Samantha had a long, drawn-out argument over this. In the end, Jack did go back and refinish the table and received the lowest passing grade the teacher could give him on it. The table was well constructed and finished, but there were such hard feelings that there was no way a fair grade was going to be given on that project. Jack also completed his other final exams. He officially finished tenth grade and was promoted to the eleventh grade. He meant what he said, though, and dropped out.

Jack found work as an apprentice doing framing and finishing work with a construction company that summer. They told him he had to buy his own tools and gave him a list of what he needed. Fortunately, he had enough still saved up from his allowance to cover this cost and the cost of proper clothing and he was ready for work within a couple of days.

They taught him what to do and he caught on quickly. The work was hot, the hours were grueling, and the pay was a pittance. He was up before dawn every day and came home at dinnertime exhausted and drenched in sweat. He showered before dinner, ate, and went to his room without much to say.

At work, he was warned not to loan out any of his tools. Being young and trusting, though, he thought the older guys were just being cynical. Once he lost a few tools to guys who borrowed them and then who then disappeared without returning them, he learned not to loan out his tools. It doesn't take too many times of having to replace expensive tools to become defensive about them.

Jack learned a lot about the ins-and-outs of how to install floorboards, put up wall frames, attach drywall, and even do some of the finish work. He just wished the job paid more than it did. He knew there was no way he could make an independent living from what he was making now. He was still sixteen and too young to live independently, but he kept looking to the future impatiently.

The company Jack worked with did construction jobs all over the area. Most of the work centered on the Lakewood area, but had jobs in Glencoe, Sparta, Napoleon, and Warsaw as well. Most people were building homes and businesses in

Lakewood, though, to be closer to the shopping amenities and the train depot. Construction was still going strong during that time, so Jack had security working with that company, even though he was only sixteen.

Near the end of the summer, Samantha began to be nosy about Jack's plans. Jack told her adamantly that he was not going back to school. Samantha was dismayed by this, but what could she do? Jack was legally able to drop out of school if he so chose. For the time being, all she could do was to let this play out.

At first, the company assumed Jack was just working there for the summer. They used this as an excuse to call him a "summer intern" and pay him only \$1.25/hour. Once Jack made it clear that he wasn't going back to school, a position was found to keep him on. Jack was a great worker, and they didn't want to lose him. Jack's pay was raised to minimum wage, which at that time was \$1.60/hour. This made Jack happier, and he thought maybe things were finally turning around for him – again.

Jack, like his father, was very frugal, and he didn't spend very much of his money. He put almost all the money he earned into a savings account that he opened at the local bank. Since he didn't know anyone socially or have much in the way of creature comfort needs, he didn't really have anything to spend the money on anyway.

He got to know some of the guys at the worksites, but just like at school, he kept his private life to himself. He didn't need any more 'friends' because he knew all too well how his 'friends' just betray and abandon him. He was friendly enough to them;

he just didn't share any details of his own life; he just listened to what they had to say about theirs. It was fine with them anyway since most people only want to talk about themselves while others just listen.

Since Jack was only sixteen, the older guys couldn't even invite Jack along after work to go have a beer. Again, this was perfectly fine with Jack since, first, he didn't want to get too close to anyone anymore, and second, he didn't need any more experience with beer. The last encounter was enough to last him a while.

Jack was beginning to get bored in the evenings and on the weekends, though. One Saturday evening in mid-September after dinner, he decided to drive to Lakewood to check out the cruising scene. He knew the kids there had a 'strip' that started at the automotive repair shop parking lot on the east side of downtown. Kids would then head northwest around the town square and out Route 16 to the parking lot of the plastic widgets factory across from the Drive-In. There, they would either congregate for a while or just turn around in the lot and head back to town to make the loop again. Kids who didn't drive, or didn't have friends who drove, would hang out in the town square just to be part of 'the scene'. Police would drive through every so often just to ensure that things remained under control.

Jack had a pretty nice car, so he was hoping that he would fit in enough that maybe some girls would notice him. After all, this was the only reason he was going there. He certainly wasn't looking for friends. His old appetite was returning; it had been over a year since his time with Michelle.

That first Saturday evening that he went, he made some loops around the strip, and got some looks, but that was about all. He saw enough to size up the situation, though. There were enough girls cruising in groups by themselves that he might have a chance, with a little more persistence and some luck.

Jack tried again the following Saturday evening, this time making a little more noise with his engine to get noticed when he went by groups of girls that looked interested. As he was going one way on the strip and a group of girls were going the other, they called out to meet them at the factory parking lot. He nodded and made his way there. He got there first, so he went to a place a little further back and parked. He got out and sat on the hood of his car.

Suddenly, a car came roaring into the parking lot and skidded to a stop sideways by Jack's car, throwing up rocks as it did so. Two guys got out and approached him.

"Who the hell are you and what are you doin' here?" one of them asked him menacingly.

"I'm no one of your business and I'm doin' nothin' of your business," Jack replied calmly. Jack didn't move a muscle from where he was. This seemed to unnerve the two guys a little.

That didn't last long, though. Just as they decided to start moving in again, though, the car with the group of girls in it pulled into the parking lot and started honking their horn. They drove over to where Jack was parked and started getting out.

"Hey! He don't mean nothin'! We told him to meet us here," one of the girls said to the guys threatening Jack. "You guys just go on and git outta here."

The guys continued to glare at Jack, who continued not to move a muscle and just casually stayed where he was on the hood of his car. Finally, the guys started to make their retreat. Jack then gave them a little wave and a smile. They stopped for a second as though they might act on that, but then they thought better of it and left.

Jack was now 5'11" tall and the summer of working had made him very physically fit. Being the youngest and most inexperienced of the group of workers made him the 'gofer', which also left all the heavy lifting for him. That paid off for him now. It had been a hot day, even though it was mid-late September, and he was still wearing just a tee shirt and jeans. His physique showed easily through the tee shirt.

The girls came up to him, and the one who yelled at the boys to leave spoke to him.

"Hi! I'm Mary," she said brightly.

"I'm Jack," he said back to her with as much charisma as he could muster.

"What grade are you in Jack?" another one of the girls asked him.

"I'm not in any grade," Jack answered her. The girls looked at each other and started whispering to themselves that he must have just graduated. Jack heard this and decided to run with it.

"So, you just got out of school then? You're eighteen?" Mary asked him.

“Yup,” Jack nodded his head. It certainly appeared that being eighteen might get him to third base, but being a dropout most likely wouldn’t.

They stood around talking, and the girls giggling, for a while longer. He found out that Mary was sixteen and a junior this year. He guessed that she didn’t recognize him from school last year because he was a shop rat and they had different sections of Driver’s Ed. He never interacted with anyone in school and kept a low profile, so no one really even knew him. Not to mention, he didn’t look then physically how he looked now.

After a while, though, the girls ended up just getting back into their car and continuing their cruising. Jack wasn’t sure if cruising was just a flirting game, and he was wasting his time or if there could be more to it. This encounter sure seemed like it was a waste of time. He got back into his car and made a few more loops around the strip, but then decided just to call it a night and go on home.

He tried again the next week, this time on Friday instead of waiting until Saturday, holding out hope that he would find someone interested in making out. While he was riding the strip, he saw the group of girls again. The first time around the strip, they didn’t see him, though. Going around again, they did see him and began honking. They told him to meet them in the factory parking lot again.

When they met there again, Mary was interested in riding around the loop with Jack in his car.

“Well, let me see if there’s any room in here for you...,” he said jokingly, feeling all around the passenger seat. Mary giggled at this, which Jack took to be a good sign.

Once inside, both cars drove off, rejoining the strip.

“So, what do you do, now that you’re out of high school?” Mary asked him.

“I do construction work. I do framing, drywall, and some finishin’,” Jack answered.

“Ohhh, that sounds like fun,” Mary said, even though she had no idea what any of that meant.

“It’s brutal in the summer. Not so bad in cooler months, though,” Jack replied.

It was still nice weather, so they were driving with the windows down. As they drove the loop, Mary would see people she knew and yell and wave out the windows to them. They talked and he got to know her a little bit. He dodged most every question she asked him; it was alright – she wasn’t really listening anyway.

As it got a little later, he was about to ask if she wanted to go somewhere to park. She beat him to it and told him that it was time for her to rejoin her friends in their car. On the next loop, she waved them down and told them to meet in the factory parking lot. On the way to the parking lot, though, she wondered if Jack maybe wanted to do something sometime.

Well, it wasn't a total loss, Jack thought. He suggested maybe they go to the Drive-In the next night. They could cruise for a little while beforehand, and then go see the movie afterward.

She thought that was a great idea. When she got out of the car, she told him she couldn't wait to see him tomorrow.

Jack had heard so many stories from 'friends' and the guys at work about what happens at drive-in movies. There wasn't much in the way of watching movies, "if you know what I mean". He was very excited to find out if this was true.

The next evening after dinner, he headed to Lakewood to cruise the strip. They would have about an hour of cruising time before going to the movie. He looped a couple of times before seeing the girls on the strip. They met at the factory parking lot and Mary got out of their car. She was wearing a skirt and button blouse combination and looked really nice. All Jack saw was points of entry for making out.

Jack held the passenger door for her as she got in and then they rejoined the strip for some more cruising. After an unknown number of loops and Mary yelling and waving out the window at everyone she knew, it was finally time to go to the Drive-In. Instead of turning left into the factory parking lot to turn around, he turned right into the Drive-In's entrance queue to purchase their tickets.

He didn't even know or care what movie was showing that evening, he was only interested in one aspect of that evening. He knew he would have to take it slow and not "go for it" right away. He would have to wait and see how she started to play it before he decided what to do. He just hoped he wouldn't be strung along, kind of how he felt last night.

He guided the car into a space toward the back instead of nearer to the front. Mary had a quizzical look on her face but didn't

say anything. Jack thought that didn't bode well for the evening. While the advertisements played on the screen, she kind of looked at him questioningly.

"Do I have something in my teeth?" he asked, not understanding her look.

"Aren't you going to ask if I want any refreshments like popcorn or anything?" she said, kind of with a pout.

"Oh...", he said, "Right. I haven't been to a Drive-In before. It never even occurred to me to think about that since we didn't walk past the concession stand."

He thought that was a good recovery – and it was the truth, too. Plus, it helped with the explanation of his choice of parking spot.

"Would you like to walk up to the concession stand and see what they have to offer?" he asked, trying to be charming.

"Why yes I would," she replied genially. "Thank you."

The drive-in had a building near the back-middle of its parking lot that housed the concession stand, the projector room, and restrooms. They walked up to the concession stand and ordered popcorn, drinks, and some candy. They returned to the car and got ready to watch the movie. Jack became worried that they actually were going to watch the movie.

The movie started and they watched, ate popcorn, then ate candy, and drank their sodas. When the movie got to be about halfway over, Jack was losing hope; but then Mary suggested that they get into the backseat so they could sit right next to each other while watching the movie. Jack's car was a manual

transmission, so there was no way for them to be close to each other in the front seat. Jack readily agreed, and they got into the back seat of the car. It was a two-door car, so they had to get out of the car and release the levers on the front seats to be able to slide into the back seat. The back seat sat lower, so they left the front seats leaned forward and closed the doors. Mary snuggled in against Jack's muscular side and arm. She went back to watching the movie. Inwardly, Jack sighed.

A little while later, though, Mary started to move around a little bit, which gave Jack the impression that she wasn't paying all that much attention to the movie. He looked at her and she was looking at him. He decided to lean down and kiss her. She accepted it and so he decided to keep going.

They kissed for a while. He even got her to evolve into open-mouth kissing. It was when he went to begin unbuttoning her blouse that she balked. She told him that she didn't mind kissing him, but she wouldn't do anything else with him. He resigned himself to just kissing her for the remainder of that date.

When the movie was over, they returned to the front seat. He gathered up their trash and took it to one of the provided trash cans and tossed it. He returned to the car, and they exited the Drive-In. She seemed a little embarrassed on the ride home.

"I hope you know that I don't just go around making out with boys," she said, not looking at him.

"Why would I think that?" he asked.

"Because I made out with you on the first date!" she said, more visibly upset.

“I don’t know why you’re getting upset, Mary,” Jack told her. “I’m not looking for anything serious. I’m just lookin’ for a good time. Didn’t we have a good time?”

Mary glared at him.

“That’s all this was to you?” she asked meanly. “A good time?”

“Well, yeah,” Jack said slowly. “I’m really sorry if you thought it was any more than that...”

“Yeah, well, me too,” Mary pouted and turned to look out the window.

“Come on, as flirty as you girls were being on the strip, what did you expect?” Jack asked defensively.

Now Mary wasn’t talking at all. When they got to Mary’s house, she just got out of his car and slammed the door. Jack waited until she got into the house before he drove away. He then drove back to Glencoe wondering if all the girls in small towns were like Mary, and there just weren’t going to be any girls like Michelle around here.

Even with these doubts, Jack still went back to Lakewood the following weekend to cruise. He made a few loops and then saw the same car full of girls again. They honked and told him to meet him at the factory parking lot. He was worried this time. Were they just going to yell at him about how he treated their friend? Worse, would they have those guys there to “take care of him” after all now? He decided he would take up an easy get away position in the parking lot so as not to get boxed in, “just in case”.

The girls got to the lot first this time and there didn't appear to be anyone else lying in wait for him, so he pulled close to them, but still angled his car so that he could get out of the parking lot in a hurry, if need be. He got out and another girl he hadn't met yet got out of the other car. Mary wasn't in the car this time.

"Hey," she said, kind of in sultry voice, which took Jack off-guard.

"Hey, yourself," Jack replied, looking at her warily.

"My name's Jane," she said. "I hear you wanna have a good time, but don't wanna get bogged down into any commitments. That right?"

"Yeah," Jack said. "That about sums it up."

"Let's go for a ride," she told him and started walking toward his car.

He went to open her car door, but she waved him away. He went around to the driver's side, got in, and they rejoined the strip. Jack found out that Jane Kaplan was a senior this year and was accepted to Ohio State University for the following fall semester. She intended to live on campus, and she wanted to get some 'experience' here before she went there. She didn't want to come off as a hick girl who didn't know what to do. Jack told her he was from the north side of Cincinnati, and he really was afraid that all the girls down here were just that.

It turned out that he didn't have much to work with, though; Jane didn't have any real experience from past encounters. The farthest she had made it in the past was open-mouth kissing.

He was willing to go slowly with her and be patient in going forward since he knew a payoff was coming. Over the next few months, Jack was a very happy boy.

By the time Jack's birthday rolled around in 1969, he had gotten Jane all the way to "third base" on a regular basis. Now, it was just a matter of potentially taking that final step. Jane had mentioned it a few times, but just wasn't sure. Jack knew *he* was and even tried to pressure her a bit in that regard. Jack kept plenty of condoms handy in the glove box of the car, with high hopes that Jane would make the leap one of these days.

Both of Jane's parents were from Cincinnati and they moved to Lakewood to get away from the city and raise their family in a quiet, peaceful setting. They ended up having only one child and they spent at least two Saturday afternoons and evenings per month in Cincinnati visiting friends and family. This helped to make things easier – and warmer! – for Jack and Jane to get together when it got really cold outside.

Jane had also kept to her end of the deal. She hadn't become the least bit clingy or nosy about his life, who he was, his interests, nothing. She had no interest in 'going out' with him anywhere or in him meeting anyone she knew, especially not her parents. The whole thing really was just about getting experience with the physical side of 'things' before she went off to college.

Using his upcoming birthday as an excuse paid off. Jane finally agreed to go all the way with Jack the weekend before his birthday. Jack took an extra-long shower that morning before he went to Lakewood.

Her parents went to Cincinnati for the day and evening, leaving Jane home to ‘study’. Jane was very nervous about this whole thing but was determined to go through with it. She got several towels out from the linen closet and placed them by the bed. She wasn’t sure if there was anything else she needed to do.

Jack arrived and brought in a few condoms with him.

“Just how many condoms do you think you need?” she asked him.

“Well, you never know,” he said with a smile. “You might decide you like it and want to do it again.”

She laughed nervously but wasn’t really sure what that meant. They began their usual making out and it progressed as usual. When the time came, they both got fully undressed, and Jack unwrapped one of the condoms. He had practiced a few times how to put one of them on – it was more complicated than it looked! He put the condom on while she laid the towels across her bed in the appropriate place, and then they slipped back under the covers.

They continued to make out for a while to get excited again and then they went all the way. Even with the condom on, Jack didn’t last all that long. It was a good thing for Jane anyway; it was painful, and she bled some onto the towels. Neither one of them found a second condom necessary that day.

Jane needed to get the towels soaking to get the blood out of them and Jack needed to take his ‘trash’ with him so there was no evidence that anything had happened that day. Jack did his best to reassure her that things would improve; this was just how it was the first time. Jane said that, yes, she had expected

that she might bleed some, she was just hoping that she wouldn't.

They did go all the way a few more times over the next month and a half, but then Jane decided that she was finished with what she needed from Jack. She felt that she had the hang of 'the experience' and could make her way around now, whatever way that might be. Jack was caught off-guard by the suddenness of its ending, but he realized he shouldn't have been, given how it started.

Of late, Jack had begun reflecting on the emptiness of the relationship anyway. Given that, he couldn't say he was sad that it was over. He would simply miss the physical satisfaction that it provided. He was finally reaching a place within himself where the emotional hurt wasn't as bad as it had been, and he might be willing to try having a 'real' relationship again. It just might be nice if it had a physical component to go along with it...

Jack remembered the date with Mary and how upset she was with how it ended. Should he try to pursue a relationship with her again? This time, he would treat her as a person instead of an object and get to know her. *Try A Little Tenderness* by Three Dog Night kept playing in his head. All this, of course, assumed that she would even be willing to speak to him again.

Now that the weather was getting nicer again, the cruising scene was picking up again. Jack started making the loops again to see if Mary and her friends were driving around. It took a couple of weeks before Jack saw Mary in one of the vehicles with her girlfriends. He honked to get their attention and asked them to meet him in the factory parking lot.

He got there first and waited. The girls showed up and Mary got out of the car.

“What do you want, Jack?” Mary said unkindly.

“I was hopin’ you and me could talk, Mary,” Jack replied.

“What could we possibly have to talk about?” she huffed.

“About maybe havin’ a real relationship instead of that messed up thing I said the last time we were together,” Jack offered.

Mary’s stance softened considerably when she heard this, but her tone was still unbelieving.

“Why should I believe that you’ve changed suddenly?” Mary asked him. “Especially after all these months have gone by?”

“I’ve had time to think it over,” Jack told her honestly. “I’ve learned that you’re right, and it was really wrong of me to treat you that way.”

“Well, I suppose we could ride together and talk about it...,” Mary said.

Jack opened his passenger door, Mary got in, and they went cruising for a while. There was no mention of making out. Jack knew better than that. He just wanted to spend this time getting to know her better to see if he even liked her. On the whole, he liked her well enough.

Jack and Mary began dating shortly after that. School was out for the summer about a month after they started dating, but Jack still worked full time, so it didn’t really affect how much they saw each other. Jack could still only come to Lakewood

on either Friday or Saturday evenings, or even during the day on the weekend if something special was going on.

Mostly, their dates consisted of cruising and going to the Drive-In. Once in a while, they would go to Paul's Frozen Treats for some ice cream and sit on a bench in the town square while watching others cruising on the strip. Mary was not a deep person, and everything could be seen right there at the surface. One did not usually have to guess what was on her mind, and even then, that answer would be not much of anything.

This didn't bother Jack that much, though. He was just happy to have someone to be with and share time with. Mary was almost always happy, which helped Jack with his outlook on things. She never dug in about his life, she was always preoccupied with talking about her stuff. Jack didn't mind listening; he spent too many years with too much silence around him. They did make out some, but just barely to second base.

One Friday evening in July, while picking Mary up for a date, Jack was invited into the living room. Mary's father was there reading the newspaper. He was grumbling about everything going on, and wrong, in Vietnam.

"Ain't you worried about getting' drafted kid?" he asked Jack.

"No, why?" Jack answered.

"Well, why the hell not?" the old man asked indignantly. "If I was your age, I'd be worryin' my ass off!"

"I'm too young, sir", Jack said and then realized his error.

“What?!? Mary said you were out of high school and workin’ full time!” the old man yelled.

Mary came into the room to see what was going on.

“What’s all this commotion?” she asked.

“This boy says he’s too young to be drafted!” Mary’s father said pointedly. To Jack, he said, “Just how old are you then?”

“Seventeen,” Jack said, looking away.

“Seventeen?!?” Mary asked, looking at Jack. “How can that be? You have a full-time job and haven’t been in school for over a year!”

“I thought you said he graduated high school year before last!” her father said, his face going red.

“That’s what he told me!” Mary said, now very upset. “What’s the truth, Jack?”

“I dropped out of school after tenth grade,” Jack replied. “A little while before I first met you. You guys just assumed that, because I had a full-time job, I graduated high school.”

“You said you were eighteen!” Mary spat back at him.

“Yes, I did lie about that, and I’m sorry,” Jack said.

“I think you need to be leaving, son,” the old man said and pointed toward the door.

And that was the abrupt end of his time with Mary.

July 1969 was not a good month for Jack; not only did he lose Mary, but he also lost his job. At a job site in Warsaw, Jack and another worker were unloading 4'x8' sheets of drywall down a ramp from the back of a truck. Jack was walking in front and the other guy was walking behind. At some point, the guy behind tripped on something, pushing the weight of the drywall forward, which in turn caused Jack to tumble forward and to the side. This caused Jack to step hard off the ramp of the truck, which twisted his knee badly.

This injury was pretty much permanent. Jack could no longer lift and carry heavy loads, especially not all day long. His career in construction was over. Jack had a month's long recovery at home on the couch, not really being able to move due to his swollen knee. Even after that, it would be a very long time before he could walk again without limping. Fortunately, he was able to put enough weight onto it to be able to drive (operate the clutch) after the initial month's rest.

During the month off, Jack was back to contemplating the age-old question of "what did I do to deserve this?". *It seemed that the Universe was back to kicking him in the teeth again. It seemed as though every time the Universe began to ignore him, and things were going alright again, it suddenly remembered he existed and refocused its horrible intentions on him again.*

Jack now had to figure out what to do with himself. Doing manual labor was all he knew. He certainly wasn't going back to school, no way in hell was he going back to school. It was a good thing Jack had built up quite a bit of savings. Not that he needed much to live on since he still lived at home, but he still needed money for gas, etc.

Once he recovered enough to drive, he started going back to Lakewood to begin cruising again. He figured he needed to start looking for a replacement for Mary. He cruised the strip for several weeks without success. Some girls flirted with him from passing cars, but that was about it.

On a particular Saturday evening in September, he decided to park in the factory parking lot and just sit for a while. He wasn't sure why or what would happen, but he just had a feeling that he should. He parked facing the factory. That's when he saw the "Now Hiring" sign on the side of the building.

He wondered what kinds of jobs they were hiring for and if he would be qualified, and even able now, for any of them. He told himself he would come back first thing on Monday morning to investigate this opportunity. Shortly after, another muscle car came into the lot and pulled up by Jack's car. Jack prepared for the worst.

"Hey, nice wheels, man!" a kid in the other car said admiringly.

"Thanks," Jack said, "Yours is cool, too."

"We've been seein' you around but haven't gotten to talk to you yet," the kid said. "My name's Jeff."

"Hey. I'm Jack," Jack replied, still a little wary.

"We were wonderin' why you never come out to the campground to hang out and party with everyone?" Jeff asked.

"I didn't know about it," Jack replied, now very interested. "Where is it?"

“On the northeast side of town, between Concord Road and Ten Mile Creek,” Jeff said. “We can show you how to get there, if you want.”

“Yeah, sure,” Jack said.

“You obviously aren’t twenty-one, so it helps if you chip in some money so Mike can go get everyone some beer,” Jeff said.

Jack didn’t know what to say next. He didn’t want to think about his experience with alcohol, but he also didn’t want to lose this opportunity. He realized he could still chip in the money but didn’t have to drink the beer and still get to hang out with people. He might even get to meet some girls this way.

“Sure, how much does Mike need?” Jack asked.

“People usually chip in couple a bucks – enough for a six-pack,” Jeff replied.

Jack nodded and said he would follow Jeff to the campground. Jack was also still on guard in case this was some kind of ambush. The entire way, Jack made sure to watch for anything that looked suspicious and ways to make an escape, should it become necessary. Once they reached the campground, he saw he had nothing to worry about.

There were other kids there of varying ages, enough of them twenty-one and over to make it easy to get alcohol for everyone. Jeff introduced Jack to a few people, including some girls, and then to Mike. Jack gave him a couple of dollars to cover the cost of a six-pack of beer.

Jack was still limping during this time, which helped with the sympathy vote from the girls. He explained about his work injury and got lots of attention. Someone gave him a beer and, at first, he was going to refuse it, but everyone else had a beer. The girls all had beers in their hands, and he really wanted their attention. *It's funny the things you blame the Universe for that you do to yourself...*

Jack drank the beer very slowly. He still got a buzz from it anyway. He didn't get anywhere with any of the girls, though. They were just there to have a good time, not get hooked up with anyone; at least those girls weren't. He hung out long enough for the buzz to start wearing off before he left. Fortunately, he had some gum in the car to chew on for the ride home.

That Monday morning, Jack drove to the factory in Lakewood to inquire about the job openings. It turned out they had a job opening as a tool and die press operator and it was a seated position that Jack would be able to do. The seated position would keep pressure off his knee while it continued to heal – as much as it was going to anyway. It paid more than minimum wage, so that was even better than Jack had before his accident. Jack was able to start the job later that week.

Even with the good turn of events in getting this better job, Jack just couldn't help but tempt fate. He kept going back to the cruise scene in Lakewood on the weekends looking for girls, and when that didn't pan out, he headed to the campground to party. He was getting comfortable drinking beer. It wasn't giving him such a buzz anymore when he drank

it. Every once in a while, a girl would be there who would be willing to go off and make out for a little while, but never too much. She would always want to get back to the party pretty quickly. The alcohol was also making Jack much more comfortable talking to the guys at the parties. He mostly still just listened to what they had to say, but when came to talking about cars, girls, or anything mechanical, Jack would become much more interactive.

Jack stayed out later and later at these parties until they stopped happening after the second week of November. After that, it was just too cold to hang out. It was fortunate for Jack that the parties stopped happening; he was on a collision course with fate. He was starting to drive drunk, and he was aggressive when he was really intoxicated.

The rest of the year and early into the following year were fairly uneventful. Jack didn't drink any more, didn't find any more girls, and just went to work like he was supposed to. Even the holidays came and went without any drama.

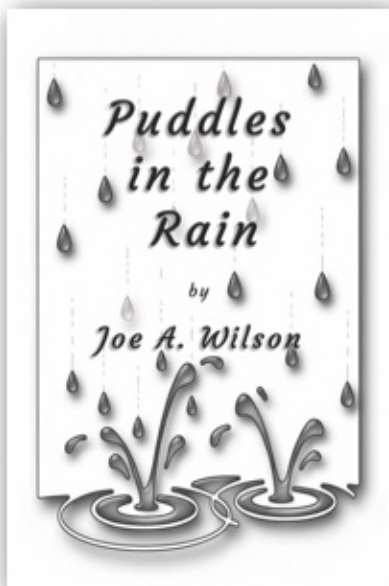
Shortly after his birthday, Jack registered with the Selective Service System as was required of all men turning eighteen. Of course, being Jack, he received a letter from the draft board in early April stating that he would report to Lexington for induction into the Army. Jack was beside himself with fear and despair. Yet again came the question, "what did I do to deserve this?".

Jack drove to Lexington on the proscribed date. The song *Kentucky Rain* by Elvis Presley played on the radio, just making him feel even worse. He went into the facility with the letter in his hand and filled out the assigned paperwork. When

he was administered the physical examination, he was immediately dismissed as being unacceptable for military service due to his injured knee. He drove back to Glencoe in a daze.

As the weather warmed, Jack resumed going to Lakewood on the weekends in search of girls, cruising the strip, and going to the campground parties. He fell back into the habit of drinking and staying out later and later. Jack began losing control of himself...

Jack stepped through the door into the diner.



Life is more complicated than we can know and things seem to happen for a reason. Jack and Sarah are destined to meet and, eventually, fall in love. There are many hurdles and both are badly wounded romantically before they meet.

Puddles in the Rain

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