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By Jerome Mark Antil

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THE LONG STEM IS IN THE LOBBY

From Bad Times to Good Times – How I Found My Way

JEROME MARK ANTIL

LITTLE YORK BOOKS

ISBN 978-0-9847187-5-7 Paperback
ISBN 978-1-7353076-1-9 Hardcover

For Mr. V.

Chapter 1

It was snowing the first time she mentioned it. We were slow dancing to *Tears On My Pillow* when she looked into my eyes and told me she was thinking about going into the convent after she graduated from high school. The eleven months to follow were anxious for me, to say the least; we'd talk about being together forever, all while kissing passionately in complete denial. My first real love did me in, truth be told. I was a kid. It was 1959 now, a sweltering summer in Cincinnati, despair gnawing on my gut like a sewer rat. God and I were about to come to blows.

The aches echoed back to the Friday night we first met. It was the beginning of my Freshman year's fall semester at college. My family had moved four times in three states my senior year of high school. When I stepped off a bus in Cincinnati, I was looking forward to four years in the same place. I was a nervous six-foot-ten-inch seventeen-year-old— naïve in matters of the heart and a little insecure being away from home for the first time and with a five-dollar bill that had to last me a week.

She was eighteen, a high school senior, bussed in from across town with a load of Catholic girls, almost like a miracle, for the first weekly dance at our men's Jesuit university. I spotted her eyes sparkling from clear across the room as she walked in the darkened dance hall. It was just as if Donna Reed had come walking out of a movie and into our college dance looking for George Bailey (and I was George Bailey). A narrow, pretty, black velvet headband kept her wavy brunet hair from her face and guided it in soft folds down onto her shoulders. She had inquisitive, twinkling, happy eyes, the smile of a newsstand

magazine cover girl.

"C'mon, c'mon," I mumbled to myself, "don't just stand here with your mouth hanging open looking stupid, get over there and ask her for a dance."

One of her smiles up at me was all it took for me to be cooked, and not long after our fourth slow dance we just knew we were about to be grabbing at each other like fool rag dolls and kissing. Complete messes in love and pretty much inseparable we became, for sure contented with it and the feeling it gave us. I would smell her hair in my sleep, her perfumes, powders, and lipsticks in class, on the basketball court, at every turn in my memory. Whether standing on her front stoop, dreaming of a home and white picket fences while her father growled throat clearing hints threateningly from upstairs, or sitting on a park bench waiting for a bus, or just walking and stopping—it was no matter, we'd kiss. Anywhere we found ourselves we'd be kissing, pretending it was Paris. After I got back to my dorm I'd call her, tying up Brockman Hall's only pay phone, when I should have been studying.

We fell in love at first sight in September and here it was, already summer, the summer I was about to lose her to the convent, my longest one ever. The summer I thought I would never get those tastes, those smells, those eyes, that smile out of my memory; never would I get over the emptiness the thought of her leaving me dug in the pit of my stomach.

My college, Xavier University, was the shape of a shallow, wooden salad bowl you'd find at a yard sale—one with a dark, oil-stained crack split right through its middle. The crack: a road named Victory Parkway. On the right side of the parkway, up the sloping hill, looking northeast to the far, V-shaped corner, surrounded by trees, was Dr. Link's

white stucco house with Spanish-tile roof. The doc taught business. He rented out rooms. Next to his place, coming this way, was Brockman Hall—a four-story, prison-beige brick dormitory. Freshmen were required to live there. The previous semester I had stayed in room 219 with Gregory Marquis. I wanted to be with her so I lied to my folks about not being able to come home for the summer because of basketball practice. In my impulse I just assumed I could stay at Brockman Hall over the summer, but I was wrong. Proctor Father Dan lived in the dorm year-round and had thrown me a curve. He locked it up tight when the term ended. He didn't want people knocking on his room door, waking him up or interrupting his reading Latin or offering his daily Mass, asking a bunch of damned fool questions about how to get to the armory, or which way was it to downtown Cincinnati and Fountain Square, or did he have any Reds tickets.

I didn't want anyone to get wise to my staying on campus unattended for the summer and maybe calling my mom or dad and telling them, so I didn't bother to knock to get my duffel bag with a change of clothes and underwear, in case asking for my duffel would raise suspicion. Turned out my lack of planning for where I might sleep when college let out rendered me homeless, causing me to have to scrounge for places to lay and sleep nights during the hottest summer on record. I wasn't afraid of grass and trees; I had grown up camping out in the woods. I was an immature six-foot-ten-inch sophomore, only just eighteen, who chose not to go home for the summer; I was deep over my head and in an emotional free-fall.

Back this way was Albers Hall, Edgecliff Hall, and then a modern, tall, glassy science building. Rumor was a Jebbie (Jesuit priest) had discovered the enzymes that ate

protein and Proctor and Gamble put them in Tide detergent, to eat grass stains or food stains, which are protein. The campus buzz was that the company had donated the building as a thank-you for the discovery. Then there was Hinkle Hall, a classroom building. At the near end of the right side of the salad bowl was an army green Quonset hut left there since WWII was my guess. It had a halfmoon-shaped tin roof that started on the ground on one side, went up and over the top, and ended down on the ground on the other side. At both ends it had a wooden wall and door with small glass panes. It looked to me like it hadn't been used since it put up soldiers during the war. It had bundled-up cots stacked all through. I slept in it for a while without anyone knowing, just after school let out. It was an oven in the afternoon, and the Cincinnati heat and the hut's hot tin roof kept it a fearful mean through the night in July, so I went outside and lay on the grass with the crickets and croakers. Right across the path was a shanty the university used as a bookstore for students; it looked cooler, but it was locked.

My problem had started about the time basketball players were told they couldn't go home for Christmas. I played basketball; I was a Xavier Musketeer. We had to double practice most days during the holidays. The varsity needed the freshmen for scrimmage, so I was stuck. My girlfriend stood on her front porch, handing me a Christmas present tied with green crinkly curled-up ribbon. She told me her dad had got her thinking she maybe had "a calling," and now she was giving some serious thought to entering a convent to find out. I'd heard of guys having a calling for the priesthood. A girl having a calling was new to me.

I started looking down into her eyes on that very porch, looking for some sign, for some little confirmation,

until I saw in them she was dead serious about considering the convent. Not knowing how much time I had left with her was the reason I decided to lie to my folks about not being able to come home for the summer. I told them I had extra basketball practice. I figured I needed some time and might be able to kiss the whole convent idea out of my girl's mind. I even made up a whopper that I might need my appendix out.

They believed me. No reason not to. I was on a full four-year basketball scholarship, first our family had ever seen—everything paid during the school year, plus seven dollars after every home game and more for away games, what they called meal money. Our freshman team only lost one game all season. We were about the best there was, according to *Sports Illustrated*, and I started. Mom, a mother of eight, was confident my freshman coach—Coach Ruberg—would take good care of her boy in the hospital, so it helped me get away with the lie. Not a word of my yarn was true, at first, but I was so convincing to a doctor examining me that he did eventually remove my appendix at the Good Samaritan Hospital, making that part true. I was doing anything I could dream up to stay close to my girlfriend.

Of all the campus buildings, Albers Hall was the most ivy-covered and college-looking, with its Greek columns and stone carvings, covered walkways and vine-covered brick walls. It had two floors of classrooms and the administrative offices for the university president, Father O'Conner, and for the dean of men, Father Ratterman. When the basketball season was over, I took a part-time job in the Albers Hall basement, working for a man named Mr. Edward P. VonderHaar, the university's vice president. Mr. V had the calm demeanor of a Cary Grant but with a

shorter gray brush cut to his hair. He was also president of the American College Public Relations Association, according to the plaque on his small, windowless corner office wall. It hung next to a picture of Father O'Conner standing with Pope Pius XII, in Rome. The plate on Mr. V's spotless black 1953 Cadillac read XU 1.

It was back about March when I first started working for him part-time. He paid me sixty-five cents an hour for typing the addresses of donors to the university building fund on three-by-five index cards, stuffing envelopes, licking stamps, and mailing invitations to people to give even more money. During work breaks, if he wasn't too busy, I'd sit and listen to his musings about why young men should consider jumping on tramp steamers or cattle boats somewhere and heading off around the world before they grew up and got landlocked. One clumsy morning I dropped a box of paper clips by the door to his office, and they scattered every which way on the linoleum. Down on all fours picking them up, I mumbled and muttered to myself my woes and general disdain, talking and ranting on about how the only girl I ever loved in my whole life was thinking of going in the convent, and now wasn't I the danged fool to go take her to see *The Nun's Story* with Audrey Hepburn, for Pete's sake, that convinced her maybe her daddy was right and she was certain more than ever she had "the true calling" and now I was a twisted knot inside dropping stupid paper clips.

Mr. V, hearing me crawling on the floor grumbling, came close to spitting out his coffee through pursed lips trying to make sense of all he was hearing. He wasn't a snoopy man by nature, but he placed the cup down in the saucer on his credenza and turned his head toward me, swiveling full around in his brown leather chair and

swallowing a mouthful of coffee before he choked on it or shot it out through his nose:

"Mrs. Burke! Hold my calls, please!" he shouted. Mr. V was not one prone to shouting.

"Yes, sir, Mr. VonderHaar!" Mrs. Burke yelled back.

"Pick those up later, Jerry," he said to me. "No time to be wasting on paper clips now."

He sprang up, motioning me toward the doorway with quick flips of his hand, then up the stairs to the main floor of Albers Hall, where he fumbled deep in his pocket for some nickels and bought two bottles of Coca-Cola from the red machine between the bulletin board and the drinking fountain. With the metal bottle opener on the front of the machine he wrenched the caps off each and handed me a bottle. He began pacing a small circle in the hall at first, thinking, arms semi-folded, one hand holding the Coke bottle top against the bottom of his chin, resembling The Thinker's knuckles, propping it up in deep thought as he edged himself into bigger circles and toward the main building entrance and out into a breezeway, walking and now talking to me in a thinking-out-loud, out-of-breath stuttering mumble, just as a coach does in a huddle of a tie game with three seconds to go, all the while trying to introduce me to the concept of "flair." The silver-haired gentleman, in suit and tie, was kind of steering himself through the halls and walkways with a Coke bottle, like it was a periscope. It was a sight.

"Does the girl love you, Jerry."

"I know she does, yes, she loves me."

"Has she expressed why she has decided on the convent over you?"

"It's her dad. He doesn't like me."

"Have you had words?"

"No. That's just it, Mr. V. Her dad thinks I'm a spoiled rich kid – not right for her. Truth is we used to be rich, I guess. We had a big house in upstate New York, but we had to move to a one room apartment in Milwaukee when dad lost all his money. Like a big jerk I never told her dad the truth. I just played something I'm not and let him think I was a rich kid. He didn't think I was right for his daughter."

"A young man in love doesn't need money, Jerry, he needs flair in his dictionary of tools. Look it up, Jerry. Flair is how a person can almost always make another person stop and think. It's the attention-grabber. Done with a proper finesse, flair can leave a very nice, lasting impression on someone, making it most difficult for them not to want to pause and at least consider your message before they forget you. Done well, flair takes a great deal of thought and imagination. It's a primary marketing tool. Flair is that something most ordinary folks wouldn't think of but often wished they had, and they celebrate when you think it up for them, to enjoy and share it with them. Your damsel hasn't entered the convent yet. You have that going for you. This is no time for spilled paper clips. I'm thinking you need some creative flair right now, Jerry."

The faster Mr. V thought, the faster he walked, me following. If he thought any faster, we would have broken into a trot.

He was so convincing, I confessed to him the inclinations I felt I had for it—the flair thing—going all the way back to growing up in the little village of Delphi Falls.

"Mr. V, when I was eight, I thought I was in love with Olivia Dandridge. I saw her three times in *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, with John Wayne playing Captain Brittles. It was at a Saturday picture show in a town near where I

lived. Why, I thought she was the prettiest girl I'd ever seen, and she wore this yellow ribbon—a mesmerizing yellow ribbon in her hair. Wearing it in those days was supposed to be a signal she liked somebody, see, a particular guy. Well, two of the horse cavalry men both thought it was them and kept throwing up their dukes and fighting over her. I tell ya, I thought it was for me. By the time I got home, I was so in love with Olivia Dandridge I painted my bike with my dad's canary-yellow house-shutter paint that very day. I figured if there ever was a possibility she'd come by the house, she'd see it, don't ya see? Now was that flair, Mr. V, or just being a dumb kid?"

"A wonderful movie. You're a true romantic, Jerry," said Mr. V. He clicked his Coke bottle up against mine in a toast to my childhood chivalry. "That most certainly was flair."

Mr. V paused and turned, looking up at the sky.

"I started here as a freshman in 1927, Jerry, when the world was young. There's not that many of us romantics left in it today. We must bear the standards and wear the colors confidently, proudly, and not let hurt, disappointment, or even so much as a sense of defeat ever dampen our spirits or let us get downtrodden. Flair and its fearlessness is arsenal enough for a vulnerable heart."

I was following him as fast as he walked—I was on scholarship.

"You are down to the final wire, Jerry. It's far too late to try to mend fences with her father. We must be creative."

Pretty much everything Mr. V was saying was going over my head, but I did find it most interesting and something to think about.

Mr. V raised his bottle high in the air, pointing it to

the sun in open challenge.

"*En garde*," he barked. "Onward and upward—through the arts, young man."

"You have an idea, Mr. V?"

"Save every nickel you can, Jerry. You may need it in these final hours."

Seeing my plight, that March Mr. V took me under wing during coffee breaks or between classes. Our goal was our bond, to keep my girl from going into the convent. This I did understand. He had an idea a day to help me convince my girl not to leave me in the dust. As the early spring weather warmed into a blistering hot summer, we'd walk between the columns on the walkway of Albers Hall hoping to catch a breeze, conjuring. I would recount things I remembered my dad, "Big Mike," did with flair—for his bakery, back in upstate New York.

"My dad told me marketing was about getting someone's attention. Doing something with such a bang they would stop and take notice and, while you had their attention, asking them for the sale. I used to ride with him all throughout upstate New York watching and listening to him talk to grocers. His stories of sales and marketing, they were adventures to him. 'It's in the numbers,' he would tell me. He would say to try to get people's attention by making a big impression—a good impression, though, so people will talk or think good things about you. Mr. V, is getting people's attention the flair part?" I asked.

"Most definitely," said Mr. V. "Your father is a smart man. It's making a big enough impression to make someone want to stop what they're doing and listen to what you might have to say."

"Dad told me a story about how he learned how simple getting someone's attention could be," I said.

“When he was sixteen, in 1918, he had a job driving a telephone company Model A pickup around Minnesota as a telephone lineman. Most people didn’t have phones back then, ya know. He’d climb poles and connect phone wires from telephone poles to the homes or businesses in the area. He told me the kids on the hot, dusty summer days near the Indian reservation roads he drove through would run alongside and yell, ‘Flat tire, mister; flat tire, mister.’ As most would do, in those times, he’d pull over to a stop, get out, and check his tires. That’s when the kids would stretch their hands out, grinning at their tomfoolery, and beg, ‘Penny, mister? Penny? Penny?’

After a time he’d carry a roll of pennies and stop the truck, get out, and sit on his running board waiting for them, and he’d give each a penny or two so the poor kids with nothing to do or no swimming hole to cool off in could go buy a Popsicle or an icy cold soda pop on a hot summer’s day. He always made them tell him what grade they were in, spell a word, and promise they would stay in school. Dad told me it was those kids who taught him the true simple nature of getting someone’s attention and then asking for the sale, although he didn’t approve of the character in their technique, as effective as it was.”

“A nice story,” said Mr. V.

There I was, walking almost daily with one of the most important men in all of Cincinnati, maybe one of the most important men in the country, and he was listening to me. I would sip on my Coca-Cola most gentlemanly, rationing every drop, stalling, making it last through the stories.

He had hired me full-time end of term for the summer, but I never let on I was homeless, sleeping under the stars most nights.

With Mr. V taking a break now and then every chance he got and teaching me, I knew I was making a lifelong friend. Between his stories and what my dad had already taught me, I was beginning to understand the power and value of flair, of getting someone's attention in a big way. Knowing since December that my girl was thinking of going into the convent, I forced myself to save most of the money I got after basketball games, the five dollars a week allowance Dad sent me, plus the money I earned from writing English compositions for guys. I was broke so I would help older guys with their English assignments. At the expense of my own homework I was writing hundred-word compositions—earning extra money doing it. I charged for A's ($3), B's ($2), or C's ($1), and nothing for D's or F's.

I knew it was wrong—well, maybe more immoral than wrong—but I knew better than to tell a Jebbie who might recognize my voice in the confessional and put a stop to it. Most of the students at X were a lot older than me, in their twenties, some with families, just back from fighting in Korea and maybe shot at on Pork Chop Hill or someplace. I grew up during World War II and knew a soldier's bravery and what it was like to sacrifice. I looked at my writing their English compositions as doing my part for the boys in uniform. Besides, Hemingway told somebody if it felt good after, it wasn't immoral. Even if I didn't need the money I'd have done it for nothing. It'd been my writer's duty.

I never had the nerve to tell Mr. V how I made my extra money during school. I often wrote the hundred-word English compositions between classes—sometimes while walking and even carrying on a conversation just to show off that I could. One guy asked me how I did it so easy. "I

was born a creative, wordy pedantic, I guess; what can I say? It's a talent just comes natural to me, sort of like spitting. I guess it's from being in the woods a lot alone, walking and talking to myself when I was younger," I told him.

I wanted to give her a nice going-away present, maybe a set of luggage, but when Mr. V started teaching me and opening my mind up about flair and "All's fair in love and war," as he would say, I started thinking bigger than luggage and roses. I figured I had saved up enough writing English compositions and Mr. V's .65 cents an hour to go all out and pay $125 to charter the private airplane with a pilot he told me a senator had used one time. Mr. V was certain nuns would never get a chance to fly in a private chartered airplane. I flew her up to Columbus in June, when school first let out for her graduation from high school, just to impress her and let her get a taste of what life might be like if she stayed out of the convent, and I became a famous writer.

I took her up to meet my brother, the one I call "gourmet Mike," and his family. We caught a bus back to Cincinnati right after supper. The pilot just shook his head but didn't charge me for the hole the heel of her shoe punched in the canvas wing of the plane as she was twisting her hair into a pony tail while trying to step off. He could see I was in love, just shook his head again and said not to worry about it. During the summer I would take her to Moonlight Gardens at Cincinnati's Coney Island and hold her in my arms and gaze into her eyes as we danced under the stars. I took her to the racetrack that was free to get in, where she placed a two-dollar bet and won thirty-eight dollars. On weekends I would sleep in the park on top of the tall hill just behind her house in Price Hill so I could

be with her when morning came and we could go for walks or catch a city bus somewhere.

Another time, on a hot Saturday, Mr. V arranged for me to hire a limousine and driver for almost nothing. Hess & Eisenhardt were limousine manufacturers up in Norwood who didn't normally hire them out—they just built them for presidents and big companies—but they did the favor for Mr. V after I hinted at the possibility. I took her fishing and for a picnic in their limousine, just as a president of a country could. Mr. Eisenhardt went to XU years before and was a romantic, too, so I got a good price for the hire. I don't remember any worms or tackle, but she and I sure enough sat in the back seat holding hands and hugging and dreaming with our two tall cane fishing poles and lines stuck out the side window with our bobbers plopping up and down in the Ohio River. The driver sat up the river bank, under a shade tree, gentleman that he was, reading a book. That's when I gave her, between our kisses and our stopping long enough to stare out the back window at the giant Delta Queen Riverboat splashing and paddling on toward Louisville, the three-piece set of light sky-blue Samsonite luggage that had caught my eye in a store window up in Norwood, and that I'd been paying four dollars a week for since April. Nuns would need luggage, this I knew, but I suggested they would be good for a honeymoon—maybe even on that very Delta Queen.

"Their color reminded me of your eyes," I told her.

Her eyes flashed a twinkle as she melted into another kiss.

I took her to the Gourmet Room twice. It was a fancy French restaurant Mr. V had told me about, on top of the Terrace Hilton in downtown Cincinnati. He also mentioned that few people could afford it. It would take

more money than I made at the PR Department and more than I had saved up, but I just had to do it, so I'd hitchhike up to Klostermann's bakery every night for a week for each dinner I wanted to take her to, after working with Mr. V all day. Mr. Klostermann knew my dad and he let me ice cupcakes by hand for $1.14 an hour until early morning just before sunrise. After, I would go sleep a couple hours somewhere and go work for Mr. V again. When we went to the Gourmet Room I would take the Maître D aside and tell him how much I had in my pocket and I couldn't go over that or I'd be in trouble.

"Sir, perhaps you will permit me to order for you and your special lady?"

"And you won't go over and you will get a tip too?"

"I will handle everything, sir. Go join your lady, I'll be over shortly."

I kept learning and trying the "flair" stuff Mr. V taught me. I kissed her longer and better each time. We didn't always need a moon. She would raise her hand to my cheek gently, never wanting a kiss to end. I could feel her heartbeat when we danced, but insecure not knowing if she would be going in the convent.

Chapter 2

Fresh off the job one day with Mr. V, giving some thought to where I might lay my head that night, I stepped from the curb onto Victory Parkway to cross the oily crack in the salad bowl to the other side. The smell of road tar melted in my nostrils as I wondered if it could possibly get any hotter. The humidity coming off the Ohio River made it feel more like New Orleans, or so Mr. V would tell me. I'd never been to New Orleans other than in a book, and come to think of it, I don't think Huckleberry Finn did much more than talk about going down there his own self. Once across, I started climbing the steps that reached up the entire height of the very tall hill on the other side of the salad bowl. These stairs were a cement vein that went up the whole side between the armory and Field House, which were built into the hill as its bookends.

The steps were so tall, climbing them gave a body plenty of time to think. I wasn't giving up on the possibility of her choosing me over the convent, but I was starting to think perhaps Mr. V had a point about tramp steamers and cattle boats. Thinking about them could get the threat of the convent out of my head; maybe I could become a famous writer after all, using the flair he and my dad were teaching me by just traveling around the world from port to port on steam freighters. My dad had already taught me how to bake. "Everybody has to eat," he would say. Big Mike would agree with Mr. V about jumping tramp steamers, although if Mr. V knew the truth about me sleeping homeless every night around campus this summer, he would most definitely be on the phone telling my dad I was barely surviving—and then dad would be disappointed with my tall tales—even if I was a heartsick-in-love, broken-

spirited, plain-not-thinking-straight, temporarily-crazy-in-the-head eighteen-year-old. Lying to my dad was wrong, I knew better than anybody, and I had to carry that. So was writing compositions for money, for that matter. I tried other enterprises: shaving guys' necks and around their ears for a quarter, after they got homemade haircuts. I even ironed their shirt collars and cuffs for a quarter so they'd look nice under V-neck sweaters. Xavier men had to wear ties to class. Truth was, quarters didn't stack up quite as tall or spend as well as a bunch of folding dollar bills from A's, B's, or C's for compositions that took me five minutes to write and always earned me more in dollars than they cost me in inconvenience or contrition.

About a third of the way up the stairs, at the first landing, just before they got steep again, I caught a bold, rank smell. Maybe from my armpits, I was thinking. It seemed to be an odor I wasn't all that familiar with, one I felt worthy of my attention. It was offered up as a sign to a boy in that stage of still growing, never being quite sure of what surprises to expect from his body—especially in the motionless, blazing hot air of a concrete alcove oven. It was from me, the smell, I was certain, not a smell coming from the armory or the field house where I practiced and played basketball.

I knew I had basic washing, shaving, and tooth brushing down as any young man out in the world had ought to—and always felt I was fairly near Sunday presentable in that regard when I went out in public—but the baking air lingering this rank in my nostrils got me thinking I was maybe in need of some help getting my clothes properly washed. A boy whose only home is about to become his wits doesn't think of packing a bag. I was thinking maybe it was my shirt and not me. Each night I'd

find a sink and dip my undershorts in the basin of cold tap water and use them as a wash cloth for a stand-up sink bath. I'd rinse and wring them out best I could and pull them on damp to help me stay cool through the heat of the night until I fell asleep. Maybe two months was too long to wear the same shirt. I made a mental note that tonight I'd ask my friend Carlo Mastropaolo where I could get clothes washed without anyone knowing the details of why I was even on campus during the summer. He'd know.

Carlo was a nice, short Italian man with a gentle smile, wavy hair and a mustache, a quiet demeanor and pleasant disposition. He owned a small Italian restaurant, Chico's, on Montgomery Avenue—back up the hill in Norwood, behind the right side of the salad bowl, about a ten-block walk past the tracks. Carlo once played violin for the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra and now gave lessons when he wasn't pulling up a chair and talking with customers or pouring coffee at his restaurant. Carlo would always tell me not to bump my head on the door as I walked in. He understood what I was going through, what with my girl about to leave for the convent. His mother took him into the kitchen for a talk the night she heard me tell him that if my girlfriend really went into the convent I would feel like I was being tossed out like a squeezed lemon.

"I know a breaking heart when I see one," she told Carlo. "A growing boy with a breaking heart still needs his greens. You be good to that boy. Don't let people tease him. He's a good boy."

He would let me sign the tab and pay when I could. Romantics had to stick together. I didn't eat much more than mostaccioli and meatballs ever and maybe a glass of water so I could keep ahead of the tab and his hospitality

without wearing out my welcome. His mother was the cook and she always sent me a salad—on the house.

I made it to the top of the stairs and headed the four blocks beyond the other side of the salad bowl, looking for a "turn of the century" three-story gray-stone and green-shingled house set back a bit off the street and surrounded by big trees like it had been grand and important in another time past. I stepped off the campus and started the walk to what might hopefully be my secret new summer digs. Some upperclassmen had rented the house last year and named it the Sodality House. It was meant for young men who were very religious, maybe even thinking of the priesthood, who helped younger students in need. I wasn't thinking of the priesthood, I liked kissing too much, but I was in need. I still prayed regularly for my old friend Charlie Pitts and for my Aunt Kate, who have since passed, and I kept praying to God; He'd let my girlfriend stay out of the convent.

I'd never been inside the Sodality House, but I had just seen a notice for it with a picture tacked on a bulletin board and thought maybe the place was empty for the summer. The thought was, if I could get in, I could open windows on the west side of the house and not get seen. An ample breeze two stories up could surely keep a body cool enough to fall asleep in this summer heat. As I walked I could hear music in the distance; it seemed like it was coming from a radio through an opened window. Maybe from the Sodality House. The closer I walked, the better I could see two windows on its second floor pulled open and a young man, maybe my age, shorter, with neatly combed, pitch-black hair, sitting on the sill, back to one side, legs stretched across the window ledge, in a short-sleeved shirt, reading a book.

"Hey," I shouted up, stopping and wiping sweat

from my forehead.

"Hello," said the young man, looking down timidly.

"I'm second year," I said back up. "I was figuring on maybe staying here tonight—for a while even, maybe—if it's okay."

"Okay," said the boy. "There're many beds."

"Do they charge to stay there?" I asked. "I'm a little short, ya see."

"I've been here a week," he said. "Nobody else has been here. I don't think they charge, but I don't know. The door is open. You want to come up?"

I detected an accent. I thought Spanish, but decided to mind my manners and not ask. I stepped up the six stone steps, opened the front door, and walked in through a main entrance hall and then up the wide wooden staircase to the second floor. There were four tall doors in the hallway, two on each side. I guessed at the room the young man might be in, peered in, saw him, and walked in. The room had six beds in it with bare mattresses on them; one bunk bed was turned sideways in front of the opened windows. I extended my hand. The lad earmarked a page in the book in his hand, *The Old Man and the Sea*, closed it, and shook my hand.

"I'm Jerry," I said.

"Tomas," said the young man. "Tomas Vargas."

I took the book from his hand and looked at the front cover, the spine, then the back cover.

"Is this good? I think I would like Hemingway, from what I hear. You going to X?" I asked.

"I don't know—about going to Xavier University, I mean. I'm from Cuba. There are many problems in my country. My father sent me here; he told me to wait for his telephone call."

I handed the book back to Tomas and stepped

around the room, looking at beds.

"It's a very good book. It's about a nice old man, a fisherman, and a young boy. My father met Mr. Hemingway in Havana," said Tomas.

I started in the heat.

"Excuse me. Where did you say you were from?"

"Cuba," Tomas said. "It's a country …"

"I know Cuba. Holy Cobako. Why of course I know Cuba," I shouted.

For the first time in my life I felt I was a part of international intrigue, just as in the movies.

"I mean about your dad, for real? What you said—your dad met Hemingway?"

I grabbed the book from his hand and pointed at Hemingway's picture on the back cover.

"This Ernest Hemingway here? Where, when?" I asked.

"He did. They had drinks together at a gambling casino in Havana."

I lifted the book up, examined Hemingway's picture carefully, imagining what it would be like to meet him at a bar. I handed the book back.

"Well, I'll be," I said. "Someday I'm going to be a famous writer."

I looked around the room again.

"What problems?" I asked.

"What?" asked Tomas.

"In Cuba. You said there were problems. What problems in Cuba? Jack Paar—he's a late-night TV show host—he went down there, said Fidel Castro was good and winning the revolution and problems would be over. Why, he said everybody liked Fidel Castro because he was beating hell out of the dictator, Batista. I can't think of that

fella's name—Batista right?"

"Batista; he is a bad man, this is true. Dictator, as you say. But now Fidel is no good," he said.

"Well, did he win or lose?" I asked.

"Fidel drove Batista out, but now he's changed; he's already taken my father's land and our hunting guns. He left us with a few acres to feed our family, my father, my mother, my brother, and me, like dirt farmers. The sugar plantation had been in our family for many generations," said Tomas, now staring blankly at the floor.

"I liked his frankness, his honesty. It crossed my mind that had I been as honest with my girlfriend's dad about our moving to a one room apartment in Milwaukee when dad went broke, I wouldn't be in the mess I'm in now."

"Well that sure stinks," I said. "He sounds like those Hitler or Mussolini bastards," I added.

I edged around the room feeling mattresses with the palm of my hand, trying to calculate the directional flow of breezes through the opened windows.

"Fidel went to high school with my brother. They were even friends. Now he is my brother's enemy and the enemy of people who have businesses. He's a communist. His brother is, too. Communists take everything away. They say they are Robin Hoods but they are just crooks. If anyone argues with the revolution for any reason, they go to jail. Father put me on an airplane to get me out of the country while I still could get out. He knows a priest here at the university, Father Holland, who said I could come and stay until my father could decide what to do with me," said Tomas.

"Father Holland—teaches theology," I said. "He's nice; only gave me a C. Good talker, though, can stir ya up,

make you think."

"I don't know him," he said. "They gave me the address and told me the door would be unlocked and to stay here."

"Unlocked all this time, eh? Well isn't that my dumb luck," I mumbled to myself.

I settled from my tour of beds on the bunk bed that straddled two opened windows.

"You use the top or the bottom?" I asked.

"Top, please, if you don't mind," he said. "I like to watch the stars and think of my family watching the stars."

"Ya know, I'm not totally convinced about that North Star stuff pointing north," I said. "Takes me forever to find the Dipper, never know which one I'm looking at. Why do they have to have two Dippers anyway? I've studied it from four different states now; tops of cliffs in New York, riding trolleys in Milwaukee, laying on the grass here. I still can't tell heads from tails without a compass. I'm just not convinced."

I grabbed a pillow from a bed nearby and threw it on the bottom bunk—claiming it. The lower bunk was windowsill high and certain to catch breezes throughout the night. I pointed toward the bathroom.

"Is that way north?" I asked.

"I think so, but I don't know," said Tomas.

I'd sleep with my head facing north, I decided. I moved my pillow to the other end of the bunk.

"I'm getting hungry. You hungry?" I asked.

"I'm hungry," said Tomas.

"You like spaghetti?"

"I've had two apples today. I didn't want to leave the telephone in case my father called for me," said Tomas.

Tomas pulled a suitcase and a canvas bag off the

lower bunk while I walked to the bathroom to splash my face with cold water, rubbing the wetness over my head. It was a learned afternoon ritual that offered temporary relief from the sweltering heat. I lifted my arm and smelled my armpits to see if the rankness of the shirt was following me too badly. I wondered if my girlfriend could smell it when we danced.

"Let's go," I said.

We walked down the stairs and out of the house. Tomas burst into talk, like he had been holding it in out of loneliness and fear. There seemed to be such a relief in his meeting someone closer to his own age. All down the sidewalk toward the armory and field house stairs he never stopped talking about missing his family and how he worried about his *madre y abuela* (mother and grandmother) back at home worrying about him. Down the street and then starting down the hot concrete steps on the left side of the salad bowl, Tomas rambled on and on about the look in his father's eyes when Fidel took his land; how his father had told him since he was a little boy that he would someday manage the family's sugar plantation; how he had taught him how to care for the crop and watch for the weather, what to do when the winds blew, how to get the cane to market, and how to bargain and wait for a good price.

"So is the sugarcane business considered farming, or ranching? I only know about dairy farms," I muttered to myself.

"When it would rain, and they couldn't work outside, Father told me many stories of how hard his *abuela y abuelo* (grandmother and grandfather) worked, always saving their money so they could buy more land to build a proud heritage for their families," said Tomas.

Tomas told me how the villagers loved his father, respected him, and would come back year after year for harvest; how sad it was, not knowing if those people were out of work or if they now worked for Fidel Castro and his brother. I could see the pride welting up in his face when he spoke so lovingly of his father and of the others in his family. I could see the despair in his brown eyes from not knowing what the future had in store for him alone in a country away from his family. I stopped and turned.

"There's something I have to tell you, Tomas," I said.

"What's that, my friend?"

"My dad used to be a big deal, but he lost everything too, like your dad is losing everything. I just don't like talking about it. I feel like I'm disrespecting him, like I'm betraying him when I talk about it."

We crossed Victory Parkway and started up the other hill on Dana Avenue to Chico's. Listening to Tomas made me homesick and melancholy.

"My father's a baker," I said. "In the 1940s and early1950s, I would ride with him for endless miles and hours through central New York State while he checked stores that sold his bread. We'd spend all day and drive from Binghamton, New York, down near Pennsylvania coal country, way up to Watertown close to Canada and our Mississippi River—the St. Lawrence Seaway—then back on down around the famous, quiet Finger Lakes stretched out like an old-timey, five-fingered Yankee baseball glove. I'm sorry; those are parts of our country," I said.

"I know New York and Pennsylvania," Tomas said. "New York Yankees, Pennsylvania Pirates." He laughed.

"Pittsburgh," I said. "Pittsburgh Pirates."

"My father's sugarcane went all over the world.

Large ships would carry it from Havana," he said.

Halfway up the hill on Dana Avenue, I stopped talking, paused, and turned around just to gaze back at the other side of the salad bowl and reflect—the armory steps, the football stadium, the trail we had just come down from and back up this other side.

"My dad could drive for hours," I said.

I pointed down the hill over at the expanse of the football stadium across the salad bowl.

"My dad designed a sign, Tomas, they built so high up on the side of a great hill between the city of Cortland and the town called Tully, back in New York, why, you could see it for twenty, thirty miles. People sure talked about it and even drove for hours on Sunday afternoons just to show it to the kids and look at it up close as a wonder of the world, like a Niagara Falls. That's a big waterfall between New York and Canada. That was 1935, I think, and to this day no one knows how he built it without walkie-talkies or any other way of talking almost a mile up the hill to help him from down below. The whole sign stretched out a couple of football fields in width," I bragged. "Why, the 'D' alone on the sign stretched up the hill more than three hundred fifty feet tall. Can you imagine?"

I was missing my dad, feeling guilty about my lies about not being able to come home, and just muttering away all yackety-yackety-yack with someone I'd just met and hardly knew.

Tomas said, "You miss your father, I can tell. That's okay, I miss mine, too."

We turned back and continued our walk to Chico's. I buckled up, straight and tall, masking my guilt, my loneliness. I started spewing thoughts aloud just as though I

was dictating a composition for an A, just to impress my audience of one.

"On rides in the country with my dad," I began, "each sound in the car seemed iambic …" I interrupted myself. "Is iambic the best word here? Iambic, like pentameter—a poetic beat," I thought out loud. "I'm just not sure; I'll have to look that one up."

I rattled on.

"Iambic to the particular moment, like the roar in a crowded baseball park. With all four windows opened and the two wing vents turned back to help cool us off at sixty or seventy miles an hour on country roads—every air sound would compete to be heard over the already raucous, pounding, ear-whapping of air breeze's flopping sounds coming in from all sides. But, magically, just as in a crowded baseball park, regardless of the pitch of the crowd noise, the boos and the whistles, I could still hear the distinct sound of my dad's voice above the other noises. It was just like you'd always hear that crack of the bat, for a home run or triple. It's magic, you can hear that crack above the other noise."

"My father would take us to see baseball in Havana. I remember the crack of the bat for certain," said Tomas.

"On our drives, Tomas, we'd always be looking around every next curve in the road for another adventure or maybe a fishing hole; could be a domesticated buffalo we'd stop and stare at through a fence and dream of Buffalo Bill, or just a pair of donkeys we could pet and think of Mary and Joseph on their way to Bethlehem. After we moved to the country was when my dad and I became best friends for life. I was seven. I never got to work in the bakery as you got to work on your plantation, but lucky for me, I heard and learned how to market a product, from

every word he ever said. I knew I wanted to be a storyteller, you know, a writer just from listening to him tell them. His stories were always the crack of the bat, to me … the home run. I'm sorry you can't be with your family," I told Tomas. "It's just not right."

"My father gave me a world globe *para Navidad*," said Tomas. "He carefully showed me your wonderful St. Lawrence Seaway on it, where ships would take our sugarcane from Cuba to Montreal, Canada. Someday he was going to get me a ride on a ship."

"Navidad?" I asked.

"It means Christmas. *Feliz Navidad* means Happy Christmas," he said.

"Well, I'll be. Imagine me learning that walking to Norwood," I said.

Tomas and I walked quietly now. I started thinking of lying to my dad and mom, and of my girlfriend about to leave me any day now, maybe forever. Neither of us said another word until we got to the distraction of the train tracks.

"Follow me," I said. "We'll go this way."

We stepped on a rail of the track, raised our arms straight out for balance, and walked it a good hundred and seventy feet to the next street crossing while we cleared our heads. It took our minds off homesickness for a spell and only cost us a block or two out of our way on our trail to spaghetti dinner at Chico's.

"We are just alike," said Tomas. "Two young men out of the nest, one tall and one short—missing something or someone but just the same, even though we are from two different countries."

Stepping off the rail I halted, turned, and made a bold observation.

“Just imagine, your father met Ernest Hemingway, in person,” I observed.

“He did,” Tomas said.

“And now you, my new friend, Mr. Tomas Vargas from Cuba, a world traveler, have met the one and only Jerome Mark Antil—in person.”

We laughed at my arrogance, and I pulled Chico’s door open.

“Don’t bump your head,” chided Carlo, standing by the cash register.

Tomas and I walked in confidently and headed toward a booth over by the corner.

For several hours we talked about our fathers and what they had taught us and how we missed them. I told him about Mr. V. I chose not to tell Tomas about my girlfriend’s maybe leaving me for the convent. I didn’t want to diminish our mutual pain of homesickness by sharing my personal problem. I asked him about Cuba. Tomas told me of the gambling casinos in Havana, although he had not been to one. I told him about the gambling and prostitution there was in Newport and Covington, cities right across the Ohio River, in Kentucky.

“Have you been to them?” asked Tomas.

“Well, there’s this time when I was a Freshman,” I began. “A guy named Tito Carinci, see, a real nice fellow—it turns out who went to Xavier one time, played football. Heard he was pretty good at football. Tito has a place down there, Covington. Everybody says he’s mafia, but I don’t know that. Some of the basketball team I play on borrowed a car and went to his restaurant in Covington one time. When we went inside, Billy Kirvin, being our team captain, asked for Tito, and he told the lady we came from Xavier to meet him.”

“Did you see prostitutes?” asked Tomas.

“Not sure. At least I don’t think so. I’m not sure what a prostitute looks like,” I said. “She walked us over to a coat closet with one of them Dutch-door things, you know, the bottom half of the door with a shelf on top—a counter on it. The hat-check girl stepped out of the coat closet and told us to step in. She closed the top and the bottom of the door and the whole closet just started to move up, it was an elevator. It was the dandiest thing. When it stopped and the door opened, there was Tito standing there smiling, waiting, at the entrance to a whole smoke-filled floor of gambling, roulette wheels and blackjack tables, men wearing green shades over their eyes and stacking chips and counting money. It went on forever. Tito pushed a basket in our guts and told us to empty our pockets. Then he handed us each fifty dollars’ worth of gambling chips. He gave us each ten chips; they had five dollars stamped right on them, in gold.

“He set the rules quick: ‘These chips are yours.’ He said, ‘Yours to win from or to lose from, or to cash in and keep the money. Win what you can and keep it—but if you lose, it will have been my chips you lost, not your money. Understood?’”

“Caramba,” said Tomas. “Exciting. Such an adventure. Did you go back?”

“Nah. Never could get a car. Other than going to the Latonia horse races with my girlfriend, it was the most fun I’ve had, other than maybe sitting behind home plate at a Cincinnati Reds game with my basketball team. We got to see Hank Aaron play, some others,” I rattled.

“Orlando Peña plays for Cincinnati,” Tomas said. “He’s from Cuba. Perhaps we can go see him play. I wonder if he knows about what Fidel is doing.”

Summer was ending long before the heat. In a gentle rustling, like a rambling brook carrying that one leaf downstream, an occasional student would walk through campus. Tomas and I eventually lost connection, going our separate paths just as I'd become accustomed to athletes doing after games of battle—like ships passing in the night. The respect you gained in your opponent's eyes through the course of a basketball game or even a game of chess was always a fleeting memory. The doctor registered me into Good Samaritan on Labor Day weekend for my appendix operation, just before school was to start up. From my hospital bed I glanced and could see my girlfriend stepping into the doorway of my room, to say goodbye.

I began to shake; I could see the glistening of tears welling in her eyes; I could tell, from her sad, turned mouth, that the tears had been there for some time and now she wanted me to raise my arm, motion her over to my bedside, take her in my arms, hold her tightly, and kiss her, to wake her from this nightmare we were both in. I saw the silhouette of her father coldly leaning against a corridor wall in the distance behind her, waiting for her in the hallway. I wondered if it was too late to tell him the truth, that I wasn't a spoiled rich kid. I looked away, concentrating my eyes on the light cracking through the lowered venetian blinds. I didn't ask her over to my bedside. I didn't beg her not to go. I didn't kiss her or hold her or smell her hair.

"Bye," I said.

She was gone from my life. It was real now.

My appendix and my heart came out the very same day.

Xavier University came to life again. I walked to the Sodality House after work one day to jump in the

shower and noticed Tomas's things were gone. An upperclassman, dropping a box on a bed and walking down the stairs for another, asked me if I belonged there.

"Yeah, I sleep here. Well, no, I guess I don't technically—that is, belong here. But I'd like to. Who are you?"