

Good Night

by Rick Reil

Preface

Every first grade class has to have its prettiest little girl. In Sister Mary Bernice's class it was Mary Mitchell. This might not have been universally known or for that matter a topic of discussion, but it was the gospel truth to Jerry O'Brien. As far as Jerry was concerned, Mary was the most beautiful girl in the world. Her golden curls and bright blue eyes would hold him spell bound. The admiration was truly one-sided. While the smitten Jerry was in the grip of puppy love, Mary hardly knew he existed.

It was 1955 and the first year of classes for the brand new Catholic parochial school in Richland, Washington. For years, Father Sweeny, Christ the King parish's priest dreamed of building a parochial school . His dream came true with the completion of Christ the King School. The school provided religious and secular education to over 800 students from first to eight grade. Who would have thought that a few years earlier this school would have an enrollment over three times the population of the town in 1942?

In 1942 the government started the super secret Manhattan Project. It was a successful effort undertaken during World War II that produced the first nuclear weapons. A reactor to produce plutonium was needed and Uncle Sam found just the place it needed in the desert of south eastern Washington. Approximately 630 square miles of eastern Benton County was purchased as part of the project. This included the town sites of Richland, White Bluffs, and Hanford and a small portion of neighboring Franklin County. The small isolated farming communities were located on the Columbia

River. They were also close to the newly completed Grand Coulee Dam, at that time the largest dam in the world. Isolation, plenty of electric power, and the second largest river in North America was the ideal place to build the world's first nuclear reactor. The reactor produced the plutonium that fueled the nuclear bomb that devastated Nagasaki, Japan and helped end the war.

During the war the population of the Richland area grew from a few hundred souls to over 50,000. When the war ended the population settled in at about 25,000 to support the cold war mission of producing plutonium for nuclear weapons at the Hanford Atomic Energy Site.

Chapter 1

Tens of thousands of the nation's armed forces were on ships in the western Pacific in the summer of 1945. They had been preparing to invade Japan for several months. One of those ships, near the Philippines, was the USS General C. H. Muir. It was a navy ship crewed by the U.S. Coast Guard. Electrician 3rd Class, Bob O'Brien, a cowboy from Choteau, Montana was serving on the ship. Bob, like many other patriotic young men, was anxious to help win the war. He enlisted in the Coast Guard in February 1943. After attending basic training he was assigned to a unit protecting the Ballard Locks in North Seattle.

Many young couples at that time, especially those with a military connection, and usually away from home, were anxious to get married. Miss Dorothy Jackson, Bob's high school sweetheart, caught the train in May of 1943 and traveled to Seattle. They married right way and found an apartment in Ballard. Dorothy got a job at the phone company and the couple settle down to enjoy the newlywed bliss. That very happy time ended when Bob received orders report for training at several military schools and to eventually join the crew of the Muir in April of 1945.

In the summer of 1945 the ship's crew was told they would be joining the fleet to invade Japan. The war ended before that happened and the ship spent the next six months transporting troops from ports in the Mediterranean and Indian Oceans back to the states.

In November of 1945 Bob was discharged and headed back to Seattle. He was obviously anxious to be reunited with Dorothy.

Bob arrived in Seattle right before Thanksgiving. After the holiday he saw an ad in the Seattle Times newspaper. Jobs for

electricians at Hanford were being advertised. Bob was successful in getting a job working at the Hanford Atomic Energy Works. The couple moved to Richland and rented an apartment in a government “A” duplex on Ritchie Court and settled down.

Bob and Dorothy were blessed with their first child, a sweet girl they named, Cheryl on January 20, 1947. Although the couple missed Montana, they were comfortable in Richland and decided they were there for the long haul. In 1948 the young family moved into and brand new “Ranch” house on the 1400 block of Sanford Avenue. It was a lovely home with a neighborhood full of the other families with lots of young children.

On July 11, 1949 the couple was blessed with a fine boy. They named him Gerald and called him “Jerry” for short. Being devout Catholics both of the children were baptized by Father Sweeny at Christ the King Catholic Church when they were but a few weeks old. Bob and Dorothy were very active in the parish. Bob was in the Knights of Columbus and Dorothy was active in the Altar Society.

Dorothy, like most mothers of the time, chose to stay home with the kids and took the title of “house wife.” She was proud to be the mother of two fine children and the wife of the only man she ever loved. Her time was spent tending the kids, making her home a lovely and inviting place, and helping out at the church.

The kids were taught how to work by helping with the chores and learning how to garden. Dorothy loved her vegetable garden and was the envy of the neighborhood for the quality of her produce. Jerry and Cheryl had been given an large red “Radio Flyer” wagon for Christmas in 1953. Dorothy suggested that they might make some spending money selling

her extra produce around the neighborhood. It was a great idea and rewarded them for their assistance in planting, weeding, watering, and harvesting the vegetables.

Dorothy had picked up some wooden produce boxes that were being thrown out at Campbell's grocery store on the corner of Thayer Drive and Williams Street, not far from their home. The boxes were loaded in the wagon and filled with carrots, cucumbers, tomatoes, peppers, squash, radishes, and whatever else was in season. The kids pulled the wagon and knocked on doors for several blocks around. They split the money but Dorothy insisted that ten percent was given to the church and half of the remainder was put in the bank. They were free to spend the rest on whatever they wanted.

Cheryl liked clothes and most of her money was spent at the J.C. Penney store at the Uptown shopping center. The Uptown had been built in the late '40s and was the hub of retail merchandising in Richland. It hosted many chain stores including Sears, J.J. Newberry's, Montgomery Ward, Mode-O-Day, as well as locally owned stores such as Parker's Hardware, the Spudnut Shop, and the Uptown Theater.

Richland was basically a brand new town, built by the government to house the government workers at Hanford.

By the early fifties the government town was largely complete. Most of the houses, stores, schools, and churches were only a few years old. In the O'Brien's minds it was almost complete except for one thing...a Catholic School.

Chapter 2

To the Christ the King parishioners, the completion of Christ the King School in 1955 was truly a miracle. Father Sweeny with the assistance of the Yakima Diocese, many of the church families, and a local bank, was able to secure a loan of nearly one million dollars to build the school. The mortgage was \$1,000 a week. Every Monday morning Father Sweeny would personally take the mortgage payment to the bank.

The church teaching staff was largely made up of nuns from the order of “The Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary.” The order was founded in Canada in 1843. The nuns wore black and white habits and as far as their teaching methods, they were pretty black and white too. Class sized ranged from 50-60 students per class. There were no aids or class helpers. One nun against a class of students that was twice the size of those of the local schools required, at least in the nuns’ minds, strict discipline. This teaching method was pretty much the norm for Catholic parochial schools of the time.

Cheryl was 8 years old when the school was opened. She had been attending Jason Lee Elementary since kindergarten and was ready to start 3rd grade. Bob and Dorothy felt it best to let her continue there since she was doing well and was happy being with her neighborhood friends. Jerry on the other hand had only attended Kindergarten and wasn’t so entrenched. It was felt that he should attend Christ the King School and get a good Catholic education.

In September of 1955 the doors of the school opened for the first time. Jerry’s teacher was Sister Mary Bernice. She was a well seasoned teacher who was transferred from another catholic school. The rest of the staff were mostly nuns

transferred from other schools in the Diocese. There weren't enough nuns available to staff the school so a few "lay" teachers were recruited from the parish to complete the staffing needs. They were paid \$375 a year. It was mostly a calling they did out of duty and their love for the Savior and the parish.

The first day of class in 1955 was a time of excitement. Father Sweeny visited each class and welcomed the students to the new school. The priest was a native of Boston and had a thick accent. He had come to the area in 1943 to serve the needs of the Catholic workers at Hanford. He was well liked by most and served the parish until his death in the 1996.

For Jerry, it was a great change from Jason Lee Elementary, the neighborhood school he had attended the year before. Since Christ the King wasn't a public school, there was no school bus service to provide student transportation. The school was over a mile from the O'Brien's home. Some of the neighborhood parents arranged for a local taxi company to pick up about 11 children and take them to and from the school.

The taxi service enlisted an elderly man to drive an ancient 9 passenger station wagon to provide the transportation. He went by the name of "Junior" which was funny since he was at least 70 years old. He was rarely clean shaven and was missing a few teeth. Those remaining were yellow and brown, obviously the result of decades of smoking. He was rough and tough and little bit scary to a bunch of six to nine year old kids. Eleven kids crammed into a nine passenger station wagon may seem a bit crowded but you need to remember, this was the mid-1950s. There were no seat belts and small little kids' rumps don't take up much room. Most of the time they made it to school safely.

Chapter 3

Going from a kindergarten class of 23 students to a first grade class of over 50 students was a difficult transition for Jerry. The only one in his class he knew was his best friend Jimmy Schroeder. Jimmy lived a few houses away. They had become friends in Kindergarten. Another help was having Mary Mitchell ride the taxi with him to and from school. Jerry had never seen Mary before the first day of school when the taxi had picked her up. The Mitchells lived several blocks away from the O'Briens. Mary was the prettiest girl Jerry had ever seen. She had two older sisters who rode the taxi with her. It was all Jerry could do not to stare at her. Even when he wasn't looking, he was thinking about her.

Though Jerry was smart, he hated school. Right from the start he didn't get along with Sister Mary Bernice. Jerry was easily distracted, especially with Mary in the class. He was constantly sent to stand in the corner for talking, usually to Jimmy. His only respite was lunch, recess, and music.

The school's music teacher was Sister Peter Andre. She was tall, thin, and had bushy black eyebrows. That's about all Jerry could tell about her since her habit covered everything above her eyebrows and below her neck. Jerry loved to sing, he was very talented and not shy about his talent. Sister Peter Andre wasn't the sweetest person but compared to Sister Mary Bernice she was a saint. Sister Peter Andre was aware of Jerry's talent and asked him if he'd like to sing a solo part in a school Christmas program. He agreed.

It was mid-November when practice started. The two first grade classes were given the song "Do Your Hear What I Hear?" Each class was to learn the song during class music

time. They would then practice with the other class in the gym when the program was put together.

Jerry was asked to come to the front of the classroom and face the students. He was given the lines for the shepherd boy from the third verse. The class sang the first line, “*Said the shepherd boy to the mighty king*”, and then Jerry followed with,

*“Do you know what I know,
in your palace warm, mighty king?
Do you know what I know?”
A Child, a Child shivers in the cold;
let us bring Him silver and gold,
let us bring Him silver and gold.*

His voice was sweet and clear. His phrasing tender. His voice became louder and stronger on the last two lines. As he looked up at the class he saw that Mary was smiling and looking at him. He smiled back.

The rest of the day was uneventful except for Jerry’s time in the corner. The bell rang ending the day and Jerry hurried to the taxi. He sat on the middle seat by the door. Mary sat next to him and a kid named Jerome from the other 1st grade class sat by the opposite door. With all the children accounted for Junior drove the taxi out of the parking lot (which was also the play ground during recess) and up the hill to Long Avenue. He turned right and then on to Stevens Drive.

The taxi stopped at the light at Stevens and Williams Boulevard. When the light turned green, and just as the car was turning left on to Williams, Jerome stood up on the floor in front of the seat and turned to Mary. He threw his arms up in the air and said, “Mary Mitchell, I love you, I love you, I love you!” He leaned back against the door which flew open and he

fell out of the car. Mary and Jerry turned and looked out the back window and saw Jerome rolling on the street. Junior saw him too and quickly pulled over. He opened his door and ran and picked Jerome up.

The car had been moving slowly as it turned the corner and Jerome didn't appear to be hurt too bad, but he was clearly shaken. Junior was shaken too. That day he took Jerome home first. His mom was in their front yard raking leaves when the taxi pulled up. Junior got out and walked Jerome to his mom and explained what had happened as the rest of the passengers looked on. The remaining children were taken home. The next day Junior was replaced by "Gus", another old guy with nice false teeth.

Mary didn't seem to share Jerome's feelings. Jerry was glad Jerome was okay but even happier that he got to sit by Mary. The taxi service was discontinued at the end of the year.

Chapter 4

Time seems to move very slowly, especially when you're young. Year's seem like decades. Your body and your mind mature at an astonishing rate. Your eleventh year of life seems to be one of the best of your life. At eleven most kids still like their parents and their parents still like them. You're old enough to do things without their supervision. Acne is a few years off and though hormones are starting to raise their ugly heads, they're not to the point of teenage raging.

It was the summer of 1960 and Jerry had just turned 11. Never at any time before or since has the Catholic Church had more priests and nuns, more active members, or a Catholic running for President. The country was in the middle of the cold war and Hanford was making plutonium that would make the bombs and warheads that would keep our country safe from our cold war adversary, the U.S.S.R. Other than that if you were 11 years old and living in Richland life was pretty good.

The municipal "Big Pool" was the gathering place for most of the town's preteens on hot summer days in Richland. On Saturdays the Uptown Theater had free movies for anyone under the age of twelve. It was still legal for a kid to make a little money by moving the neighbor's lawns or doing other chores. The lucky boys had Tri-City Herald paper routes and hence a regular income. If you were Catholic you were probably sporting a "Vote for JFK" button. One of the best things was using some of your hard earned money to go to the Rollarena.

The Rollarena was an air-conditioned roller skating rink. Air-conditioning wasn't common for most Richland homes at the time. Escaping the heat when you were 11 in 1960 was wonderful. For about 35 cents you could rent skates and rink

time. You also got do to the Hokey Pokey on skates. There were also contests where you would win a Coke at the snack bar. It was a wonderful way to spend some summer time with kids your age.

Jerry and Jimmy Schroeder were roller skating one day that summer at the Rollarena. They had ridden their bikes there. It was just down the hill from Christ the King on Stevens. Jerry had been fortunate enough to get a paper route. He had saved his money and bought a new Western Flyer English racer bicycle at the Western Auto store in Uptown Richland. Mr. Thompson, the owner gave him a good deal because he was good friends with Jerry's dad. Jerry really wanted a Schwinn Varsity 10 speed which were sold by B. B. & M. sporting goods a few doors down from Western Auto, but they were about twice the money. Money that Jerry, who was a little frugal, wasn't willing to spend.

Jerry's new bike had fenders and head and tail lights. They were powered by a little generator that rubbed a wheel against the rear tire to generate electricity when needed. It also had a book rack that sat above the rear fender.

Jerry and Jimmy had just finished doing the Hokey Pokey, when free skate time started. The rink was crowded and a girl about Jerry's age was bumped by an older boy who didn't even seem to notice what he'd done, he just kept on going. The girl crashed to the floor right in front of Jerry. He awkwardly stopped, just barely missing crashing in to her. He looked down at her, she was crying and looking down at a bloody knee sticking through her ripped pant leg. Jerry asked, "Are you okay?" She looked up at him and smiled through tear soaked eyes, it was Mary.

"Oh, Jerry, it's you. Did you see that boy knock me over?" she asked.

“Yes, what a big jerk, he didn’t even stop to help you. Here let me help you up.”

Jerry helped her up and then over to the chairs and tables by the snack bar. Jimmy skated up to them and seeing what happened grabbed some napkins from the dispenser on the table and handed them to Jerry. He gently wiped the blood from her knee and asked Jimmy to get a wet paper towel from the boys restroom. With the wet towel he cleaned up her knee. “Jimmy, ask the lady at the snack bar if they have a couple of band aids.” Jimmy came back with the band aids and Jerry placed them on the cleaned scrape.

“Thanks for helping me Jerry, it’s so kind of you. I’ve known you since first grade and I think this is the first time I’ve spoken to you.”

Jerry just smile and answered, “Can I give you a ride home?”

She laughed and asked, “But Jerry, you can’t drive.”

“No, but you can sit on the book rack on my bike and I’ll pedal you home.”

She agreed and said she needed to tell her older sister, Bonnie. They returned their skates to the rental booth and with Bonnie’s permission. Jerry, Mary, and Jimmy rode up Stevens, turned left at the light on Williams the pedaled past the light. As they were heading away from the light Mary said, “Jerry, remember when that Jerome kid fell out of the taxi?”

“Yes, right after he told you that he loved you?”

She laughed and said, “Yes, how could a first grader be in love?”

Jerry just smiled to himself as he pedaled her home.

Chapter 5

Jerry and Jimmy left Mary with her sister Valerie. Her mom was gone but would be back soon. The boys left and returned to their homes. Jerry need to deliver his papers. It was a little easier now that he could use his bike. It was hard for him not to think of Mary. She said she'd know him since first grade and today was the first time she'd spoken to him. Wow, she at least knew who he was.

Their simple meeting at the Rollarena had started something. From then on they were friends. They looked out for each other. As soon as they were able to attend the CYO dances they were there, dancing every dance together. On Sundays at Mass they made every attempt to sit together. In high school they ate lunch together, studied in the library together, and spent as much time together as their parents and schedules would allow.

When Jerry was 16 he quit his paper route and got a job working at Parker's Hardware at the Uptown Shopping Center. Mr. Parker was known to be a bit cantankerous but he was good to Jerry. He taught him a great deal about mechanical things including fixing lawn mowers. It was 1965 and he and Mary sang in the church choir. Music had change greatly in the '60s and so had the church. The second Vatican Council had taken place from 1962 to 1965. The church was changing. English had replaced Latin in the Mass. Revolutionary ideas about religion and relationships were shaking things up. Church members, especially the young were questioning many things taught by the Church. Questions were being asked about doctrine, morality, church authority and young people were looking for answers.

Prior the council the church had not had congregational signing. That began to change in the 1960s. To keep the young

people involved in the church, youth choirs were formed. They even included guitars. These changes provided an opportunity to use the power of music to touch the hearts of church members.

Jerry, as always, had saved some of his money from working at Parker's. His mom and dad had always made sure their kids had transportation. They had let Cheryl use their old car, a 1959 Rambler Classic station wagon. While not the coolest car in town, it was reliable and paid for. Cheryl had left for college at Gonzaga in Spokane so the car was passed down to Jerry. He wanted to buy a guitar so he could help with the youth choir. He drove over to Pasco and found a nice used steel string guitar at a pawn shop for \$50. At the time that was a lot of money but Jerry had a few friends in the church choir who said they'd teach him how to play.

Jerry was a natural and soon mastered many songs by leaning to play chords. He and Mary were often asked to sing duets, not only at church but in the school choir as well. For years afterwards, those that graduated with them from Columbia High School (now Richland High) remembered how well their voices blended.

Most high school romances are fuel by teenage hormones, lust is often confused with love. With Jerry and Mary just the opposite was true. Their deep conviction to the Lord and each other was strong enough to avoid the temptations many of their friends were succumbing to. They decided to marry soon after graduation. That happened on June 29th, 1967. They are married by Father Sweeny in the church rectory. Both sets of parents were there to support them. Jerry was only a year younger than his parents were who had married 24 years earlier.

With Jerry's savings the couple was able to put a down payment on a two-bedroom prefab on the 1400 block of Perkins Avenue, only two blocks from Bob and Dorothy's. The mortgage payments on the balance were \$32 a month. They both enrolled in classes at Columbia Basin College (CBC). As would be expected a baby was soon on the way. The couple announced to the family at Christmas that they would be grandparents in July of 1968.

The pregnancy was uneventful. Mary quit school after the first semester and found employment at the J. C. Penney store at the Uptown. The couple had decided that a growing family needed a newer car. The old Rambler was nearly 10 years old and had over 100,000 miles on it, high mileage for car built in 1958. Jerry continued his classes at CBC studying auto mechanics. He also continued working a Parker's. The couple had saved enough to purchase a 1965 Dodge Coronet station wagon from Graves Dodge in on Avenue "C" in Kennewick. The car had only 15,000 miles on it. Mary's dad, Lloyd Mitchell went with the couple to the dealership. They were able to get a very good deal from Bob Graves, the dealership owner. They left with a car that met their needs for only \$600.

It was good timing, the car was purchased only two weeks before a sweet baby girl was born on July 20th at the original Kadlec Hospital which was built in 1944. Mary and Jerry were both born in the same hospital in 1949. They named their daughter Michelle, the name from the popular Beatles song of the time. They called her "Shelly" for short.

Jerry was a huge Beatles fan and could play most of their songs on his guitar. Their second bedroom had been setup as a nursery. Friends and family had donated a crib, baby changer and a rocking chair. Mary's mother, Ethel helped make curtains and together they had made a lovely yellow quilt. Since there

was no way of telling a baby's gender before birth at the time, yellow was nearly always the color of anything made or purchased before the baby arrived.

Though sweet and beautiful, Shelly suffered from colic and had a difficult time sleeping. Needless to say this was hard on the young couple. On November 22 of that year, the Beatles white album was released. It was a two record set and the album came with the words of all the songs printed on pages between the record jackets. The last song on the album was "Good Night", written by John Lennon and sung by Ringo Starr. Jerry could play anything on his guitar by ear. He learned the song the first evening he had the album. He wrote the words down as he listened to the song over and over.

*Now it's time to say good night
Good night, sleep tight
Now the sun turns out his light
Good night, sleep tight
Dream sweet dreams for me
Dream sweet dreams for you
Close your eyes and I'll close mine
Good night, sleep tight
Now the moon begins to shine
Good night, sleep tight
Dream sweet dreams for me
Dream sweet dreams for you*

With that done he looked in to Shelly 's room. She was fussing as usual. Mary was exhausted, having gotten little sleep for months. She was rocking with the baby in her arms. Jerry grabbed a kitchen chair and his guitar and took it to the room and sat it in front of Mary and Shelly, both girls were crying. He began to play..."Now it's time to say good night"...and continued for the rest of the song. When he finished both the girls were asleep.

He picked up the baby and put her in her crib and covered her with the yellow quilt. He gently picked up Mary and carried her to their bedroom, laid her on the bed and covered her with a blanket. She awoke for a moment and with her eyes still closed said, “I love you honey.”

He kissed her on the cheek and said, “I love you too, more than words can say.” He turned out the light and closed the door. He’d take care of the baby that night, Mary needed some rest.

Chapter 6

Thanksgiving came and went, the O'Briens and Mitchells celebrated together. Shelly was both families' first grandbaby and there were to be no hard feelings over who got to have her for the holiday. Christmas eve was spent with the Mitchell family and Christmas day with the O'Briens. It was a typical Catholic Christmas with both families sitting together at Midnight Mass.

Over the holidays a letter came from the U. S. Government. Mary and Jerry were dreading the letter. It was a draft notice. Jerry was notified to report on January 3rd to the Armed Forces Induction Center in Spokane. If he needed transportation, a bus ticket would be issued from Pasco to the center and back. Mary and Jerry had decided not to take a military college deferment. They felt that serving two years and getting college paid by the GI bill was worth the risk. There was also the benefit of health insurance.

Mary and Jerry drove to the Induction Center. Jerry passed his physical and was ordered to report to back to the center on January 30, 1969. From there he was sent to Fort Ord, California for basic training and then to Fort Jackson, South Carolina for Advanced Individual Training (AIT) as a mechanic. In all he was gone for five months before he was given leave. He returned home to Richland in May.

Mary had taken a part time job back at Penney's. Though their expenses were small, so was Jerry's Army income. The grandmothers took turns watching the baby. By the time Jerry got home she was walking. She didn't know him and was afraid and clung to Mary when she tried to hand her to him. Jerry expected this and knew he could fix things when bedtime came.

Mary took her and laid her in her crib while Jerry fetched his guitar. Shelly watched him come into the room through her crib bars. He sat in the rocking chair, put the guitar on his knee and began singing... Now it's time to say good night... Shelly smiled through the bars and closed her eyes. Jerry finished the song as Mary leaned on the door casing looking on. Again there were tears in her eyes. Jerry picked her up, carried her into the bedroom and turned off the light.

Morning came with a little voice coming from the other room. Momma, momma. Jerry got up and walked into the room. He pointed at himself and said, daddy, daddy. Shelly giggled and said da da. Jerry laughed and picked her up and took her into bed with Mary, the day was spent snuggling and getting reacquainted.

After being home for 10 days it was hard to leave his family, but being drafted and from a patriotic family with veterans on both sides left him little choice. He knew it was his choice but his heart ached as he had to say goodbye to his girls.

Jerry's orders were to serve in Vietnam for the next 18 months. He was assigned to the 124th Transportation Command at Cam Ranh Bay which ran the port and truck transportation units.

Mary drove him to the Pasco airport. She parked the car and the three walked to the terminal. The rest of their families said their goodbyes at home. The kids wanted to be together as a family one last time. Jerry carried Shelly to the gate. Mary clung to his arm and cried. The call was made to board and Mary had to peel Shelly from her daddy. It was so hard to leave his two crying girls, the loves of his life. He turned and walked out of the building and up the rolling stairs to the plane. He turned and waved goodbye. It would be a six months before he returned.

Jerry arrived in Viet Nam 3 days later. He was assigned to a barracks and given an orientation that was standard for new arrivals. The next day he reported to the motor pool service center.

Most soldiers fresh from AIT are considered novices and given few important jobs. Jerry was different. His year studying auto mechanics at CBC and repairing friends' cars had given him a background that was far greater than those with only AIT training. His superiors soon knew they had someone they could count on. He was given jobs and training that most soldiers wouldn't receive for at least six months. He enjoyed his job and like the guys he worked with.

Jerry's mind was always on his girls, he avoided the local bars and the vices associated with them. Finally his leave time arrived and he was on his way home. He was given two weeks and he spent it well. Again It took some time for get reacquainted with Shelly. The old guitar and his repertoire helped. His leave went too fast and it was time to go. This time he felt it would be easier. He would only be gone six months and then be discharged. He and Mary discussed how the GI bill would let him finish college and maybe they could even buy a bigger house with a VA loan.

Mary and Shelly waved goodbye as the Air West prop jet took off to the west. Shelly looked at Mary and said, "Daddy bye bye?"

"Yes honey, but he'll be home soon, don't you worry."

Chapter 7

Time went quickly, especially with regular letters from home and a couple of quick phone calls. There were only two weeks left until he returned home and was discharged. He was working under a big truck fixing it's brakes when the First Sergeant stuck his head under the truck, and in a serious tone said, "O'Brien, the company commander wants to see you in his office."

"Okay Sergeant, can I finish bleeding these brakes first, I'm almost done?"

"No, he said it was important and to come right away."

Jerry crawled out from under the truck and wiped the grease off his hands and face and headed over to the commander's office. It was in an adjacent building with air-conditioning. He thought to himself, "At least I'll get a chance to cool off."

He entered the building and walked down the hall to Major Vaughn's Office. He was surprised to see Captain O'Malley, the Army's Catholic Chaplain assigned to the base sitting in his office as he entered. Major Vaughn was sitting at his desk but stood when Jerry entered. Jerry saluted, the Major returned the salute and told him to sit in the chair across from the priest.

Jerry quickly looked at the two men and became worried, this kind of meeting most often isn't one you look forward to. "What's going on?" he asked.

Father O'Malley answered, "Sergeant O'Brien, I'm so sorry to tell you that there was a terrible accident in your hometown. Your wife was hit broadside on her side of her car and was critically injured. She was rushed to the hospital but was too badly hurt to save."

Jerry paused for a minute and asked, "My wife died, when did this happen?"

The priest answered, "about six hours ago, It was about

5:30 in the evening your time. We've made arrangements for you to call your parents. They're waiting for your call now. " He handed Jerry a paper and said, "Here's the number you need to dial, the operator will patch you through to your parent's home. Take as long as you need, there's a phone in the office next door. I'll wait here for you."

In a fog Jerry walked to the office next door. If anyone was going to be killed it was a soldier in Viet Nam, not the soldier's wife in a safe town like Richland, Washington. This had to be a dream, no a nightmare. Jerry entered the office, sat down, and dialed the number. The operator connected the call to his parents' home. His mother answered. "Oh Jerry," she said, "our Mary is gone."

She began to cry, her sobs made it impossible to talk. She handed the phone to Bob.

"Jerry, Mary is gone, but Shelly is safe, she was with us when it happened." he said.

"Dad, what happened?"

"She had just finished her shift at Penney's. She had walked out to the car and was pulling out of the parking lot when a drunk hit her broadside on the driver's side. A Richland policeman we know, John Morey, was there right away and called an ambulance. He did what he could, she was unconscious, the ambulance arrived in just a few minutes, it came from the fire station on George Washington Way. She was still alive when they took her to the emergency room at Kadlec. Son, they did everything they could but she was too hurt to save. John stayed with her until she was gone. The hospital called Father Sweeny and he went to the hospital and gave her last rites. Then he came to the house with John Morey and they told us what happened."

Jerry paused for a minute and asked, "Dad, did she suffer?"

"No, the doctor told John that she was hit so hard it knocked her out. When can you come home?"

"I don't know, there's a Chaplin... a Priest, waiting for me in the next office. I'll let you know as soon as I know, how's Shelly?"

"She's upset, she knows her mommy was hurt and that's

about all right now. Your mom and Ethel are taking turns caring for her. I guess I need to let you go. Please call me as soon as you know what the Army is going to do... we love you son."

"I will dad, as soon as soon as I know I'll call you. Tell Shelly her daddy loves her and will be home soon. Give mom and Cheryl my love, and please do the same for Lloyd and Ethel. I love you too dad, goodbye."

"Goodbye son, hurry home."

The call ended and Jerry returned to the commander's office. Major Vaughn asked what he could do to help.

"Get me home as soon as possible." Jerry answered.

The Major told him he'd already spoken with the base commander. "Since you're only two weeks away from discharge we're going to process you now and send you home tomorrow, that way Uncle Sam will pay for your ticket. You should be home in two days. "

Jerry thanked him and asked if he could make another call and let his parents know what was going on. The Major agreed and told him to use the same phone and number again. "You'll probably want to call one more time after that to give them your flight schedule. Is there anything else we can do to help you?"

"Not at this time, thank you for your kindness." He turned to the priest and asked him to pray for his family. "This is going to be rough on all of us, my Mary was one in a million," he said.

The priest told him he already had and would continue for some time.

Jerry returned to the service center and told his coworkers what had happened. He took the framed photo of Mary and Shelly from his work station, gathered his other personal belongings and returned to the barracks. That night was the longest night of his life.

Two days later he returned home. His parents had brought Shelly to the airport to meet him. It was a bitter-sweet reunion. That night and he and Shelly stayed with his parents. The next

day he went to Einan's Funeral Home on Williams across from the old cemetery. They had done a good job making her look good. Her beautiful face wasn't hurt in the accident. His thoughts went back to first grade, then to the Rollarena, and then to their first kiss under the Christ the King School stairs after a CYO dance in the school gym. He thought of their marriage and the birth of Shelly. Oh how he loved her, his heart was breaking.

Two days later Mary's funeral was held at Christ the King Church. There was standing room only. She was buried at the new cemetery on Swift just across from the bypass highway. The family had pitched together to buy two plots and a double headstone. Jerry was the last to leave, but not until he could quit crying.

Chapter 8

As much as it could, life returned to normal. Jerry decided to stay at the prefab, it was where he felt closest to Mary. Shelly was only two and a half and only understood a little of what had happened. Cheryl helped Jerry take care of Mary's things. Her wedding ring, and some other personal things were put away for Shelly when she was older.

Jerry got a job as a mechanic at the Bell Bangert Ford dealership on the corner of Lee and Stevens. Shelly's grandmothers, Dorothy and Ethel took turns watching her while Jerry was at work. It was obvious to the family that Jerry might never remarry. Who could ever replace the girl he had loved since he was six years old?

Shelly was comforted by Jerry playing the guitar. He often sang her to sleep while playing "Good Night." For fun he would play her "Michelle." Other songs were often played and they would sing together. As she grew and had friends over there were funny, sing-along songs played as well.

Jerry had decided he needed to fill the role of both mom and dad. With the help of his mom and sister he learned to cook, sew, and do other tasks as required. Their little house was cozy and inviting. It was the gathering place for Shelly's many friends.

Like his mother, Jerry enjoyed gardening. The little house was surrounded summer and spring with flowers and other ornamental plants. The little vegetable garden produced a bounty that Jerry shared with some of the older neighbors who used to buy produce from Cheryl and him when they were kids. Shelly loved to help outside. Eating cherry tomatoes warmed by the summer sun was one of her favorite things to do.

Like her parents she attended Christ the King School. Most of the nuns were long gone and had been replaced by lay teachers. Kindergarten was added and grass was planted on the playground below the parking lot. All in all it was a much friendlier place. The old church was replaced with a much

nicer and larger one in 1981. Parents were encourage to be involved as needed. Jerry coached Shelly's basketball and soccer teams.

The students still played on the asphalt parking lot. One day while running at recess on the blacktop, Shelly tripped and skinned her knees and split open her pant legs. Jerry's sewing skills were put to use fixing her pants with some heart shaped patches made from some girly fabric scraps Cheryl had given him. Skinned knees and split pant legs reminded him of the first time he and Mary had actually talked with each other when she skinned her knees at the Rollarena.

While most young girls would have been mortified having to wear patched pants to school in the '70s, Shelly was known for having a cool dad that could take something plain and make it a fashion statement.

When Shelly was in the eighth grade she decided to enter the school talent contest. Her dad had been teaching her to play some simple songs on the old guitar. She wanted to play something special so Jerry and her got out his Beatles songbooks and he let her pick which one she want to perform. After reading the lyrics of many of them and remembering hearing them often on their stereo, she chose "In My Life."

*There are places I remember
All my life though some have changed
Some forever not for better
Some have gone and some remain
All these places have their moments
With lovers and friends I still can recall
Some are dead and some are living
In my life I've loved them all
But of all these friends and lovers
There is no one compares with you
And these memories lose their meaning
When I think of love as something new
Though I know I'll never lose affection
For people and things that went before*

*I know I'll often stop and think about them
In my life I love you more
Though I know I'll never lose affection
For people and things that went before
I know I'll often stop and think about them
In my life I love you more
In my life I love you more*

It was one of Jerry's favorites for obvious reasons. He told her he had the Beatles' recording but she might like to hear the Judy Collins version which was recorded in 1966. It had more of a folk song feel and with Shelly's sweet soprano voice it might work better. He put the record on the turn table and they both listened.

"I think this one will be the best version." She said. Jerry nodded his agreement and they began to work on the song. As Shelly worked on mastering the chords and strumming patterns she thought of her mother. She would have listened to this song in high school she thought. She had only a few memories of her, mostly from the songs she would play to her when her dad was away. She knew all about her though from the family stories. From looking at the family photos she could see she resembled her greatly.

The talent contest was held the week before Thanksgiving. It was one of the school's most popular events. The student participants were asked to arrive an hour early. Jerry drove the few blocks from Perkins over to the school on Long Avenue and parked in the lot on the school's lower level. He told Shelly to go up the stairs to the gym and he'd be up a little later. She gave him a hug and with the guitar ran over to the stair door by the cafeteria. He watched the door close and then got out of the car.

He stood on the blacktop where he and Mary had played as kids. He looked over at the door to Sister Mary Bernice's old classroom and saw the light was on. It was cold, he put his hands in his coat pockets and walked over to the room and looked through the windows. School had been out for several

hours and the classroom was empty except for the custodian who was emptying the trash cans. He tapped on the window with a knuckle and the woman came and opened the door. She recognized him and said hello.

“Hi Judy, I just dropped Shelly off for the talent contest. I’ve got a little time to kill so I thought it would be fun to take a look at my old classroom. “

“Help yourself Jerry, I’m through here so just turn the lights out and pull the door shut when you leave.”

He told her he would and she left. He walked over to the corner where he had spent so many hours. He traced the mortar seams between the bricks with his finger like he did when he was banished there so often as a six year old. He looked over toward the window where Mary used to sit. He remembered the time when Sister Mary Bernice became angry at her for asking several times if she could go to the lavatory.

The nun lost her patience and picked her up and shook her. She slammed her down in her chair in a fit of anger. He then watched Mary start sobbing while she wet her pants. He only wished it was him that was sitting there, he would have taken her place.

He walked over to the door and switched off the lights and left, pulling the door shut behind him. He headed up to the gym. The old wooden bleachers had been pulled out and chairs were set up on the gym floor. The judges sat at a table near the end of the bleachers by the stage. He sat on the top row of the bleachers, he wanted to make sure he had a good view of his little girl.

Chapter 9

The gym was packed with parents, grandparents and other friends and relatives. Jerry looked toward the door and saw his parents arrive with Cheryl and her husband and the Mitchells. They looked up and saw him sitting on the bleachers and walked over and asked him to join them on the folding chairs. He smiled and thanked them but told them to go ahead, he was up there to get a better view.

The talent show was organized by grades. The kindergarteners were first and then the contest progressed through the grades. The eighth graders were last. All in all there were about 30 participants. There were students playing instruments, there were tap dancers, there were magic tricks, there were lots of vocalists, most singing popular songs of the late '70s and early '80s.

It was nearly 20 years earlier when he, Jimmy Schroeder, and Mary had sung "If I Had a Hammer", a Pete Seeger song made popular by Peter, Paul & Mary. Since none of them played an instrument, Jimmy's older sister Yvonne, a Junior at Columbia High School came and played the piano for them. They won first place.

The contest began. The talent was fine, some participants were better than others as was to be expected. You could hear comments being made from those in the audience. Finally the time for the eighth-graders arrived. There were four competing. The first three were well received by the audience. Mary was the last. The MC announced her as a stage hand set a high stool in front of two microphones, one for her voice and one for the guitar. The lights had been dimmed and a spot light illuminated her.

Shelley walked to the stool, into the light, and sat down. She adjusted the microphones, looked up and said, "Hello, I would like to dedicate this song to my dad, he's the one who taught me to play it." As she started a hush came over the audience. Her voice was strong and sweet, the guitar playing good, and she looked beautiful.

*“ There are places I remember
All my life though some have changed...*

Many knew her story and the song tugged at their heart strings.

*... Though I know I'll never lose affection
For people and things that went before
I know I'll often stop and think about them
In my life I love you more*

In my life I love you more”

As she finished she paused and looked to her father on the top row of the bleachers and said, “I love you Daddy.”

The audience stood and the applause filled the gym. There were few dry eyes that November evening in the Christ the King gym.

The talent contest of 1981 would long be remembered for the graceful and loving performance of Shelly O'Brien.

Chapter 10

Shelly's high school years followed. Jerry was now in charge of the service department of Lorne Bangert Ford on Fowler Street at the Richland Wye. He was making good money but as usual, he was saving for his daughter's college expenses and the two continued to live in the little two bedroom prefab.

As with most high school students, Shelly's days were full with her studies, extracurricular activities, and church programs. She was dating some but no one serious. Her vocal talents were well known and she was often asked to sing at weddings and other special occasions. When graduation came she was honored for her academic and music achievements by being asked to sing at commencement.

Graduation was held in the Richland High Gym. The school's name had been changed in 1982 when Shelly was a freshman. The day was as expected with the usual speeches by the school board president, principal, and valedictorian. When they had finished the principal introduced Shelly. She had the old guitar strapped around her neck and stood at the microphone. "My song is one that my father taught me many years ago. As many of you know, my dad raised me by himself. My mother was killed by a drunk driver when I was two. I pray that this day will be one of joy and celebration. I pray that none of you will ruin it by losing your life or taking any others' lives by indulging in irresponsible behavior.

My song for you is "*I'll follow the Sun*" by the Beatles. The audience went wild as she began.

*One day you'll look to see I've gone
For tomorrow may rain, so I'll follow the sun
Some day you'll know I was the one
But tomorrow may rain, so I'll follow the sun*

*And now the time has come
And so my love I must go
And though I lose a friend
In the end you will know, oooh*

*One day you'll find that I have gone
But tomorrow may rain, so I'll follow the sun*

*Yea, tomorrow may rain, so I'll follow the sun
And now the time has come
And so my love I must go
And though I lose a friend
In the end you'll know, oooh*

*One day you'll find that I have gone
But tomorrow may rain, so I'll follow the sun*

When she had finished she raised her hands in the air and then blew the class kisses. The principal had to stop the applause so the graduation could finish. Long after the speeches were forgotten her class members Jerry knew they would remember her words and her song.

That summer was short. Shelly was getting ready to attend school at Washington State University. She had been awarded a scholarship to study music. Jerry bought her a new 1986 Mustang. In September he helped her pack her things in the car. Her grandparents were there to see her off when she left for school. She had arranged to share an apartment with some friends from school. When she arrived she unloaded her things, starting with the back seat. She then returned to unload the trunk. She opened the lid and there was a brand new guitar case. She open it and there was the old guitar with a note taped to it. "Take good care of her, she helped me court your mother, Love Dad."

She lifted the instrument from its case and underneath it was Jerry's old, worn Beatles song book.

She smile and thought of him all alone in his little house without his beloved guitar. "How could anyone have a better dad?" she thought.

She traveled home often to spend time with him and her aging grandparents. She loved school but missed her family.

Right before Christmas of her senior year she called home and asked her dad if she could bring a friend home for the holiday. Jerry answered, "What's his name?"

"Oh dad, you know me so well, it's Ryan Kelly, you'll love him."

"Is he Irish?"

"Yes."

"Is he Catholic?"

"Of course, I met him at church."

"Does he drink?"

"Not anymore."

"Where's he from?"

"Spokane."

"Does he love you as much as I do?"

"Yes."

“Impossible, but bring him home anyway.”

“Thanks, dad, see you next week, love you.” She hung up and Jerry called his parents and told them the news.

“Christmas was a jolly time. The family loved Ryan and the couple announced they were to be married after graduation in June. Shelly had already been offered a job at Kennewick High teaching music and coaching basketball. Ryan landed a job at Hanford High and would be teaching math and coaching wrestling.

The wedding went off as planned. The couple rented an apartment near Gage Boulevard and Leslie Road in Richland. They both went to work teaching the August of 1990.

Chapter 11

Times flies, especially when you're older. It's a thing about relativity, a year when you're ten is one tenth of your life. A year when you're 50 is one fiftieth of your life. You're in your 20s and one day you blink and you're in your 40s. Looking back you understand the concept. Looking forward you don't have a clue.

Before they knew it Shelly and Ryan were in their 40s with two sons, Tyson, 20, and attending CBC and Seth, 18 and a senior at RHS. The caboose was a 14 year old daughter named Mary who was an 8th grader at Christ the King.

Life was hectic. Especially balancing family and work. It was 2014 and of the grandparents only Grandma Dorothy was still living. She was 90 and though her mind was good she was quite frail. She was living with Cheryl and her husband Larry in North Richland.

Shelly and Ryan were living with the three kids in a nice home near the Meadow Springs golf course. Jerry was still living in the prefab on Perkins. He was 65 and planning on retiring after the winter holidays.

Jerry was just as good and grandfather as he was a father. His grand children adored him. He taught them how to garden and to play the guitar.

In early November he was working late at the dealership on Fowler. He had on his dark-blue Ford jacket and decided to walk across the street to Zips Drive-in. It was dark and was drizzling rain. The street light was out where he tried to cross the street. His hearing was failing and his bifocals were wet from the rain. A car turned off Columbia Center Boulevard. It was driven by a young woman and was speeding. She was

talking on her cell phone and didn't see Jerry crossing the street. He was hit and thrown over the top of the car. The employees at Zips heard the crash and called 911. A Richland police care arrived moments later and an ambulance a few minutes later. Jerry was taken to the Kadlec Emergency Department.

The police notified the family. Jerry was stabilized, both his legs were broken as well as his back. His internal organs were severely damaged. The doctors did what they could but things didn't look good. Cheryl and Larry arrived first. They were shocked to see him like this. Shelly and Ryan arrived next. The doctor arrived and asked to speak with them in the little chapel by the entrance. "I'm afraid the situation is bleak. We don't expect him to make it through the night. We'll transfer him to a intensive care unit (ICU) room soon. We can only let one of you be with him at a time. The family worked out a schedule. Cheryl would stay for the first two hours, then Shelly, and then Ryan, they'd see what was needed after that.

By the time Jerry was transferred to the ICU it was nearly 11:00 p.m. Cheryl stayed and the rest went home to break the news to their families. At 1:00 a.m. Shelly arrived. "Has there been any change?" She asked.

"No, they keep checking his vitals but so far he hasn't regained consciousness."

"Cheryl, can you want here for a minute, I have to get something from my car."

"Sure."

Shelly retuned a few minutes later with the old guitar. "I just thought it might help."

Cheryl smiled and gave her a hug and left. Shelly entered

the room, It was separated from the other ICU rooms by glass walls. The nurse let her in and closed the door. Jerry was hooked up to various drip lines and monitors. One of them showed his heart was still beating. She whispered, “Dad?” There was no reaction.

She bent down and opened the beat up guitar case and removed the instrument. She sat down and put in on her knee and began to play and softly sing...

*Now it's time to say good night
Good night, sleep tight
Now the sun turns out his light
Good night, sleep tight
Dream sweet dreams for me...*

Jerry opened his eyes, looked at her and smiled. She took his hand in hers and he squeezed it. He looked at her again, smiled once more and closed his eyes. The heart monitor stopped beeping and the nurse rushed in. She felt his pulse and checked his eyes. “I’m afraid he’s gone.” She looked and Shelly and said, “Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m okay. He’s not alone, he’s with my mom, it’s where he always wanted to be.”

She called Cheryl and told her he had passed and asked her to tell the rest of the family.

“I will, and then I’ll come down there to be with you.”

“Thanks, I could use a good auntie hug right now.”

She picked up the guitar and began to play, the tears make it hard to sing, but she did her best. Her sweet voice sang one of her father’s favorites...

*Blackbird singing in the dead of night
Take these broken wings and learn to fly
All your life
You were only waiting for this moment to arise
Blackbird singing in the dead of night
Take these sunken eyes and learn to see
All your life
You were only waiting for this moment to be free
Blackbird fly
Blackbird fly
Into the light of the dark black night*

Cheryl arrived about 30 minutes later. It was cold and she was wearing a warm coat. She gave Shelly a hug and reached into her pocket and pulled out a medal with a ribbon on it and handed it to her.

“What’s this?” she asked?

“My brother told me that if anything should happen to him that I was to give this to you. He said you’d understand.”

Shelly took the medallion and read the inscription;

*“First Place
Talent Contest
Christ the King School
1962”*

She understood.

-The End-

