

## **“Swimming the Mississippi River at Hannibal Missouri”**

A Short Story by D.C. Kuhns—March 25, 2018

Introduction: *After my Hitchhiking Trip around the 48 states in 1973, I desperately wanted to continue my quest for adventure. So each summer, between 1974 and 1977, when school let out for the Residential Treatment Center where I had low-paying job as a teacher/ counselor, I would hitchhike across the country from California to Washington D.C., while my wife would visit her folks in Chicago. In 1976, after separate visits to our respective homesteads, we planned to join together in Washington, at my family’s home, then travel to The Family’s Beach House in Delaware for a relaxing summer vacation at the Beach.*

*Each summer, I would put on my backpack again, walk to the bottom of University Avenue and stick my thumb out. This location was like the cab-line in Manhattan. Between twenty to thirty hitchhikers would be lined-up with their thumbs out, waiting for a ride. The wait was never long. This was the diving-off place in the East Bay, whether you were going to Sacramento, California, Los Angeles, or anywhere on the east coast. People seeking rides across the state or across the U.S. from Northern California would start from Berkeley. The bottom of University Avenue was like a Grand Central Station in New York. You could catch ride anywhere...*

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The journey began innocently enough. I responded to an advertisement in the classified ads section of the Berkley “BARB”, requesting passengers for a cross-country road trip.

When I arrived at the address, on Berkeley’s famous Telegraph Avenue, I knocked. I was met at the door by Maxine Freund, a short quirky, diminutive woman with owl-like black glasses. Maxine was sporting an Afro. She had a personality to match her assemblage.

She probably cracked three jokes in the first 15 minutes of the interview. It was after the interview she told me that I was the second and last person to respond to the advertisement in the Berkeley paper. When I asked why, she replied, “Because we’re going in my 1976 Volkswagon Beetle. It’s going to be pretty cramped. I don’t want any pussies.” I knew right then and there, traveling with this woman would be a real adventure. What I didn’t know when I signed up would come later.

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On the day of our departure, I met the second passenger, Faith O'Connor. Faith looked the part. She had excelled as a swimmer, since she was five years old, She. She was tall, and narrow at the hips with broad shoulders, sun-tanned with Auburn hair, and freckles. Her parents were intent upon making her an Olympic Champion. She had won a scholarship to the University of Maryland at 17, and was the top speedster in her class. At 18 she was scratched from the Olympic trials, even though she placed first. This was during the days when the Commission for the Olympics was banning all kinds of drugs, including some cold medicines. Faith's college coach didn't get the memo, and when Faith tested positive for \_\_\_\_\_, she was ruled ineligible to compete in the Olympics.

Faith never competed in swimming again. She graduated from the University of Maryland in 1975.

As we departed from Berkeley that Friday afternoon, we had a good view of the *Grand Central Station* in the East Bay. All the hitchhikers were lined up at the bottom of University, waiting for their rides to anywhere in the USA. Maxine cocked her head and yelled, "So long suckers. Next-stop, Washington, D.C.!"

We drove the three hours to Truckee then stopped for some dinner at a tavern outside Truckee, Nevada. Friday-night business was booming in the tavern, with a crowd lined up two-deep at the Bar, and people standing in the aisles, waiting for tables. The swinging doors opened and twelve people walked into the tavern. A big man with a barrel chest, a scruffy beard, and a black cowboy hat announced in a booming voice,

"Folks, my name is Hillbilly Rabbi Norman, I am driving Route #80 all the way across the Great Salt Desert. My destination is Trenton, New Jersey. I have a 5-ton Chevy Stake truck outside with plenty of room for travelers in the bed. So if you have money for gas, you are welcomed to come along." Some hitchhikers in the crowd yelled, "take me" before the tavern returned to its normal Friday-night raucous noise level. I went to the men's room. When I returned, I saw Maxine Freund standing on a bar-stool in her red vest and black leather skirt, with a beer in one hand yelling, "Rabbi Norman, are you a true Rabbi, or is that just your street name." The tavern crowd got quiet all of a sudden, waiting for the Rabbi to answer.

“I may look like a Hillbilly, but I am an ordained Rabbi. My specialty is circumcisions and conversions of Christians to Jewish faith.

“Well Rabbi, she answered, as you can see I don’t need circumcision, but I am a member of the flock of Jews for Jesus, so I may need your help with a conversion.”

The crowd roared, and people in the throng lifted Maxine off her perch from the bar-stool, parading the diminutive woman around the room. Before we all left the Truckee tavern, Maxine talked and laughed with Hillbilly Rabbi Norman, and they hugged before we left.

I felt that my first intuition about Maxine had been correct. She certainly was a “pistol”. Little did I know we would learn more about Maxine’s personality and history, as we all traveled in her red Volkswagon across the U.S.A. That night we parked and slept in our sleeping bags in a roadside Rest Stop near Reno.

The next morning, after breakfast in a diner in Reno, we made the decision to travel on Route #50, all the way across the U.S.A.

*A little know fact about Route #50 is this road was one of the first trans-American highways. During the Silver Mining strikes of the 1920’s, The U.S. government cooperated with the states of Nevada and Utah, to build this trans-American highway through Silver mining areas, to bring the silver ore to markets. Wherever prospectors found a mother-lode of Silver, a boom-town would spring up. People would flood to the location of the Silver strike, anticipating an overnight camp, and eventually a town. Many of these towns went bust, and became ghost towns after the Silver played out.*

*But the road was still there.*

During the day, that little Volkswagon roared up and down, taking us over several mountain ranges and salt flats in Nevada. There were very few towns. Sometimes it would be hours before any cars drove past in the opposite direction. Along the way we observed green-colored signs stating directions to places like “Moose-Junction- 74 miles”. The road following the Off-Ramp was dirt or sand for 74 miles, and then...Well who knew?

Every few hours, someone would call out, "Pee-break."

We would pile out of car; women on the right, single man on the left, to relieve our bladders, and simply stretch our legs. It was hot and dry. The temperature was over 100 degrees. During one of these stops Maxine called for me to come over to the girls' side of the car. When I got there she was still squatting with her shorts pulled up around her knees.

"Oh, so sorry. Didn't know that you hadn't finished," I said.

"Don't worry, she retorted. I just wanted to show you something. " She reached through the leg of her shorts, and manipulated her genitalia, so a narrow, but forceful stream of urine shot out a distance of three or four feet, nearly hitting my bare feet in Karachi sandals. I jumped back trying to avoid getting wet.

"Holy, moly, how did you do that?"

Maxine nearly fell over laughing.

"I lived in Thailand back in my teens. The Strippers in Bangkok taught me how to pee a narrow stream. These are the same Strippers that smoke cigarettes with their vagina muscles."

I just shook my head in disbelief. Maxine was a joker, with a pretty salty sense of humor.

We stopped to see the "Tower" in the town of Austin Nevada, and had lunch at a bar in Eureka. The waitress gave us change in Silver Dollars, which was the local currency. That night we followed our normal routine of stopping at a roadside Rest Stop near Gunnison, Utah. With no one there we decided to build a small fire. I cooked a couple cans of beans and franks over the fire. After eating, we laid out our sleeping bags. Maxine, who had driven all day, went to sleep, while Faith and I talked.

I asked her what she was going to do in Washington D.C., after we dropped her off.

"I'm going to my older brother's wedding, she said."

"My twin brother John just got married in 1975, last July," I told her.

As we sat there in dark night, lighted only by the dying embers of the campfire. The clean mountain air was laden with the scent of pines in the woods outside Garrison. Overhead, the swirling cluster of stars in the Milky Way provided a brilliant array of light in the skies.

She told some of her family story...

“When my family first moved to the D.C. Area, we were dirt-poor Irish immigrants, living alongside poor Italians and Irish in an upstairs two-bedroom apartment in Takoma Park, along Flower Avenue. When my father got a good job at the Post Office we moved out to a new suburb in Prince Georges County.

“So your family story is one of success?”

“Yes, we got out just in the nick of time. My brother ran with an immigrant Irish street gang. He was caught in gang-related activities many times. Nothing serious of course, but the police in Takoma Park were prejudiced against immigrant Irish and Italian boys. His next offense was going to land him into Loch Raven, juvenile facility. Anyone who goes to Loch Raven, comes out a hardened criminal”

“So now he’s getting married?”

“Yes, he’s in medical school at George Washington University.

“That’s quite a turn-around.”

“Absolutely!”

The embers burned down to nothing, so we went to sleep.

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The Third day we got an early start but after lunch Faith wanted to stop in Green River, Arizona.

“We’ve had been in the desert for a few days,” She told us.

Faith wanted to swim in the Green River.

“I am swimmer, I will always be a swimmer,” she explained. We’ve been through deserts and salt flats for the past days. I need to swim.”

Since none of us were in a particular hurry, we gave her what she wanted. We stopped in the town of Green River, bought some wheat bread and turkey sandwiches from a Deli on Main Street, and drove to a picnic area in town where Faith could swim, while we had lunch.

The Green River is a shallow body of water that flows into the Colorado River. Further south in Canyons Land National Park, the Green River joins the mighty Colorado River in the Grand Canyon on its way through five other states before it reaches the Gulf of Mexico.

Faith found some potholes in the Green River where she could swim in the cold, clear water.

We had now been on the road three days, and we were already in Utah, We felt like we deserved a leisurely afternoon at this beautiful spot. There was a cool breeze. Above the water, several birds of prey perched upon the dead pine spars, looking for their dinner, including a bald eagle and golden eagle. All of us watched, as the golden eagle swooped down and caught a big brown trout swimming too close to the water's surface. Reluctantly, toward the evening, we left that heavenly spot to follow Rt. #50 again. I laid down in the back seat to take a quick nap.

It was nearly 8:30 PM, approaching twilight. As the sun was setting in the path of the Volkswagon the sky was an artist's pallet, evolving before our eyes. The orange and yellow sky gradually changed to purple as night was falling.

I had dozed off. But the girls heard a police siren. The siren was coming from a brown auto, with no police markings, directly behind us. The officer stopped, and instead of going to the driver's side, he approached the passenger side and tapped on the window with his high-powered flashlight.

"Roll down the window, he demanded."

Faith complied asking, "What is the problem officer?"

"Both of you get out of the car, he demanded again!"

This is when Maxine yelled out,

"I know my rights! You have to tell us what you stopped us for, before we get out of the car!"

Maxine's yell emboldened me. I pushed past her to open the door.

I saw that this guy was truly a fake, trying to imitate a policeman. He had nothing but a high-powered flashlight.

When this fake policeman saw me get out of the car, he retreated for his vehicle, stripped the fake red-cherry light from the roof and started the engine, speeding away in a cloud of dust and gravel.

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We were all pretty frightened by the incident with the fake policeman in Green River, so Maxine asked me to drive. We continued to drive through the night, until we stopped at a Roadside Rest Stop, just outside of Dodge City Kansas.

*What we didn't know then, we later learned in 2012, the Green River Killer, masquerading as a policeman, over a 30 year period, would stop*

*and coerce females to get into his vehicle, then kill each one, and dump her body into the Green River. If the fake policeman who had stopped us that night was the Green River Killer, he would have been a killer-in-training. Later, he would perfect his trade, and his modus-operandi; preying on single-female drivers.*

The next couple of day we would follow our routine, finding Faith a place to swim in a nearby river. She swam in the Arkansas River, near Dodge City. Then, the Fifth day of our trip, we veered off of Route #50 and headed south, to the Stockton Reservoir, near Springfield Illinois. On the Sixth Day of our trip we ate breakfast early, traveling from Springfield along US Route #44 to St. Louis, and then north, along the Mississippi River to Hannibal, Missouri. Hannibal was the birthplace and home of the great satirist, Samuel Clemens, aka Mark Twain.

While at Hannibal, we couldn't find a place for Faith to swim along the Mississippi River. We asked many townspeople who looked at us like we were crazy, or simply shook their heads, and kept walking. An old woman who we stopped, warned us, "There are no places to swim along because the Town doesn't want to encourage impulsive, suicidal people like you, to go into the river. Mark my words: this is a dangerous river. You will surely drown!" Unfortunately we ignored these warnings. Finally we found a place with a grassy knoll, along the river, called River View Park.

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Faith, in standard red and white swim-team outfit, adjusted her cap. "I'll be back in just 20 minutes."

Maxine wearing a pink sun-suit with polka-dots, called out, "Make it a short swim. Don't drown, and don't get eaten by any aquatic animals! No tellin' what's lurking below the surface of this old River."

Without turning around Faith dove into the placid estuary. Then, with smooth even strokes she entered the main channel of the Mississippi River. Suddenly, the current, like a wild animal grabbed her and swept her away, at a speed faster than Mark Spitz, the Olympic gold medalist could swim.

Seeing Faith swept away by the swift current of the river hit me in my gut. Within 30 seconds, impulsively, I was in the water swimming furiously toward her bobbing head, 100 yards out into the churn of the Mississippi River. As I entered the main stream, I felt the vortex of currents capturing me, tearing at my body, pulling me under with incredible, inhuman violence.

I soon forget any of my initial intent, my false chivalry, a hubris that comes instinctively to all men regarding the fairer sex. Against all odds, I was fighting for my life just to stay buoyant, to resist the currents pulling me down into the depths of the raging river. I quickly became exhausted swimming the crawl. I sensed—rather hoped, if I changed my stroke from the crawl to the backstroke, I might have a chance at avoiding exhaustion. But the more I struggled against the powerful vortex of currents in this Grand Old River, the more an invading sense of inevitability washed over me.

I knew I was losing my strength. I felt I was going to die.

All of my life flashed before my eyes, like a scratchy 35 mm film on a basement projector.

I was broken-hearted because in my father's eyes, I had always been second fiddle to my twin brother John.

I had regrets about the things that I had said or done, especially to those who were close to me.

I regretted breaking up with my 8<sup>th</sup> grade girl friend, Risa Denenberg; taking back the ring I had given her because I felt lust for another girl. I regretted cheating on my college girl friend, Cindy LaPenta, with a woman, whose name I had quickly forgotten, after a drunken night of debauchery.

I regretted my school-boy clashes with individuals: like William Stitt in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, whom I had beaten, as I saw him bullying a younger boy; and Eliot Pfanstiehl whom I had beaten, (avenging brother John) because Eliot would never be John's friend.

I feared all memories of me with people I loved would disappear in time, after they learned of my death from drowning.

I began to lose hope. In my mind's eye the constant parade of these crimes and misdemeanors beat me down into a state of exhaustion. I stopped swimming, letting the current take me wherever. I gave up caring about my fate. I figured the EMT's would eventually find my body, where it had drifted a few miles downstream. I closed my eyes, letting the waters close over me. I tried to breathe out, so there would no longer be oxygen in my lungs.

I was sinking fast now.

As I sank deeper, the detritus in the river, including whole dead trees, kept surging past me. I hoped I would lose consciousness, as my lungs filled with river water.

At about 40 feet down, I was awakened from my dying reverie by a soft, rubbing on my right thigh. There it was again, more insistent now.

I opened my eyes and saw a giant seven-foot long catfish that must have weighed 400 lbs. It had the longest whiskers that I had ever seen on a catfish. Its whiskers were wrapped around my leg while the Giant began sucking my thigh to test how I might taste.

*I recalled fishing with my boyhood friend Milton McCarthy, at Seneca Locks, along the Potomac River. We had waded from the shallows, across the rocks into the fast-flowing parts of the river where the fishing was better. I remembered my eyes left the red bobber, held down in the current by a one -ounce lead weight, as I watched a family of ducks, swimming up-river, along the riverbank. The mother mallard was leading her ducklings in a line as they were feasting on duckweed in the shallows. While I was watching, a large catfish rose up and swallowed a little duckling. The whole scene was so bizarre, I fell over in the rapids and got soaked, much to the amusement of my friend, Milton.*

Catfish are carnivores **first**, and bottom feeders second. Now I thought, what if this Giant catfish tries to eat me?

My survival instincts were now fully awakened. I began kicking violently, swimming for the surface of the Mississippi River. As I rose up through the water my lungs were bursting for want of oxygen. As I broke the surface, I saw I was drifting under the two-lane Rt. 106 suspension bridge going over expanse of the river toward Aladdin, a small town just southwest of Hannibal.

Maybe the adrenalin kicked-in when I saw the monster catfish, mistaking me for a tasty morsel. Maybe it was the parade of memories marching through my mind's eye. I felt the will to live— surging up through my body. I began to swim with renewed vigor. Soon I developed a routine to aid my aching muscles: 30 crawl strokes; 30 back strokes; and 30 side strokes. After about 45 minutes in the water, and a mile and one-half downstream I had approached within 50 yards of the eastern bank of the river. But I was just on the edge of the vortex of currents. As hard as I tried to reach the shore, the vortex would always pull me back in toward the middle of the river. Desperate to reach the far shore, I devised a plan: I would do 60 crawls strokes, combined with 60 backstrokes. The plan began to work.

As the river rounded a bend, I could see some large oak trees whose roots, undermined by the spring flooding, had fallen down with branches extending 30 yards into the river. I lunged to grab a long branch but only came away with scratches. Approaching the next fallen tree, I tried again and failed.

Third time the branch held. I was able to pull myself along the trunk of the tree to shore.

I fell down in the sand and wept, thanking God for saving me from certain death.

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A few minutes later, I found the strength to stand up. I saw Faith's form, washed up on the eastern side of the river some 100 yards downstream. I ran down the shoreline to her body face down in the sand. There was an open wound, scraped along her back and neck. Her swim-team cap was missing. As I walked up to her, I thought she might be dead.

But, as I got closer, I could see that she was breathing but unconscious. Gently, I turned her over. Only then, did she awaken with a start, flailing her arms as if she were still in the water.

Not knowing whether she had any internal injuries, I tried to restrain her. "Faith, stop! It's me. Please stop before you hurt yourself further."

The sound of my voice calmed her a bit.

She sat up, and groaned. "I feel pain in my back and neck."

“Shush-shush, I said gently, there’s is bad scrape along your back and neck but it’s a superficial wound. Do you feel other pains, anywhere in your body?”

Faith grimaced but shook her head, “No-no other pain.”

“That’s good, I said. You’ll be alright as soon as I get you cleaned up.”

There happened to be an empty half-gallon Clorox container, washed up from the spring flooding. I picked it up and walked to the waterline.

Before drawing water from the river, I rinsed out the container.

“This is going to sting a little, so brace yourself,” I said as I poured it over her back and neck.”

As a competitive swimmer, Faith was used to pain. She grimaced but did not yell out.

“Do you know what caused this scrape along your back?”

She nodded, yes.

“I was in the current, washing past a fallen tree, when I tried to grab a branch. A big piece broke off on top of me. I think that’s when I passed out.”

I sat with Faith for a while, trying to think ahead. What could we do to get back to River View Park? By my estimation, we were now nearly two miles downstream. We were on a deserted stretch of dwarf pine trees along the shoreline, and forest up on the ridgeline of the riverbank. I know Faith was a strong swimmer. I could sense from her state of mind, swimming in the Mississippi River had shaken her to the bone. It had been an experience she would never forget. I looked around. There had been no boats on the river I had seen. There were no public phones for us to make an emergency call.

There would be no rescue. We were entirely on our own.

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Still barefoot, we started through the head-height, dwarf pine-trees above the shoreline. Little did we know that late summer was skin-shedding season for deadly water moccasins. While shedding, these deadly snakes temporarily become blind; vulnerable prey for some coyotes or raccoons. So to avoid these predators, the snakes would slither up onto highest tree branches. After about  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile, Faith walking behind me screamed. She was shaking, as she pointed to a water

moccasin crawling along the ground toward her. I picked it up by the tail and flung it into the water. As we looked up, we saw scores of them, hanging from the pine trees directly along our path. We now had to abandon this path for an alternative plan.

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Meanwhile, back at River View Park, Maxine kept looking at her wristwatch. It had now been almost an hour since they had both dived into the river, she thought to herself. At the half-hour mark, she had gone up her Volkswagon and retrieved her owl-shaped glasses. She looked down river. There were no boats, and no swimmers. For the first time on this cross-country trip, Maxine was slightly worried. After one hour she went to the phone booth at the edge of the park, and called the County Sheriff. After the dispatcher listened to her story, she transferred Maxine directly to the County Sheriff.

“Sheriff, send a couple of squad cars directly to my location”

“Not so fast Lady, I give the orders in this office.”

This irritated Maxine to no end.

“Listen Bubba, and listen good, my friends were just taking a leisurely swim from River View Park, and they have disappeared”

“Probably drowned,” the Sheriff retorted candidly. No one swims in the Mississippi River at River View Park. Currents are deadly.”

This enraged Maxine. Probably anger and a growing fear her friends might not be coming back caused her to lash-out. Losing her temper, she pounded the phone on the side of the phone cabinet.

“Sheriff, get up off your fat, donut-eating ass, and come down here NOW! She slammed down the phone.

Ten minutes later the County Sheriff, showed up with a Deputy. Despite the Sheriff’s attempts to calm Maxine, the situation rapidly deteriorated as her frustration boiled over. When the Deputy tried to restrain her, she simply kicked him in the balls. He fell over grabbing his crotch.

That’s when the Sheriff called for back-up. Together, the County Sheriff and his deputies corralled her—not without injuries to each man.

They shoved her in the Paddy Wagon.

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Faith and I found a well-worn path up on the ridgeline about 100 feet above the river. After about  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile we came to the Rt. # 106 suspension bridge and ran across. From the middle of the bridge, I could see River View Park and Maxine's car parked on the roadside along the river. But no Maxine Freund anywhere. Twenty minutes later, we arrived on the Hannibal side of the River. She was nowhere to be found. I entered her car, which had the windows open to shed heat on this hot fall day. I found the keys above the visor. We planned to drive directly the Hannibal Sheriff's office on Main Street to find Maxine. I pretty much figured that's where Maxine would be.

First we stopped at a drug store, so that I could get some antibiotic cream and some bandages. Then we put on some fresh clothes. Upon our arrival at the police station, the County Sheriff informed us that he had jailed Maxine on charges of aggravated assault, and resisting arrest.

"What happened to you all in the Mississippi River? You know the Mississippi is incredibly dangerous, with currents that will pull you under." So I lied to him. I told him that we had just swam along the bank a ways and then walked into town to do some shopping. I could tell that he didn't buy my story by the way he looked at me.

"This is a quiet town with almost no crime. We don't get too many crazies. In my opinion, she is a lunatic; a danger to herself and others. Frankly the two of you are not far behind. *Shopping that's a Whopper!*" He muttered under his breath then he looked me straight in the eyes.

"Now I am going to give her a break. Frankly I don't want to fill out the paperwork. So I am releasing her to your recognizance."

The Sheriff told me his report would just say that she had a "psychotic episode" because she was grief-stricken over the loss of her friends, by drowning. That worked for me.

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That night, I suggested that we stay the night at a Motel \$6. We were especially tired after what had happened in Hannibal. There was no objection from the group. The next day, we all slept until I knocked on

the girls' door at 10:00 AM, to inspect and change Faith's bandages. Then we found a place for breakfast.

By Noon on the seventh day, we were on the road again.

After the Mississippi, Route #50 goes through the southern part of Illinois. We passed through green fields, ready for harvest with corn, sugar beets, and wheat. In between we drove through farming towns, large and small; sometimes only scattered houses, hovering around just four-corners, with gas stations, general store, and auto-repair garages.

It was about 5:30 PM in the afternoon, when we drove into Salem, Illinois. There was a large green sign at the entrance to the town that shouted out in big bold letters: Salem, Illinois: Birthplace of William Jennings Bryan, a great orator, and a true patriot. We decided to stop at a Diner. Across the street was the William Jennings Bryan Park with his statue, on a marble pedestal at the center. The plaque read:

*"William Jennings Bryan, elected to the U.S. Senate, twice, supported Prohibition, and opposed Darwinism on religious and humanitarian grounds, most famously at the Scopes Trial in 1925 in Tennessee. Five days after the conclusion of the Scopes case, which he won, Bryan died in his sleep."*

We walked into the Diner, and sat down at a booth. The Diner seemed like a throw-back to the Fifties with red plastic booths, Formica counter-tops, and a jukebox at each booth. Despite the dinner hour, no one was in the Diner but the three of us. A voice came out from the jukebox, and said,

"Can I take your order?" Despite the strange presentation, we ordered dinner. Within 15 minutes the Cook, wearing a cook's hat which looked like an oversized muffin from the oven, brought the meals to our table. "Should you need anything else, just press A-1 on the jukebox and I will answer." The food was cold, and tasted terrible. But we were hungry and started to eat. Maxine pressed A-1 and yelled, "Hey, Cookie, my French-fries are cold, and you didn't provide Ketchup! Hurry up and bring some fresh French fries, and a bottle of Ketchup."

The voice out of the Jukebox replied “Right away ma’am.” Then silence.

Despite the quality of food the poor service, we ate everything the Cook had put on the table. Fifteen minutes passed before Maxine lost her patience, and pressed A-1, again.

“Hey Cookie, now I am getting pissed, bring the additional fries, or I swear to God, I am going to come through the kitchen door. You don’t want me coming through the kitchen door!”

There was no response. Not wanting a repeat of the incident we had yesterday, I got up and went through the kitchen door. There was no Cookie, nor any personnel in the kitchen. I went out the delivery door, behind the Diner, and found no one. The place was deserted.

Back at the table, I told the group.

Maxine was the first one to speak-up. “Well that was a crappy meal, and I’m not paying for it. If there’s no one here, there’s no one to stop us.” It made sense to me.

So we all walked out without paying for the meals, got into the car and began to drive down Main Street. Within 60 seconds, five green Salem Police cars surrounded the red Volkwagon while another police car drove in front of us to cut us off.

The first policeman to approach had Lieutenant’s stripes.

“Do you all know that you just created a misdemeanor?”

“Lieutenant, there was no one in the building to take our money.”

“That’s not the point here. You all received meals—and you didn’t pay! That’s a misdemeanor in my book, and also in the Town regulations.

Now you’re under arrest!”

Now my Dad had always warned me, when a police officer orders you to do something in a strange town—don’t do anything rash.

He is the law, and you are in his jurisdiction.

Faith and I started for nearest the squad car. But Maxine held her ground.

“I’m not going anywhere, she protested, folding her arms across her chest. When one of the deputies put his hands on her, she kicked him in the balls. I just watched in disbelief, thinking, “Here we go again.”

Two deputies tried to carry her to the squad car. She disabled the first deputy by knocking off his glasses. When the second deputy tried to

pick her up, she reached up over her head and poked him in the eye with her thumb.

“Missy, we’re going to have to put you in a straight-jacket”

The officers threw Maxine in the Paddy Wagon. They put us in a squad car. At the station, the deputies escorted me, and Faith to jail cells.

While two hefty matrons in uniform sat on Maxine, a third matron fitted her into a straight-Jacket. Maxine cursed and howled like a banshee.

“You are all going to hear from my lawyer. I will sue you, and everybody in this God-Forsaken town, just you wait!”

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On the eighth day, a Lieutenant Sullivan of the Salem Constable’s office came to release me from the cell where I spent the night.

He walked me outside, and said,

“There’s a helicopter from the Governor’s office carrying a man who wants to meet you.”

The helicopter bearing the State of Illinois’ seal, landed in the parking lot outside the Marion County Building, containing the Constable’s Office, as well as the Marion County Sheriff’s office, in Salem, Illinois.

A tall man in a dark suit and tie disembarked, ducking his head from the centrifugal force of the blades. He had brown hair, flecked with silver.

Wrinkles in his face told the tale he was a heavy smoker. He walked across the parking lot toward me, and Lieutenant Sullivan of the Salem Constable’s Office.

“Is there somewhere to meet in private?” The Lieutenant nodded and escorted us to a small room, with one-way windows, used to interview prisoners. The man in the dark suit, said to the Lieutenant,

“ You may leave us now.”

He took out of his briefcase two packages and a sealed envelope. He set these on the table. I asked him his name. He just looked at me without emotion.

“You may call me Mr. Smith,” he said without smiling.

“These packages are for Maxine Freund from her father.

“Who, if I might ask, is her father?”

There was a pause, as I thought I had asked the wrong question.

“He is known in the media as the *King of Wall Street*. His name is John H. Gutfreund, (pronounced- Good Friend). He is a very powerful man, head of the Trading Desk for Salomon Brothers.

Then he looked at me with his dead-pan expression.

“Maxine said in her message to talk with you directly because she had confidence, you alone would know what to do.” Smith continued,

“I received a call at midnight in New York from Mr. GutFreund with instructions to charter a plane to St. Louis, and to arrive here in Salem, Illinois this morning to ‘fix his daughter’s situation” at all costs.” He explained why Mr. Gutfreund had sent him to fix the situation.

“Maxine *may be* his child from dalliance with the female heir of the Revlon Fortune, Samantha Perleman, the granddaughter of James Cohen, CEO of the Hudson News Empire. But we don’t know for certain.”

As we talked further, he explained that Maxine had been born to Samantha Perleman in 1952. There were rumors about whose daughter she was. Despite the rumors, her mother raised her in New York, where she attended the finest privates schools, and then Sarah Lawrence College. When Maxine immigrated to Berkeley California, she stopped all communication with her mother, and her father.

“Last night, she used her one call from the Constable’s office to contact her father. She left him a message asking for his help. I can tell you that her father was beside himself to get her call: distressed over her trouble with the law, also ecstatic because she had reached out to him for the first time, since she was a teenager.”

There was an awkward pause in the conversation.

“What do you want me to do,” I asked.

“I have a package, and a letter: the package contains \$1,000 in cash, and a gift from her father.”

The envelope contained a hand-written letter from Daniel Walker, the Governor of Illinois, a pardon for Maxine’s and our collective misdemeanors.

Furthermore, before he departed via helicopter back to New York, Mr. Smith made me sign a Non-Disclosure agreement, to guarantee that I would never talk to anyone about Maxine’s history.

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After Lieutenant Sullivan of the Salem Constables Office read the Governor Walker's letter, he promptly released Maxine and Faith to me. I told Maxine about the pardon letter, the cash, and the gift from her father. I decided to deal with Maxine privately to explain how Mr. Smith described her father's reaction to her phone call.

We retrieved Maxine's car from the Salem impoundment lot. Maxine asked me to drive. After breakfast, we were on the road again. Considering all the events in the past few days, the 7<sup>th</sup> day was pretty uneventful. Maxine was quiet, for once— no off-color jokes. We decided to make up for the nearly 24 hours that we lost in Salem. The red Volkswagon speeded along Route #50 through Cincinnati.

Illinois, Indiana and Ohio, all together, are the heartland and bread-basket of America. We rode past farmers in big combines, who appeared like mechanized dragons through giant clouds of dust, as they roared through fields, harvesting ears of corn.

Late that night, we stopped at a Roadside Rest area just outside of Athens, Ohio. With no one there to stop us we built a small fire between two picnic tables. We had some left-over cans of beans & franks for a fine camping meal.

Faith went to sleep, so I took the opportunity to talk with Maxine. "How did you like the gift from your father?"

Beaming, she unbuttoned her blouse to show me her father's gift, a necklace of turquoise, red coral, and labradorite, *opal of the Andes*.

"Truly incredibly beautiful," I said, admiring the necklace.

"He wants me to come visit him in New York."

"Well, are you going to go?"

She hesitated. "I'm not sure yet. Part of me wants to condemn him in the harshest way for being a hypocrite all these years. Part of me wants to visit him, because he is *finally* trying to be my Daddy!"

"Well, in this world where many, many children have lost their parents, or never knew them, you have a chance to finally be part of a family."

I saw a small tear wash down her face. Quickly she wiped it away.

There was no more to say.

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The Ninth day, we got an early start, principally because all of us were eager to reach our final destination. We left Rt. #50 in Winchester for Route #66 heading into Washington, D.C.

We drove on the Rt. #495 Beltway north to Maryland, took the exit for Langley Park at New Hampshire Avenue. At the intersection of New Hampshire and Piney Branch, Faith called out, "This is my stop!"

We all got out of the car for a group hug. Faith turned to me and said, "I know you weren't planning on it when I dove into the Mississippi. But thanks for saving my life." I will never forget you both.

Then she was gone.

Maxine drove me into Takoma Park and stopped at my Father's house at 7808 Takoma Avenue. She came around to the passenger side of the car, and hugged me. "It hurts too much to say goodbye, so I will just say 'later.' Thanks for the adventure. I will never forget you."

As I watched the red Volkswagon speed away, I wondered if I would ever see Maxine Freund again.

Sometime later, I went to her house on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley, where we had first met. I knocked on the door. Her roommate said she had never returned, just sent a guy named Mr. Smith to pack up all her belongings and send them to New York.

I left smiling, thinking to my self, "All's Well that ends Well"

The End

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