

Good New from the Bullpen Café

Genre: Drama...Based on the Novel By Robert Ringham

Logline: Sometimes the road less traveled is the only road to travel

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Charlie Finstune is a recent college graduate who comes from a long line of attorneys and is planning on attending Harvard Law School in the fall. But upon the death of his Uncle Roy—a little known member of the family and the owner of a small town café in Bullpen, Minnesota—Charlie decides to take a year off and run his uncle's café and blog about his experiences. So who was his uncle? And why had he chosen to give up on a promising law career of his own to run a small town café? Charlie Finstune whether he knows it or not.....is about to find out.

Deeply rooted in the traditions of law and white-collar suburbia, Charlie is bound to follow in his family's footsteps. But when his Uncle Roy dies shortly before his college graduation, Charlie (who has been accepted at Harvard Law School in the fall) decides to run the café against the wishes of his parents and see for himself what life is like on the other side of the tracks.

With help from the Small Business Administration, Charlie is determined to franchise his new 'retro' café idea, make millions and retire early. But he quickly comes to realize that the town wants the same old café they have had for years including the dented malt maker, the Formica orange countertops, the toy train that runs around the track above the door, the smiling moose that is mounted on the wall, the coffee cup hall of fame, and a toothless old piano. Like a successful entrepreneur, Charlie quickly discovers that it's best to leave a good thing alone.

In need of a cook, he comes upon a former convict by the name of Jerome Boatman, a Black man who was imprisoned in one of the local jails after coming up from Louisiana shortly after Hurricane Katrina. His only experience is that he cooked for the prison; and despite his own judgment, Charlie hires him only to find out that Jerome's taste for hot and spicy Cajun food stands out in the all white Scandinavian community of Bullpen almost as much as the color of his skin. While singing all four verses of each hymn during the Sunday services at the local Lutheran church, Jerome begins to add just the spice of life that makes the bland community of Bullpen take notice---especially when he sings just a half note off key.

Soon Charlie finds himself engulfed with the town's cast of often quirky characters: the studious and former school teacher Slater Gray who often slips into the teacher/protégé mode with the patrons of the café; the humble 85 year old Homer Robertson—the old most eligible bachelor in Bullpen; Maynard--the retired Postman and Millie his colorful wife; the quick witted retired Vietnam veteran by the name of George and his tabloid entourage known as "The Boys"; Lenny and his

wife LuAnn--the steady pillars among the local farming community; Miss Maddie--the wise old sage who mentors Charlie in the ways of life; and the crafty Mrs. Sherburne--the determined Sunday School superintendent whose always on the look out for fresh blood to teach the Sunday school.

Charlie's blog, called "*News from the Bullpen Café*", is structured to make the reader of the novel feel like they are a fellow blogger themselves. It describes his own observations about life and his experiences from the small, predominantly Scandinavian community: teaching 1st and 2nd grade Sunday school; making Hush puppy pancakes; preparing lutefisk dinners, organizing Bullpen Days --Bullpen's annual summer festival, helping with the community harvest, shooting his first 'deer' during the hunting season in November, directing the annual Christmas play, and witnessing first hand the sinking of the USS Chevy as it breaks through the ice while attempting to recover an old ice fishing house. As time passes, his blog grows with readers writing in--much like an interactive diary--- that soon has a direct affect upon the outcome of the story.

As his relationship with his former girlfriend in college dissolves after her engagement to an Italian while visiting her grandparents in Italy--Mary, a friend from Charlie's elementary school days who had always had a crush on him, begins to follow him anonymously on his blog site and is known as 'Mary from New York'. Mary's parents had died in a car crash years ago and she moved to New York to live with her grandparents after the fourth grade.

When Mary pays an anonymous visit to 'Bullpen Days' late that summer, she sees Charlie first hand. When Charlie asks her if he knows her, her fear of being discovered gets the best of her and she quickly departs. Months later, when his high school friend by the name of Tim tells Charlie that he has been following his blog and that is growing exponentially, Charlie asks him about the status of anyone he has been keeping up with since their schools days. Tim suddenly realizes that 'Mary from New York' is the same Mary from their elementary school days. Now exposed, Mary and Charlie's relationship takes a new direction and begins to grow.

We also begin to see bits and pieces into his uncle's apparently simple and unassuming life and how important and essential he really was to the fabric of the community. But why he had given up a promising law career to come and own the small town café, still remained a mystery to Charlie until he discovers from Lenny and Luann that his uncle had met and married Suzanne—a waitress at the café—years ago. He met her after getting lost on the highway, but soon found in her the love of his life.

They were married shortly afterwards, much to the dismay of Charlie's own grandfather, an attorney who had hoped all his sons would have followed in his footsteps. Nine months later, both Suzanne and their daughter died in childbirth—something Charlie knew nothing about since his uncle was a taboo subject at home. From his own aunt Katie--his mother's sister--he discovers at Christmas on his

return home to North Cedar (a prestigious suburb of St Paul), that his own mother had loved Roy and was hoping he would propose to her some day.

He never did.

Like Miss Havisham in the book *Great Expectations*, Charlie's Mother was devastated when she heard the news he would be marrying a simple waitress from Bullpen. An aspiring attorney like Uncle Roy, she turned and married Roy's brother—Charlie's father—an aspiring attorney himself who had always loved her.

Determined to have her son Charlie attend Harvard in the fall like his older brother Karl, Charlie's mother is a nagging reminder of what he should and could be in life—something far greater than merely an owner of a small town café. Things come to a head at Karl's graduation in Boston when Charlie tells his family that he will not be attending Harvard Law School in the fall. He will marry 'Mary from New York' and remain in Bullpen--much to the dismay of his parents. What follows, is the last 17 pages of the novel.

June 5 . . . Boston

We arrived at Logan International Airport in Boston the morning of June 5, rented a car, and checked into the Charles Hotel later that morning. My mother had reserved connecting rooms at the hotel months ago. I had my own room with a double bed.

Class Day ceremonies started at 2:30 on Holmes in front of Langdell Library, with the reception following at Jarvis Field, behind Hauser Hall, at 4:00 pm. We were to meet Karl at noon in front of the Langdell Law Library prior to the Class Day program. Since it was a nice day and the Charles Hotel was only a few blocks away, my father wanted to walk. My mother disagreed, so we drove the car and parked a few blocks from the Langdell Law Library.

Shortly thereafter, we met Karl. My mother rushed to greet him. She was beaming with delight as she continued to hug her oldest son.

"My god, Karl," she kept saying, "how proud I am of you."

My father also seemed to beam with a quiet dignity as he embraced him, then pushed him back with outstretched arms, as if trying to get a better perspective of his own son. I, too, reached out and shook Karl's hand. I sensed a change in Karl. It was a self-assuredness that bordered on arrogance. I could see it in his eyes. It was more than a quiet confidence that projected from his demeanor that afternoon, and it startled me. As we stood there on the open field before the podium, a few of his classmates came and went, with each one patting him on the back.

Suddenly, Hillary came. When my mother saw her, she could not withhold her affection, hugging her as she would her own daughter. Hillary, too, enjoyed the long embrace, and then my father came and gave her a hug as well. When he was finished, I reached out to shake her hand.

It was then Karl took Hillary into his arms and the two of them turned to face my parents.

“We have something to tell you,” he said. My mother’s face began to glow in anticipation of what would come next. “We are getting married,” announced Karl. My mother let out a shout of joy as she rushed to Hillary and hugged her as tears began to stream down the sides of her face. “Congratulations!” she said over and over again. “I am so proud of you.” My father also reached out and hugged Hillary and then hugged my brother.

Suddenly, I felt like a fifth wheel—an outsider—as I watched the four of them lost in the celebration of their engagement. When the wave of congratulatory accolades had passed, I stepped in to congratulate my brother and his fiancé. I hugged Hilary and shook my brother’s hand.

“I was going to wait to tell you later,” my brother continued, “but I wanted to break the news to you before the program.”

My mother nodded, wiping away the tears on her face as my father reached out to shake Karl’s hand again.

“We’re so proud of the two of you,” my mother said, standing back and looking at the two of them as if for the first time.

Then my father began with a few accolades of his own. When he was finished, my mother got out her camera and started taking photos of the two of them. Then she asked if I could take a picture of the four of them, and I did. I was about ready to put the camera away when Hillary asked that I join them.

Karl then flagged down one of his classmates, and the five of us stood there for a photograph. It was an awkward moment when the camera clicked. The photo showed me standing off to the side and looking like an after-thought— which I was—but the good news is that I was smiling.

Thank God I was smiling.

I don’t remember much about the rest of the day. As my mind began a panoramic view of the school, I began to wonder what life was like at Harvard. I had never been on campus before. I had only seen it from the photos, and it was the only school I had ever considered. I had never set foot on campus, and yet it was to be one of the most important and pivotal decisions of my life. It would propel me into my own future, faster than anything I could ever do (or even think of doing) on my own. It

was the launching pad for countless graduates who were to ascend the final frontiers of law and order. And I wondered what life would be like here . . .

At the reception at Jarvis Field after the ceremony, my mother was in her element. Like a social butterfly, she began to move about from table to table, hobnobbing with faculty, politicians, and what I presumed to be other notable people. My father was doing the same in a more reserved fashion. I sat at the round table enjoying the view and the warm summer sun when suddenly I felt as though I had been transported back to the Delta Queen last summer during my father's fiftieth birthday party.

Only this time I had not drunk any champagne, made a spectacle of myself, or disgraced my family . . . Life was good.

That night we celebrated my brother's wedding engagement with Hillary's parents at the classy Moo Restaurant in Boston. Like my own parents, they too were in their fifties and had been successful with their own careers. Her father was a vice president at one of the local banks in Albany. Her mother was a doctor at one of the clinics. The table conversation centered on each other's careers, achievements, and future opportunities—and of course, the wedding. I was content to watch the tennis ball of polite conversation as it was being lobbed back and forth in the discovery process. I preferred to sit on the sidelines and watch the various serves and volleys, but then the ball drifted into the stands, and I was forced to throw it back onto the court.

"So, Charles," Hillary's mother began, "what do you do?"

All eyes suddenly shifted in my direction. I was under a magnifying glass, and I had better answer thoughtfully.

"I run a local café in the small town of Bullpen, Minnesota," I replied.

"But he will be attending law school this fall," my mother quickly interjected.

"Oh!" came the reply of Hillary's mother. "That's wonderful."

"Yes, it is," agreed my mother, gently guiding the conversation away from her renegade son, hoping this loose cannon would not go off. No . . . far be it from me to say anything stupid. Just keep your mouth shut and smile politely. Let them think you are a delightful young man. Yes, Charles is such a nice young man. Very intelligent and very thoughtful.

I kept smiling like a blinking idiot, nodding politely as the conversation swirled about me for the remainder of the dinner. It was when dessert was being served that Hillary's mother turned to me and asked me how life was in Bullpen. We conversed at length about Small Town USA. It was polite conversation until she asked me what my plans were for the summer—and just like that, it came out.

"I'm getting married in a couple of weeks," I said.

"Really?" she asked.

"Really," I replied.

I had touched upon the taboo subject of the day that we had all carefully avoided on the plane ride from Minneapolis. It was, after all, Karl's day and Karl's moment. Who was I to ruin it? Suddenly all eyes were on me.

"Well, tell me about your fiancée," replied Hillary's mother. "Well," I started, "she is from New York." "What part?" she asked. "Seneca Falls," I answered.

"Oh, yes—that is such a quaint town. The movie *It's a Wonderful Life* was modeled after that town. So what does she do there?"

"She writes for a local paper and does some free lance writing as well," I replied.

"That's wonderful," she continued. "So does she come from a big family?"

"No, her parents died when she was in fourth grade, and she and her brother moved to New York to live with their grandparents."

"Oh, how tragic," she replied.

"Yes," I said.

"So are her grandparents still alive?" she asked.

"No, they both died a few years ago."

"So, it's just she and her brother?" she asked.

"No, she has a three-year-old son."

It was as if a bomb had gone off, and now the repercussions of the blast permeated even the thickest of walls and conversations. As the rubble and dust began to settle, I tried to look through the clearing and assess the collateral damage. It was extensive. Everything got suddenly quiet, and I could see the contortions on my mother's face begin to swell. She had not known about Anders, and I had not told her. It was bad enough that the news came on the heels of Karl's engagement, but it was worse that it came out via a third party conversation that my mother was privy to only by proximity. There was an awkward, uncomfortable moment that followed, and I could sense her anger. As usual, I seemed to have ruined everything.

"Oh," replied Hillary's mother, as if trying to placate the awkward moment as best she could through an act of social etiquette.

I suddenly found myself getting up from the table, and what came out next startled even me: "I'm sorry, but I need to go," I said to her. "I don't belong here."

I then turned to Karl and Hillary. "Congratulations," I told them.

I then turned and walked away—past the hostess and the maître d' and out the front door to the busy sidewalk that lay beyond it.

A few steps down the block I heard my name. "Charles!" my father yelled. I turned around. "Charles!"

I stopped and stared him in the face. I was expecting him to be angry, but he wasn't—and it surprised me.

"Charles," he said at last, "don't go."

"I don't belong here, Dad," I said.

"What do you mean, you don't belong here?"

"I don't belong at Harvard, and I am not sure I belong to my own family."

"Why, that's ridiculous," he said. "You will always be family."

"Will I, Dad?" I asked him. "Will Anders be part of that family, too?"

He simply stood there like a deer caught in the headlights. It seemed as if I had confronted him with the question his legal mind refused to comprehend. He was caught between two answers, and I could see the wheels spinning in his mind. If he said yes, that would incur the wrath of my mother; and if he said no, he would risk losing his son. He chose the politically correct route and refused to answer.

"That's what I thought, Dad," I said at last. I turned and walked away.

"Charles!" he cried out again.

I turned around and stared at him. He was shaking now, looking bewildered. I was waiting for a reply, but there was none, so I turned to walk away again.

"Son, don't go . . . don't . . ."

"What is it that you want, Dad?" I said, turning around. He didn't answer. "Your brother found love in Bullpen, Dad . . . and so did I."

"Don't be ridiculous, son," he stated.

"You never knew your own brother, Dad. He wasn't the crazy uncle you and

Mom always made him out to be. Because he chose to run a different race than you, doesn't make him any less. The irony is that he still loved you. I found a whole file drawer of pictures that he had saved, pictures of you and him when you were younger: trick or treating, Sunday School, summer camps, family vacations—they are all there, Dad, in a file he called "My Brother." People were passing now on both sides of us, but my father simply stared at the sidewalk. There was no rebuttal. There were no more arguments from the counsel and no objections from the bench. It is as though the words have penetrated deep, beyond the veneer of my father's plaintiff-minded heart.

"I hope you can make it to our wedding, Dad." Then I turned and walked away.

He didn't follow me after that, and I never looked back. I just kept walking and walking. I found my way to the Charles River that night and simply stared at the lazy current as it shimmered in the various streetlights, dancing across the tiny ripples. I wondered where the water had come from and where it was heading. Water was always coming from somewhere, as it was always heading somewhere with more water to fill its place, like soldiers filling the ranks of others. It kept pushing its way eastward toward the Boston Harbor where the first insurrection against the tyranny of England had taken place over 230 years ago. I thought about the Boston Tea Party. It was the first demonstration of freedom against an oppressive world power that sought to control and manipulate its colonists for its own personal gain. What would have happened had those men decided not to dump the tea into the Boston Harbor in 1773? Would we still be living under the oppression of another man's tyrannical whims? It was all about control and power and captivity and freedom. Freedom had always come first with a desire—then a declaration, and then a price. It would be eight long years before the colonists would defeat the world's most powerful army—a miracle by anyone's standard. After all, how could a ragtag corps of common, ordinary settlers defeat the largest and most powerful army in the world—apart from divine intervention?

It was a notion that confounded the proud.

I suddenly considered my own freedom and my own declaration of independence that had come from my mouth only a few hours before. Yes, I had declared myself free, but there was an impending confrontation that lay ahead. It would be a battle between two wills. I gathered my courage and approached the hotel. I decided to pack my belongings and take the next flight out of Boston. I would fight my mother on my own terms and on my own soil.

It was later that night when I arrived at the Charles Hotel. I entered my room and started packing. As I was stuffing the last of my clothes into my duffle bag, I heard the key card slide outside my own door. The handle flew open, and I stood face-to-face with my mother.

"Why, you little--"

There was anger in her eyes as she approached me. Then she reached out and slapped my face.

“Why, you little shit!” she shouted. I was taken aback by the blow and recoiled like a spent boxer.

“So, that’s the way you act in court?” I said defiantly. She reached out and tried to slap me again, but I caught her hand. “Not this time, Mother. Don’t you ever try to slap me again, do you hear me?”

“You are an embarrassment, Charles Robert Finstune . . . a total embarrassment. You can’t do anything right. It was your brother’s engagement, for God’s sake, and you ruined it like you do everything else! You have your little kid tirade and then walk away and leave us to pick up all the pieces of your damn little tirade. ‘I don’t belong here. I don’t belong here,’” she said sarcastically. “My God, Charles, where do you belong?”

“Bullpen,” I replied.

“Oh . . . oh, so that’s how you’re going to live the rest of your life, in that rotten little dump of a town? If that’s your choice—then you are right. You don’t belong here, you don’t belong anywhere.”

“If you chose to disown me,” I said, “then that is your choice. But I will not be coming to Harvard, and if that is an embarrassment to you, then that is your problem, not mine.”

“Good grief, Charles,” she countered, “You don’t know what you are saying. Listen to you!”

“And if you refuse to accept Mary and Anders and me, then that’s your choice, not mine.”

“You have always made the wrong choices, Charles. You don’t know how to make the right ones, and now you will regret this for the rest of your life.”

“No,” I replied, “*you* will regret it the rest of your life, Mother.”

“Don’t you dare tell me what I will and will not regret!” she shouted.

“You missed it, Mother. The very nature of who you are as a mother—you missed it. You chose your career over your children, and you will never get that back. You chose to climb the corporate ladder with all its glory and then assigned a nanny to do what you should have done. You missed it, Mother, and you will never get that back.”

She was fidgeting now, clearly nervous. It was as if she was searching desperately

for a defense, some objection to the accusation that was before her, but there was none. It was as if, for once in her life, she could not out-run, out- maneuver, or out-manipulate the truth—and she stood before it naked, without excuse.

“You have an opportunity to make things right with your grandson and your grandchildren,” I continued. “I’m getting married, Mother, and that means you will need to accept us—all of us—because we will be one—Anders and Mary and me. You can choose to be the kind of grandmother that you should be, or you can choose not to. You can choose to continue with your own self-centered lifestyle or to leave behind a legacy of love and affirmation. It’s up to you how you want to be remembered.”

I picked up my duffle bag and walked past her.

“Charles!” she shouted, “you stand here and accuse me with all your self- righteous accusations, but you don’t understand a thing about life.”

I stopped and turned around, staring her in the face.

“What don’t I understand, Mother? What don’t I understand? That you loved Uncle Roy but he refused the lifestyle you chose? Is that what I don’t understand, Mother?”

She bristled. “Who told you that?!”

“That he never wanted to live under that kind of pressure, always trying to be better than someone else. Always trying to get ahead and pushing his way to success so that he could hold his head up among his peers and fellow man? Is that what I don’t understand?”

“Who told you about your uncle!”

“Your sister!” I shouted.

“Well, she was wrong! I was never in love with your uncle.”

“So, how could you not be in love with him if you were hoping to marry him?”

“I never wanted to marry him!”

“That’s a lie!” I shouted.

“Are you going to stand there and accuse me of lying?” she shouted, coming closer now, as if trying to intimidate me with her very presence. But I stood my ground.

“You have been lying to yourself all these years, Mother. You could never admit that it hurt.”

She laughed.

“Why, that is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard! Listen to you! Why, just listen to you! You stand there in your self-righteous little piety and accuse me of something you know nothing about!”

“So, why the anger towards Uncle Roy?” I continued. “Why was it when he did visit us that you were always upset with him? Why didn’t we ever go visit him in Bullpen? And why didn’t you ever tell us that we had an aunt and a cousin?”

She simply stared at me.

“Because it hurt,” I said. “My God, Mother, I had an aunt and a cousin that you never told us about because you didn’t want anything to do with him.”

“That’s not true!” she shouted.

“Because he didn’t choose you!” I shouted. Her countenance suddenly changed. Her face became disfigured and violent, and it scared me.

“Get out of here!” she screamed. “Get out of here!”

Suddenly it was as if I was outside my body looking in, removed from the emotional volley, the pent-up rejection and bitterness that had been stored up for years and was now unleashed in a torrential fury. My mother was beside herself with anger and using words I had never heard from her before. It was as if the devil himself had taken over her very soul. From her mouth spewed a volley of expletives that came with such voracity and force that it frightened me. As she continued to rage on and on, shouting and cursing, a strange sensation came upon me that I had won my case, that I had flushed out the ugly truth— not from an eye-witness perspective, but from personal experiences and hearsay evidence that had triggered the response I was looking for. The truth had hit its mark, and it stung.

As she continued with her emotional tirade, she suddenly looked spent and used and ugly, and that too frightened me. It was the same face I remember as a kid when she tore into my uncle for having taken us sledding behind his truck. She was still screaming for me to get out, but I continued to stand my ground.

And as I did, a certain peace came upon me that I cannot describe. It was as if I was in the eye of a hurricane with chaos and torment swirling all about me—but not on me. How long I stood there against the winds of fury, I don’t know. But suddenly the storm passed, and she fell into a nearby chair, exhausted.

As she sat there pointing at me to get out of the room, compassion suddenly came over me, and I found myself saying words I had not expected.

“But Dad chose you, Mom,” I said. “He chose you because he loved you.” I then

turned and walked out the door.

June 9 . . . Mary's Arrival

Mary came today with Anders, and I picked them up in my uncle's truck at the Minneapolis/St. Paul International Airport. It had been less than a week since I had come home from Boston. The flight that night had been long and exhausting; and looking out the window, all I remembered was seeing the lights of the airport glowing in the distance as we made our final descent. And when our plane touched down, it was as if a great weight had been lifted. And now, seeing Mary and Anders, I felt as if another great weight had been lifted.

I gave Mary a kiss, and then I reached out to shake the little man's hand, but he shrank back beside his mother, so I rubbed the top of his head. Suddenly, a little smile broke across his face, and I felt that I had made connection. I then gave Mary another kiss and threw her luggage in the back of the pickup, and we took off down the road towards Bullpen.

I found myself looking more at Mary than the road on the way home that afternoon. And as we veered back and forth in our own right hand lane, I felt a little like Maynard. But every time I looked at her, she smiled as she continued to stroke Anders' little head.

Mary had told him that I would be his new daddy. He had never seen his real daddy, and I didn't know if that was going to make things easier or harder. God only knows what goes on in the mind of a little child about things like that. All I knew, however, was that I was the new man in his life and I had not even begun to grasp the weight of its responsibility.

For now, all I knew was that the little guy seemed to like me, and for that I was grateful.

When we arrived in Bullpen, it was as if the whole town was out to meet us. The mayor and others came and gave Mary and Anders a hug. All the attention seemed to startle Anders, and he continued to reach for his mother's leg, and she continued to stroke the top of his head. Mary was a great mom, and that was something I had never thought about when dating women. After all, who was thinking about children at a time like that?

Not me.

Later that afternoon, Millie and Maynard had invited us for supper. Afterwards, Melissa, Millie, Maynard, and the pastor sat around the kitchen table thinking through plans about the wedding and the rehearsal. I, however, stayed out of the matter, rehearsing the "I do" part over and over so that I wouldn't mess it up.

It was actually a great time to meet and play with Anders. As quiet as he is, he likes

cars and makes sounds only a truck driver would fully appreciate. I am looking forward to more time with him tomorrow when Millie and Mary go and pick up her wedding dress in Rochester.

It will be a simple wedding. Mary's friend from New York will be coming as her bridesmaid. Jerome will be my best man.

I understand now that a few others of you plan on coming for the main event. There is still some room at Miss Maddie's home, and a few others in town have opened up their homes, as they did on Bullpen Days.

I don't know how many are expected and how many of you will come, but it is an open invitation.

God bless you all. Charlie

June 11 . . . Last Minute Preparations

Jerome is having a hard time getting into his tuxedo. We picked it up today, and he tried it on—and then looked at himself in the mirror.

"My God, I've gotten fat!" he said. "Why, just look at that . . . why, I used to be a 40 waist, an' now look at me. Why, I'm a 42, and even that's tight. Why, I gain any more weight, and you might just as well roll me over in some hog pit."

"No thanks," I told him.

He is busy now up until the wee hours of the night, cooking, preparing, and bagging food for the "main event," as it is called around here. Ever since I told him about the blog site, he is hoping a food critic might come and feature his recipes in one of the *Bon Appetite* magazines.

"I wouldn't count on it," I told him, but that didn't stop him from wishing.

Every night, Mary and I go for long walks, and so do Millie, Maynard, Homer, Jerome, and others. A scene from the movie *The Godfather* keeps coming to mind. Yes, we're a little Italian village now with family and friends walking 50 feet behind the soon-to-be-married couple. At first I thought it was cute, but it's hard to kiss Mary without everyone looking. Maynard is now Mr. Surrogate father protecting his surrogate daughter from his surrogate son-in-law. Lately, however, I have felt more like an outlaw than an in-law. I did ask Mary to sneak away with me in my uncle's truck last night, but when I met Maynard at the door, I realized that it was no longer a secret. He refused to let her go, and we argued for ten minutes until Millie came to the door in her pajamas.

"Talk some sense into Maynard, will you, Millie?" I asked her.

Millie just tapped him on the shoulder and told him to do what a good father should do. And with that, she went back to bed.

Then Maynard shut the door in my face, leaving me on the outside looking in through the peephole.

I banged on the door a few more times, but when the outside light went out, I knew he wasn't going to change his mind.

So, fellow bloggers, I am alone tonight, blogging my last thoughts as an unmarried man.

Good night to all, and to all a good night.

June 12 . . . The Main Event

It was a beautiful morning—warm and sunny. And when I got up, I found that the mayor, Jerome, Homer, Lenny, Slater, George and the Boys, and others were outside setting up the church tables and putting chairs around them. The mayor had gotten permission to extend the reception hall out halfway into the street in front of the café. I had to admit, it looked a little like a French café with a lot of round tables. Melissa and others then put white tablecloths on them, securing them with safety pins to keep them from blowing away. Then Melissa and others put candles on the tables and little chocolate Hershey's Kisses around the candles.

The kitchen smelled great, and there were six serving tables lined up, all covered in a white cloth. It was here that the food would be served with one line going in the door and the other line going out.

Knowing I would not be playing fiddle today, Gary found and paid for a fiddler from Zumbrota would be joining him and the others for the music this afternoon. Gary went all out and had rented a little stage and then set it up off to the side of the café. His stage included an amplifier and four large speakers.

The wedding was at three o'clock, and at about one o'clock Lenny and others shooed me out of the café and told me to get lost.

I did.

I went up to the church and waited for Jerome as some of the early spectators arrived. When he arrived, the two of us sat in the cemetery and listened to the birds.

"Oh, man this is a great day, Charlie. Hear them sparrows just a tweeting' their hearts out? Why, just listen to them their birds. Oh yeah, there ain't nuttin' that beats them tweeters . . . and oh, listen . . . we gots ourself a mourning dove . . . oh yeah, they sure is pretty, too . . ."

He cupped his hands together and then blew on the top of his thumb knuckles, imitating the sound of the dove. When I asked him how to do it, he showed me, but I never did get the knack of making the birdcall. The memory of Jerome, however, blowing through the tops of his thumbs into his cupped hand was an image I will not forget.

At two o'clock we got dressed. Mary had wanted pictures taken before the wedding so that we could then take our time and enjoy the reception afterwards, but I disagreed. I wanted to see her in her wedding dress for the first time when she came down the aisle.

She reluctantly agreed.

As I was getting ready in the first and second grade Sunday school classroom, Mary's brother came and poked his head in the doorway. Tom was his name. He stepped into the room dressed in his military uniform. I saluted him, and he saluted me back, and then I reached out and shook his hand.

"You must be Charlie," he said. "You must be Mary's brother," I replied. "Yes, the military gave me a leave," he said smiling. "Congratulations,

Charlie. Mary is a sweetie." He then reached out and shook my hand. He told me that Mary didn't know he would be coming and then asked where he might find her. "Just down the hall," I replied. "In the fifth and sixth grade classroom." He shook my hand again and then left. Moments later, I heard Mary shouting with joy at her brother's unexpected arrival. I was going to take a peek at the two of them, but I decided not to look.

At ten minutes to three o'clock I could hear music above me in the sanctuary, grinding its way to another gut-wrenching crescendo. Mrs. Swenson—the pinch-hitting, 85-year-old pianist—was behind the wheel of the organ, driving it hard and fast with her own poetic flair. Even though the music was barely audible from the basement, I sensed that she had lost control of the wheel— and the keys to the organ.

It was shortly after that that the pastor came down and told Jerome and me to come up the back stairway near the front closet that Ole Gunderson had built for his fur coat—the same closet I had walked into by mistake that first and dreadful day I set foot inside the church.

Doggone that Ole Gunderson.

As I came up the stairway, the grinding sound of the organ grew louder. I stopped half way, and Jerome almost bumped into me from behind. I turned to him and asked him how I looked.

"Like a man about to get married," he said. I shook his hand in the back stairwell,

and I told him that I loved him.

“Don’t get all gussy on me,” he said. “You got a whole lot of marrying to do.”

Then he pushed me up the steps. When I stepped into the sanctuary, I was overcome with emotion. There were people everywhere—packed in the pews and the side aisles and the balcony upstairs. As I looked about in amazement, I suddenly saw my dad sitting in the front row.

I don’t know why, but when I saw him, tears began to run down the sides of my face. I then went over and hugged him. He, too, had tears in his eyes.

“I love you, son,” he said. “I love you too, Dad,” I replied. I don’t know how long we stood there embracing each other in the sanctuary—seconds, minutes? All I knew was that I loved my dad more than words could say. He then patted me on the back as if to let me go, and I asked him if Mom was coming. He shook his head no, and I nodded to let him know I understood. As I wiped the tears from my eyes, a vocalist began to sing, and when I looked up, I saw her.

It was Mary—in all the splendor of her white wedding gown, as she slowly, gracefully moved towards me with Maynard by her side. People suddenly rose from their pews as she and Maynard continued down the aisle—hand in hand—in rhythm to the song. Behind Mary was her bridesmaid from New York. Behind her was Anders carrying the ring and little Abby McBride, who was dressed in her own little white gown.

When Mary stopped before me, Maynard—looking like the proud, surrogate father he had now become—let go of her hand, did an about-face, and took his seat beside Millie. And suddenly it was just the two of us before the altar.

I don’t remember much of what happened next.

There were words by the pastor—a greeting perhaps. As he spoke to the congregation, it was all I could do not to stare at Mary’s pretty face behind the veil. The congregation then sat down, and just when they did, there was a loud noise that pierced the silence in the back of the sanctuary. A door had opened, and when I turned around to see who it was, I saw her.

It was my mother.

She was standing at the back of the sanctuary, staring down the aisle in awkward silence, looking frazzled and lost and out-of-place, as if wondering what to do next.

A mother of honor should never look lost or out of place or wonder what to do next.

I then reached out and took Mary’s hand and stepped down from the altar. Mary looked bewildered and confused, but as she turned and saw my mother, she began

to cry. We then walked down the aisle together as my mother continued to stand there, looking pitiful, awkward, and lonely—like a little girl at recess who had never been picked. “Pick me,” she seemed to be saying, standing there fumbling with her hands. “Please pick me.”

And we did.

When we reached out to hug her, she began to sob uncontrollably, as if a floodgate of memories, disappointments, and bitterness had suddenly been ripped loose by the hand of God. It was as if all the sins of omission and commission had been wiped clean with the salt of her tears. And suddenly it was as if nothing mattered any more but love—simple, unquestioning, unashamed love.

As we stood there crying in the back of the sanctuary, my dad suddenly joined us. He, too, was crying. I had never seen my dad cry like that before, and I doubted if I would ever see it again. But for that moment—that brief and wonderful moment—the four of us were lost in each other’s arms.

It was a great wedding—a simple, memorable wedding. The reception afterwards was even more so. Gary and the musicians played every kind of bluegrass song under the sun as we went through the food lines, shaking hands and greeting people from all across the country. Truck-driving Pete from New Hampshire came with his wife and his trucking buddies. Far Quart from Arkansas came with fishing buddies and cornered Jerome afterwards about some kind of endorsement. Apparently, he had caught more fish than he was willing to admit using the Stinky Bait. Queen Crab was there and Candlestick with five of her grandchildren. Sweet Tea and other bloggers came, as well as Tim Belcher and most of my frat buddies. Aunt Katie was there, and even 85-year-old Oscar Finstune arrived from Florida with his new girlfriend.

Millie had made her famous lemon cake, and Mary and I cut it together and ate it. We then moved out onto the partitioned dance floor that included half of Main Street. Gary and the musicians then started playing the “Tennessee Waltz.” I reached out and took Mary into my arms, and we began to dance.

“Tennessee Tuxedo!” shouted my first and second graders. “Tennessee Tuxedo is wearing his tuxedo!”

“Yes! And Tennessee Tuxedo is dancing to the “Tennessee Waltz,”” I shouted back.

Then I motioned for everyone to join us. And suddenly, out of the corner of my eye, I saw them. My father got up from the table and took my mother’s hand. She hesitated as if embarrassed, but my father persisted until she joined him out in the middle of the makeshift dance floor. And like a giddy little schoolboy, my father started to laugh and whirl my mother about again and yet again in rhythm to the

music until she too began to laugh. They were a spectacle as they danced well beyond the dance floor and out into the opposite side of the street. And as they continued to dance, a simple, childlike joy overcame the two of them, spilling carelessly over with the fullness of itself like the smell of cherry blossom trees in spring, permeating every imaginable boundary...yes, cherry blossom trees in spring and Pink Prairie and Ole Gunderson's bullpen...Suddenly, everyone stopped and stared at the two of them, then burst into simultaneous applause while my father continued to whirl my mother around again and again and yet again—oblivious to the rest of the world and the traffic that had begun to back up in both directions...

...But the traffic would have to wait. My father and mother were in love.

The Final Blog

When it was all said and done, when the last of the people had left the cafe, Mary and I drove to the top of Thomforde Hill. Still dressed in our wedding attire, I took her into my arms and lifted her up into the back of my uncle's truck and then began typing the final blog with Mary by my side. It suddenly seemed so long ago—light years ago—when I first stood outside the café staring up at the hole in the clouds, and then days later when I began broadcasting *News from the Bullpen Café* to what I thought was an imaginary audience out in cyberspace. Like Apollo 13, what had started out as an all-too-apparent tragedy with a Finstune breaking rank from the long line of family lawyers had ended in one of the Finstune's finest hours.

Houston, do you copy?

Houston . . . Perhaps that was the voice of God that I had heard all along: heaven's command center with a host of angels dispatched to help orchestrate one man's life, like Clarence Oddbody, the clumsy angel from the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*. . . or the engineers who had worked all night to assemble a simple CO2 filter with nothing more than duct tape, cardboard, and a plastic bag—common, household items that saved the lives of three astronauts on board Apollo 13.

But I guess that is what a loving God does best. He takes the common, ordinary things in life to confound the proud. Perhaps that is what my uncle found here. Perhaps that is why he stayed.

As I continued typing, Mary put her arms around me and asked me what I was thinking.

I stopped and looked down at the sleepy little town that was not even found on most state maps. Then I kissed her on the forehead.

"Good News," I replied. "Good News from the Bullpen Café."