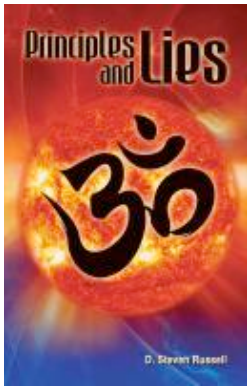


Principles and Lies



D. Steven Russell



Shelby and Lizzie always loved each other. A storm of life tosses their hope in different directions-drugs, abuse, loss. Hope is stronger than the torrent, and life is fairer than its misdirection-because Shelby and Lizzie always loved each other.

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ISBN 978-1-62646-445-2

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

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

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Booklocker.com, Inc. 2013

First Edition

Principles and Lies

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Chapter 1

Principles?

Shelby was thinking of how principles maintain a dishonest world where people know little about themselves or their fellow man.

First, he thought, "If a boy with a pellet gun shoots a bird, is the principle that the pellet killed the bird, or that a boy with a pellet gun can kill a bird? Perhaps the principle is that birds die. Perhaps it is something else." He was confused.

"Maybe principles are woven into the fabric of life." He really did not understand principles at all. And, so, he tried to understand just a few.

He thought, "People do not honestly share what they are thinking about beauty, sex, desire, or even everyday events. No one truly knows how he or she is perceived, or even something as simple as whether someone wants to have sex with him. Yet people live their lives in this manner."

Shelby saw that these deceptions cause most humans to live their lives in lies, circling as hungry buzzards, removed from honest, living human experience.

He tried inductive reasoning with negative logic.

Principle One: Shelby was in the yard watching his neighbor, Kelli, installing car seats for her children. He was neighborly:

"Gees, Kelli, I feel sorry for you, having to lug those seats to your mother's car everyday before you go to work."

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Kelli responds: “I only do it once a week. I work on Thursdays.”

Shelby was deceived by the assumption that Kelli did this task every working day, when in fact she only did it once a week.

Because he was in the yard smoking within 30 minutes of the same time each day, he believed that she loaded the car seats everyday: *It is what one does not see about what another does not do that deceives.*

Principle Two: Lizzie was beautiful and smart, but believed herself to be ugly and average.

Shelby saw her beauty, but failed to share his thoughts. Everyone thought it understood that Lizzie was beautiful. Thus, Shelby soon found his beautiful girl on the arm of a sleazy guy. Only a sleaze ball was brash enough to ask her out—and needed a trophy. Shelby failed to tell the girl that she was beautiful, and the girl did not see her beauty: *It is also what one does see about what another does not see that deceives.*

Thus began Shelby’s story. He would become adolescent-average, become dashing, become ugly, become solid, retry ugly, and then become handsome, wise, and strong.

Following principles, Shelby had a crush on Lizzie in high school but, being average, lacked the courage to ask her out. Soon she wore the ring of a dope-smoking sleaze ball.

In college, when Shelby was dashing and lost, he lacked the courage to ask Lizzie out. Thus, she moved in with a dope-snorting sleaze ball.

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When Shelby was recovering from being the dope-snorting sleaze ball, he finally asked Lizzie out, but she was married and—ever the woman of integrity—working on a hopeless relationship.

When Shelby was handsome, successful, clean & sober, he saw Lizzie but lacked the courage to capture her.

He reasoned, “There are infinite principles, but the essence of life is a bending of perception and truth. The world is 98.6% deceived by what people see, do not see, and by what they share honestly or dishonestly. Even what people *do* is a lie; but what people *do* remains.

This is the foundation of a truth. Is truth the makeup of principles?”

Chapter 2

Innocence

THE CIRCLE JERK: Young males—not all, because some lack the courage—have a ritual called the “*circle jerk*.” This ritual is before males ejaculate white semen, yet after they have learned to masturbate.

It is not a gay activity when done in sufficient numbers—five or more. When done in even numbers, one may argue that it is a mating ritual and not a circle jerk.

The circle jerk is an adolescent bonding experience, preceding manly hunter-seeker roles. The raw honesty of circle jerks is the inner core of the onion of sexual truth.

If, for example, two youth masturbate together, it is likely definitely a gay experiment and, therefore, a search for truth. However, two boys could not form a circle and are thus limited to a *line jerk*, a *limited arch jerk*, or a *facing jerk* (which might well be purely gay). There is no *line*, *limited arch*, or *facing jerk*, only the *circle jerk*. Three males would be a *triangle jerk*. This is also not a *circle jerk*. Less than five members precludes a circle jerk. Less members equates to more risk and more sexual honesty.

Why is this important? It is important because the circle jerk is an innocent form of honesty that is soon lost and defaulted into the principle of hiding thoughts and matters.

When boys become young men and begin dunking baskets and shooting white semen, they begin the tough-guy male phase. The circle jerk is mentioned no more. It remains hidden behind the masks of manhood. Adolescent manhood is the essence of all future relationships and creates a need for demonstrative female relationships. Sexually, men are always adolescents.

Shelby participated in circle jerks. He even tried one facing jerk, but quickly discovered that he preferred private masturbation, thinking of girls. Lizzie brought out his hormones yet began his fear of women. He masturbated incessantly and thought of Lizzie. She masturbated occasionally and thought of Shelby.

Shelby was shy, as was Lizzie and, so, each had no romantic reaching-out toward the other.

Lizzie was attracted to Shelby, but concluded that a “nice popular guy” could never be attracted to an ugly duckling, average girl like her. Therefore, their relationship stood on the lie of mutual attraction, hidden beneath unspoken truths and masks of insecurity. It was not yet a full-blown lie—it was a puppy lie.

Their favorite time was in library sessions where Miss Moorhead “monitored” them as they “studied” between classes. There, they would whisper and giggle—bumping knees—to discover the world between each other’s ears and legs.

“Did you know that light has a film around it like water?”

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"No." Lizzie looked at Shelby, quite impressed that he knew that.

"Yes, and if one immerses himself in a beam of light big enough, he can be on the moon in less than two seconds. He's in a space suit, of course."

"Noooo. That's bullshit, Shelby."

"No. It's true. And in fact they have sent a man to the moon using this technology. It's top secret."

"Then how do you know it?"

"I have a cousin at NASA who told me. Moreover, he told me that as soon as the light beam detects shadows—like in a crater—it shuts off and lands the guy on the moon. There was one problem with it though."

"What? She believed him now."

"When the beam hit a shadow of the crater it shut off and dropped him. He fell into the crater and they haven't found him yet. He was likely splattered from a thousand foot fall."

"Wouldn't they have thought of that?"

"Engineering error. You know how they blow up rockets and shit."

"That's a shame."

"Isn't it? I guess they'll find him on our next flight to the moon."

"I hope so. His poor family." She was teary eyed.

"Gotcha!"

"You asshole!" She slapped his arm. "You are such an asshole."

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She laughed and Miss Moorhead scowled at them, wagging her finger. They acted as if they were studying.

There was a hormonal tug in their giggles. Each thought the other to be brilliant and creative, but neither told the other specifically. Each thought that the friend already knew that. Thus, the lie of intellectual feedback planted and grew.

Lizzie assumed that her strength was that of fun *personality* and not *intelligence*. Shelby thought the same about himself. Each of them, thus, believed that they were faking intelligence, and so, the headlights of personality glowed brighter as confidence waned.

Behind this light was a growing vacuum and a desire to hear someone say, "You are SO smart and I want to have sex with you NOW." Unfortunately, that line would pull Lizzie to Vic Gorkin, sleaze ball. No one would tell Shelby that *he* was smart or manly, so, he settled for dating "sweet" girls. He always wanted Lizzie.

"So, Lizzie, what's shakin?" It was Vic disrupting another session of library talks.

"Hey, Lizzie, me and a few other kids are going to the Crossroads Bar on Friday and I wanted you to go. They have a great band. We can boogie. Besides, you're the sexiest girl in school." She looked disgusted and interested. Vic was a master of flattery.

She looked at Shelby for a counteroffer, but he sat, red faced. She looked disappointed and hurt and, then, said yes.

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“See ya Shelly.” Vic looked at him like he was the biggest pussy in school.”

“It’s *Shelby*.”

“Ok, Shelly. See you girls later.”

Vic walked off, and thus began Lizzie’s sleaze ball relationship with alcoholic Vic. Oh, but he was fun—for a while.

Shelby and Lizzie were in the same chemistry and history classes. Vic was in those classes also. Vic was paired-up with Lizzie in chemistry, so, over time, she became more disruptive and more of an outcast.

Shelby knew that this was not Lizzie’s nature, but Vic convinced her of his rebel IQ—as he blew up the back of the chemistry lab.

Perhaps Vic had that “rebel IQ” and perhaps it was the ultimate sword of a hunter-seeker, but the boy was a flaming asshole. Shelby put out the burning chemistry lab.

Shelby remained a faithful friend to Lizzie, by way of glances, but found his mate dinosaur-boned and absconded by Vic’s possessive jealousy. Their high school friendship was over.

Chapter 3

Bounce

Shelby went to the University of Kansas on a basketball scholarship. Lizzie went to Xavier in New Orleans. Both had academic scholarships.

Shelby was a point guard. He was about 6' 3", but quick, strong, and balanced. He could dunk a basketball with ease.

He would play as a KU freshman because he was that good. Schools like UNC, Kentucky, and Duke had recruited him as well.

He never drank beer in high school, but that would change in Lawrence. He never smoked pot in high school, but that would change in Lawrence. He never had sex in high school, but that would change in Lawrence.

Lizzie, on the other hand, had Vic. She had too much beer, pot, and sleazy sex in high school. That lifestyle continued.

Vic, of course, never went to college, but hung around New Orleans to hang on Lizzie. She was his trophy.

He dropped out of technical school and was fired as a mechanic. His cousin's heating and air business was his salvation, and his cousin was a dealer/sleaze ball as well. They were a pair made in heaven—no, not heaven.

Lizzie wanted to move on and find a nice college guy, but Vic would not allow it. She was conquered.

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Ultimately, she would move in with Vic and take daily verbal abuse about being the “smart little college bitch who thinks she’s too good for ole Vic.”

He began beating her. He would bring her supermarket flowers and cheap jewelry to make up for abuse. It soon covered her as dust bunnies on a precious flower. As she wore cheap perfume, snipped dead flowers, covered bruises, and put on cheap earrings, her self-esteem looked and smelled like Vic.

At Kansas, Shelby had moved into Jayhawk Towers with a guy named Brad. Both were good students, though both grew an affinity for Wednesday and Friday night beer specials. Saturday was a no-brainer. They would do the routine college stuff, like have guzzling contests, whereupon both would go home puking and laughing. Shelby’s other basketball teammates seemed to be more disciplined.

When Brad came home with a bag of weed and some coke, Shelby quickly refused to participate. However, on a particularly bad day on the Hill, and after a practice where the coach ate his ass, he helped smoke a joint and did a line of coke. From there, he was off to the races.

Soon, he was not playing much and ultimately became a benchwarmer.

The season was half through when the coach suggested that, “It just doesn’t appear that we have the same goals, and Kansas basketball doesn’t appear to be for you.”

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Shelby dug deeper into the drugs. He was crushed. His dreams were shattered. He did not give a shit about academics or higher education; he wanted to play basketball for KU, and that dream was over.

He stopped going to classes and became a laugh-a-minute guy. His roommate followed a similar lifestyle. The laughs were now at meth and crack houses or solo in their smoky apartment. They ultimately entertained one another with spontaneous drug-talk.

“Did you ever see a rat’s tail?”

“Yeah, man.”

“What’d you think of it?”

“It looked like a rat’s tail, man.”

“Did you ever think that a small snake and a rat had mated?”

“No, man. That’s not gonna happen.”

“I dunno. It seems possible to me.”

“No way, man.”

This was the level of conversation that filled night and day until they finally passed out, one, two, or three days later.

Shelby thought of Lizzie constantly and thought of calling her, but was too ashamed after losing his basketball scholarship. This was his biggest concern and his biggest resentment, not the fact that his life was on a fast train to hell.

When semester grades came in, the Dean’s office called and said, “It just doesn’t appear that we have the same goals, and a Kansas academic scholarship doesn’t appear to be for you.”

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Shelby was finished. He transferred to a small community college where he quickly found the same answers from those in charge.

He moved to Kansas City and got a job in a small shop as a mechanic's helper. That lasted about as long as his fifth miss from work. Then they suggested, "It just doesn't appear that we have the same goals, and working at this shop doesn't appear to be for you."

Drugs were easier to get in KC and so was debt. He could not pay his rent and soon found himself on the street.

Shelby pawned his possessions and moved into a fleabag hotel. His dealers were also less than friendly when it came to selling him free dope, so he was in big trouble. Shelby could not see a means to feed his habit and contemplated suicide. He couldn't do it yet, though, and began a series of slick maneuvers to hustle money and coke. He affirmed that meth was cheaper and that it worked as a poor man's coke. It lasted for several hours per line, not just several minutes.

He was able to work a line of crank every few days, which was better than nothing.

One of his suppliers cooked it in a suburban house and allowed Shelby to move in. The deal was that he would push and deliver meth to users in exchange for a room, drugs, food (though he was rarely hungry), and a delivery car—a 1974 Plymouth Duster. Life was good again.

Chapter 4

Dealing

Shelby's dealing friend, Robert, branched into cocaine and became big enough that he was an up-line dealer for other dealers.

Robert trusted Shelby so he allowed him to become the delivery man for meth and coke to dealers. He also allowed him to operate as a street dealer if he wished to make extra cash. Shelby did, though this was much higher risk work.

"So, Shelby, can ya fix me up with a wholesale half-gram?"

"Sure, Muff, I can do that, but you gotta pay this time...and you still owe me a hundred from last time." This negotiation was an every time affair.

"Here's one-fifty, Dog. You can carry me for the new delivery."

"No can do, Man. I need the entire amount or we can't do business."

His friend had warned him about addicts and their guns, but this was Shelby's first encounter.

His client pulled a gun and noted that, "One-fifty is good enough tonight, Dog. We WILL do business for one-fifty."

Shelby left him the meth, knowing that he would not do business again and that he also would begin carrying a gun—and a knife. His roommate arranged that and told Shelby that he had to get the rest of the money, without selling any more product to this particular client.

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“Getting shot or stabbed goes with the business, whether it’s five-grand or fifty bucks, Shelby. You cannot be weak or they’ll fuck you and spread the word, Bro. Gotta be strong.”

Shelby went back to get his money and it got ugly. The guy didn’t have any money and was incensed that Shelby didn’t bring more dope.

“I bought a lotta shit from you, Asshole, and I want some tonight. *TONIGHT*, Shelby. Don’t fuck around with me, man.”

Shelby acted as if he were going to the car for a gram, but came back with a gun.

“Give me the money or we’ll have a problem, Muff.”

Muff didn’t have it, so Shelby left him a gram and took Muff’s gun as payment. Muff didn’t give the gun willingly; Shelby took it. These were the people that he didn’t want to run into around town.

Shelby felt a seed of thorns planting and knew that he was in deep now. He flushed with fear to know that no amends or pussy-presentation would un-burn the bridge, and he knew that other bridges were ahead. But, the alternative was being homeless, so he slept with a lie of principle and pushed on.

Something in him hardened like an eggshell, or perhaps like a steel wall that day. His face hardened that hour and his posture became erect. It was a lie of protection, a thousand times that of lying to Lizzie in the library. He walked like Vic

now. Oh, how he longed for that high school innocence and friendship. He had none left.

Soon Shelby had a problem with the \$5,000 that his roommate had described, but he knew the principle of payment and produced a gun, demanding payment. Dealers were harder than even he, so the dealer quickly produced a knife, stabbed Shelby in the shoulder, took his dope and left him with \$500.

“Now we’re even, Motherfucker. Don’t ever play banker or show me a gun, Asshole. I hate bankers and pussies. You ain’t man enough to shoot me. Heal up while I get more money. We *will* do business again.”

Shelby thickened the wall in his soul while he healed. He didn’t need counsel from his roommate this time. He knew what he had to do.

He continued to deliver product to other dealers and stopped dealing to single buyers. Cops aside, that was just too risky for the money. He healed and hardened. Soon he was strong and “man enough” for a visit.

First, he shot and then he found money. The man lay moaning with a bullet in his shoulder.

“Man enough for you now, ASSHOLE? Thanks for the prompt payment. Your loan is paid in full, but your credit score is bad, so this bank can no longer do business with you.”

“You shot me for \$4,500!?”

“It’s interest on the principle of the matter.”

This scene became a trend. He was braced for nonpayment now, and kept his back to the door

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with a hand near his gun. A knife met with his gun and fists met with his knife, though he learned the power in his own fists and learned to fight like a cougar.

Shelby began to hate this life, though he had a suitcase filled with money now.

No one knew where he and Robert lived and he was careful that no one followed him home to the suburbs.

Robert had a million dollar home and bannered a couple of vans that said “Rock Man Contracting Company” on the sides. It was a legitimate front for a bottomless business.

If someone actually called the number, Robert delivered via a couple of guys that he knew did mediocre work, and he was willing to eat a portion of a poorly done job. He was irritated when too much business came his way and when customers didn’t complain. It was all a distraction to his calling.

When Shelby looked in the mirror one night—a rare occasion—he saw a skeleton with graying teeth. He was horrified as though he had seen a demon, dressed as him. He developed plans to eject from this lifestyle. Robert permitted him to walk away.

He went to United Way, got clean through one of their agencies and, then, used another UW agency to learn the heating and air trade.

He made it through rehab and began courses to become an HVAC technician. The entire thing

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took about seven months—28 days in rehab and six months of coursework.

Then it collapsed. A “friend” called him and asked if he would like to share a gram of cocaine. It was off to the races again.

Soon Shelby found himself using, but not selling. Adventures took him to places that he knew were subterranean life forms, but he rode the dark wave.

One night, for example, he and his friend were at the house of a vet who recently returned from the Army. They were drinking, snorting some coke, and smoking joints.

When the wall phone rang, the vet simply took his .45 and shot it.

Shelby’s memory imprinted two things: First, that of a yellow phone still ringing, painfully, as though it were wounded and, second, the idea that he may well have been perceived as that irritant instead of a phone. The knowing was a mushroom cloud. Nonetheless, he pressed on.

A year passed in the depths of euphoric hell. Shelby felt empty, isolated, and hopeless like never before. Again, he pondered suicide.

He began to run into old customers—some happy, some squawking crows, lions, or hungry buzzards.

He decided to move to St. Louis. He hoped that, there, he might find a change of lifestyle and get a legitimate job in the heating and air business.

He had been lucky enough to keep free of the law and survive—two gunshot scars and three

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knife wounds aside. He also had scars on his chin, nose, and lip from rough banking work. Fortunately, despite his latest-year run, he still had a half-suitcase of cash.

Shelby moved to St. Louis.

Chapter 5

Resurrection

In St. Louis, Shelby found a job as a heating and air technician and began to put his life behind him.

He thought daily of Lizzie and finally called his parents. His family was distraught and thrilled to hear from him. They thought him dead or worse and asked that he come and visit. He declined, preferring only to see if his mother knew Lizzie's number. She did.

He was scared to death, but he called Lizzie. He anticipated a conversation wrapped in the thrill and innocence of high school. It was not.

"Hello."

"Did you know that squirrels sing with the beauty of birds and the meow of baby kittens?"

"Shelby?! Shelby."

"No, it's true. I heard one in my yard the other day. I thought it was an evening bird. Squirrels also use their tails for balance. I always wondered what that fat tail was for."

"Where ARE you?"

"I'm in St. Louis. St. Louis." He felt unworthy and heard fear and defeat in his voice.

"Listen, I *can't* talk. Vic reviews all of the phone bills and will beat me up about this call. I have to go now."

"But, Lizzie..."

"I've gotta go, Shelby. I'm...I'm so sorry. Bye."

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She was gone. The phone sounded like a cemetery at night. The emptiness consumed him and he wanted to use. He was riddled with pain—worse than any gunshot or knife wound. He was powerless and wounded with something beyond thought or words. He wanted her so much.

He tried to call again a few weeks later, but got the same answer.

“I can’t talk, Shelby. I told you that. You’ll get me in a lot of trouble. Vic and I are working on our marriage. We’re working on our marriage. We’re trying to improve our...relationship.” She was gone.

“Marriage?!” Shelby now felt like a soldier in the soil of Gettysburg—shot, forgotten as a life, killed by a frightened man, and buried in an unmarked grave.

Shelby stayed clean and worked diligently as a heating and air guy, slowly regaining his confidence and focus. He thought daily about Lizzie but, out of respect for her, left her alone. He prayed for her happiness.

He attended some AA and NA meetings but found them to be egomaniac, delusional individuals bound by asocial, high school cliques.

Within a year, he enrolled in night school at St. Louis University and began studying Human Resources. His suitcase of residual money seeded that venture.

He soon met a member of the men’s basketball program and played pick-up ball at the YMCA. That was a turn of good fortune.

When Shelby knocked down his fourth straight three-point shot and dunked his third inside drive, his friend suggested that he go out for the SLU *Billikens* team as a walk-on.

He knew that his age and drug use would have beaten his body unmercifully, but found himself in pretty good shape from crawling around in attics and bending tin, so he decided to try it.

The coach took Jeff's word that Shelby was a pretty good player and allowed him to practice with the team. Shelby gratefully warmed the bench while scholarship *kids* started, but he rotated into play and happily stayed the course.

He was taking 19 hours of coursework, practicing, and working full time.

Since the heating and air company specialized in 24/7 commercial installations, Shelby was able to juggle work around his class-and-practice schedules, so found himself only missing sleep.

His mind told him that if a meth-head could do without sleep for days, a strong man could do it easily. It wasn't easy, but it worked. He balanced the schedule, making straight-A's, and getting better at basketball. The coach couldn't help but notice.

Shelby was a humble, likable guy and other players were attracted to that. His leadership qualities caught the coach's eye.

The coach, and his friend Jeff, encouraged him to apply for an academic scholarship, and the coach offered him a basketball scholarship for year two. He got the academic scholarship and took the

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basketball ride. Now he could quit his job. As reserve, he still had a quarter of a suitcase of money.

He moved in with Jeff.

They lived in an athlete's apartment complex where they were fed three balanced meals a day. It was part of the scholarship—ensuring health of the athletes. He was grateful that Jeff was a levelheaded, good man and not a dooper.

One night a couple of the engineering students came in laughing and looking out the window as though they were paranoid. They should be.

It turns out that they built a series of bombs out of cutting-edge chemistry and blew up a county bridge.

"It was fantastic! The damn thing looked like a movie. It creaked, groaned like a sick man and fell like a shot rhino! Dust flew everywhere!" Their eyes were dilated from the experience. It was the biggest natural high that Shelby had ever seen.

"We put a makeshift, spray-painted sign that said '*BRIDGE OUT*' on each side so some poor fucker didn't go airborne—assuming they can read, of course."

"I don't study Political Science, but if I did, I'd guess this will be a case study for the County prioritizing an infrastructure project—it was an old wooden bridge, by the way. For once, it should be simple: 'We need a bridge. So moved...second...unanimous.'"

Including shot phones and a dealer's life, it was the most fucked-up thing Shelby had ever seen.

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These were the same two that would ultimately build advanced weapons systems for Boeing.

His senior year the team was good enough to go to the NCAA Division I Basketball Tournament. Their record—and recognition that they had the 17th hardest schedule in the country—allowed this honor.

Shelby rotated off the bench whenever a guard gave the “tired” fist and when the team needed a crackerjack 3-point shooter. They had named him “Doc” because of his surgical accuracy in hitting 3-point shots.

In round one of the tournament, when they were trailing badly, he came off the bench and hit five of six three-point shots. They won the game, but lost in round two, proud of their season. Shelby was a big man on campus and actually felt like a winner for the first time in years.

He graduated with a 4.0 average and went on to get a Masters of Public Administration, thinking that he wanted to become a City Manager.

That would provide another turning point for his life.

Chapter 6

Government

St. Louis could be a rough town.

Shelby got a job as Assistant City Manager in a suburb of St. Louis and went to work for a man named James McCook. Together they were a great team. Shelby managed the budget, oversaw several departments, and served as Human Resources Director for the City. Despite 17-hour days, he was happy as a pig in shit.

Three to five of his 17 hours were spent drinking with members of a seven-member City Council.

Each night, excluding weekends, found each Council member, the City Manager, the City Attorney, and himself buying drinks. Each man bought two rounds, so Shelby went home five days a week with no money and at least twenty shots of bourbon in him. Frequently the City Manager would buy Shelby's round, recognizing that an Assistant City Manager didn't have enough income for marathon drinking. Shelby wanted to be a City Manager.

Then reality hit. A man named Frankie Blackstone was a powerbroker for the City Counsel's politics. He controlled four votes on the Council, so no matter what issue was being voted on, his will was done.

The City Manager would routinely shoot pool or drink with Mr. Blackstone to ensure that streets got paved and that issues important to the

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community passed. To Mr. Blackstone, it was a simple matter of respect.

The environment offered a series of events that honed Shelby's concept of politics.

The first event was when a Council member, who went rogue, was run down by a car—no doubt, an unfortunate *accident*. The man survived as a paraplegic, but was unable and unwilling to continue his role as a Councilman.

Another Councilman was appointed. Now votes were five to two, not four to two. The two dissenting councilmen voted their conscience and were never disrespectful to Mr. Blackstone. Votes were irrelevant, given that Blackstone now had a strong majority of the votes.

The second notable occurrence was when a police sergeant—and Shelby knew that the police department was polluted with bad cops and mob politics—called the City Manager and stated that he had arrested a Councilman's son for possession of marijuana.

This particular Councilman had been respectful, but quite vocal and uncooperative with several votes that Mr. Blackstone wanted passed. Oh, they passed five to two, but threats to expose Mr. Blackstone's agenda radiated. It was a convenient occurrence.

"McCook, we've got Harvey's kid. Come down to the station and we'll talk about a deal."

Both Shelby and the City Manager were drunk. Shelby watched the Manager take a large chance.

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James picked up the phone and called a police lieutenant, Lieutenant Boudreaux. James was pointblank.

“I want you to go to the station and suspend Sergeant Brooks, now; and I mean right now. If the Harvey kid is guilty of possession, you book him and process him like you would any kid...no special treatment.”

James looked at Shelby and said, “We’ll see if Boudreaux is dirty. How he handles this will make it crystal clear if we can trust him. I may get killed or fired, but I’ll be fucked if I’m going to get sucked into this cesspool. Now is when we decide if we are professionals or thugs. I’m not going to shit-can or taint a degree from the best city management school in the country—good ole Kansas University.” It was ironic, but true.

Lieutenant Boudreaux was not dirty. He handled the situation as a consummate pro and ultimately fired Blackstone’s police Sergeant. It was bumpy, but it was a turning point for the government’s integrity. Blackstone was pissed, but amused that McCook had shown the balls to fire his guy. Things smoothed out for a time.

The third event was a result of Council politics.

In this city, when it was election time, Council members who backed Blackstone miraculously had streets in their ward paved. James didn’t care because his town was being paved—it was good for the citizens, good for community development. Paving projects always resulted in Blackstone’s guys being reelected.

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Citizens loved their new streets, as other citizens wondered why the streets in their ward—the ward of two dissenting council members—were not being paved. This resulted in two new council members being elected—coincidentally, friends of Mr. Blackstone. Now the votes were unanimous on all but piss ant items. Dissenting votes were for show.

Anyway...as the Public Works Director was finishing a street one afternoon, it rained like the day of Noah's ark. The City Manager received a call from the Director that sounded quite distressed.

When the Manager and Shelby arrived, a particular run of new asphalt was crawling down a hill, burping a few dozen volcanoes of steam. Seemingly, cool rain didn't mix well with 400-degree asphalt.

The trio did all that they could do. They went to a small bar at the bottom of the hill and got drunk. The hill was only volcanic for about 30 minutes before it settled as a hole-filled washboard of black rock. It was the third most fucked-up thing Shelby had ever seen.

He wondered how the City would repair this matter. The Public Works Director, though, had already ordered dump trucks to haul it away for fresh re-repaving. Oops.

A next event occurred. A man who wished the City to buy his cable franchise offered the City Manager an envelope filled with cash. The Manager knew the roots of this solicitation.

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While it was obvious that the envelope contained cash, the City Manager simply stood up, threw the envelope at the man, and threw the man out of his office.

Blackstone would be pissed. He would make the real money beyond chump change.

“You chicken shit peddler, don’t ever come in this office again. You will never get a franchise in this town and, if you try it, you’ll be looking at Lieutenant Boudreaux’s face...and the *Globe Democrat*, not mine.”

There were other events tied to daily business that made the job entertaining. One dealt with the City Manager’s secretary—a bitch.

Ruth was not a sometimes bitch; she was always a bitch. She disrespected the City Manager at every opportunity. She was efficient, though, and James was loyal to his employees, including her.

She was likely a nightly alcoholic, and commonly jumped up, running to the bathroom to puke in the morning.

James’ theory was that she was pregnant, and so he brought in a dozen greasy donuts routinely to watch the effects. It didn’t matter if she were pregnant or hung-over; it mattered if he could make her puke. It was normally successful.

Radios were used for communication from the manager’s car to a “base” radio in Ruth’s office. This was the Manager’s way of communicating necessary street repairs, public blight, and so on.

All calls could be heard on Public Works vehicles and by the 911 dispatcher.

The Manager would drive around the community, frequently with Shelby on shotgun, surveying problem areas. When he would find something, he would call Ruth and request a “buck slip” for action by Public Works. On this particular day, it went south.

“99 to base. Make a buck slip for a pothole at 2nd and Rosemary. It’s a big one, so please mark it as *priority*.”

Perhaps it was puke time or perhaps she had alcoholic PMS, but Ruth’s response was blunt. “Make out your own damn buck slip!”

James’ face turned to square stone. His eyes were pinpointed, like those of a dead man, and his chin was notably rolling with grinding teeth. He returned immediately to his office.

He walked briskly, almost at a run, to Ruth’s desk.

“We’ll have your final check tomorrow, or if you wish it today, you can write your own damn check.”

Ruth made some—previously never seen—humble pleadings, which fell on General McCook’s cold battle stare. It was over. She packed her things and left.

Shelby felt a deep joy to have this particular shared secretary depart. He hated her and ANY replacement—even Attila the Hun—would be a marked improvement. They would save money on donuts.

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He and James went immediately to get drunk. For both it was a celebration.

Then, it was summer. Shelby was managing the Summer Youth Employment Program. This was a real opportunity to do meaningful work. It had its moments.

In scene one, a youth was hand-signaling a dump truck as it backed up. He moved as the dump truck driver waited on the hand-signal to stop. That never happened and the truck backed off a cliff. The truck was finished, though the driver was only banged up. Kiss a hundred grand plus workers comp goodbye.

In scene two, the Public Works Director reported that a “slow” boy had silenced a couple of the best men he had.

These men, of course, were hazing the new kid and making a bit of fun while they picked up a railroad tie and loaded it into the truck. One tie worked them both.

“You can handle em now.” They looked at one another and chuckled, victorious.

The boy was larger than a lineman for the St. Louis Rams.

He smiled meekly and grabbed *two* ties, picking them up and asking, “Do you want these on the truck too?”

Shelby loved working with youth and, basically, detested groups of adults—especially politicians.

In a final scene, as Shelby was watching TV on a Sunday evening the phone rang. It was Mr. Blackstone.

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“I’m—we’re—not pleased with some of McCook’s actions lately and I was wondering if you had any interest in becoming City Manager.”

Shelby’s heart sank. He loved the City Manager and wanted nothing to do with the politics that James had handled so brilliantly. He could never be a Judas, kissing the cheek of his teacher.

He pondered the evil call and soon offered his resignation, choosing to go to work for a large construction company in a neighboring community.

James tried to make him stay, but he would not.

Shelby had been shot and stabbed, but this was over his head, and he was frankly scared.

He left for the construction business.

Chapter 7

Seedlings

Naturally, a major corporation would not place one on a career track that made sense.

Shelby's resume clearly said "4.0 student and HR Manager," but he was placed in pricing & bids for the construction firm.

It quickly became apparent that those who climbed in the company had elite sponsors and were engineers or construction managers. Ones only other hope for Vice-President slots was to become a Sloan Fellow at Stanford before the age of 33.

In the absence of sponsorship—which took a while to gain—one would become a project manager, at best, but likely a 1st level supervisor. A non-engineer M-I-G-H-T hope for 2nd level management over time—much time. Shelby hoped for that.

The company's administrative area was a land of 300 desks. People turned like a kaleidoscope as they meandered about the ant pile. Desks were in a giant room spaced three apart with only room for chairs before there were three more behind and in front. There was room for a small aisle and then three more desks, and so on. It looked like a desk factory.

One became quite familiar with this tin can environment and the people in it. One generally knew the people within shouting range, and

intimately—good or bad—knew those within normal speaking distance.

During Shelby's first week, a guy and a chick got into a big pisser right in the midst of the work environment. They were shouting distance apart.

It seems that Stu had just returned from Vegas and was bragging about his fling with a blonde babe when Cindy overheard the recounting.

"Yeah, this chick cost me like \$300 for an hour and came with a line of coke. She put some on the head of my dick and began snorting it. Ever had coke on the head of your dick?"

Cindy heard it all and the screaming started.

Shelby quickly became aware that everyone in the area had married, divorced, fucked, fucked around on, or had an affair with about every combination of people in the area. He was stunned by the incest. He had always been instructed, "Don't dip your pen in the company ink." That didn't seem to apply here. He made friends, however...seeming outliers who were simply spectators like him. Everyone seemed resigned to the fact that everyone was a well-paid slave without hope of stardom.

"Hey," asked Pete. "Have you met Doctor Doom?"

"Doctor Doom?"

"Yeah, he's the guy five rows back...dark haired guy in his mid-fifties. Go introduce yourself."

Shelby, overcome with curiosity, did it that very moment. What could be weird in this environment?

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He extended his hand. "I'm Shelby. I'm new to the area."

"Jack." The man scowled.

"So, Jack...been here long?"

"Ay HATE this fuckin place. I'm gonna retire as soon as I can to my bunker."

"Bunker?"

"Yeah. I'm gonna build a concrete bunker and live in it with a self-contained power plant and all my guns. I'm buyin guns and ammo as fast as I can afford em."

"When you gonna do this, Jack?"

"Ten years. Ten years and I'm outta this fuckin place. Ay can't wait to get outta this fuckin hole. I can't wait."

"Well, great meeting you, Doctor...I mean, Jack."

"Yeah, whatever."

This was a fuckin loony bin. Shelby wondered if their products were handed to a client saner than its makers. Christ, he hoped so. He feared not. The world was a corporation that had gone crazy. This was a microcosm.

Shelby had respected Lizzie's request to leave her alone, but his thoughts haled her. He ached to know that the Love of his Life was out of reach.

He dated a couple of nice girls, Sally Miller being the one he cared most for.

Sally was a beautiful girl who was studying at SLU to become a computer scientist. She was the most beautiful girl that he had seen in his

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corporate life, but she never spoke. She was as silent as a western Kansas night.

About two years into his construction adventure Shelby and a friend named Cliff Otterman went on a 22 state trip back east. The purpose was Cliff's evaluation of transportation programs at Penn State and the University of Maryland.

They blasted off on the road trip, stopping at many states just to walk across the line and say that they had visited it. Sure enough, they visited 21 states. They drove through New York to Niagara Falls and into Canada. That segue was an arc to Detroit, their 22nd state. It was damaged.

All along the journey, they had stayed at friends and family of Cliff's. This was no exception. The difference was that, at this stop, Cliff's college buddy took them to a Detroit bar where they got shit-faced.

That night Shelby puked all over Cliff's friend's house, including the hallway and the bathroom. The friend's mother was a kind woman who cleaned it up and helped Shelby to bed. There—just after brushing his teeth and showering—he fucked the kid's mom and woke up with a hangover.

There was an uncomfortable wiggling at the breakfast table, as Shelby couldn't wait to hit the road. After 22 states, Cliff seemed surprised by his hurry. The mother cooked breakfast and acted as though nothing had happened. Perhaps, to her, nothing had.

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Shelby blushed and struggled to look Cliff's friend in the eye. Finally, they returned to St. Louis.

The infidelity didn't set well with Sally, while Shelby learned the truth of lying about indiscretions. The truth: Lie. The relationship was likely over, and amazingly, he felt relieved. Sally, however, was the forgiving kind. Nonetheless, all he could think about was Lizzie.

He called her.

Lizzie was aghast. It was obvious that her life was now at a boiling point and that her comfort with talking was zero. She spouted out a quick number and said, "Call me at my work." The conversation was over.

He called her on Monday morning.

"Lizzie? Hey, I'm so sorry to have called you at home, but I think of you night and day. I finally...I had to call. Forgive me if I put you at risk."

"It's ok, Shelby. It's just that Vic has gone completely nuts. He has basically imprisoned me, allowing me to only go to work and straight home. He goes out every night, but checks in to make sure that I'm at home. He even drives by my job to make sure my car is in the lot. It's terrible, but I have to do it. I don't want to be divorced. To me, divorce is wrong." She was a good Catholic girl.

"I want to visit you in New Orleans, Lizzie. I don't want to put you at any risk, and I'll be a gentleman. I just miss you and want to catch up. Can we visit if I come?"

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“It will be hard, Shelby, but I can go to work and tell them that I have a meeting out of the office. That will allow us to have coffee and catch up. I just CANNOT let Vic know about it. That would be *really* bad. When would you come?”

“The first week of April...on April Fools. I’ll arrive on April Fools.”

“Call me at this number on the morning of April 2nd and I’ll meet you for coffee, Shelby. It will be really good to see you. I think of you often.”

The truth is that Lizzie thought of Shelby nearly every waking hour, but the high school lie had to continue. Now, well beneath a mask, it was no longer a puppy lie.

Chapter 8

Realignment

Shelby flew to New Orleans on April 1. He called Lizzie at 8:00 on April 2. They met for coffee in his hotel coffee shop at 10:00. He was nervous all night and shaking by 9:00. He couldn't wait to see her. She felt the same.

"Goddamn you look good, Girl! Fucking great! Oooooeee."

She had worn an orange suit with orange shoes and an orange camisole. When Vic ate her ass for "looking like a chick that planned to fuck the boss," she said that she *did* plan to fuck the boss. That resulted in the cut on her left lower lip and a well-masked black eye. She was good at covering these scars now, and—typical of employers—everyone was daily mute on the obvious.

"You look better than I've ever seen you, Shelby."

He had gone to the dentist a dozen times to get teeth fixed and whitened. He was grateful now. It all cleansed his past and made him the consummate All American Boy. He did look better than ever before.

Synchronously, they spoke. "So, what have you been doing all these years?"

They laughed as they had in high school, but it was as he spotted Lizzie's bruise and cut lip.

"Did Vic do that?!"

"It's not your deal, Shelby. Don't start this conversation on that tone or I'll get up and walk out right now."

"I'm sorry. So what have you been doing all these years?"

"Well, I graduated from Xavier with a degree in Accounting and then went on to get an MBA."

He found it interesting that, of all topics, she chose the intellectual path. She presented it as though this was an interview, and she needed to demonstrate human-doing worth. Likely, she did need that. He tried not to stare at the cut on her lip, but knew it well from his days as a dealer. It was not a domestic cut; it was domestic violence. He focused on her eyes.

Her eyes were like a morning cup of coffee in a dainty teacup. Her pupils sat as prophets, equally filled with pain and beauty. He actually discerned a pause of safety in them as she looked into his as well. If the count of two were a passing glance, he wondered what the count of 10 meant. There were no words, just permission to look into one another's eyes.

"You look happy, Shelby."

"You do not." He chanced that high school conversations permitted him to begin honestly, though at great risk. It was another angle away from the intellectual and into her real life.

Lizzie flinched. Then her eyes dropped the pain and defaulted to love. His countenance mirrored the transition and they were home. He loved her now as he daily loved her and she saw that.

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He did not know that she loved him equally and had all these years, but he did see something now. He turned pink and wordless.

"It's been a long, bumpy road, Shelby...a LONG, bumpy road. I'd be lying to undersell it and bumpy is not the right word." He saw an accountant's eyes searching for a word more horrible. "It's been hell, Shelby. It's been absolute hell, but I can't leave him. I just can't."

"I want to hurt him; you know that." Shelby looked like a man collecting a drug debt.

"He is a violent man, Shelby. Night and day, he is a violent man...not just to me. He hunts for it; and the drugs...oh, the drugs are like gasoline in a never-ending fire. He is completely lost, Shelby, and I keep hoping he will get better, but, he's always been Vic—true north Vic."

"I'm so glad that you came to see me this morning, Lizzie. That obviously took a lot of courage."

"I wouldn't have missed it for the world, Shelby. So, what have *you* been doing all these years? Are you married?"

"No. I never have been. I can't get over you." He winked, but she perceived that he was not really joking. She wanted to walk away from her job without notice, pack no bags, and run away to St. Louis with him.

Out of fear, he decided to mirror her resume.

"I worked for awhile as a drug dealer, then went to work for a heating and air firm, finally

went to SLU, and ended up with degrees in HR and City Management—an MPA.”

She smiled, knowing that it was all true.

“But, I thought your dream was to play ball for Kansas?”

“Long story, but basically, I pissed it away. I got down with drugs and alcohol and lost it all.”

“Do you believe that I make over \$100,000 a year and we have debt up to our ass? Vic has more than a little drug problem. He’s into crack and meth.”

“That shit e’ll eat you. I’ve been there.” For a moment Shelby felt sympathy for Vic. “I know it’s bad, Lizzie. Has he lost all of his teeth, or just most of them?” This shortcut to the truth gave Shelby’s resume stark credibility. She saw that he had indeed been there.

“Let’s talk about something else.”

“Well, umm, I like New Orleans a lot. It’s pretty...in a rusty, broken concrete sort of way. I like the morning-after smells—booze mixed with seafood.”

“I love it too. It’s filled with culture and song—300 years of it. It is magic to know that one can walk cemeteries and immerse in the past. Hell, even the RTA cringes every time it builds new track. Every shovel bets that they will dig up some guy’s grave—right there on the neutral ground. It’s magic. And, shit, Shelby, biracial couples, like us, can actually go unnoticed—even a black chick with a small-dicked white boy is acceptable.” She now winked.

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"It ain't small, baby. It's just cold." It felt like high school, but Lizzie now turned pink.

"So, was that pitch about the squirrel bullshit?"

"No, it's the God's truth, Lizzie. I saw it with my own ears. Everyone hears the little bastards make that clucking sound, like a raven-chicken, but it takes an evening watch to hear their beautiful bird sound. The first time I heard it, a baby squirrel was lost and cooing for his mother. She seemed to know the voice and came flying through the trees to find him. He had no doubt done a Jungle Jim through a half-mile of trees and got lost. It was a beautiful thing to hear and see. I've heard others singing after sunset and they didn't seem lost. At first, I thought it was a bird checking-out after all the other birds had stopped singing. Beautiful."

"I was afraid that the finale was a flying squirrel landing on the moon. You are normally so full of shit."

"I am, aren't I?"

"Yes, and I love that about you. You are so creative and so smart, Shelby."

She said it. She said the unspoken high school lie of omission. He reciprocated.

"You are the smartest person I've ever met, Lizzie...no close second, and I've met a shit-pot of people." He wanted to say "I love you" but he didn't. Even now, fear welled up inside him. He had known too many women that he couldn't practice on. He had never really loved any of them.

"I have a poodle. Vic says it's a pussy dog."

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"I like poodles. They feel good and they're so smart. What color is yours?"

"Chocolate, of COURSE, baby. Gotta be chocolate." She wiggled that cheerleader hoochie coochie.

"That reminds me of a small town internship I had in southern Missouri." She leaned forward on her folded hands, listening intently.

"It was the shit. I was riding with this buddy of mine in his truck and he had a poodle—white—that was romping around on the seat between us, jumping around to look out the window. It got so excited that it began pissing and jumping, pissing and jumping. My buddy got so instantly pissed that he sat his beer on the dash, opened his truck door and tossed the poodle into the street. He drove off."

She looked very unhappy with this story.

"Bear with me."

"Anyway, my buddy got remorseful within a few blocks and turned back to get the family pet. It was gone. Small town and all, we drove around a dozen blocks but could not find Muffy. She was gone."

"So, we went back to his house and called the local police station—a one guy operation."

"My poodle, umm, jumped out of my truck and I can't find her, Lyle. Ya haven't seen her have ya?"

"Is she a ratty little thang...white, jumps and pisses a lot?"

"That's her, yeah."

"Come get her here at the headquarters."

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“HEADQUARTERS, by the way, was a cube-shaped building with two desks, a radio, a telephone and a single jail cell.”

“When we arrived at Headquarters there was a pathetic looking white poodle with its little paws on the bars and two drunks sleeping on the floor behind her. It must have been hard time—and the loss of dignity—for a dog to be jailed with a couple of drunks...well, how traumatic.”

“That’s no shit?”

“No shit. True story.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I don’t make this shit up—at least some of it.”

“Wow.”

“So what’s the weirdest thing you’ve ever seen, Shelby?” Lizzie was back, fully relaxed and fully present now.

“That’s a no-brainer. Happened in a nice residential area where I was renting a nice house from a nice couple who thought I looked like a nice renter.”

“It was about Christmas. This guy had a kid who had spent some time in the Salvation Army Homeless Shelter because he was a heroin addict. It helped the kid, he stayed clean, and the guy was eternally grateful so he put a Salvation Army pot in front of his house—by the street—and began ringing the bell.”

“That’s sweet, but not that weird.”

“No, wait.” Shelby smiled that cat-like grin that Lizzie remembered from high school.

“Anyway, the guy was getting a quarter here and a dime there which pissed him off—it being a ritzy neighborhood and all. So he went into his garage—he was a mechanical engineer for the local aircraft company—and came out a couple of days later with a toll-booth machine. But, it had an arm made of high tech composite materials so that NO motherfucker could simply run through it. When bolted to his sidewalk, it ran all the way across the street...like a railroad arm.”

“Whaaaa?”

“It gets better.”

“The machine had a sensor on each side of the street that activated the arm when people put money in it. He watched for trash and overrode the arm if somebody threw paper or junk in it. It even had a little camera on each end so he could monitor the hoppers.”

“Kids loved it; people going to work were not pleased. One truck even rammed it and fucked up his truck. He filed a claim against Zimskie who promptly counter filed for destruction of his ‘collection vehicle’ and property damage. The thing was operational the next morning. After the novelty of it—and depletion of all patience—the neighbors were SOME pissed so they called the cops.”

“The cops made him disassemble it and gave him a few tickets for things like illegally operating a toll road, illegal vehicle, traffic violations, shit like that.”

“NOOOO.”

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“Yeah. And he asked me to go to court with him a couple of weeks later, December 23...which I did. He needed moral support and a character witness—isn’t that ironic—that would affirm his being a good neighbor at all times and so on.”

“The judge looked at his case and laughed uncontrollably. He tried to put on his sober face, but couldn’t stop the giggles. Finally he said, ‘These are serious charges; what do you have to say for yourself, Mr. Zimskie?’”

Zimskie looked stern, with that look of one willing to go to prison over a principle, and said, “Those rich bastards in my neighborhood were unwilling to support the Salvation Army Homeless Shelter when I tried to play nice, so I had to do something more persuasive.”

“One of the charges is Attempted Robbery, Mr. Zimskie. How much money did you actually make off of your, umm, device?”

“I made \$5,753.37, your Honor. I, of course, ate the cost of building my *persuasion* vehicle. Here is a receipt from the Salvation Army for, umm...my neighbor’s donations.”

“Case dismissed. Merry Christmas, Mr. Zimskie.”

“THAT is the weirdest thing I ever saw.”

“Fuck!”

“Funny thing is...Zimskie is a Jew.”

“Fuck! I’ve never...”

“So, what’s the weirdest thing you’ve ever seen?”

Lizzie's eyes looked downward and to the right as she searched her memories.

"Ok, ok...this is no match for yours, but I have something that is kinda weird."

"There was this kid in our neighborhood who was a little odd...and a complete loner. He was apparently smart enough—no doubt, a budding maniacal engineer—and his parents seemed normal enough. They were actually nice, friendly people."

"Anyway—rain or shine, winter or summer—at 9:00 every Saturday morning the kid dressed up in a pink winter snowsuit and rolled down the sidewalk like a pink snowball."

"His head was tucked safely in its down parka and his arms were around his folded legs...rolling, rolling, rolling. He rolled as smooth as a tire and as round as a ball. Here he would come from a block away, past he would go, and away he rolled...out of sight. Based on how long it took him to return, he had to roll for a quarter-mile or so. His dad finally got a transfer to Huntsville and they moved away. That's the weirdest thing I ever saw."

"Well, that's fucked up. That's some shit, Lizzie. Weird shit. It would be interesting to see what happens to the kid. Maybe he'll become a pink wheel for that chick that's driving NASCAR."

"Yeah."

Her face became serious and tears formed. Shelby read it.

"So how are you dealing with the abusive life—really—Lizzie."

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She cried. "Vic beats me several times a month, Shelby. I love him, but he has become a mean, drunken drug addict. It's horrible."

Shelby saw red. Banker roles surged in his gut and he wanted to kill Vic. It showed.

"You can't do anything, Shelby, but you asked so I'm just being honest. In fact, I need to get back to the office. I need to go."

"Wait, Lizzie. Please wait. I don't want this to end again. I've always loved you and I don't want you to leave. Please stay at least a little longer. Please."

"I really can't, and I..." She couldn't say it. The principle of lies was beaten too far into her fiber and she couldn't say what she was feeling and had always known."

"I really have to go, Shelby. Thank you for everything. This has been a real vacation for me. You are the best. I miss you and I'll keep missing you." It was the best she could muster.

She stood up and looked at him as only one in love could.

"So, what are you driving these days? You always had that beat up Bug."

She thought it small talk, but it wasn't.

"I drive a green neon colored Bug. I just love those damn VWs. Got into my blood, I guess. GREAT stereo, and that's my definition of a car: It starts, it runs, and it has a great stereo." She turned to leave.

"I'll miss you, Lizzie, and I'll try not to stalk you, but I will call from time to time—at work, of course. Is that ok?"

"Sure, Shelby. Call me from time to time."

"Can I walk you back to work?"

"No, Shelby. Vic might see us and that would be..."

Shelby was burning to protect the Love of his Life. Animal instincts to protect were surging, but he left her at the lobby.

If he had asked her to go to his room, she would have. Lizzie still masturbated and thought of him. She flushed and hoped he wouldn't notice that she was turned on. The light bumps of their knees had fueled it, though that was not necessary. If only he had asked, she would have made love with him. He wanted to, but could not.

At the doorway to the lobby, they hugged for a long hug and kissed appropriately as parting friends. It was sufficient for emptiness.

That night, well after Lizzie would be asleep, Shelby called the house. Vic answered and Shelby's message was simple.

"Vic, this is Shelby from high school. My folks gave me your number. I just got to town and wondered if we can get together for a couple of beers and a joint—for old time sake."

"SHELLY. Well, we don't have no old time sake, but I'm always game for a buzz. Sure, where ya wanna meet? Hey, you ain't seen Lizzie have ya?"

"No, why? Are you guys still together? Damn, Vic, that's a long time. You must be a hell of a

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husband. I haven't thought about Lizzie for years. Damn...you and Lizzie still together. Hey, can you bring a joint? I couldn't exactly get one on the airplane."

"Still a pussy, huh Shelby? Afraid to bring a little ole joint on a plane."

"Yeah...still a pussy, Vic. How about that little bar called Booger's on Bourbon? You know where that is? Is that ok?"

"Fuck yeah, Shelly...I mean Shelby. That'll be fine. See ya there in half an hour. I'll roll a doobie."

Shelby knew that Vic wouldn't bother Lizzie. He had done a persuasive job of acting dumb and he also knew that Vic wouldn't want to wake up his meal ticket—had to keep the work horse rested and all. Plus, Vic wouldn't want her to know that he was sneaking out—AGAIN. Ah, how he knew ole Vic.

Booger's was a sleazy place on the dark end of Bourbon, composed mainly of neon signs and a dark alley. It was dark by any definition. They could go in the alley to smoke the joint. It was perfect.

Vic showed up an hour and ten minutes later, typical of his couth.

The greeting was a fist bump and cold as hell, though Shelby seemed friendly enough.

All conversation was about Vic, his job, his car, his dope and, of course, his wealth...never mentioning that Lizzie brought home the bacon. Vic also said that Lizzie was still "a pretty fine lookin bitch" but that he was getting regular pussy

from a couple of “fine bitches” that he’d met on Airline Highway, “...if you get my drift.” Crack ‘hos.

They slammed down a few beers and agreed that it was time for the joint. Off to the alley they went.

“We could get mugged here, but I’m still a tough son of a bitch and I don’t think any of them little gang banger fucks will fuck with ole Vic. Hope not for their sakes.” He pulled his jacket back and patted a knife. “Don’t worry, Shelly, I can take em alone.” He winked...Same ole Vic.

The alley was dimly illuminated by a blinking amber streetlight. They lit the joint and passed it back and forth a couple of times. Shelby decided to unroll his agenda.

“So, Vic, how’s marriage to our beautiful girl, Lizzie?” He waited on a response to the words “our” and “beautiful girl, Lizzie” but none was forthcoming. Instead, Vic said, “She’s a fucking dull bitch, man. If I didn’t get pussy elsewhere, I’d get about none. I damn near have to rape her to get fucked at home.”

“Well, she’s always been beautiful to me, Vic—ALWAYS been.” Vic looked at him as though he had seen her since high school, maybe even recently.

“Why? Have you seen my wife!?”

“Yeah, I saw her today and she’s still beautiful...no, she’s more beautiful than ever.”

“You **SAW** her. Why, that bitch...I’ll...”

Principles and Lies

“No, Vic, you’ll do nothing...ever again.” Shelby’s eyes blazed hatred. Vic wondered how such a pussy could look so mean.

Vic pulled his knife and swung it at Shelby. Vic was slow and indecisive. Shelby easily grabbed his arm and twisted his wrist. The knife fell to the ground. Now Vic was focused and pissed.

Vic reached for his knife, but Shelby grabbed it and stepped back. Vic kicked at Shelby’s nuts, but Shelby grabbed his leg and dropped him on his back. He then immediately stuck the knife completely through Vic’s foot and stepped back again.”

“Oooooo, you son of a bitch. You stabbed me. Vic was limping, but eventually arose, pulled the knife out, and swung at Shelby. It was ugly now.

Shelby began wailing Vic without hesitation or mercy. He cared not that he was beating a man with a lame foot. He pounded and slapped and punched and chopped until his foe was lying nearly unconscious and begging for mercy.

“Here is what I want you to do, Vic.”

“I want you to file for a divorce—immediately. Then you can simply fuck your whores. Fortunately, you have no children, genetic dangers aside. I also want you to stop beating Lizzie and I mean immediately and forever, Vic—immediately *and forever*. You got that?”

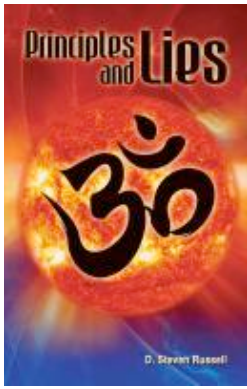
Vic nodded meekly, peeking from one eye that was nearly swollen shut and blinking to see past the blood that dripped from his forehead.

D. Steven Russell

“I’ll call Lizzie within a week to see if you have filed for divorce. I’ll also ask her if you have beaten, slapped, or threatened her in any way. A yes will result in your immediate death. Do you understand what I mean by immediate death? Yes?”

Vic nodded and tried to say the word “yes” but his lip and teeth were too fucked up to utter it.

“Hey, I’ll let you use Lizzie’s insurance to fix your teeth and foot. I’m not an unreasonable man. See ya, Vic.”



Shelby and Lizzie always loved each other. A storm of life tosses their hope in different directions-drugs, abuse, loss. Hope is stronger than the torrent, and life is fairer than its misdirection-because Shelby and Lizzie always loved each other.

Principles and Lies

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