

BREAKFAST AT THE DINER

FORMERLY *A SUMMER HARVEST*

BY SCOTT FIELDS



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A KILLING IN A SMALL TOWN



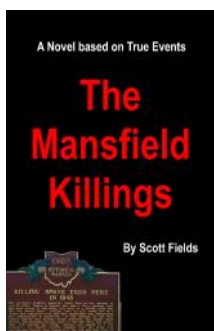
Harlan Steelman owned most of the town of Bear Creek and found his way in and out of every backroom, barroom, and bedroom.

When his rival from high school, John Watson, returns to Bear Creek with his wife and son to start anew, Harlan vows to ruin John's life and take Kara, his wife, away from him.

When Harlan is found murdered, John Watson is the likely suspect and is taken into custody.

What happens next is the trial of the century for the little town of Bear Creek, but it takes a horrible twist at the end.

THE MANSFIELD KILLINGS



It was the worse two-week killing spree in Ohio's history. On the night of July 21, 1948, Robert Daniels and John West entered John and Nolena Niebel's house and forced the family into their car and drove them to a cornfield just off Fleming Falls Road in Mansfield.

Robert Daniels then shot each of them in the head. The brutal murders caught national attention in the media, but the killing spree didn't stop there. Three more innocent people would lose their lives at the hands of Daniels and West in the coming week.

Scott Fields tirelessly researched the killings, the capture and trial of Daniels and even interviewed a surviving member of the Niebel family to weave this tragic story into a must-read novel bringing the reader back to those dark days in the summer of 1948. It has been more than sixty years since the tragedy, and, yet, the why of it all still remains unanswered.

The killing spree is not only remembered to this day, but is an important and dark part of Mansfield lore.

SUMMER HEAT



If you read *Fifty Shades of Grey*, you'll like *Summer Heat*! When she was 17, there wasn't a man alive she would let get near her, and when she was 18, there wasn't a man she would keep away.

Women universally hated her, men continued to hold doors for her long after she passed by - just to watch her walk away.

Ninety-nine point nine percent of the men in Steam Corners wanted her, but she only wanted one man, Spencer Deacon. The one thing that Spencer didn't want was Jessie, and his firm and undeniable rejections infuriated her.

What followed was a series of sordid events involving murder, deceit, betrayal and the conviction of an innocent man.

All books are available on Amazon in print and as an ebooks as well as available from Barnes & Noble and fine bookstores everywhere.

DEDICATED TO MY WIFE, DEB, WHO HELPED MAKE THIS
BOOK COME TO LIFE

1 WILTON'S GARAGE

At one end of town, a faded, red pickup truck stopped in front of Wilton's Garage. A gray-haired man dressed in denim work shirt and blue jeans slid across the seat and climbed from the passenger side of the vehicle.

"Sam!" he shouted as he stood in the open doorway. It was dark inside the work area of the building, and he could barely see. One light bulb dimly glowed over a workbench near the back wall. There was a sea of cars in and around the building. Some were waiting to be repaired, and others abandoned by their owners when they received their estimate for repair.

"Sam!" he shouted again. "Where the hell are you?"

"Hold your horses," a muffled voice came from under a 1987 Ford Escort. The man walked over to the driver's side of the car and found two legs protruding from under the car. "Can't ever get any work done with all the interruptions!" he said as he wiggled from under the car. Sam Wilton's head appeared, and he stared at his uninvited guest. "Not today, Frank. I'm really busy."

"I don't care if you're fixing the Pope's car. I need you to come and look at my truck."

The big man struggled to his feet. "I really don't think the Pope drives an Escort," he said. He grabbed a rag that was lying on the fender of the car and started wiping the grease from his hands. "Now, what do you want?" he asked as he walked over to the front of the truck.

"Get down on the ground with me," he said dropping to his knees.

"Really don't have time for this."

"Just get down here, Sam. I want to show you something under the truck."

"Oh, for Christ's sakes!" he said falling to his hands and knees. "What is it this time?"

"Do you see that ball joint, Sam?" he asked pointing with one hand. "It's gone bad, and I want you to replace it."

"How do you know that it's gone bad?"

"It's making a clunking noise when I turned to the right. That's how I know."

"That doesn't necessarily mean that your ball joint is bad."

"And, Mr. Wilton," he said getting to his feet. "That ball joint went bad as a result of the work you did on this truck last month."

You're getting senile, Frank!" shouted the mechanic. "I put shocks on the back of this thing. How do you figure that made your ball joint go bad?"

"I don't know! You tell me! You're the mechanic! All I know is that it was fine before you worked on her, and now she has a problem."

"Frank, this is a 1949 vehicle. The guys who built this thing are either dead or drooling on themselves in some nursing home. They stopped making parts for it years ago. It's worn out. It belongs in the junk pile."

"Don't talk like that in front of her, Sam!"

The mechanic stopped wiping his hands on the rag. He turned and stared at the truck and then back at the man standing in front of him. "I'll tell you what. I'll be done with this one in a couple of minutes, and then I'll check your ball joint. Ok?"

"I'm going down to the diner to get some breakfast," he said turning away. "I'll be back in an hour. By the way, you'll have to use the passenger side door. The other one's stuck."

"It's been stuck for over five years now. Do you want me to fix it for you?"

"Hell, no!" he shouted without turning around. "You cost too much! Besides, the other door works just fine. I got better things to spend my money on than that!"



Springfield was a small farming community nestled between the fields of corn and soybeans. There were only three stoplights in town, and one of them hadn't worked in two years.

The population of Springfield had reached over a thousand people years ago but had steadily declined ever since the recession of the early 80's. Many of the surrounding cities and

towns experienced hard times during that era. Factories closed, and people moved away. Jobs were hard to find.

In time, the economy improved, and things returned to normal, but not for Springfield. The damage caused by the economic recession of the 1980's left deep scars on the little town. What little money that was coming into the businesses downtown was from the farmers. There were many that said that if it hadn't been for them, the town would have surely died.

The downtown business district was only three blocks long with old and decayed buildings lining both sides of Main Street. Many of the businesses had occupied the same building since the turn-of-the-century, while others had served the needs of a variety of ambitious entrepreneurs who ultimately met with certain failure.

One of the most prominent members of the business community was a man who carried the nickname of Rackets. No one in town could actually remember his real name. Over twenty years ago, he had come to Springfield with an inheritance from his recently departed father and an ambition to open his own business.

He first opened a hardware store that remained open for just over two years. He was sure that he could compete with the other hardware in town. It had such a limited assortment of merchandise to offer. But nobody had explained to him about loyalty in a small town. Bailey's Hardware had been in business since 1890. To the people of Springfield, there was only one hardware store in town. Within a month after Rackets opened

his business to the public, the novelty was gone, and the town's people were once again bringing their business to Bailey's.

A string of short-lived ventures soon followed. Undaunted, Rackets was determined not to give up. He was confident that there was a business that would succeed for him. Then in the early 90's, Rackets opened Bob's Diner. It was an instant success. He had finally found the right business for him to run. No one in town was quite sure who Bob of Bob's Diner was. Rackets had been known as Rackets since anyone could remember.

The important thing was that Rackets had finally succeeded. Nobody was quite sure why this business worked out when the rest had failed. Many believed it was because of his extraordinary size. Rackets weighed just over 300 pounds. It was said that he might not have known much about hardware, but he sure knew something about eating.

It was a fairly large restaurant for such a small town. It was oblong in shape with booths lining both sides and a row of tables down the center to accommodate the farmers who met there everyday. Rackets recognized a need for a place for farmers to congregate. They needed a place to talk about the weather, the price of soybeans, and generally share the same gossip day after day. Shortly after he opened the diner, Rackets installed the row of tables and soon had more business than he could handle.

Frank pulled open the heavy wooden door and eased it behind him. All of the regulars were already there. The room

was a din of loud chatter and conversation as small groups tried to talk over the others to be heard.

"Good morning, Frank!" came a chant almost in unison.

"Morning, Gentlemen," he responded as he walked past the long table of men. "You too, George," he added pointing at a man sitting next to an empty chair that was saved for him. He walked behind the counter near the cash register and poured himself a cup of coffee.

"Good morning, Frank," came a voice from behind him. Frank turned to see an extremely obese man coming out of the kitchen.

"Morning, Rackets," he replied as he started for his place at the table. "My, you're looking lovely this morning. There's a certain glow about you this morning."

"Eat shit, Frank," replied the big man as he eased himself into the booth next to the register.

"What are you doing after work tonight, Rackets," he said loudly as he took his place at the table. "You know, I'd love to have your next baby."

"Now, that conjures up an image that I could do without," said George Ridgeway.

"How are you doing, George?" asked Frank, stirring a spoon in his hot coffee.

"Well, I didn't wake up dead this morning, so I guess I'm all right."

"Hell, at our age, you can't ask for much more than that," said Frank. He took a sip of his coffee and made a face. "My God, that's strong coffee." A waitress hurried by the long table

carrying a tray of food to a booth at the front of the restaurant. "Carol!" shouted Frank. "Who made the coffee this morning?"

"The boss did," she snapped without turning around.

"Well, that figures," said Frank turning to George. "Rackets never could make a decent cup of coffee." Frank paused as he watched Carol nearly run towards the kitchen to get more food. "What the hell is going on around here, George? Carol is about ready to drop from exhaustion, and Rackets actually made coffee. This place seems a little crazy this morning."

"Don't you notice anything different?" asked George with a strange looking grin.

Frank glanced around the room and then back at his friend. "What are you talking about?"

"Look around you," barked George, the smile leaving his face. "Don't you notice something missing?"

Once again, Carol hurried by with another tray of food. "That's it!" shouted Frank. "Millie's missing! Where the hell is Millie this morning?"

"Boy, nothing gets by you, does it Frank?"

"All right, smart ass! Where is she anyway?"

"The biggest piece of gossip in weeks, and you're the last one in town to hear it."

"Jesus, George. What happened?"

"Millie ran off with Joe Parker's son," announced George as he took a sip from his cup of coffee.

"Ran off? What do you mean by ran off?" asked Frank with a puzzled look. He couldn't imagine Millie doing something like

that. In all the years he had known her, she had said nothing about being in love.

"As in eloped. As in married. As in had to."

Frank looked down at the other end of the table where a man was bent over a plate of sausage and eggs. "Way to go, Parker!" shouted Frank. "Because you don't like wearing condoms, my breakfast is going to be late coming to me." The man at the end of the table glanced at Frank with a puzzled look and returned to his breakfast.

"So, Millie's getting married. That's nice," said Frank turning to his friend. "It's just too bad that she's marrying Joe Parker's son. You know, there should be a law. Guys like him shouldn't be allowed to reproduce."

George stared at his friend with a puzzled look. "You seem a little grouchy this morning. Are you retaining water today? Been having cramps lately?"

"You're probably right, George. I have been a little irritable lately," said Frank. "It just seems like nothing ever changes. Do you know what I mean George?" His friend mumbled an acknowledgment as he stuck a forkful of fried potatoes in his mouth. "I come in here everyday, listen to the same old stories from the same old guys, and go back home. It just seems like there should be more to it than that. Something is missing, George. What is it? What's missing in my life, George?"

"I'll tell you what's missing."

"What is it, George? What's missing in my life?"

"Somebody to take your order. I'm almost done with my breakfast, and nobody has even taken your order," said George thrusting an entire sausage link in his mouth.

"Don't worry about me," said Frank turning away from his friend. "My guess is that tray that Carol is carrying has my breakfast on it." The two men watched as the young woman weaved in and out of the chairs and tables. She stopped and set a plate of hot food in front of Frank.

"I don't know how you do it, Frank," muttered George.

"What do you mean, George?" asked his friend. "Carol knows I like my eggs over medium and hash browns on the crispy side."

"No, that's not what I meant. I'm talking about the fact that the last time you left a tip, Moses was a Cub Scout, and yet she brought your food quicker than she did mine. You didn't even have to place an order. She knew what to bring. How do you do it, Frank?"

"Women love me, George," said Frank with a smile. He stuck a fork into the pile of hash browns. "I just have that certain something that women can't resist."

"My God, will you knock it off? I'm having enough problems digesting this food."

"So, tell me, George," said Frank as he continued eating his food. "What's Rackets going to do about a waitress?"

"Some stranger came in yesterday looking for a job, and Rackets hired her on the spot. She starts tomorrow morning."

"Someone should have warned her," said Frank.

"Warned her about what?"

"Rackets. Can you imagine working for that guy? She must be one desperate woman."

"There you go again, my friend, with that sexist thinking of yours," said George.

"What in the hell are you talking about now?"

"You just naturally assume that since we're talking about a job that involves waiting on tables, we must be talking about a woman. It could have been a man who got the job, Frank. You're a sexist, Frank, and you need to come into the new century. You have old fashion thinking, and you need to be a little more sensitive."

Frank finished the last bite of his breakfast and set his fork on the empty plate. "Was it a woman who got the job, George?" he asked wiping his mouth with a napkin.

"Well, yes. I guess so."

"Then, blow it out your ass, George."

"See. That's what I'm talking about. You've got barbaric thinking. You're not a today-kind-of-guy."

Frank drank the last of his coffee and set the cup on the table. "What would you know about being a today-kind-of-guy, George?" he asked. "You wore a leisure suit to church last Sunday."

"Hey. I happen to like leisure suits," George replied. "Besides, polyester wears like iron."

"I have to be going," Frank announced as he got to his feet. He walked a few feet from the table and stopped. George turned to see that his friend had put on his reading glasses and was studying his bill.

"Be careful, Frank," he said. "Don't let them cheat you out of anything." He paid his bill at the cash register, and as he passed by the table of men, George shouted at him. "Don't worry about the tip, you tightwad. I'll take care of it."

"Hey, Frank," shouted one of the other men. "What is your tip for the day?"

"My tip for the day is don't pick up hitchhikers and don't let your meat loaf. See you gentlemen tomorrow." With that, he walked out the door of the restaurant and started for the other end of town.

In a few minutes, he had walked the length of Main Street and was soon standing in front of the garage where he had left his truck. He was satisfied that his truck must have been repaired since it had been moved to the other side of the garage.

"Did you replace that ball joint, Sam?" asked Frank.

The mechanic walked over to Frank wiping his hands with a rag. "There's nothing wrong with that ball joint," he announced. "In fact, I drove it twice around the block and couldn't hear a thing that sounded bad."

"Jesus Christ, Sam!" Frank shouted. "I'm so old I have a prostate as big as a basketball, and yet I heard it."

"Calm down," said Sam. "You're working yourself into a snit."

"I wouldn't be this way if you would just learn to fix cars!"

"Good God! You really do need a hobby or something."

"Hobby, my ass," he mumbled and started for the truck.

"Frank!" shouted the mechanic. "Watch this!" Sam sprinted to the driver's side of the truck, and, with a big smile on his face, opened the door. "How 'bout that? It works again."

Frank walked slowly around to that side of the vehicle studying the open door as if it were some kind of aberration. "I'm not paying you for it!" he snapped. The smile on Sam's face quickly disappeared. "I didn't ask you to fix it, so I don't have to pay!"

"This is my gift to you," said Sam. "Besides, it makes it easier on me when you bring it in to be fixed."

Frank became silent as he opened and closed the door several times to verify that the door was indeed fixed. Sam waited patiently for Frank to either apologize for his rude outbreak or thank him for the work that he did for free. "I got to be going," said Frank as he climbed into the driver's seat and closed the door behind him.

He started the engine and began to slowly pull away from the curb. "I'll be back in town tomorrow!" he shouted from the open window of his truck. "If I hear that clunking noise between now and then, I'll be back!" Sam slowly shook his head as he watched the vehicle lumber down the road.

The last two years had been a period of adjustment for Frank Watson. He had been married to the same woman for over forty years when, without any warning, she died of what the doctor called an aneurysm.

Frank was in shock. It happened so suddenly. The woman who was his friend, his lover, his partner, his mate was gone. The woman who had shared his bed for nearly half of a century was ripped from his arms. He was lost without her.

For the first four months, Frank didn't leave the house. He sat in his favorite rocking chair staring at the blank television

screen. His son and daughter would stop by and check on him from time to time, but their visits became less frequent as the months passed.

The last several weeks, Frank seemed to be his old self. He had always been the irascible sort. Everyone in town had always described him as argumentative and quick-tempered, and now, two years after the death of his wife, it seemed that he was even worse.

The faded red truck pulled into the stone driveway that led to his garage. He parked the truck in front of the garage as he often did, got out of his truck, and followed the walk that led to the back door.

It wasn't a large farm, only about a hundred acres, but it had dark, rich soil suitable for growing just about any crop. The two-story, colonial farmhouse stood proudly just off the country road with a garage, two chicken houses, and several small buildings that sheltered the farm equipment. The barn he added later was built from scratch. It was an idealistic setting that reminded him of a Currier and Ives depiction of rural America.

His wife's friends had always described the house and the surrounding grounds as picturesque and pristinely neat in appearance. Throughout the years, the house proudly displayed its stark white coat of paint that seemed to glow to those who passed by the house. In spite of the demanding hard work that summer brought to a farmer, Frank always had time to keep the lawn neatly cut and trimmed. But that all changed two years ago with the death of Ida. Old dried paint peeled from the side of the house. The barn and chicken coops were empty now. The only

thing that remained was a faint odor from the generations of livestock that had come and gone. Weeds grew now where once there were none.

Frank opened the back door and closed it behind him. He walked slowly over to the kitchen sink and poured himself a glass of water. He emptied the glass and returned it to its place on the sink.

For a few moments, Frank stared out the window that was just over the sink. He could see the decay all around him. It seemed that the farm had died with his wife some two years ago. He didn't plan it that way. It just happened. He knew that his wife would have wanted him to go on with life without her, but for some reason, he just couldn't. He wanted to. He wanted desperately to get his life back to normal, but it all seemed so pointless now. He tried to focus on the things that had mattered to him before she died, but without Ida's gentle smiles, he had no reward for mowing the lawn. No hot blueberry muffins to look forward to after gathering the eggs. He hadn't realized that Ida was the centerpiece in his life until she was gone, but now the aching emptiness remained where she once was. Sometimes, he thought he could smell her perfume, and he half-expected her to breeze into the room in a new sundress she had made, giving him the same girlish smile that had melted his heart so many years ago.

Frank turned and walked across the kitchen floor. He entered the living room and eased himself into his favorite chair. Frank picked up his favorite pipe that was sitting upright on the table beside him. He carefully tapped it on an ashtray, freeing

the ashes and unburned tobacco to fall from the charred bowl of the pipe. He unzipped a leather pouch and dipped the empty bowl of the pipe deep into soft, aromatic tobacco. With the skill of years of experience, he tapped the tobacco into the bowl with the exact amount of pressure. He struck a match and held it over the tobacco, lightly sucking through the pipe to make the flame dance on the tobacco. Soon he could hear the crackle of the tobacco as the fire spread throughout the bowl. Frank expelled a cloud of smoke and then held the pipe in mid air allowing a small trickle of smoke to dance and flit as it ascended to the ceiling.

Frank's eyes wandered aimlessly around the living room and the hallway that led to other parts of the house. Nothing had changed in the last two years. Everything was left undisturbed. Frank wanted it that way. This was the way things were when she was alive, and that's the way they should stay. Her favorite chair remained just the way she had left it, her fingerprints still intact on the wooden arms of the chair. The occasional visitor who was invited into his home was sternly cautioned not to use that particular chair. They were told that it was broken and would collapse with the weight of even a child.

Frank gently puffed on his pipe, the bowl getting warmer in his hand. He removed the pipe from his mouth and carefully studied the aging pipe. The bowl was paper thin from the constant use and would soon need to be replaced. Frank made a mental note that the next time he went to town, he would try to remember to buy a new one.

He stuck the end of the pipe back into his mouth and breathed deeply. A cloud of smoke enveloped his head and stung his eyes as he began to search the room again.

His eyes stopped their search as they came to the door. He tried to avoid looking at it as he had tried for the last two years. Unfortunately, they would always eventually come to rest on the door.

It had been difficult for Frank to live in that house after the death of his wife. There were too many things that brought back too many memories. He had even considered selling the farm and moving away. But there were just too many things he couldn't give up. It was bad enough that he lost his wife. There was no way in the world that he would give up the things that were a piece of her. These were the things that he could touch and hold in his hands and would bring back a flood of sweet memories.

Frank had learned to adjust to living in this house with all its memories except for one part of the house. Behind that stark white door was a bedroom. It had been their bedroom for all those years. His wife had noted just before she died that they had never slept even one night away from each other in all the forty two years of marriage, and, except for a vacation that had taken them out of town, they had spent every night together in that room.

Frank removed the pipe from his mouth and held it in mid air as he rested his elbow on the arm of the chair. He stared at the door, his eyes unblinking. Nothing had changed in the house. Everything was the same as it was when she was alive.

Since nothing had changed, he expected her, anytime, to come walking through that door. She had laid down for a nap and would soon be getting up. The door would open any minute now, and she would emerge. She would probably be well rested after her nap. He would wait here until she awoke so that he could see her smiling face when she walked through that door.

Frank jumped in his chair as the back door opened and closed with a loud bang. He looked up at the clock over the fireplace. It was ten o'clock in the morning. That could only mean one thing. Toad was here.

Toad was the name given to a woman who lived in the farmhouse just across the road. Her real name was Dorothy, but everyone knew her as Toad. It was said that when she first began to walk as an infant, she seemed to hop like a toad. Her older brother called her Toad because of it, and the name remained with her.

Frank's wife and Toad had been friends for all their lives. There was not a day that went by that the two women did not spend time together. For the last twenty years, Toad came over for coffee every morning of everyday at exactly ten o'clock. Even after the death of her life long companion, Toad continued to make coffee for Frank every morning at ten o'clock.

"Put your pants back on Frank," she shouted. "You've got company."

"Have you ever thought about knocking when you enter someone's home?" he asked without getting out of his chair.

Toad began to pour a pot of water into the coffeemaker. "From what I've seen over the last several years, I don't think I have to worry about catching you doing anything."

"Same to you, Toad," he shouted over his shoulder in the direction of the kitchen. "How exciting could your life be if you come over here everyday to see me?"

She measured three scoops of coffee into a filter and slid it into the machine. "You know, Frank," she said. "Just once, I'd like to walk through that door and smell coffee already brewing."

"It'll never happen," said Frank. "I don't want you to get the idea that I can do without you."

Toad turned on the coffeemaker and stared at it briefly until water started trickling into the empty pot. She turned and walked into the living room. "So, did you make your morning trip to town to visit your playmates?"

"I sure did," he replied as he leaned back in his chair. "We solved quite a few world problems this morning."

"I doubt that," she said as she sat down on the flowered sofa. "Don't forget. I know all these idiot friends of yours."

Frank became silent as he tried to remember some of the topics of discussion. "Did you hear that Mindy down at the restaurant ran off with Joe Parker's son?"

"Where have you been, Frank. That's yesterday's news."

Frank paused for a moment. "Did you hear that she's pregnant?"

"Frank, don't insult me," she said. "I'm a woman. It's my job to know these things."

"Christ. How do you find out that stuff so fast?"

"Sorry," she replied. "If I was to tell you that, I'd have to kill you."

The gray-haired man became silent as he stared out the window that was beside him.

"Are you going to the nursing home today?" she asked.

Frank began to lightly tap the arm of the chair with his open hand. "Yes, I think I will. I try to get out there at least twice a week, and I didn't see him at all last week."

"How's he doing?"

"I don't know. Sometimes he seems that he's getting better, and then other times..."

"Does he recognize you?"

"Most of the time, he does. I'll walk up to him, and he'll call me by my name. Then, ten minutes later, he'll ask me if I've seen Frank."

Toad walked into the kitchen and poured two cups of coffee. She brought them back into the living room and gave one cup to Frank. "Are they taking good care of him, Frank?" she asked as she sat back down on the sofa.

"I don't know, Toad. He seems all right on Tuesdays, but they know that I come there every Tuesday. Last week, I stopped by on a Friday to drop off a new sweatshirt, and he was terrible. He hadn't been shaved in days, his hair was greasy, and his diaper needed to be changed."

"You need to complain to someone. Someone's not doing his job. You need to let someone know, so they can fix the problem."

"I just can't, Toad," he said. "I just can't."

"Why not?" she asked. "It's just not right what they're doing."

"I know it's not right, Toad, but how do I know what they will do to him after they get in trouble? I'm telling you, Toad. I know that I don't have any proof, but I swear there is abuse in that place. Too many cuts and bruises with the same old excuses."

Silence fell on the room. Toad took a sip of her coffee and sat back in the sofa. "I'm sorry, Frank," she said softly.

Frank said nothing. His eyes wandered around the room until they stopped at the door.

"Is today the day?" asked Toad.

He looked away and then stared at the floor. "No," he muttered. "Today is not the day."

"You know as well as I do that it's time you faced this thing. I'll do it with you."

"Maybe someday," he said without looking up, "but not today."

The room became silent. Neither said anything more as they finished their coffee.

"Well, I best be going," said Toad getting to her feet. "I'm right in the middle of doing my laundry, and you know how exciting that can be."

"You sure know the ins and outs of having a good time," Frank said, leaning forward in his chair.

"Try not to hurt yourself today, Frank." She started for the door but paused with one hand on the latch to give him a wry smile. "I can tell you're going to work yourself to death today."

Frank laughed. "See you tomorrow, Toad."

"See you later," she replied, and then she was gone.

It was late afternoon when Frank finally emerged from the house. He had just finished watching a series of game shows, a re-run of "Gilligan's Island", and two of his favorite soap operas. He walked down the back walk and got into his truck. He pulled out of his driveway and onto the road that led to town.

The nursing home was on the other side of town, and within minutes, Frank was pulling into the parking lot. It was a large, old building that set off the road on the outskirts of town. There was room for over a hundred residents, and there was always a waiting list to get in.

Frank's father had been a resident here for the last five years. It was a shock to the town of Springfield when Ned Watson checked into Saint Mary's. Neither his friends nor the members of his family could accept the fact that Ned Watson was now wearing a diaper and was confined to a wheelchair.

He was a strong and virile man, who continued to farm his land well into his seventies. At the age of sixty-five, he had declared himself retired, but, to nobody's surprise, his retirement only lasted for a year. After a brief period of planting flowers near the house and watching television, Ned found himself back in the seat of his tractor. Retirement, or "loafing", as Ned referred to it, was not meant for this man who had worked all of his life. He declared that he would work the fields of his farm until he dropped dead on his tractor.

Everyone was certain that he would do just that. The rigor and hard work of farming would most certainly take its toll on a

man of his age. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that he was destined for a heart attack.

Ironically, it was not the stress of farming that caused his inevitable heart attack. It was a warm day in May when Ned was walking up to the back of the house when he noticed a weed in the flowerbed beside the back porch. He bent over to remove it when it hit him. It was a heart attack of such massive proportions that it stopped his heart from beating and him from breathing. He lay there for nearly ten minutes with his heart stopped.

It was strange what happened that day. Nobody ever was able to explain the course of events that occurred that led to the saving of Ned Watson's life.

Willard Kendall was the mailman at the time. He stopped in front of Ned's house to deliver to small stack of bills and advertisements. As he opened the front of the mailbox and reached out of the car with the mail, one of the letters slipped from his hand and fell to the ground.

It was a perfectly quiet summer day with hardly a leaf on a tree in motion. Suddenly, there was a gust of wind that picked the letter off the ground and moved it about ten feet. Willard got out of his car and walked towards the white envelope. Another gust of wind picked it up and sent it high into the air until it landed at the rear of the house. This time, Willard ran to the envelope. He started to bend over to pick up the elusive prize when he heard the soft whimpering of a dog. It seemed strange to Willard because he knew that Ned had never owned one.

He turned in the direction of the sound, and there lying on the ground near the back door of the house was the body of a man that Willard knew instantly as that of Ned Watson. Leaning over his head and making an almost melodic sound was a small white dog that was more of a puppy than anything else was.

Willard ran over to the man and fell to his knees. He had known CPR since high school and had even used it once to save a drowning victim when he was a lifeguard. Less than a minute later, Ned Watson's heart began to pump lifesaving blood through the already cool and stark white body.

But the damage was done. His oxygen-starved brain had been permanently damaged. Ned Watson entered the hospital a short time after that never to return to his farm again. Within four months, he was transferred to the St. Mary's Nursing Home and has been confined there ever since.

Nobody in the family wanted it that way. Nobody wanted Ned Watson seemingly locked away in a world he didn't want to belong. However, it was quite obvious to everybody that this had to be. He was confined to a wheel chair and could do nothing for himself. He required professional care virtually every minute of the day, and this was the only place that could provide it.

Frank got out of his car and walked to the front door of the nursing home. Reluctantly, he opened the heavy oak door and closed it behind him. He opened another door that led to a hallway down one of the wings. As he walked down the hall to his father's room, he passed by the many open doorways to the semi-private rooms. The stench of urine soaked diapers and

undisposed feces seem to burn Frank's nostrils. Old men and women strapped in their wheel chairs were parked near the walls of the hallway. Many were bent over in a death-like sleep. Others babbled incessantly to no one in particular.

Frank weaved his way through the hallway until he turned into his father's room. The old man was sitting up in his bed slightly leaning to one side. "Hi, Pop!" shouted Frank as he stopped at the side of his father's bed. "How are you doing today?"

"My ass hurts," the old man replied. "That's how it's going."

"Are those sores hurting again, Dad?"

"They never stop hurting, for Christ's sakes," he replied. "They hurt day in and day out. My ass feels like it's on fire all day long."

"Has there been a doctor in to see you lately, Dad?"

"I haven't seen a doctor in over a year!" he shouted as he began to squirm in bed.

"Dad, I know better than that," said Frank taking his father's hand. "There was a doctor in here two weeks ago. I saw him myself."

"Bullshit!" shouted the old man as he snatched his hand from his son's grip. "Damn doctors don't care about me. Hell, look at my red ass! Do you think I'd have these boils on my butt if they cared about me?"

Frank stared at his father. He pulled a chair to the side of the bed and sat down. Silence fell on the room. Frank stared at his father. Ned stared at him.

"Have you seen the President of the United States lately?" asked Frank.

"He left just before you came in."

"How old are you, Dad?"

"Twenty-two. Say, what are these dumb questions for anyhow?"

"Oh nothing, Dad," said Frank patting him on the leg. "No reason at all."

Frank leaned over and brushed a lock of hair from his father's forehead. He stared into the old man's eyes. It was hard to see him like this. A once proud and strong man, Ned Watson could seemingly do anything. No matter what it was that needed to be done, Frank could always depend on his father to be there.

He stared at his father, half smiling and dreaming of the past. "Do you remember what you used to tell me all the time, Pop?" asked Frank staring into his father's eyes. There was no reply. "You used to tell me that the world was made for the winners, and that the sick and weak were eaten by the strong. I wonder if you still believe that," he said still looking at his father. "Knowing you, Dad, as well as I do, I have no doubt that you still do."

Frank turned to look at his father's roommate who had been there for only a month. He was an old man in his nineties, whose health was failing fast. At one time, Frank made an effort to get to know his father's roommates. It seemed like the kind and right thing to do. But, for some reason, being Ned's roommate meant immanent and certain death. In the last five years, Ned Watson had shared his room with over twenty men, all of whom, except for his current one, were now buried in their

graves. It was a standing joke in the Watson family that sharing a room with Ned Watson was the kiss of death.

"How's your roommate, Pop?" asked Frank turning to his father.

"He's fine," was his quick answer.

"And alive," added Frank.

Ned looked over at the old man, as he lay motionless in his bed. "Don't be too sure of that," he said. "Every time I look over there, I get a sudden urge to check pulses."

Frank took his father's frail hand and engulfed it into his own. He was an old man to be sure, nearly eighty-three years old. But he still had a handsome face and a full head of snow-white hair that many women of all ages still found attractive.

"Do you remember what you always used to tell me, Pop?"

"What's that, Son?"

"You always used to say that if you take care of yourself, you can get laid at any age. Do you remember that, Dad?"

"You bet I do," he replied as he squirmed to find a new position.

"So, tell me, Pop. Is it true at eighty-three? Have you gotten lucky in here?"

"No," he quickly responded.

"Oh, so your theory about women isn't true after all," said Frank. "Why is that?"

"Cause I didn't take care of myself."

Silence fell on the room. Frank got to his feet and moved his chair back against the wall. "Well, Pop," he said. "I've got to be going, but before I do, I have to ask you the question."

"What question is that?" asked his father.

"The question that I have asked you every time that I come here. The question. The question that you should know the answer, and when you do, I'll know that your memory is back to normal."

"Well, what in the hell is the question?"

"All right, Pop. Here it goes. What did you get me for my sixteenth birthday?"

"Is that all you wanted to know?"

"Yes, that's it. What did you get me for my sixteenth birthday?"

"I don't know."

Frank patted his father on the shoulder and said, "That's all right, Dad. I'm going to keep asking that question until you, by God, remember."

"Pick another question."

"What?"

"Pick another question, Son. Who cares what you got for your birthday."

Frank leaned over and kissed his father on the forehead. "Got to go, Pop," he said. "See you later."

He started for the door when his father said, "Hey, Son."

Frank stopped and turned to the man lying in the bed. "What do you want, Pop?"

"Do us both a big favor, will you?"

"What's that, Dad?"

"That sixteenth birthday present that's been bugging you? Get over it, will you?" Frank smiled at his father's light-hearted

Scott Fields

comment. "Good bye, Dad," he said and walked out of the room.

2 THE NEW WAITRESS

The next day began with a fiery, red sun rising proudly in the eastern sky. It was after seven o'clock when Frank Watson eased himself down the steps from the back porch. He cut across the backyard towards his truck that was still parked in the driveway.

Frank climbed into the cab of the truck and turned the key. Instead of roaring to life as it had for over thirty years, there was only a faint clicking sound coming from the engine compartment. Frank tried it again. Nothing. "Damn!" he muttered as he got out of the truck and lifted the hood. He carefully examined the engine hoping to find some obvious problem that he would be able to detect. He tugged on the cables attached to the battery and checked the belts for tightness. With the hope that he had somehow, inadvertently,

found the problem, he slid across the seat and turned the key. Nothing. "Damn it all!" he said much louder this time.

He got out of the truck and stormed across the yard to the barn. He swung the double doors open to reveal a freshly painted 1955 gray and red Ford tractor. He grabbed a set of jumper cables that were hanging on a hook and climbed into the cold metal seat. With the slight turn of the key, the machine instantly came to life.

He drove over to the truck and parked as close as he could to the front of the vehicle. Within seconds, he made the connections with the jumper cables and had transmitted the necessary power from the tractor to bring the tired old truck to life. He disconnected the two vehicles and climbed back into the cab.

Frank eased the truck out of his driveway and onto the road that led to town. Within minutes, he was downtown driving past the small businesses that were just waking to a new day. From the number of vehicles parked in front of the diner, Frank could see that the usual crowd was already there. He glanced at his watch and realized that he was nearly a half-hour late.

Frank pulled into the parking lot of Wilton's Garage and parked just in front of the office. He climbed out of the cab of his truck and walked over to a man whose head was buried in the engine compartment of a new pick up.

"What did I tell you," announced Frank leaning over the front of the truck.

The startled mechanic jerked his head back nearly hitting it on the open hood. He turned to his visitor who was only inches

away. "Jesus, Frank!" shouted Sam. "Don't sneak up on me like that. Now, what did you say?"

"I told you so!"

"Frank, you see these cars parked all around here," he said pointing his finger. "Their owners are anxious for me to get them fixed. So, I really don't have time for your games today."

"I told you that the new ones aren't any better than my old Ford. What's the matter with that one? Need a new engine?"

"Frank, it needs an oil change. That's all. An oil change. Besides, this truck is over five years old. Of course, in your world, that is brand new, isn't it, Frank?"

"You know, Wilt. I don't have much time either. I'm already late for breakfast, so I'm going to come right to the point. You sold me a bad battery!"

Sam's mouth fell open as he stared at the man in front of him. "What did you say?"

"That battery you sold me was no good. I had to jump start her this morning."

"Frank, I don't even remember putting a battery in your truck. How long ago was it?"

"Not long ago."

"What do you mean not long ago? Was it a year, two years, three?"

"I don't know. You're the hotshot mechanic. You figure it out," said Frank walking away. "What makes the difference? The thing doesn't work, so give me a new one."

"Frank, don't get it in your head that you're getting a free battery out of this!" he shouted.

By now, Frank was nearly a block away. "I'm late for breakfast, you nitwit. Just fix my truck," he shouted without turning around.

The heavy, oak door of Bob's Cafe creaked and groaned as the man opened it and let himself in. "Good morning, Gentlemen," said Frank as he walked by the table of men.

"Good morning, Frank," came a chorus of voices.

"Little late, aren't you Frank?" asked Ben Sager. "What's wrong? Not enough sticky on your Depends this morning?"

"You know, Ben," said Frank pouring himself a cup of coffee. "The next time Leno goes on vacation, I'm sure they're going to ask you to fill in."

"Hey, Frank," shouted one of the men from the other end of the table. "Order your breakfast, and then we've got something to talk about."

Frank looked up to see who was talking as he sat down with his cup of coffee. It was Willard Miller, a farmer and former mayor of Springfield. "What's the matter with Willard?" he asked turning to George.

"I don't know," he replied. "Something's going on though. They've been talking about something important. I couldn't hear what it's all about."

"I wouldn't bet on it," said Frank taking a sip of his coffee. "Everything's a crisis with Willard. I swear he's been going through menopause for the last ten years."

"Well, there's something more interesting than Willard Miller this morning," said George with a smile. "Let me tell you."

"George, I got a pimple on my butt that's more interesting than Willard Miller."

"Wait until you see the new waitress that Rackets hired," said George grabbing Frank by the arm.

Frank looked down at his arm and then back at his friend. "Jesus, George. Control yourself. This is my last clean shirt, and you're wrinkling the hell out of it."

"She's hot," he said excitedly. "Wait 'till you see her, Frank, and the best part about her is she's divorced. You know what they say about divorced women."

"No, George. What do they say about divorced women?"

"They want it, Frank," said George. "They want it bad. They need sex. It's a proven fact."

"And where did you hear that?"

"I read it some place."

"Did you happen to read this while standing in line over at the Cash and Carry?"

"I might have. Why?"

"That explains a lot."

George grabbed his friend's arm and squeezed tightly. "Here she comes," he said excitedly.

Frank looked up to see an attractive blonde woman nearly thirty-three years old charging in their direction. Her brow was wrinkled and her lips were set in a grim line as she stopped in front of Frank.

"Well, here I am," she snapped as she put her hands on her hips.

Frank said nothing. He studied her angry face for a moment and then returned to his menu. "I'll have two eggs over easy, hash browns, and white toast. No meat today, thank you," he said folding the menu and laying it on the edge of the table. He looked up at the woman standing in front of him. Her hands were still locked in place on her hips. "Are you going to write any of this down, or are you doing some kind of Superman pose for the cover of a comic book."

"I'm here, Wise Guy," she blurted. "Give me your best shot!"

"Give you my best shot," Frank muttered with a puzzled look. "What in the hell are you talking about?"

"You're the big stud who's supposed to be able to bed me down in five minutes. I'm waiting to see your moves."

"Bed you down in five... I still don't understand what's going on here."

"One of your playmates down at the other end of the table told me that you've been bragging about how you'd have the new waitress in bed in five minutes," she said pointing at the group of men at the other end of the table. "I've been real anxious to see this man among men and the kind of moves you must have."

Frank glared at the men sitting at the other end of the table. He wasn't sure who was responsible, since they were all snickering and stealing glances. "You didn't believe those...those morons down there, did you?" The young woman said nothing. "Don't listen to anything those idiots tell you. Half of them barely made it through high school." He looked up at the woman who was staring at the men who were, by now, laughing

hysterically. "Now, do you suppose I could get some breakfast?" asked Frank. The woman stood motionless for several moments and then turned and walked away.

"Way to go, Frank," muttered George as he took a sip from his coffee cup.

"What?"

"You sure know how to make a great first impression on a woman."

"Hey! Don't start with me! It's those idiots down there," said Frank pointing at the other end of the table.

"Hey, Frank," shouted Ben Sager. "Do you mind stopping by my place sometime today. I got a young heifer that needs to be bred." The entire table exploded into laughter.

"You know, Ben," said Frank with a slight grin on his face. "There's an old saying that says you shouldn't upset the one who serves you your meals. Do you know why they say that, Ben?" Silence fell on the room. The laughter turned to grins. "It's been said that there have been things added to food by upset waitresses. Did you ever hear about that, Ben?" The smile faded from Ben's face. "I don't know, but I think she seemed a little upset with you. If I were you, I'd check my food real close from now on."

"So, what did you think, Frank?" asked George. "She's a real beauty, isn't she?"

"She looks like a nice young girl trying to make a living. That's all."

"Come on. She's perfect for you."

"Perfect for me?"

"Yes, she's perfect for you. I think you should ask her out."

"Ask her out? George, I have corns on my feet that are older than her."

"So, there's a little difference in your ages."

"A little difference? Christ, I can't remember back to when I was her age."

"Here she comes with you breakfast," said George nudging his elbow into his friend's arm. "Ask her out, Frank."

The young woman stopped beside Frank and set a plate of food in front of him. "You know," said Frank looking up at the woman. "We probably got off on the wrong foot. Let's start over. My name is Frank Watson," he said extending his hand in her direction.

"You know, I really don't care what your name is, and I'd appreciate it if you and your little friends would just leave me alone. You order food, and I'll bring it to you. Is that all right with you?"

Frank said nothing. He stared intently at the woman with his hand still outstretched. She turned and stormed away. "Does this mean that we're not going out on a date?" he asked turning to George.

"I told you she wasn't for you," said George taking a sip of his coffee.

Frank stared wide-eyed at his friend, but before he could say anything, Willard Miller pulled up a chair next to him. "We have to talk," said Willard.

"Jesus, Willard, what's got you in such a tizzy?" asked Frank.

"Something's going on, Frank, and I'm not sure what it is just yet."

"Well, what's the problem?"

"You know Horace Sweeney over in Jefferson County, that high-powered real estate guy?"

"Sweeney Realtors. Yes. I know him."

"He's been sniffing around talking like he wants to buy some of the farms around here."

"Well, that's what realtors do. They get involved in the buying and selling of property."

"No, Frank. You don't understand. Horace represents some big company that wants to buy five or six farms that are next to one another. They want to buy over five hundred acres. Something just ain't right. Who would want that much farmland out here?"

"How did you find out about this?"

"Bob Howell was telling me about it. He said that they were talking to him about buying his farm only if they could get the others that are around him to sell too. It's an all or nothing kind of deal."

"Bob Howell? His place is right next to me."

"That's right. You should be hearing from them soon. See what you can find out."

"Willard?"

"Yes, Frank."

"Did anyone ever tell you how cute you look when you get excited?"

Willard sat back in his chair. "You know, Frank," he said putting his hands on his knees. "You've been nothing but a horse's ass ever since Ida died."

A silence fell on the room. Some of the men picked up their coffee cups, and others looked the other way. Frank picked up his fork and began to eat his breakfast. One of the men quietly asked one of the others what had been said, and a mumbled explanation followed.

"Sorry," muttered Willard as he got to his feet and returned to his place at the table.

"So, what do you think, Frank?" asked George in an effort to change the topic of conversation. "Are you going to ask her out?"

"George, she nearly spit on me for Christ's sakes Besides, why all this fascination with my love life? Did they cancel your favorite soap opera?"

"Because Willard was right," said George. "You are a pain in the ass."

"Thanks a lot, George. You, too?"

"I know you don't want to hear it, but you haven't been the same since Ida died. It's been two years, Frank. You need to get on with your life."

"Save your armchair psychology for someone who cares what you have to say."

"All right. I won't say anything more about it, but I knew Ida just as long as you did, and I know that she wouldn't have wanted you to become a hermit. She would have wanted you to get involved with someone. You know it as well as I do."

Frank said nothing. He stared straight ahead as he continued eating his breakfast.

"You're my best friend, Frank," said George setting his coffee cup on the table, "and I want you to be happy. I actually care about you and what happens to you. I know that's hard to believe, but it's true. You might be a pain in my ass, but you're still my best friend."

Frank remained silent. He finished the last bite of his breakfast and set his fork on his empty plate. He drained the last of his coffee from the cup and set it on his plate as well.

There were only a few men left at the table. Most of them had paid their bill and had already left the restaurant.

"So, what do you think, Frank?" asked George. "Now that you know how I feel about you, do you think there's a chance that we might go steady?" Frank smiled. He turned to his friend. George leaned over and stared into his eyes. "At least, consider going out on a date together. I promise to be ever so gentle."

Frank burst into laughter. "You're an asshole, George," he said grabbing his check and getting to his feet. "Has anyone ever told you that before?"

"Yeah, Frank," he said. "As a matter of fact, I think it was you who called me that at least once before."

Frank walked to the register and paid his bill. As he headed for the front door, he stopped at the long table just in front of his friend.

"No, no, no," said George waving his hands back and forth. "Frank, you keep that shiny, new nickel in your pocket. I'll get the tip today."

Frank paused for a moment as he stared at his friend. He laid a hand on his shoulder and smiled. "I must be going," he said and walked to the front of the restaurant. He opened the front door and turned to his friend. "You save yourself for me," he said and walked out the door.

Minutes later, he had walked the length of the downtown area and was standing near his truck when Sam approached him carrying a fistful of papers. He spread them out on the hood of the truck and turned to Frank.

"Did you get her fixed?" asked Frank.

"Yes, Frank," he replied. "Your beloved pickup is fixed. All it needed was a new battery."

"I told you that you sold me a bad one."

"Frank that was a five year battery that I sold you, and it lasted fifty-two months. It wasn't exactly a bad battery."

"Well, it didn't last five years."

"I know that, Frank. I gave you nearly six dollars credit towards the new one for the eight months left on the warranty. You still owe me \$39.50 for the new battery."

"My God, Sam!" shouted Frank. "You must be kidding me! Forty dollars for a battery! How do you sleep at nights, Sam?" Frank removed his wallet from his back pocket and pulled out two twenty-dollar bills. "Here, for Christ's sakes, take my money! Take all my money for crying out loud!"

Sam took the money with one hand and handed the paper work to Frank with the other. Frank studied the papers in his hand. "Where did you get these old receipts?" he asked.

"They were in the glove box of your truck," he replied. Frank took the papers and folded them up. He looked up at Sam who was still holding the money in his hand. They stared at each other for several moments.

Frank held up both hands. "Well?" he frowned.

"Well, what?"

"My change, damn it! You owe me fifty cents!"

"Jesus, Frank!" barked Sam. He dug into his pockets and pulled out a handful of coins. "All I have is pennies and nickels. I don't have any quarters."

"That's all right," he said thrusting his hand in Sam's direction. "It all spends the same." Frank thrust the assortment of coins into his pocket and climbed into his truck. He turned the key in the ignition, and the vehicle came to life. "Lucky for you!" Frank shouted to the mechanic who was still standing in the same spot.

"Always nice to see you again, Frank," he said as he watched the truck drive away.



It was nearly eleven o'clock in the morning when the back door of Frank's farmhouse opened and closed. Toad walked across the kitchen towards the coffeepot. "Are you in the living room holding down that easy chair, Frank?" she shouted into the next room.

"So, you made it after all," Frank shouted from his chair. "I thought for a minute there that I was finally going to get some privacy. You know. Do things in my house without having to worry about some woman barging in on me."

Toad finished with the coffee maker and started for the living room. "Tell me, Frank. What would you do in your house that you would need this privacy?"

"I don't know. Maybe, I would like to walk around the house in the nude. Did you ever think about that?"

"Frank, I've seen you in the nude, and it wasn't that big of a deal," she said as she sat on the sofa.

"What are you talking about?" asked Frank turning to his guest. "When did you ever see me in the nude?"

"That time right after Ida died. Do you remember? You came walking out of the bathroom after taking a shower."

"So, what? As I recall, I had a towel at the time."

"That's right, Frank. You had a towel, but it wasn't covering anything important."

"Do you mean that you saw my privates?"

"Yes, I saw your privates, but don't worry. It wasn't that big of a deal."

"You saw me naked, and you say that it was no big deal?"

"Frank, I've seen chipmunks that were bigger than you."

"You know. It's that kind of talk will, someday, get you barred from this house."

Toad got to her feet and started for the kitchen. "Then, who would you get to fix your coffee for you and put up with your crap?"

"Good point," he shouted in the direction of the kitchen. "I guess maybe I'd better keep you. Besides, now I know why you keep coming over here."

"And why is that?" she asked as she handed a cup of coffee to her friend.

"Since you've seen me in the nude, you have this uncontrollable lust for me."

"You're right, Frank. It was too much for me," she said taking a sip from her cup. "Seeing that tiny little thing hiding in the shadow of that big stomach was a real turn-on. I'm surprised I haven't raped you by now."

Frank chuckled softly and took a sip from his hot coffee. "So, why were you so late this morning? Did you forget how to get here?"

"I was on the phone with Clara Edwards. You know what it's like to hang up on her. She was telling me about the new waitress at the restaurant. Did you happen to meet her this morning?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, I did."

"What did you think?"

"About what?"

"About her. What did you think about her? Is she nice? Is she pretty?"

"I don't know. I really didn't pay much attention."

"Jesus, Frank. The first new woman to come to this run-down town in years and you don't remember if she was pretty or not. Well, tell me this. Do you think you might want to take her out on a date sometime?"

"Oh, for Christ's sakes. Not you too! Why does everyone think that I need a woman in my life to be happy? Besides, she's half my age. She's the same age as my kids. That almost makes it

seem a little sick like I'm some kind of a pervert. The kind of guy who has Cub Scout hats under the seat of his car."

"You're worried about dating someone who's a little younger than you? My God, Frank, get with the times. You got interracial marriages, homosexuals marrying homosexuals, and, I'm sure if you looked hard enough, you could find people and farm animals tying the knot. So, don't try to shock me with a little age difference. This day and age, you have to try harder than that."

Frank gulped his coffee and then stared into the cup. He became quiet, as if he were miles away. Toad stared at her friend. She wondered if he was remembering Ida. Two years was not enough time to heal. He needed more time to get over her.

Theirs was not a common marriage. It was unique in many ways. It was holding hands after forty years of marriage. It was notes that said, "I love you" taped to the bathroom mirror and sharing a pizza and a late night movie together. Even after all those years of marriage, they still missed one another when they were separated and felt a certain tinge of excitement when they were reunited.

Most everyone in town knew the Watsons and jealously wanted a marriage like theirs. When asked the secret of the perfect marriage, Frank Watson always replied, "There's only one ingredient for a perfect marriage, and that is we never take one another for granted."

It seemed so simple. Yet, many never really understood what it meant and those who did, found that it helped their marriage. It didn't matter to Frank and Ida. It worked for them, and that's all that mattered.

Toad drank the last of the coffee from her cup and got to her feet. "Need to be going," she announced. "I have stuff to do today."

Frank winked his eyes several times as if he were awakening from a sleep. "Well, you've already done the most important thing of the day."

"And what's that, Frank?"

"You made my coffee for me."

"Got to go, Frank. Try not to get hurt watching those soap operas. Okay?"

"Hey. The real meaning of life is right there on the television every afternoon."

Toad opened the back door and stepped outside. "Get a life, Frank," she shouted and let the door close behind her.

It was almost two o'clock in the afternoon when Frank turned off the television. He walked into the kitchen and poured himself a drink of water at the sink. After gulping down its contents, he set the empty glass on the counter and gazed out the window at the backyard.

Frank winced at what he saw. Trash littered the backyard, and the weeds grew wildly everywhere. Dried and peeling paint fell from the sides of the barn and garage leaving white piles all around the perimeters of the buildings.

It wasn't always like that. There was a time when the stark white buildings stood proudly against the dark green grass. Frank smiled as he remembered the smell of fresh paint and newly cut grass. Work clothes and flowered dresses hung from a clothesline that stretched the length of the backyard. Frank turned to watch his small children as they played on a tire hanging from an oak tree across the driveway.

"Frank, supper's ready. Holler for the kids to come in."

Frank turned and looked over his shoulder. "Right away, Ida," he said.

He walked onto the back porch and opened the back door. He stepped outside and looked in the direction of the oak tree. The rope and tire were gone. Even the branch that supported it had fallen during a storm years ago.

Frank's face paled, and his smile disappeared. A gust of wind scattered the thin strands of hair on his head, and a discarded newspaper came to life, its pages spreading across the yard like ghosts in the wind.

"All those years ago," he muttered aloud, turning once again to the oak tree hoping to see that rope and tire. The fierce wind stung his tired eyes as Frank gazed across an open field. He stared into a river of memories until his heart could no longer take it. "All those years ago," he said again and turned back into the house.

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SCOTT FIELDS

THE AUTHOR

In 1966, Scott turned down a contract with the Detroit Tigers to pursue his lifelong dream of becoming a published author by earning a degree at Ohio University. In 1996 with a lifelong dream of being a writer, Scott started writing short stories. Within two years, he had four stories published. Since then, his first novel,



All Those Years Ago, was published, *Summer Heat*, his fifth novel, was published in May 2012 and his most recent, *The Mansfield Killings*, based on a true story, was published in October 2012. To date, Scott has published 11 novels.

Now, Scott spends nearly all his time writing his next novel.

Scott lives in Mansfield, Ohio, where most of his novels take place, with his wife, Deb.

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