

DOUBLE-WIDE

“Yeah?”

“Sorry to bother you,” the guy said, standing on the newly-installed Trex deck that I commandeered from the abandoned double-wide at Happy Wheels RV Park last week. I planned to raise it to the appropriate height, but, like so many other times in my life, I came up a little short.

“Wadda ya want?” I growled, not liking my Sunday Football being disturbed. I towered above him, in the doorway of my thirty year old Fleetwood double-wide because of the short deck.

He was early twenties, and I could see the blue Volvo, with his wife and little girl watching us. He had one of those near-beards that young people think are so cool. To me, it’s a six-day growth. If you’re going to grow a beard, do it right. This guy looked like Yasser Arafat reincarnated with a narrow face and a hawk-like beak, and I could see him rethinking this little visit.

“Um, I’m looking for James Lee Martin... the lady at the office said this was the trailer.”

James? The only people called me that was Mama and bill-collectors. And trailer? This ain’t no Red-neck Condo: it’s a Fleetwood Manufactured Home, the Cadillac of double-wides. No wheels on this baby; it’s permanently affixed to Mother Earth here at the Mount Holly Residential Park in Willard’s Crossing.

I squinted through the haze of the half-dozen PBR’s I’d downed since Kick-off, deciding that bill-collectors didn’t take their wife, kid and Volvo along for a Repo, least not on Sunday, so my Ford pick-up was safe. And if Mama came to visit, she would’ve arrived on a Chariot from the Heavens.

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“You found him,” I said bravely, day-dreaming that this dude was delivering somebody’s Last Will and Testament, leaving all their worldly possessions to one James Lee Martin.

He smiled. “Mr. Martin, my name is Nathan Crowe, and I have something that belongs to you.” He reached into a brown-paper shopping bag I hadn’t noticed before and pulled out a rusty metal box.

I squinted again. “Me?” I asked skeptically. It could implicate me in some misdemeanor, or worse, felony. Better tread lightly. “It don’t look familiar. Why do you think it’s mine?”

“Look inside.” He held it out for me, and I took a half-step back, wary of this Arab-looking dude with the Volvo. Seeing my reluctance, he held it in both hands and opened.

I could see that it was an old lunch box, Davy Crockett model, circa 1955, the one with Ole Davy aiming Betsy at the big brown bear attacking him, and it brought me back sixty years. I found a similar lunch box under my Christmas tree. Mine had Davy at The Alamo, swinging Old Betsy at Santa Ana’s army, and it all hit me like that Flintlock did them Mexicans. I proudly wore that Coon-skin cap to bed for a month, just like every kid in America.

Papers and cards filled the box, and Nathan Crowe announced, “We moved into a place on 1214 Cow Pasture Road last year. This spring, we were planting a garden, when my wife found this buried near the rear fence.”

I grew up at 1468 Cow Pasture. Mama and Daddy raised 5 kids there. 1214 didn’t ring a bell.

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“We looked through the papers and found your name,” he went on. “We’ve been looking for you for two months. It sort of became a mystery for us to solve.” He looked back to his wife who was waving at us. I weakly gave her a hello.

“This box is rusty, but in mint condition, these things are going for two hundred bucks,” he said proudly. “And, some of these old baseball cards are probably worth something, too.”

Maybe this was the closest I’d ever get to a Last Will and Testament. I warily took the box, as if it was an egg on a spoon. “How’d you find me?”

“It was my wife Ellen, mostly. She checked with the school district, figuring you’d be in your middle-sixties now, found out what high school you went to, checked with the Alumni Association, and they said you lived here. Not too shabby, huh?”

“Well, I don’t know exactly what to say, Mr. Crowe... Would you all like to come in?”

He smiled again, this time in a condescending manner. There was no way he was bringing his little girl into my “trailer,” and I didn’t blame him.

“Well, thank you... Maybe we can split any money I make from the cards?”

“That won’t be necessary, thanks. What you could do for us, if you would?” He reached into that shopping bag again and handed over a stamped envelope. “After everything settles, if you could just let us how it all turns out?”

Now I was squinting from confusion. What was in this box, and did I want to know? Hell, yeah! I took the envelope, which was addressed to 1214 Cow Pasture Road, and thanked him again as I gave a hearty wave to the Missus.

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I watched the Volvo pull away, deciding I needed at least two steps to make my Fleetwood truly accessible, scheming where I could scam the lumber. A nice handrail would add class too, but right now, that box felt warm in my hands. Placing it on my kitchen table, I glanced at the score of the game out of habit but it didn't register, and I downed the last of that long neck, not tasting a drop.

I dug around one of the many junk drawers and came across Cheaters with the +200 sticker still on the lens, squinted through them and decided they were better than nothing. I sat at the sturdier of the two kitchen chairs, swept the table clear of my breakfast dish and coffee cup with my fore arm, and carefully dumped the contents out of Old Davy. The papers went in one pile, and the Topps baseball cards went in the other.

There were 22 cards, all from 1957. I would've been seven then, and for sure would've remembered owning them, but didn't. About half were some big names, Mays, Mantle, Hodges, Berra, Snider, Skowron, and Bobby Thompson. The rest were lesser names, Ozzie Virgil, Bobby Shantz, Andy Carey, Jim Gentile, and so forth. The common denominator, I could see, was they all the played for New York, either the Yankees, Giants or Dodgers. None were from my beloved St Louis Cardinals. While these cards would've had trade value, seven year old Jimmy Lee Martin, would've traded them all for a single Stan the Man.

The pages also held no meaning. Book reports in someone else's handwriting on books I'd never read. The yellowed pages didn't seem to hold any pattern, like the cards did. There had to be 20 pages, a few of which were on smaller paper, as if torn from a notebook, and I felt a flutter in my gut as I unfolded them. The writing was in script,

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cursive they call it now. And it wasn't done by a seven year old boy, that's for sure. The penmanship seemed obviously female.

"I can't sleep," one began. "I feel badly, but I made a promise and I can't break it. James Lee will be okay. Those Martins are tough, everybody knows. But he doesn't deserve what everybody is saying. It wasn't him, and he's getting blamed. I should speak up but now I waited too long. I don't deserve to sleep. James Lee Martin isn't sleeping too well, I bet. He deserves better."

The pages, I could now see now, were torn from a diary, and based on the date, April 16, 1963, I was thirteen, in eighth grade at Lakeview Elementary School. My mind drifted back more than fifty years, and that time came into focus.

Never much of a student, with little attention-span, I spent class gazing out the window, seeing a sparrow and mentally switching places with him, then soaring above Lake Norman, swooping low, then a quick flap, and climbing high, swerving left and right, until Mrs. Quinn brought me back with a sharp, "James Lee Martin!"

Somehow, I managed to absorb just enough to keep advancing through the grades, never failing, but never soaring. As long as I passed, they didn't bother me much, but every report card noted, "Needs to apply himself," and "Day Dreams." Then, two things happened: The Spring Bazaar and Maggie O'Toole.

Mama could bake better the best in Lincoln County and she convinced me to volunteer to the Bazaar Committee to improve my standing for graduation and moving onto Iron Station High. It didn't take too much coaxing since Maggie O'Toole had already volunteered.

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Maggie was new to Lakeview, arriving the previous September. The fellas made little note of her, with her flat freckled face, pixie nose, prominent chin and untamed red hair, but she was real, the realist person I ever met, and I was smitten. Those blue eyes drew me like a sparrow to Lake Norman.

Not known for shyness, I found myself shuffling my feet and rubbing my cheek whenever she was around. She quickly became part of our circle and I spent as much time in her presence, whether she knew it or not.

The Lakeview School Bazaar was held on Saturday, April 13th, with Bake Sales, Three-Legged Races, Balloon-Popping Booth, and assorted other games. I worked the concession, selling soda-pop, and slices of cake and pie, placing the receipts in... Oh My God! Someone had provided a metal lunch box to use as a cash box! Could it have been Old Davy? I had no idea.

Anyway, sales were brisk. Maggie was doing fill-in at every booth and my heart pounded when she relieved Kenny Schultz at my table.

“You’re doing great business, James Lee,” she told me, and I proudly held the stack of singles and rattled the change in the box. She laughed her hoarse, real, laugh and her red mop shook, and those blue eyes twinkled... at me!

We packed up at the end, the teachers and parents collecting the receipts while us kids got to finish off the cakes and pies. We sat together, talking about likes and dislikes, and I felt my shield come down, opening up to Maggie like I never had to any human, not counting Stanley, our old Collie.

After everything was eaten and put away, folks started heading home when Maggie asked, “You’re going to Burger Barn, right?”

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I hadn't heard anything from the crowd about that night, and asked if she was going. She seemed embarrassed. "Oh, James Lee, I'm sorry, I thought you were invited."

Invited to a burger joint? Who needs an invite?

"Wesley Farnsworth has rented the side room. You didn't know? I'm sure he just forgot to invite you."

Wesley Farnsworth never forgot anything, including that beating I laid on him after him and his buddies jumped me and Timmy Houston after a Lakeview football game. I never found out why, but the next day, before class, I walked up to Wesley. "You were pretty tough when you had us outnumbered. How about just you and me?"

He smiled to his friends, being two inches bigger than me. "I don't need no help with the likes of you," he answered as he tried to sneak the first shot in, but I expected it, blocked and ran at him, catching him off-balance. We hit the ground with me on top and he never recovered. A week later, he still had a mouse under his left eye when we had to shake hands at the principal's office.

That was two years earlier, and though we stayed distant, we had to co-exist in such a small school. "Wesley didn't forget," was all I said to Maggie.

"I'm sure you could come as my guest," she replied.

I would've loved to spend the night in her company, but I was raised not to go where you're not wanted. And, it was Wesley's party; he could invite whoever he wanted. "I ate too much cake anyway. I'll stay in tonight."

Sixty years later, I pushed away from the table, hoping the break would chase the beer-clouds. Maybe a hot shower. Yeah, a shave couldn't hurt, either.

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Half-an-hour later, wearing slacks I got last Christmas from my sister that still had the tags on them, and a fairly-clean, badly-wrinkled tee shirt, I approached the box again.

Going back in time, to the following day, April 14th, at church, I saw Maggie with her mom, a heavy-set redhead who lacked Molly's smile. She waved but kept going.

"Jimmy Lee!"

I turned to see Jack Sharkey, the local rumor-monger fast-approaching. "Man, what did you do to Wesley Farnsworth?" He couldn't have meant two years earlier. Not only had he been there, I believe it was he who snitched to the principal.

I just shrugged. "Nothing, why?"

"He went on about you at Burger Barn, and bad! Said, you were a thief, a liar, and a cheat, that nobody should trust you with anything."

Jack must've seen my confusion. "Everybody felt bad, Jimmy Lee, everybody. There was no call for that when you weren't there to defend yourself."

"I guess nobody felt bad enough to stand up and tell him he was wrong, huh?"

Jack shrunk away, having done his civic duty.

Two years is a long time, but I guess Wesley hadn't forgotten that beating after all. I resolved to remind him come Monday. But, for the life of me, I had no clue what set him off either time.

My jaw was set as I walked to school that day, ready for whatever came, but there was a change of plans. The moment I stepped into the school yard, two teachers converged. "Principal's Office, right now, Mister."

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I guessed Jack Sharkey couldn't hold his tongue on what he expected me to do. I expected that Wesley was already inside when I was told to sit outside. I was wrong again. No Wesley, and fifteen minutes later, Mama walked in.

"The principal will see you now," the receptionist said.

"Mrs. Martin, we have a problem," Principal Fields gravely advised.

Calling Mama to a fist fight that hadn't even happened? Ridiculous.

"James Lee was seen breaking into the school and stealing the funds from our Bazaar."

WHAT?!?

Mama looked at me. "Mama, I swear, it wasn't me!" To Principal Fields, I said, "Who says they saw me?"

"I'm not at liberty to say."

Mama looked worried.

"Mama, I swear, I didn't do it! I don't even know where they kept the money."

"You were on the committee, right?" Fields asked.

"Yeah, but I didn't steal anything, I tell you!"

"What proof do you have," Mama asked.

"We have a witness."

"A witness you won't name."

"Mrs. Martin, your son has a reputation of settling things with his hands. I will not put that student who witnessed this in danger of reprisals."

Mama turned to me again. "Now, Jimmy Lee, just listen. If you took it, admit it now, and we'll make restitution. You don't need something like this following you for

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the rest of our life. Mistakes can be corrected, but you can never get back your good name.”

Tears made them both look fishy to me, like through a glass of water. “I-Swear. I-Did-Not-Take...”

“I believe my son. If you choose to believe some un-named witness, you are doing this boy a grave injustice.”

“Mrs. Martin...”

“Mr. Fields, I know my boy, and I know when he’s lying, and he ain’t.”

“I’m sorry...” was all he said, and we rose.

“Now what?” Mama asked.

“I will have to meet with the Board.”

“I want to be there,” she demanded.

“That’s just not possible.”

The next day, April 16, 1963, we reported to Principal Fields’ office.

“You may return to class,” he said.

“That’s it?” Mama asked.

“The Board agrees that since we have no proof, there is no other recourse.”

“What about the accusations? I’m sure they’ve gotten around. Is your office prepared to announce that James had nothing to do with the robbery?”

Fields held his hand up. “By doing so, we would in fact be giving credence to the accusation.”

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Back in class, I saw the looks, the hatred, the distrust. Sure enough, the story had leaked, probably by the same so-called witness. But, what could I do? It was like screaming at the wind: it didn't listen.

Life changed on that day. Where teachers had ignored my daydreaming, I was now disciplined. My grades went from C-plus to D-minus. I was barely passing and at risk of not graduating. In the end, they let me pass, probably rather than keep such an incorrigible being around for another year.

Friends were fewer, and those who remained were wary. I never got to confront Wesley for fear that any action may result in expulsion. He went to a private school, so I didn't see him for a few years. When I finally did, the anger had passed. He was driving a red Mustang and I was driving a green John Deere. He went on to NC-Charlotte and I went on Unemployment. Needless to say, we haven't run with the same crowd. Last I saw, he was running for State Assembly.

Maggie went to Iron Station High, and she was always cordial, but we were never alone again, never had another chat. Her family moved in our sophomore year, and I never saw her again, never got to say goodbye.

Well, I thought, at least someone else knows it wasn't me. The diary had to be in reference to the accusations. The date was no coincidence.

A thought occurred to me, and I rifled through the regularmail that was scattered on the counter, tossing papers around until I found the blue flyer. I hadn't paid it any mind. After all, Grammar School was over fifty years earlier and who would want to see me? I assumed whoever did the mailing hadn't known my history.

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I looked at the date of the reunion: November 2nd, six days in the future. What did I care? Why did I care? Even if Maggie showed up, she had to be a grandmother by now, and I knew I was no prize! I grabbed a PBR and pondered.

Both my Social Security and pension checks would clear, so I'd be fat with money. I was overdue for a haircut, and if I took the tags off these pants, I figured there had to be a clean shirt somewhere. And, I had no prior commitments, so on Saturday night, so I fired up the pick-up and headed for Lakeview Elementary.

I really could've used a beer, and figured anyone who remembered me would expect nothing less, but decided I'd have more than enough afterwards. I left a case of longnecks chilling in my Igloo cooler on my Trex Deck.

The table outside the gymnasium held those "Hello, My Name Is..." labels, and a young lady helped me find James Lee Martin, peeling the back and affixing it to my almost-new, mostly-ironed shirt. I sucked in my gut and entered to The Beatles' *Here Comes The Sun*.

Surprisingly, the turn-out was decent. The dim lights did much to hide everyone's wrinkles, bad toupees, face lifts and paunches, but it was difficult to read the name tags, and I hadn't brought my Cheaters.

The first guy I recognized was Timmy Houston who was with me for the Wesley Attack. Through it all, he hadn't turned on me, but that didn't help because his family moved away right after graduation.

After chest-bumps, man-hugs and back-pats, we caught up, with me relating my luck in filing for Unemployment at a time when the State was looking for office staff. I wound up working for Unemployment for thirty-five years.

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Timmy had been drafted, went to OCS, did three tours in Nam, and decided he liked the life. He retired as a Colonel three years ago.

We blended into the crowd and I was pleasantly surprised at my reception. Back-pats and hugs and genuine interest in my life, like the Bazaar never happened.

A hush came over the crowd, and we all felt a presence. Even the music had stopped. The lights grew a tad brighter, and everyone turned to the door.

Hair slicked back with a pseudo-mullet, tanned skin, blindingly-white teeth in a suit that was worth more than my Fleetwood Home, if I could ever pay it off, here came Wesley Farnsworth, nodding, glad-handing, and winking his way through the crowd. Accompanied by his much-younger wife, he looked ten years younger than he was.

I figured he'd show, seeing as how he was running for State Assembly on Tuesday. In my fantasies of the past week, I had concluded that Wesley was the one, not only robbing the funds but bad-mouthing me, thereby ruining my life. In my revelry, I convinced myself that not only would I have married Maggie, but I would've been a successful Manufactured Home builder. I would've been Fleetwood's Man of the Year. And I wouldn't be living alone, twice divorced, with two kids who hate me. Hey, I could dream, right?

Wesley neared and I stiffened. I heard Timmy say, "He's still an ass-hole," and before I could respond, he was there, smiling at us.

"Hi, Guys! How've you been?" Like we were Frat Brothers.

The best I could do was nod. I have no idea what Timmy did. But, Wesley kept moving, greeting people, Mr. Roarke welcoming his guests to Fantasy Island.

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My shoulders slumped with exhaustion as my eyes scanned the gym for something to drink. The cash bar was in the corner, stocked and staffed by the Alumni Association. Whatever they were charging, I was paying. Timmy and I didn't need to say a word, both heading for a cold one.

I got the first round, and we clicked longnecks. "To Ass-holes," Timmy said.

"Amen," I chuckled.

"James Lee?"

I would've known her anywhere, at any time. The red hair was tamer but still a bit wild, and the eyes were just as blue.

"Hi, Maggie," my voice cracked, "how are you?"

She was plumper, like her mother, no longer the skinny kid with the flat face. The freckles seemed to blend together and the chin wasn't as prominent. She took my hand and stood on her toes to kiss my cheek.

"You look exactly the same," she told me, and I believed her, I don't know why. That's what everybody says at these things, right?

"You look better," I replied, realizing how bad that sounded, then added, "But you looked great before!"

She laughed, ordered a white wine and we caught up.

She was widowed, with a daughter and two grandkids, and recently retired from teaching in Ohio. "When I got the flyer, I thought, why not?"

I glossed over my career, deciding that I should find out if, in fact, I had any grandkids. But, other than that, I felt as comfortable as I had at Bazaar.

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“I’ve got to ask you something,” I finally told her. “Do you remember the Bazaar?”

“Of course! We ate all that cake and pie.”

“Do you remember about the funds being stolen?”

She grew quiet, nodding slowly.

“I was accused of being the thief.”

She nodded again, watching me with those blue eyes. “I remember.”

“I didn’t do it,” I felt the need to say.

“I didn’t think you did.”

Now I looked at her quizzically. “Then, why did you stop talking to me?”

“I didn’t, James.” She looked away. “That day, at the bazaar, I had such a crush on you, and you were so nice to me. It sounds so funny to talk about it now, but I was suddenly shy around you. I thought maybe I was too forward asking you out to the Burger Barn.” Those eyes were on me again. “I kept waiting for you to ask me out, even in High School, but you never really talked to me again.”

“Damn,” was all that came out, because I believed her. “I thought you believed the rumors; everybody did.”

She shook her head. “Everybody I talked to said you weren’t like that, people that knew you a long time. But later, when you stayed away from us, some people said, ‘Well, maybe he *is* guilty.’ But *I* never believed it.”

“Thanks, I guess.”

“You’re welcome,” she smiled.

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The realization that I had blamed others for my troubles for fifty years hit me hard. Had Wesley never accused me of being a lying thief, I probably would've had a different life. Why had he done that?

The Reunion was in full swing, with Wesley shaking hands until he found out you didn't live in his state any longer. Timmy was hanging with a group from our old crowd, and Maggie and I sat at a table, trying in vain to recapture fifty years.

No one seemed to notice the arrival of Jack Sharkey, but when I did, I can honestly say, if anyone didn't age, it was Jack. The same tall, slim frame, always impeccably dressed, looking like he stepped out of a time machine.

He seemed to scan the crowd as he entered. I probably wouldn't have even noticed except that a woman at the next table was saying how Jack was working on Wesley's campaign. In fact, she said, he was the Campaign Manager, having worked at Wesley's law firm for the last twenty years.

Jack spotted Wesley, and made a bee-line to him. Wesley stepped away from his wife and the former classmates spoke privately with animated hand-movements. As interesting as our conversation was, we all seemed caught up in Wesley and Jack, following their every move.

"I'm surprised Jack stayed," Maggie commented.

I hadn't even thought of Jack until the rusty box was delivered by Nathan Crowe and his wife. "Why is that?" I asked, just to keep the conversation going, and I felt her looking at me. "What?"

"His being... you know."

"A rumor-monger?" I joked.

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“A gay person,” she answered, annoyed. “It couldn’t have been easy for him growing up in North Carolina in those years. He used to talk about moving to New York, where he could blend in.”

Jack? Gay? How did I miss that? “Really?”

“You really didn’t know?” she asked.

Boy, I thought, I really didn’t pay attention. I looked again, and Jack was coming, followed by Wesley. “Maybe he heard you,” I warned Maggie, who looked at me like I had two heads.

“I have something to tell you, James Lee,” he announced, even though we hadn’t seen each other in a half-century.

“Oh, Hi, Jack,” I responded, too-casually to be believed, as Wesley drew up behind him.

“Jack, don’t...,” was all he got out.

Jack spoke slowly and clearly, for all to hear. “James Lee Martin did not rob the profits from the bazaar fifty years ago.”

I felt all eyes on me when Wesley said, “Jack, please...”

“Don’t ‘please’ me!” Jack screamed. “I’ve seen you do it our whole lives. I let my love blind me, but now the pension funds? Wesley, I can’t sleep! I cannot allow you to win the State Assembly, starting here.”

Wesley’s wife had caught up, hanging on his arm. He shook her off. “Jack, I swear...”

“Don’t even go there. I’ve lived on your empty promises for too many years. I should have stopped you when you began.”

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The pieces were falling into place and I rose from the table as Maggie grabbed for my arm. “What are you saying, Jack?”

“He did it,” pointing at Wesley. He laughed. “The worst part was he didn’t even need the money. He just hated you so much.”

I looked to Wesley, whose wife seemed the most confused, as Jack faced Wesley.

“I loved you,” he said, “and what we had was special, but I can’t... we can’t continue to live a lie, Wesley.”

Wesley’s eyes seemed to ooze venom. The bully was coming out again. “Shut up, Jack.”

“I loved you and you’ve loved me, long before this bitch ever came along!” Jack shrieked. “Andrew told me everything, Wesley. Did you think you could take up with a younger man and I’d just step aside?”

“You old Queen,” Wesley said coldly. “Sure, I used you, and for fifty years you’ve done my bidding! I made you! And now you’re turning on me? You’re nothing but an ungrateful old fag! I can’t stand the sight of you!”

My right fist had heard enough, and Wesley lay on the gymnasium floor, fifty years too late.

I grabbed my beer and downed it in one pull, then said to Maggie, “How about Burger Barn?”

“Dutch?”

“Sure, I’m on a fixed income anyway.” I held out my arm and she took it. Jack was looking down at Wesley, not knowing what to do next.

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“Hey Jack,” I said, “You lived at 1214 Cow Pasture, right? I’ve got a rusty lunch box and some old pages that belong to you.” I was keeping the cards for myself.

I called my oldest, who seemed thrilled to hear from me, and reported that I was a month away from being a Grandpa. Wesley lost his election bid and his wife filed for divorce. It was rumored, (Funny, a rumor about him!) that Jack Sharkey had taken a job with a law firm in his beloved New York City. He should have no trouble finding worthy campaigns with worthy candidates up there. We exchanged information before Maggie left, and promised to stay in touch. Will it happen? I don’t have a clue, but I’m hopeful. But, right now, I have steps and a handrail to build for my Fleetwood, and I owe Nathan and Ellen Crowe, their daughter and their Volvo, a letter.