In Fertile Soil

A Memoir

*The remarkable story of a man who spent 20 years growing up, 20 years messed up, and 20 years locked up, but he never gave up.*

Lyle Wildes and Joe Cadotte

*“A gripping true tale of a man who is destroyed by modern life, but discovers how to rise from the ashes of his former self. The razor sharp prose of Joe Cadotte cuts straight to the heart,”- Jayson Iwen, author of the award winning memoir, “Six Trips in Two Directions.”*

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First edition

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*Special thanks to Scott E. Vazina*

*and*

*Ed Heizler, Executive Director of Men as Peacemakers*

SECTION ONE

*“Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. They come through you but not from you, And though they are with you, yet they belong not to you. You may give them your love but not your thoughts. For they have their own thoughts. You may house their bodies but not their souls, For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams. You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you. For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday. You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth. The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite, and He bends you with His might that His arrows may go swift and far. -* Khalil Gibran.

A blacktop county road runs 12 miles between Reedsburg and Lime Ridge, Wisconsin through what is considered the “Driftless Area.” While the rest of the state has been reshaped by glaciers over millions of years, the southeastern terrain surrounding the unincorporated village of Lime Ridge remains untouched. The land is spotted with flowers and primeval oak forests winding through limestone hills and jagged sandstone crags.

Two miles east of Lime Ridge, a gravel road crosses a wooden bridge over a waist deep spring. The land rises above the spring where a barn, chicken coup, and a two story, four bedroom house stands on a baseball size field underneath the canopy of steep green hills. Here a young married couple and their two young boys work 80 acres with cows, horses, pigs, chickens, and cultivate every color of vegetable imaginable. In the summer it smells of lilacs, snowball trees, and flower gardens. There are two 40 foot weeping willows next to the house with a moist smell. The house was always shady and the woods smell like rains.

In 1940, Helma Wildes was pregnant while her husband Clelly was working in the fields, mending fences, and fixing machinery. Helma prepared meals, tended the house, and gardened while awaiting their first son, Donnie. Each week she drove an old pickup truck loaded with sacks of corn and oats to the feed mill in Reedsburg. They mixed and ground sacks of grain with minerals so their cows would give more milk.

When their second son Lyle was born in 1945, wounds from the Great Depression were manifesting in different shapes and forms throughout the southeastern Wisconsin community. A U.S. president has not yet emerged out of Lime Ridge, but there were a few from this small village that ended up in prison. At least one was sentenced to life and another to 22 years. Nearly all of the children in the valley were involved in the courts at one time in their lives. There wasn’t something in the air, there was something in the families.

A 60 acre farm across from the Wildes’s competed with them to be the best in the valley. Four others within shouting distance were remnants of tougher times, a cluster of dysfunctional families who didn’t take care of their land.

Less than 1,000 feet from Lyle’s bedroom, a farmer preached the message of Jesus Christ to his cows. By the time the message got through it sounded like random gibberish. Being an aspiring preacher himself, five year old Lyle was convinced the Methodist farmer was not interpreting the word of Christ, but was possessed by an evil spirit.

The unique geography of the area made farming difficult. Soil erosion was rampant through the twists and turns of hills and valleys. Despite a dozen livestock, and an abundance of fruit trees and vegetables, the Wildes seldom got ahead. Since the family relied on their own crops, the boys often went to bed hungry during the winter. Because Helma and Clelly came from nothing, survival was their core value.

When Lyle was five, he believed in a perfect world where everybody goes to heaven and god loves everyone. Since he thought he was going to heaven, death wasn’t a big deal. He chased Christianity but always wondered how god knew all of his thoughts. He was devastated when Helma told him Santa Clause wasn’t real.

Helma made sure Lyle went to church regularly. He began at the Wesley Methodist church in Richland County, 30 miles from Lime Ridge.

Lyle experienced religion for the first time watching people speak in tongues, jump on chairs, howl, and faint. Holy Rollers confused and frightened him so much Helma changed to a less radical Christian community at the Evangelical United Brethren Church in Lime Ridge.

The church changed three times over five years, but Lyle and Helma stayed. When they first attended service it was the Evangelical United Brethren, then it became the United Brethren, and finally merged with the United Methodist Church. As the church changed, the doctrine, principles, and truths did as well. At first, church leaders prohibited dancing, smoking, drinking, and encouraged women to wear long dresses. In the end, its members were allowed to wear earrings, attend dances, chew, smoke, and drink in moderation.

Helma was always searching for some kind of understanding. Every night she would sit up reading the Bible after Clelly went to bed, studying and re-reading courses mailed from the nondenominational Unity Church in Lees Summit, Missouri. At night, Lyle often heard Helma crying and often asked if she was okay. Her response was usually a variation of, “It’s okay, I’m just so grateful for Jesus Christ.” She had integrity and was absolutely driven by what was fair, correct, and appropriate. Helma was intelligent and got straight A’s through high school.

Clelly was admired by the work of his hands. He could figure out how to build a house or a spiral staircase, but couldn’t read a book. He was a stone mason and built chimneys and sidewalks. In 1962, he installed a half mile of curb and gutter in Loganville, Wisconsin. He also helped construct a Catholic church in Richland Center, the county’s second largest city. He was known for building beautiful stone fireplaces. He taught Lyle and Donnie stone masonry before they were high school age. When his sons helped build a fireplace, Clelly could see a difference where each boy had carried the stones. He was a quiet man, but every Saturday he would sit with Lyle and Donnie in the living room and say they were good boys. He

woke up at five in the morning every day and had the family asleep by nine at night. Lyle seldom saw his dad not working during the 16 hours he was awake.

Clelly occasionally enjoyed a few beers. After Lyle was born, he promised to stop drinking and bring his kids ice cream on Saturdays. He carried these promises through until his death in 1980. He believed in a Christian god but was scared of death. The night Clelly died, he said to the man that took him to the hospital, “You know, I’d rather work a really hard day then go through this.”

Helma and Clelly wanted their kids to have all the dreams they never had. Lyle was often told, “If you do the right thing then God will protect you.” Helma also taught them that smoking and drinking was the slippery slope of failure.

Summers were hot filled with mosquitoes, gnats, and berry picking with pails on both sides. They worked from the time they got up in the morning until they went to bed at night. The house always smelled like wood, which they cut by hand and hauled with horses and wagons.

Lyle admired his mothers’ witty intellect and his father’s unflinching diligence. Every day after school he would be the first to the top of the silo to feed down. Each day he tied a string around a series of hay bales so that when it was time, they could be untied and simultaneously fall to the barn floor for the livestock. He ate supper fast and milked cows so Clelly was able to take his time, eat supper, and relax with Helma.

By the time Lyle and Donnie were school age, their parents looked rural enough to draw stares in Madison. Helma was short and muscular from working the land. Clelly was quiet, skinny, tall, and nearly illiterate. The family wore clothes made out of flower bags and miscellaneous fabric. They were all average to homely looking. Lyle had average looks with sky blue Finish eyes.

When he was 16 years old, Lyle set out to increase his church’s congregation. At the time there were around 30 people attending Sunday service. In one summer, Lyle filled the church with more than 100 people on Sundays. During weekend services, he often shared his love for Christ and was outspoken about his religious convictions.

In high school, Lyle was a wrestling anomaly. By his junior year, he was the regional and sectional champion. At 50 wins and zero losses, he competed at the state championship in Madison where he lost his first match. He won another 25 matches the following year, but was again defeated in the state championship.

Six months before graduation Lyle was offered a job at the Reedsburg Bank, 11 miles from Lime Ridge. He sorted checks after school for the bank’s accounting department. Everyone was impressed by Lyle’s hard work ethic. He enjoyed seeing how the bank worked, got to know the names of all the wealthy people in town, and saw how much money they made.

Since Lyle had an outstanding record of two losses and 90 wins, he was offered a scholarship to wrestle at the University of Wisconsin Platteville. He turned it down because he saw his future as a banker. Several weeks after graduating high school Lyle was told he could become a branch manager. Now working full time, he bought a 1957 Ford convertible and a 1947 Harley Davidson motorcycle.

The bank’s annual Christmas party quickly changed his attitude toward developing a life as a banker. The soloist for the United Methodist Church choir was drunk, singing “Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire.” When she was done, Lyle sat down at a long table with around 20 bank employees waiting to feast on steak and ham. The president of the bank, Don Proper, gave a drunken rendition of The Lord’s Prayer. Lyle admired Proper until he smeared the word of god.

“Our father, who ‘art in heaven, hollowed be thy name, thanks for this food and all the great company, ok,” he slurred. “Let’s eat.”

Lyle’s mouth hung open, shocked by such blasphemy. Bankers offered him drinks but he refused. Between Christmas and New Year’s, he saw Proper stumble into work and obscenely slur behind the profit and loss sheet.

“Hey Charley, come here,” Proper said. “Look at how much fucking money this bank makes.”

Convinced they were all living in sin, Lyle went to Proper’s office after New Year’s.

“Mr. Proper, I’m going to have to learn how to tweet like a bird if I’m going to stay in this cage,” Lyle said.

“We don’t want you to quit,” Mr. Proper said. “We’ve invested a lot of money into you. Why don’t you take a two week paid vacation, buy yourself a new car, and get rid of your Ford because that’s not really a banker’s car. You go pick out a car, buy a house, and have them call me. I’ll finance it all for you.”

Lyle took the time off and picked out a canary yellow Corvette from the Reedsburg sales lot. He also looked at a large corner lot house for sale near downtown. Despite offering Lyle a loan that would have paid for everything, Helma convinced him that Proper was trying to fill his life with debt and sin. Before the two weeks were up, Lyle went to Proper’s office.

“I’m not interested in going in debt,” Lyle said. “I’m not interested in being a banker. So I’m quitting today.” He left before Mr. Proper had a chance to say anything. Helma was pleased to see her son quit and encouraged him to pursue an education.

Having been out of academia for two years Lyle attended “Normal School,” in Reedsburg, where he took college prep classes and played softball. During a game, Lyle pitched to a girl who he liked from class. She hit the ball hard and made a run. After the game, Lyle asked her if she wanted a ride on his motorcycle. They went to an A&W root beer stand for a hamburger and fries.

“Glenda, are you going with anyone?”

“No.”

“Would you like to go to a movie with me? ‘The Greatest Story Ever Told’ is playing, with Charlton Heston.”

She looked up at Lyle and smiled, “I’d love to.”

Helma liked Glenda because she got good grades and didn’t smoke or drink. A few months after meeting the young woman, Helma told Glenda she would make a great daughter-in-law. Lyle spent every other weekend with his new girlfriend and was developing a healthy relationship.

When he finished Normal School, he accepted the scholarship to wrestle at the University of Wisconsin Platteville. The first week of the semester, Lyle

realized he was no longer passionate about wrestling. His coach was devastated and took away the scholarship. Confused about what this meant for his future, Lyle was walking into the student center when he saw a short man with a soft, kind voice.

“How’s it going?” the man asked.

“You really want to know?

The man stopped and said, “Of course, what’s on your mind?”

“Well, I can’t figure out what I’m going to do with my life. I quit my banking job, thinking college was the right thing to do. Now they took my scholarship away, I just don’t know what to do anymore.”

“So where are you going?”

“I’m going to drop out,” Lyle said.

The man extended his hand, “I’m Doctor Hood. Would you be interested in attending one of my classes before you leave?”

Lyle looked at the ground and looked at Dr. Hood. “Why not?”

Dr. Hood gave Lyle the room number and pointed out the building.

Lyle walked into class with a flattop haircut, blue jeans, a plaid shirt, and cowboy boots. Most of the other guys in the classroom had long hair and beards. Some of the girls had sleeveless dresses with hair under their

arms and on their legs. Lyle thought, “They must be living in sin and decadence.” As he turned to leave, Dr. Hood walked up the hallway.

“You wanted me to go in that room with all those crazy looking people?” Lyle whispered.

“Everything will be ok.” Dr. Hood smiled. “Just come in.”

Lyle sat at the back of the room scanning the other students in front of him.

“Lyle is here today because he doesn’t know what to do with his life.”

Everybody clapped. A girl turned back and said, “Join the club.”

Dr. Hood captured the attention of the room with his soft, passionate voice. Lyle had never been taught anything outside the realm of Christianity and was captivated by Dr. Hood’s presentation of truth and opinion. Lyle soon made Philosophy his major.

He needed to find a job and heard Weygant’s Appliance was hiring at the edge of Platteville. Lyle was sitting on the steps of the appliance store when a white, 1970 El Camino parked next to the curb. A six foot six inch burly man opened the driver door, smoking a silver tobacco pipe.

“What can I do for you?” the big man asked.

“I’m looking for work,” Lyle said.

“You came to the right place,” the man said walking towards the store. “Most people are looking for a job. I’ve got work for you. What’s your name?”

“Lyle Wildes.”

“Wildes? Bob Weygant.” They shook hands. “You a student?”

“Yep, I go to UW-Platteville.”

“Come in, let’s talk. I have to sit down.”

Bob had sore feet from diabetes. He hobbled, walking on the heels of his shoes.

After Lyle had delivered stoves and refrigerators for a few months, Bob let him stay in a log cabin behind the store and patched it up into a house. With her first two years of college done in Reedsburg, Glenda transferred to Platteville and pursued a degree in elementary education. They married the following summer and moved into Lyle’s newly remodeled house. Bob admired Lyle’s work ethic and planned to offer him partial ownership of the store.

During Lyle’s senior year, Bob bought a two story, 5,000 square foot building that he was going to renovate into a refrigeration school. Since he was slowly losing the ability to walk, he wanted a place to train people to haul and fix appliances for him.

On January 16, 1970 Lyle was up before dawn. After philosophy, he loaded the back of the white El Camino with appliances that needed to be delivered 15 miles south of Platteville.

“Are you sure you don’t want anybody to help you?” Bob asked.

“It’s just a small refrigerator and an electric stove,” Lyle said. “I won’t have any problems with these.”

“Be careful, because when you get back we’re going to Arthur to start remodeling for my refrigeration school. I need you to lay concrete blocks.”

Lyle was nervous because it had been more than five years since he had done any masonry, but there was more work than time and he wasn’t going to let Bob down.

The speed limits in Wisconsin range from 25 mph in town up to 65 on the highway. Lyle was weaving through a snow covered gravel road at more than 60 mph, excited about the job in Arthur. He was thinking about the front door of his parent’s house in Lime Ridge, walking into that warm house, the aroma of an oak fire and baking loaves of bread filling his nostrils.

“Dad, I’m a mason!”

A yellow reflective sign with a black arrow went by in a blur. Lyle set the drum brakes and the El Camino started to float. The hood lined up with a concrete bridge and Lyle locked his arms to the steering wheel. Everything slowed down. The concrete abutment pushed the grill of the El Camino inward, shoving the engine into the cab. Lyle’s head slammed into the vinyl steering wheel at more than 50 mph.

He woke up moments later with his head caught to the steering wheel. Lyle jerked and jerked again, breaking his teeth loose from the hard vinyl wheel. His four front teeth were sticking out of the top of the wheel. He pulled the rearview mirror down, his face ghostly white. Doctors later wondered how his eyes didn’t pop out of their sockets. Lyle’s face was broken from his eye sockets, down his cheeks, and jaw. The rest of his body barely had a scratch.

Thoughts rose to the surface, “I’m not going to be able to lay the bricks up now and I wrecked the car. Bob’s going to really be pissed.” Fear and pain were absent.

The concrete bridge was 20 feet long, two lanes wide, and crossed a frozen creek. If Lyle would’ve missed it on either side, he would’ve went into a snow covered hay field. The car struck so hard, a solid three by one foot slab of concrete was broke off the front of the bridge like someone had sliced a thick wedge from it. A wide load mirror was stuck in the top of the concrete barrier like a knife stabbed into a wall.

Through the windshield, Lyle saw a small farm house in the distance. The house was white, shining on a snow covered hill. There was an old barn behind it that Lyle couldn’t see. The sky was bright grey. The land lightly covered in powdery snow, scattered like beach sand in shallow wavy drifts. In the sun, the temperature was zero. The air was still and dry, like all of the moisture had frozen and fallen to the ground. As Lyle reached to open the door, the entire car shifted to the right. He got out and ran towards the house above the cold horizon. While he was running, the house disappeared. He was standing in front of the El Camino. The house appeared again and he ran towards it. Lyle couldn’t figure out why he couldn’t get to the house. He started running again and didn’t stop. The house appeared again and vanished. Lyle closed his eyes, opened them, and could see the house again. He took off a fourth time but wasn’t getting anywhere. Lyle saw a car coming down the road.

He waved down the full-size rusty green Chevy. It was a middle aged farmer, but not a very successful one. The farmer wasn’t clean and his car was dirty, inside and out. He was skinny and wore a sweat stained red Cargill snapback cap with a short flat brim. He rolled his window down and looked at Lyle. The farmer was looking at something he’d never seen before. Looking at the car, the farmer couldn’t believe Lyle was alive.

“I have to ask you three questions,” Lyle said. “Am I hurt? And if I am, will you take me to the hospital? And why can’t I get to that house?”

“You are hurt,” the farmer said. “And I better take you to the hospital.” He pointed to the ground in front of Lyle. “You can’t get to that house? It looks like you’ve been running in place.”

Lyle was standing in a pattern of crooked circles in the snow. His shirt was soaked with sweat from running. His face was swollen so the farmer couldn’t see Lyle’s ears.

“Get in the car,” the farmer said.

Lyle couldn’t stomach the scenery going by. Things were too busy and he felt the urge to vomit. Squatting down onto the floorboard, the farmer’s voice resonated under the dash.

“What are you doing?” the farmer demanded.

“I just want to sit down here.”

“Get up in the seat, what if we have an accident?”

“I could give a fuck if we had an accident. I’m just going to stay down here.”

“C’mon get up here,” the farmer pulled Lyle from the floorboard by his hair. When he let go of Lyle’s hair, he slid to the floorboard.

When they pulled into the farmer’s driveway, Lyle was fading in and out.

“Where are we?” Lyle asked. “This isn’t the hospital.”

“I don’t want to take you to the hospital. I don’t want to get sued.”

An old woman in the house was sitting in an old, half brown, half white wooden rocking chair with the paint chipping off. She looked like Helma.

“What’s wrong?” What’s going on?” the old woman asked.

“He hit a bridge,” the farmer said.

She got up and set a chair by a small table in the kitchen.

“Why didn’t you take him to the hospital?” The old woman asked but the farmer ignored her.

“We want to know what your name is and we want to know who you work for so we can call them,” the farmer said to Lyle. He turned to the old woman and said, “So I don’t get sued.”

“You don’t need to know my name and you don’t need to know who I work for. Just take me to the fucking hospital or I’m just going to walk home. Am I hurt or what?”

“You are hurt,” the farmer said.

“So then take me to the hospital.”

“We don’t want to take you to the hospital until we know who you are so we don’t get sued,” the farmer repeated.

Lyle looked down and saw his shoes in a small pool of blood.

“Whose blood is that?”

“It’s yours,” the farmer said.

“Am I hurt bad?”

“You are hurt bad son,” the old woman said. “You are hurt very bad. Tell us who you are. We’ve got to get you to a hospital.”

“Alright, my name is Lyle Wildes. I work for Bob Weygant. His phone number is 348-2156.”

Lyle got in the passenger seat of the farmer’s car. After a few minutes, the farmer stopped and picked up another farmer who got in the backseat.

“So what’s going on?”

“This young man hit the bridge out there. I don’t even know why he’s alive.”

Lyle was squatting on the floorboard.

“Get up in the seat,” the farmer demanded.

“I can’t,” Lyle said. “I have to stay here.”

The farmer pulled Lyle up by the hair. Lyle looked at the farmer in the backseat. “I’m going to get sick if I stay up here.”

The famer in the backseat spoke up, “Huh, that’s kind of weird. Let him be down there if he wants to be down there.” Lyle slid down and passed out.

When they pulled up in the hospital parking lot, Lyle woke up, opened the door, and ran all the way to emergency room entrance. He collapsed in a wheelchair surrounded by Glenda, Bob, and two nurses. In a curdled whisper he said, “Ok, I made it.”

Lyle’s face was swollen three times its normal size. His mouth emitted nearly three pints of blood in less than an hour. The last thing he heard was Bob saying, “C’mon. Let’s go. He’s not going to make it.”

He woke up a few hours later and couldn’t move. Glenda was holding Lyle’s right hand, the doctor holding his left.

“I’m sorry Mrs. Wildes, but your husband’s gone.”

Glenda gasped and started to cry. Lyle thought either he had a damn poor doctor or death is a lot different than he expected. Lyle squeezed their hands and tried to speak but his throat was full of blood.

“Doctor, I think he’s still alive,” Glenda said.

“No,” the doctor said. “I’m sorry Mrs. Wildes but it’s just death spasms.”

Lyle squeezed both their hands as tight as he could, raised his knees, and wiggled his torso. The doctor checked the pulse on Lyle’s neck.

“Oh my god,” the doctor said. “He’s still alive.”

When the doctor realized his mistake, he decided Hazel Green Hospital couldn’t handle the extent of Lyle’s injuries. They transported him to Mercy Hospital in Dubuque, Iowa.

The phone rang and a nurse walked in.

“Hi Mrs. Wildes. Yes. This is Lyle’s room. Oh no, you can’t talk to him, he’s in a coma.”

Lyle pulled on the bottom of her blue scrubs, “Give it to me.”

“It’s your mom,” the nurse said.

Lyle put the phone to his ear, “Hello.”

“Lyle?”

“Yes.”

“Are you ok?” Helma asked.

“Yes.”

“What happened?”

“I had an automobile accident.”

“Are you hurt? I just heard on the radio that you’re in critical condition.”

“No. I just have a headache. I hit my head.”

“Are you getting out today?”

“I think so. Either today or tomorrow they’ll let me out.”

“Ok,” Helma said. “When you get out you call me.”

She later heard on the radio that Lyle was still in critical condition. Helma and Clelly packed up their car in Lime Ridge and drove to Dubuque.

Helma opened the door to Lyle’s room and ran to the bed. Clelly froze in the doorway and said, “Oh my god.” He slid into a chair and looked down in silence. Lyle’s entire head was purple. The whites of his eyes were black. Holding Lyle’s hand Helma said, “You little brat, you could’ve died and we couldn’t have said good-bye to you.”

“I’m not going to die.”

“Well you could’ve. Why didn’t you call me?”

“I didn’t think it was that big of deal,” Lyle said.

A few days later he was shot up with a hypodermic needle and everything slowed down. He was put in a gurney and nurses rolled him to a surgical suite. They wheeled Lyle to a room with a sunflower shaped circle of bright lights suspended over an operating table. Lyle caught a glimpse of his dark purple face in the steel fixtures before being blinded by intense light.

“Mr. Wildes, an oral surgeon will be in shortly to work on your jaws.”

Lyle listened to the clicking of shoes approach the operating room. The surgeon walked in and held Lyle’s head in his hands, turning it from side to side.

“Well Lyle, how are you doing?”

“I’m doing good, I just need my teeth fixed.”

The surgeon laughed while running his short fingers across Lyle’s face. Lyle wondered how the surgeon was going to fix his teeth with those short fingers.

“Doc, before you get started can I ask you a couple of questions?”

“Sure.”

“Did you get an A, B, C, or D in this kind of surgery in college?” Lyle asked.

“I got pretty good grades.”

“I didn’t ask pretty good grades, I asked ‘A, B, C, or D?’”

“I got A’s and B’s.”

“Ok, I guess that’s good enough.”

“Lyle, I want you to start counting backwards from 10.”

When Lyle got to seven, a red and white swirl flashed in front of him as he fell into unconsciousness. The surgeon installed thick pins so he could later bind some of the major fractures in his face.

“Lyle I’m going to put these rubber bands around these pins in your jaw. This will hold your jaw in place until it heals. Since your front teeth are broke off, you can insert a straw and suck food through it.”

“What if I get sick?” Lyle asked.

“You won’t get sick.”

“What if I do?”

“Your jaws will open up and you’ll admit your stomach fluids,” the surgeon said.

After the surgeon and the nurses left the room, Lyle felt nervous and sick. He puked with his mouth closed and choked on his own vomit. He pushed the emergency button and pulled the rubber bands from of his mouth. The surgeon came in and Lyle went into a rage.

“You lying son of a bitch!” You told me I would be alright. You tried to kill me and I almost died. I’m not trusting you ever again.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. I’m not trusting you ever again. I want out of this hospital.”

“Cool down, cool down Lyle. I’m really sorry. How about I put weaker ones on and I give you a pair of scissors so you can cut them anytime you want?”

“So you lied?” Lyle asked.

“I didn’t lie. People don’t get sick with those on there. I’ve never had it happen before.”

“You lied to me doc.”

Lyle was enraged being close to death after surviving such a horrific accident. The surgeon handed him a pair of medical scissors and put new rubber bands around the pins in his mouth. A few days later, the surgeon walked in with a small flashlight in his hand.

“Lyle, I want you to come with me.”

“Where are we going?” Lyle asked.

“I just want you to come with me.”

Lyle followed the surgeon out of the room, down the hallway, to a large door. He opened the door and led Lyle into the darkness.

“Lyle, close your eyes. I’m going to turn on the light.”

The surgeon turned on the light and put his hands on Lyle’s shoulders.

“Ok Lyle, I want you to open your eyes very slowly and tell me what you see.”

Shinning black eyes above broken teeth and a crooked smile were looking back at Lyle.

“So what do you think?”

“I like that guy.”

**SECTION TWO**

*“His contractors, who regarded him as the most efficient and capable foreman in their employ previous to his injury, considered the change in his mind so marked that they could not give him his place again. He is fitful, irreverent, indulging at times in the grossest profanity (which was not previously his custom), manifesting but little deference for his fellows, impatient of restraint or advice when it conflicts with his desires, at times pertinaciously obstinate, yet capricious and vacillating, devising many plans for future operation, which are no sooner arranged than they are abandoned in turn for others appearing more feasible. In this regard, his mind was radically changed so decidedly that his friends and acquaintances said he was ‘no longer Gage,’”* – A report published in the bulletin of the Massachusetts Medical Society.

Lyle’s cheek bones, the inside of his mouth, and both eye sockets were fractured. His nose was broken and several segments of his jaw were shattered. Glenda picked him up 10 days after being admitted to Mercy Medical Center. He told her that it would take several years before he would look normal again.

Before the accident they had been living together for nine months and often talked about having kids. After Lyle’s thoughts settled from the chaos of the crash, he decided he wasn’t in love with her anymore and plotted to get a divorce. He went to a small private practice divorce attorney in downtown Platteville. A clean cut, well organized lawyer was going through papers on his desk.

“My wife and I want to file for divorce,” Lyle said. “She’s not here right now, but just get the papers together so we can come back and sign them.”

The young attorney laughed. “You and your wife are coming in to sign divorce papers without an argument?”

“Yes, we will, and when we come in, I don’t want you to say a word. Just have the papers on your desk and we’ll sign them.”

“Boy, I got to see this,” the attorney exclaimed.

“I just want to pay for it today so I can come in and be divorced.” Lyle put $350 cash on the attorney’s desk and walked out. At home, he acted like there wasn’t anything wrong with their relationship.

Bob had towed what was left of the El Camino to the front of the appliance shop, facing the main highway that bypasses Platteville. People driving by slowed down and wondered whether or not the driver had survived. A few customers were in the store asking Bob about the accident when Lyle showed up.

The swelling was down and Lyle’s face was a lighter shade of purple. The whites of his eyes had faded from black to red. His four front teeth were broken and 16 others were chipped. His nose was flattened. With his jaw wired shut, Lyle spoke to a few people gathered around the wreck.

“You know, the doc told me that in order for me to get over my fear of driving I have to get in that car and sit behind the steering wheel one last time.”

Lyle sat down in the driver’s seat of the wrecked car. With a crooked smile he said, “Just like riding the horse that bucked you off.” He pulled his upper lip and put his mouth by the four teeth that were sticking out of the steering wheel. He was proud everyone could see that he was alive.

Vivid dreams and nightmares about the accident made it hard to sleep. In the middle of the night he would sit up in bed holding the White El Camino’s steering wheel and yell, “No!”

It took about a month after the bands were removed for Lyle to be able to open his mouth completely. When he went in to get the rest of his teeth

removed, the oral surgeon had to cut them out because his face was too fragile to pull them.

He sobbed thinking about the long order of surgeries stacked in front him. A couple weeks after his top teeth were cut out, Lyle went back to get his bottom teeth removed. It took months for his mouth to heal enough for dentures to be put in. For months, his diet consisted of baby food.

Lyle went to a plastic surgeon in Dubuque to fix his nose. Since it was shattered from the crash and had calcified, Dr. White would have to do major reconstructive surgery. Workman’s comp wouldn’t normally cover cosmetic surgery, but Dr. White said it was a necessity because bone fragments were making it hard for him to breath.

The operating room was a large office with white walls, white floors, and bright white lights. Dr. White was a clean cut, tall, and handsome man with well-groomed black hair. His nurse had beautiful blue eyes and thin rosy cheeks. She had silky, natural long blond hair. She wore a short white coat with nylons hugging her long legs. Lyle sat in a black vinyl chair bolted to the floor in the middle of the room.

“Lyle, we’re not going to put you under because we’re afraid you’ll drown in your own blood,” Dr. White said. “We’re going to keep you conscious. We want to strap your hands down so you don’t touch your nose during the procedure.”

Black vinyl straps with silver belt buckles hung over the sides of the operating chair. Dr. White fastened the straps around Lyle’s arms. Lyle gave a perplexed look. “We’re also going to strap your legs down so you don’t move your feet,” Dr. White said. “We have to have you sitting still so you don’t move.”

A large strap was fastened around Lyle’s chest. “Lyle, we’re going to lay you back. Everything’s going to be okay. Just take some deep breaths and relax.”

Dr. White tilted Lyle back in the chair. He drew on Lyle’s face with a black marker and strapped his skull to the headrest. “I just don’t want you to be able to move your head.”

Lyle was strapped down so tight he couldn’t move any part of his body. Dr. White reached for a full syringe with a long needle. “We’re going to keep you conscious and I’m going to freeze your face. You may feel a little pain, but it won’t last long.”

Dr. White stuck the needle deep into the front of Lyle’s face. The needle was inserted 10 more times around Lyle’s nose and cheeks. Tears of helplessness and pain streamed down Lyle’s face. The agony lasted about a minute, but it felt like hours.

Dr. White put the needle down. “We’ll just wait a few minutes for it to take effect.”

Lyle’s face was numb as a unique taste formed in the back of his mouth. He was 25 years old. Up to this point he had never smoked, drank, or did any drugs. Helma’s lectures about drugs, alcohol, and the slippery slope of failure dissolved as a tremendous freeing of inhibition swept through Lyle’s body and mind. He looked up at the young, attractive nurse.

“Hey doc, are you married?”

“I am.”

“Ma’am. Nurse. Are you married?”

“I am.”

“Are you married to each other?” Lyle asked.

“No, we’re not,” Dr. White said.

“Are you two having an affair?” Lyle asked.

The nurse slapped him on the shoulder and said, “Mr. Wildes, absolutely not.”

Lyle smiled but his face couldn’t move. His eyes were locked on the beautiful nurse.

“If I was here,” Lyle said. “I would certainly try to.”

Dr. White laughed. “Mr. Wildes, you have got to be quiet. I see what drugs do to you, we may have to tape your mouth shut.”

Lyle quieted down and basked in an uninhibited euphoria. Dr. White cut the sides of Lyle’s nose lose from his face through an incision in the bottom of his nostrils. He placed the chisel on the bridge of Lyle’s nose and said, “Tap. Tap.” The nurse hit the chisel with a small steel hammer. It almost knocked him out.

“What are you doing?” Lyle murmured.

Dr. White didn’t respond and said to his assistant again, “Tap. Tap.”

The hammer came down again and Lyle nearly lost consciousness. Before Lyle could say anything, Dr. White firmly ordered his assistant, “TAP! TAP!” When the hammer came down it felt like he was hit with a 10 pound maul.

“Are you there? Are you there Lyle?” Dr. White had smelling salt under Lyle’s nose. “Lyle, Lyle, are you there?”

Lyle was confused and oriented himself back to the room.

“I’m sorry Lyle but I had to break the top of your nose to correct it,” Dr. White seemed pleased. “The worst is over.”

The incision under Lyle’s nostrils had to be sewn shut. The needle going in and out of his nose gradually became more pronounced as the effects of the drugs faded. Dr. White thought it would hurt Lyle more to inject another shot of cocaine than it would to finish the job. After painfully sewing up the corners of Lyle’s nose, Dr. White filled each sinus cavity with a 27 foot thread of cotton yarn.

Two strips of metal were fastened to Lyle’s face so nothing could touch his nose. It was out of this experience that Lyle later said to himself, “I am going to experience that dentist office taste in the back of my mouth and feel that heavenly mental state again.”

During his transition to “not giving a fuck,” there was never a voice in the back of his mind that said, “Hey wait a minute, I have to get back to when I gave a shit about things.”

Lyle was at home recovering when he heard the sound of an earth mover.

“Glenda, why is an earth mover in the yard?”

“There is no earth mover,” Glenda said. “What are you talking about?”

Glenda went to the window to see if there was anything outside. She walked back to Lyle. “There’s no earth mover outside.”

“Don’t tell me there’s not one out there,” Lyle said. “I can hear it.”

Glenda turned around to walk away and the fridge turned off.

“There it stopped,” Lyle said.

“Oh my god Lyle, that was the refrigerator you heard.”

A couple weeks later, Lyle went back to Dr. White to get the yarn pulled out of his nose. “Ok Lyle, this is going to tickle when I pull this out. You may have an intensified sense of smell for a day or two after this is done.”

“Doc, is it possible the noise of a refrigerator could’ve sounded like an earth mover passing by my window?”

“Yeah that’s possible for what you went through and it could happen again.”

It felt like someone was tickling the inside of Lyle’s sinus cavities as he watched 27 feet of thread being pulled from each nostril. The sensation was intensely funny and he wanted Dr. White to do it again.

“Leave the mask on for the next couple of weeks,” Dr. White said. “Give us a call if you have trouble breathing.”

The next morning Lyle woke up to an intense aroma of grapes. He yelled to Glenda as she passed by their bedroom.

“Get the grapes out of the house,” Lyle said.

She had a perplexed look on her face.

“What are you talking about Lyle?”

“There has to be grapes somewhere in this house. Get them out.”

“There are no grapes in this house Lyle.”

“There has to be, I’m getting sick.”

The smell of grapes was overwhelming. Glenda stood in the doorway looking at Lyle.

“Just get the fucking grapes out of the house. I’m going to puke.”

Glenda walked down the hall, into the kitchen, opened the fridge, and saw the grape Jell-O she had made hours earlier. She went back to the bedroom.

“Oh my god Lyle,” Glenda exclaimed. “I made grape Jell-O this morning.”

“Well get it the fuck out of the house.”

She would have done anything for Lyle. She was with him every day of his recovery and brought him to all of his appointments and surgeries. She made sure all of his needs were taken care of. Despite what Glenda had done for him, Lyle had no feelings for her anymore. He didn’t have feelings for anyone. Lyle felt free from moral restraint. He no longer saw value in responsibility or commitment. As the old world lifted off his shoulders, a new one was forming around him.

With a 3.86 grade point average in his major, Lyle had no trouble being accepted to the Pacific School of Religion at Berkeley. Lyle started to

dislike everyone in his life besides Dr. Hood and saw graduate school as a way out.

He had been working for Weygant’s Appliance for more than three years and by this time, diabetes had cost Bob both feet. A few weeks before Lyle was going to graduate from Platteville, Bob rolled his wheelchair next to him and asked, “Lyle would you consider being a partner with me?”

“I don’t know,” Lyle said. “I haven’t decided.”

“We could even make it Wildes and Weygant Appliance. I’m going to be fading out of the business.”

“I don’t know Bob, I have to think about it.”

Lyle told Glenda that he was going into a partnership with Bob and wanted to expand their business. Lyle told Glenda he needed her to sign some paperwork for property he was buying in Platteville. She agreed and set a day to meet at the attorney’s office downtown.

After a few minutes waiting in his Pontiac GT-37, he saw Glenda skipping down the sidewalk. They joined hands and walked inside. Lyle asked the attorney if the papers were ready to sign. The attorney sat in awe as Glenda and Lyle walked in holding hands. The attorney turned the papers facing them. “I’ll sign them first,” Lyle said.

“Where is the land Lyle?” Glenda asked.

After Lyle finished signing, he turned the papers facing her. “Glenda there is no land. These are our divorce papers. I don’t care if you sign them or not. I am going to live divorced from this moment on.”

She fell back into a chair and as she was crying, the attorney realized what Lyle had done. Lyle glared at the attorney, “I paid you $350. You handle this, I’m done.”

Glenda was sobbing with her head in her hands. “I don’t understand,” she cried. “I just don’t understand.”

He left Glenda sobbing, the attorney looking on in disbelief. A few hours after driving back to his house, the phone rang.

“Hello.”

“So what is going on Lyle?” Helma asked.

“I divorced Glenda today.”

“Why did you want a divorce?”

“Because I don’t like her anymore.”

“You’re not the boy I raised,” Helma sternly said. “I should disown you.”

Lyle hung up the phone and called Donnie.

“Hey bro, where’d you get your vasectomy?” Lyle asked.

“What?”

“I’m going to get a vasectomy because I’m not giving mom any grandkids. She disowned me.”

“Well you won’t have to worry about knocking anybody up,” Donnie Laughed. “It’s on Monona drive in Madison.”

The next morning Lyle walked through the appliance store.

“Where’s Glenda?” Bob asked.

“She’s in Sauk City.”

“Why?”

“I divorced her.”

Bob was sitting in his wheelchair with a saddened, disgusted look on his face. “So she’s not going to be around anymore?”

“No, she’s not going to be around and neither am I. I’m moving to California for graduate school.”

Bob looked down at the floor and smoked his pipe.

Lyle set up an appointment to be interviewed for the vasectomy. The doctor frowned when he saw how young Lyle was. “Why do you want a vasectomy?”

“Cause’ I never want to have any kids.”

“Why not?”

“Because all my friends are having problems with their divorce because they have kids. I don’t want any kids. I’m going to get a vasectomy this

week and I don’t know if I have to pay you more or go somewhere else but I’m getting one.”

“What happens if you meet a beautiful girl and she wants to get married and she wants to have three kids?” The doctor asked. “You have to tell her you can’t have kids before you marry her.”

“I don’t have a problem doing that.”

“What would you say if she said, ‘Then I can’t marry you.’”

“I would say, ‘Next.’”

The doctor put his fist under his chin and frowned. “When’s a good day for you Lyle?”

After the vasectomy, Lyle asked the doctor what the chances were of getting someone pregnant.

“The chances of you getting anyone pregnant are about the same as you getting stampeded by a herd of camels in downtown Madison.”

Lyle drove his Pontiac GT-37 into the bayside town and climbed a hill so steep, the wheels slightly slipped along its pavement. A full view of the San Francisco Bay opened up as he made it to the top of the hill. He moved into an apartment behind the campus library.

Lyle took a biblical studies course with John Otwell, an Old Testament scholar and author of two historical Christian narratives. The more Lyle sat through Otwell’s lectures, the more frustrated he felt toward the Christian god. A couple months into the semester, Otwell was clarifying the meaning of words as they would’ve been written at the time of Christ. Lyle stood up in the middle of the lecture.

“I think this is all just a bunch of shit and I think you’re just wasting my time,” Lyle announced. “Christianity has been jammed down my throat my whole life and I’m sick of it. I don’t even know why I’m in this classroom.”

“What’s your name?” Otwell asked.

“Lyle Wildes.”

“Mr. Wildes, I think you should look somewhere else for what you’re trying to find because I don’t think it’s here at the Pacific School of Religion for you.”

“Does that give me permission to leave?”

“It does.” Otwell said.

Lyle walked to the admissions office and told his advisor that Glenda had just died and he had to go back to Wisconsin for the funeral. Lyle called Dr. Hood.

“Hello?”

“Hi Dr. Hood its Lyle.”

“How’s it going?”

“I dropped out of graduate school.”

“Are you coming back to Wisconsin?”

“I am, I’m really having a difficult time. I can’t focus and I just need to take a break.”

“Are you ok?”

“Yeah I am, I’ll call you when I get back in a week or two.”

“Ok,” Dr. Hood said. “Call me when you get here.”

After a couple months, Dr. Hood called Lyle and told him that a philosophy professor at the University of Wisconsin Richland had a heart attack and needed someone to take his place. Dr. Hood made a recommendation and Lyle was hired as a substitute philosophy instructor at the Richland Center campus.

Lyle took over the philosophy class six weeks into the semester. Teaching the basics to students who weren’t philosophy majors was irritating. Lyle’s disdain for teaching grew as the semester passed.

While he taught in Richland Center, his brother Donnie was setting up mobile homes for the Reedsburg Mobile Home Sales Lot. The owner of the sales lot told Donnie that demand for mobile homes was going to take off. They knew Donnie was a skilled worker and wanted him to deliver mobile

homes. He went to Richland Center to encourage Lyle to get into the mobile home industry. They met at the Richland Center Bowling Alley.

“I’ve already expanded my business into two sales lots,” Donnie said. “How about you and I become partners and work for all the sales lots in Wisconsin.”

“I can’t do it now, I have to finish this semester.”

“Lyle, this business is going to be big. I’m telling you, we can make a fortune by doing this. How much do you make working for the university?”

“Well, I just got my first check. I’ll probably be making around $900 a month.”

“We could make $900 a day. How much longer do you have to teach?”

Lyle paused his approach, holding a swirled bowling ball up to his chest. “It could end any minute.”

The next day, Lyle was lecturing about Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative.

“Think of Kant’s categorical imperative like the Sixth Commandment, “Thou shalt not kill,” Lyle said. “The Sixth Commandment is not based on consequences or outcomes but based on the imperative to not kill anyone. It’s based on reason and not based on outcomes or consequences.”

A male student raised his hand. “So if a stranger has a gun to your wife’s head and says he’s going to kill her, wouldn’t you want to take him out before he kills your wife?”

“No,” Lyle said angrily. “It is not based on consequences or outcomes. It is based on an imperative. You don’t know in fact that he’s going to kill her until it happens. That’s the imperative, that you would have to be god to determine the outcome. Don’t you get it?”

“Professor Wildes that doesn’t make any sense,” a different student said. A few others chimed in.

He turned to the 15 foot chalkboard and calmly broke three sticks of white chalk until they were too small to use. The classroom was silent as Lyle took a fourth piece and wrote on the chalkboard in large letters, “This class has been cancelled due to a lack of interest.”

In a rage he turned around and yelled, “Get out! This class is over. Get out all of you!”

Students were frozen in their seats. Lyle grabbed a three foot ruler and whacked his desk hard as he could. “Get out of here!” A couple girls screamed and everyone ran out of the classroom. He followed them out, throwing pieces of chalk at them as they ran down the hall. “Get out of here!” He went back to the classroom, got his books, and went home.

Lyle stewed about his students, waiting for someone from the school to call. A few hours later there was a knock at the door. A tall woman in her forties wearing a black dress stood in the entrance.

“Yes?”

“You Lyle Wildes?”

“Yep.”

“Boy, do you know how much trouble you have caused me?”

“Don’t ever call me boy,” Lyle slammed the door.

She knocked again and apologized for calling him “boy.”

“Mr. Wildes you have to finish the class, 30 students are counting on the credits. You have to at least finish the semester. There are only three weeks left. You have to give them a grade and then you can leave.”

“Ok, I’ll just flunk them all.”

“You have to give them a fair grade, their futures depend on it,” the woman said.

“Ok, I’ll go back and give them their final exam, and then I’m done.”

The following week, Lyle walked down an empty hall and could hear his classroom full of chatter. Everyone fell silent when he walked in.

“You’re going to do a final paper,” Lyle said. “Pick a philosopher you like. Write what you liked about their philosophy and have it back here the last day of class. We won’t be meeting anymore until then.” No one said a word. “Class is dismissed.”

As Lyle read through their final papers, he came across an essay written by a young woman who apologized for not participating more in class. She went on to say how she loved his teaching style and how his passion for teaching motivated her to change her major to philosophy. Another student wrote how he was saddened by Lyle’s frustration and thanked him for his inspirational teachings. He was surprised by the positive feedback, but unmoved. Lyle’s behavior at UW-Richland Center ended his relationship with the academic community.

In the early 1970’s it took around a week for owners to move in to a newly delivered mobile home. Soon, Lyle and Donnie would have the first

delivery service in the state focused on delivering and setting up a home so that it was ready to move into in one day.

Two years before Lyle and Donnie got started John Wick turned most of Wisconsin’s camper factories into mobile home manufactures. Wick’s first mobile homes were 10 feet wide. As the 10 foot wide homes sold, he produced 12 foot wide mobile homes and 14 foot ones that did even better. Mobile homes were starting to look more like houses and demand went through the roof.

A few days after the semester ended, Lyle bought a beat up 1949 Chevy semi-truck with air brakes. He pulled his first mobile home 89 miles from Marshfield to the Reedsburg Sales Lot. The next day he left Reedsburg at 7:30 in the morning with a 12 by 60 foot home. In less than seven hours he had moved the house 54 miles to Montello and installed stairs to the front door. With new furniture, running water, and electricity, the mobile home was ready to move into by 2:00 p.m. the same day.

The Richland Center sales needed someone to pull houses and asked Lyle if he would deliver a mobile home to Boscobel. Less than a week after setting up the home in Montello, he pulled an even bigger house and had it ready to move into. Lyle set up 10 mobile homes in his first two weeks of business.

While Lyle was pulling houses out of Richland Center, Donnie was making deliveries for sales lots in Madison and Reedsburg. Richland Center had more homes to pull than Lyle could handle so he bought another truck and hired a fulltime worker to pull homes with him. The Housing Mart of Platteville needed someone to make a delivery and asked the Richland Center Housing Mart if they had someone who could do it. They gladly gave Lyle the new gig.

When he expanded to the two sales lots, Donnie saw it as an opportunity to take their businesses to the next level. When Lyle and Donnie consolidated

in 1972, Lyle laughed and said to his brother, “My focus now is going to be on instant gratification, greed, and power.”

Their business expanded well beyond the level Donnie laid out months earlier, but he thought his brother was square since he didn’t drink with any of their customers. Since the mobile home industry was saturated with alcohol, he decided to get drunk before moving to Madison.

One Friday, Lyle dressed up and went to the Richland Center Bowling Alley. He had no idea what to order and sat next to a man in a suit.

“What-aya havin’?” the bar tender asked. Lyle pointed to the short glass of amber liquor the man sitting next to him was holding. “I will have one of those.”

An “Old Fashioned” was set on the bar in front of him, a mixed drink with American whiskey, cherries, sliced oranges, and a lemon. He thought it looked healthy with all of the fruit. Copying the man next to him, Lyle nibbled on an orange slice and sipped the sweet brew. After he drank he drank a second one, he slid off the bar stool and walked to the men’s room. Standing in front of the urinal, Lyle looked at his reflection in the stainless steel pipe and felt alive. He wondered why his parents didn’t want him to enjoy that experience.

A few weeks later on a snowy night, Donnie spotted Lyle in the parking lot of the biggest grocery store in Baraboo. He pulled his 1971 Lincoln Continental Mark Three next to Lyle’s 1964 Thunderbird. Donnie got out and took a brown bag out of the drunk.

“Lyle, it’s the Christmas season so why not enjoy a little Christian Brother’s spirit?”

Tipping back the bag, Lyle took a few gulps.

“I am going to give you some good advice,” Donnie said. “Since you are finally a drinker, I want you to always remember that when you drink you will think you’re much smarter than you really are and you will often think you are tougher than you are. If you remember that you will not have any trouble as a result of drinking.”

He never forgot his brother’s advice. He moved to Madison and got an apartment near their new office on the north side. One of the salesmen working for the Housing Mart of Beloit owned a bar on the east side called Track Two. Lyle and Donnie occasionally took their drivers there on Friday nights.

A dim, yellowish light glowed within Track Two where live bands played hard rock and college students crowded the dance floor. Layers of blue cigarette smoke crept between Lyle, Donnie, and five other drivers as they took shots of peppermint schnapps. A tall driver took a shot and tipped backwards off the high stool he was sitting on. Laughter erupted throughout the bar, everyone now watching the drivers. A redheaded Irish man sitting next to Lyle was red-faced, holding his belly in uncontrollable laughter. He wiped his eyes and announced, “That’s the funniest fuckin’ shit I’ve ever seen in my life.”

“I know,” Lyle smirked. “I bring them here once a week and get them nice and pickled, but it would be nice if there were some females here.”

“I know a place with lots of beautiful girls and some really nice tale.”

“Where’s that?” Lyle asked.

“Mr. Roberts, it has a better crowd, better music, it’s cleaner, but not the type of bar for your trucker friends. You’d probably enjoy the women there.”

“Name’s Lyle”

They shook hands.

“Nick.”

After a night of drinking with Nick at Mr. Roberts, Lyle smoked his first joint. Not long after that Nick gave Lyle his first line of cocaine and they became instant friends.

It had been a couple years since the accident, Lyle’s face had nearly settled. His senior yearbook picture revealed a plain, somewhat elongated chin, an awkward smile from an under bite, and crooked teeth. Several surgeons had changed his bone structure so that now he had a strong jawline and masculine facial features. The success of his business allowed him to install the most expensive dentures on the market so that his smile was full and bright. Lyle got more compliments from women than ever before; many said he had piercing blue eyes with a strong jaw. Despite medically enhanced looks, his face had been broken so badly that surgeons couldn’t reconstruct his chin. He grew a black beard to cover up his missing chin and compliment his prominent jaw.

Almost suddenly, Lyle and Donnie had more money than they knew what to do with. They spent most of the excess on cocaine, road trips, and girls. Some of the most wealthy business owners in the state invited them to mobile home conferences where they met key players in the industry. Lyle was known to bring beautiful, young women with him to the conferences. In 1974 he was one of the only men in the mobile home business who wasn’t married. A metal vasectomy pin on his coat indicated he was sterile, and was a stark contrast to suits and ties. A dispatcher for one of the largest mobile home factories in the state approached Lyle at one of the conferences in Madison.

“Wildes, are you keeping your trucks busy?”

“It could be better, that’s why we’re here.”

The dispatcher looked at Lyle’s girlfriend who had blond hair, high heels, and an hourglass figure.

“Wildes, how do you get such beautiful women?”

She excused herself and they both watched her nice figure on the way to the bathroom.

“You ask beautiful women out,” Lyle said. “If you ask enough beautiful women out, one of them will go out with you.”

“How could I get a date like that?”

“I don’t know,” Lyle said. “Ask one out.”

“Why don’t you hook me up with a date like that?”

“You’re married.”

“I don’t want to get a divorce,” the man said. “I just want to have a girlfriend. How can I get a date?”

“If I got you a date, what would you do for me?”

“What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to book one of our trucks everyday pulling a house out of your factory.”

“You give me the date and if I like her, your truck will run every day,” the dispatcher said.

“Here’s the deal, if I get you the date, she doesn’t have to have sex with you. She doesn’t have to do anything other than go out to supper with you. When she wants to go home, she gets to go home. If she doesn’t, I’m coming to find you.”

“I understand.”

“If you guys have sex, that’s between you and her.”

The next night, Lyle and Nick were having a beer at Mr. Roberts when one of his girlfriends walked through the door and joined them at the bar.

“What are you two up to?” She asked.

“We’re looking for a beautiful woman to buy a drink for,” Nick said.

“Ok, so what’s up?” she asked Lyle.

“I’ve never done this before,” Lyle said, “But I’m going to ask you a couple of questions and I don’t want you to be offended.”

“Well, this will be interesting,” she said.

“I got this rich friend who’s looking for a date and I’ll pay you $150 if you go out with him.”

“So what do you want me to be, your call girl? That’s pretty sick Lyle.”

“Nope, I just want you to go out to dinner with him and I’ll pay you $150 to do that. You do not have to have sex with him.”

“Why do you want me to do that?”

“Because if he likes you, and he enjoys the date, he’ll book one of our trucks every day, that’s all you need to do is go out and have a good time.”

“Ok Lyle but he better take me to a nice restaurant.”

“I’m sure he will.”

The next Monday morning, the dispatcher called Lyle’s office.

“Lyle, when do you want to start pulling for us?”

“Next Monday,” Lyle said.

A week later, the dispatcher called Lyle’s office again.

“Lyle, I want another date and I have a friend that wants a date.”

“Who’s your friend?”

“He’s a banker,” the dispatcher said.

“Where’s he a banker at?”

“Security Marine in Madison.”

“Do you trust him?” Lyle asked.

“Sure, I trust him.”

Lyle thought, “I can’t really trust any of these guys. They’re all a bunch of wise guys.”

“If I get your friend a date and he messes up, I’m kicking your ass,” Lyle said. “If he’s a flake, you’re in trouble.”

Lyle found the dispatcher and his banker friend a date. The next Monday morning the dispatcher told Lyle that the banker wanted to meet him. Lyle drove to the Security Marine Bank and walked up to the counter.

“Can I help you?” the teller asked.

“I’m looking for Steve.”

The banker offered Lyle a line of credit to lease six additional mobile home tractors that would allow him to hire more full time employees. After arranging a few more dates, Donnie asked Lyle, “How the hell are you getting through all these doors?”

“Meeting the needs of the wealthy.”

Donnie laughed, “Maybe I shouldn’t ask any more questions.”

“Play along with me on this bro, let me see where this goes.”

Running an escort service gave Lyle a unique way of gaining money and power. Word of his gentlemen’s club spread and women from massage parlors were calling for extra work. He was surprised how many married men were calling. He especially enjoyed setting up a rich guy with a woman he knew from the Reedsburg bank. Satisfying the romantic needs of wealthy men soon developed into another fulltime job.

Lyle noticed two types of clients. The first is someone who pays $300 for a date and then thinks she's his slave. This type always causes trouble. Then

there is the gentleman who pays $300 for a date and is grateful that a woman will spend time with him. These gentlemen are usually over 40, wealthy, and married. These gentlemen made up Lyle’s clients.

As the escort service grew, Lyle wanted to keep it separate from his trucking business. One of his clients who owned warehouses on the east side of Madison agreed to let him remodel a small warehouse for his girls. He closed off a room where he put in a surround sound stereo system. Lyle soundproofed the bedroom and installed blue shag carpet on the floors, walls and ceilings. The room had a king sized bed with expensive alcohol and furniture. Customer’s parked inside the warehouse so no one could see they were there. It was known as the “Foxes Den.”

Donnie was the bill collector for their company, Mobile Home Transport Incorporated. He was big and talented at getting people to pay. For a few weeks it got to the point where they were collecting money every week. One of the bigger debtors was the sales manager for around 15 mobile home sales lots in Wisconsin. The manager was almost always late paying Lyle and Donnie for homes they’d deliver. One Monday, Donnie took a shit on the manager’s office desk when he was out to lunch. When he saw the feces on his desk, the manager called Lyle immediately. From that day on, the manager was consistent and paid on time.

At their peak, Lyle and Donnie were pulling for 36 dealers throughout Wisconsin. Meanwhile, an aluminum factory owner named Vince from Illinois was trying to get dealers to skirt their mobile homes with aluminum

instead of plywood. When the housing mart of Fort Atkinson turned Vince down, they referred him to Lyle and Donnie.

Vince was a barrel chested Italian in his mid-40s. His hair was slicked back and he was always dressed up in a shirt, tie, and winged tipped-shoes. On a hot summer day, Vince walked into Lyle’s office.

“The name’s Vince,” he gave a sincere and firm handshake. “I’m with Hinderman Aluminum in Centralia Illinois and I’m interested in having our product used in skirting your mobile homes.”

“Why are you coming to us?” Lyle asked. “We don’t skirt mobile homes.”

“I was told that you guys pulled a lot of houses. Have any of your customers ever asked you to skirt their houses?”

Lyle looked at the ceiling and stroked his beard. “As a matter of fact, a lot of them do.”

“Well why don’t you use my product to skirt your mobile homes? Give me a chance to break into the industry.”

“I have to think about it. We might be interested.”

“I’ll give ‘ya a good opportunity, if you buy $5,000 worth of product from me you can do $10,000 worth of work.”

“I could double my money?”

Vince went to his car and showed Lyle samples of his aluminum. He explained how aluminum was more expensive, but lighter, more durable, and looked better than plywood skirting. Lyle ordered $5,000 worth of aluminum and doubled their money in less than three weeks. Most of the sales lots Lyle worked with caught on and bought from Vince.

One of Lyle’s mobile home servicemen was fronted $2,600 worth of aluminum. Weeks went by and the man ignored calls to collect the money. Another week went by and Vince went to Lyle’s office in search of the service man.

“Where is this mother fucker?” Vince asked.

“He’s probably at a bar near Stoughton.”

“You know this guy’s pretty big Vince.”

“I don’t care how big he is, he’s paying me today.”

They drove 20 miles to a dive bar in Stoughton in Vince’s black 1972 BMW Bavaria. A tall, stout man was drinking beer from a mug at an empty bar.

“Hi Jerry,” Vince said.

“Hi Vince, hi Lyle, what are you guys doing here?”

“We came to see you.” Vince pulled a snub-nosed .38 revolver from his black suit coat and put the barrel in Jerry’s mouth. “You’re paying me today you mother fucker.”

Jerry was trembling. “Take it easy Vince,” he said with the gun in his mouth. “I don’t have the money on me.”

“Very carefully, take out all the money you have and write me a check for the rest,” Vince said.

Shaking, Jerry pulled around $600 cash out of his pocket and wrote a check for $2,000. Lyle thought to himself, “Wow, this guy’s as crazy as we are. We’ve got to get to know him.”

If Lyle got a wise guy, he fixed them. If they were gentlemen, he didn’t need to do that. He only brought guys he considered gentlemen to the Fox’s Den. Everyone else, Lyle delivered girls to.

A construction worker who saw an ad for the Fox’s Den Escort Service in the Capital Times called Lyle for a date. Lyle and Nick picked up a University of Wisconsin student who had long wavy black hair.

“Hi Tonya,” Nick said.

“We got a live one for ‘ya tonight,” Lyle said.

“Where are we going?” She asked.

“To a small hotel on the south side beltline,” Lyle said.

“Are you sure it’s safe?” She asked.

“Nick and I are going to be in the parking lot the whole time. If you have any trouble we’ll be there.”

Nick parked in front of the hotel so he could see the window where Tonya would be. They watched her walk into the hotel and close the shades inside the room. Nick rolled a joint and they smoked, waiting for her to finish.

“Isn’t it something how much money people pay for sex?” Lyle asked.

“Yea, especially when there’s so much free sex in town,” Nick said.

“But I suppose if you’re married you don’t have the time to go out to bars.”

“I did, that’s probably why I’m divorced,” Nick smirked. “Look Lyle, Tonya’s waiving to us, she must be just about done.”

Tonya was waving her hand at them through the hotel window. Lyle and Nick busted out in laughing. “That’s crazy. That girl is just absolutely crazy.”

A few minutes later, Tonya was back again waving at the window.

“Nick, why doesn’t she just fuck this guy and get it over? Why does she just wave at us for? “Yes, yes yes.” Lyle waived back at Tonya and they laughed. “Hi, hi, hi.”

The curtain went back down. Less than a minute later she was at the window again.

“Do you think that’s a sign?” Nick asked.

“Oh my god I think she’s in trouble. C’mon Nick, we better go up there.”

They ran to the motel door but it was locked. Lyle knocked on the door while Nick slid brass knuckles on his right hand. Tonya opened the door with mascara smeared across her eyes and black tears streaming down her cheeks. The overweight construction worker was lying on the bed naked.

“He won’t pay me because he’s drunk and he can’t get a hard on and I can’t get the money.”

“Pick up your stuff and go to the car,” Lyle said to Tonya and turned to the man on the bed. “Tonight is a really unfortunate night for you because you aren’t paying this woman and we’re going to make sure that you pay her.

“Fuck you,” the man said.

Lyle grabbed the man’s wallet off the dresser, took cash out, and tossed it on the bed.

“Here’s your wallet. There’s $300 missing. We’re taking that with us. This is a legitimate business. If you come after us, your world will be a very miserable place to be.”

They got back in the car and drove Tonya home.

“I waved to you guys like three or four times and you didn’t wave back! I could’ve been killed up there!”

“We just misread it,” Nick said. “We were high and we thought you were done.”

“It won’t happen again,” Lyle said. “Next time we’ll get our signals straight.”

They sat in the car until Tonya got into her apartment.

“We can’t get high when we take these girls out,” Nick said. “We can’t think it’s funny. Girls have been killed in this business.”

The Fox’s Den attracted a wide range of clientele. They included bankers, car dealers, mobile home dealers, doctors, lawyers, dentists, firefighters, attorneys, and Vince.

There was a three day mobile home convention in Bloomington, Minnesota where mobile home dealers from throughout the Midwest gathered each year. Lyle rented five rooms in a hotel near the airport where five of his girls were staying. At the convention, he handed out Fox’s Den cards that offered an hour with a girl for $300. A few men in suits were gathered around Vince, listening to his pitch about aluminum skirting. When Lyle saw Vince at the convention he gave him a card.

“This one’s on the house Vince go enjoy yourself.”

When Vince returned he wanted Lyle to get a date for his friend who was visiting Minneapolis, a Jewish multimillionaire who owned parking lots in the Florida Keys. They met in an elevator at the hotel where the girls were staying.

“So you got women huh?” the Jewish man asked.

With a smile on his face Lyle said, “Yeah, I got a couple of women.”

“So you think it’s funny?”

“No I don’t think it’s funny,” Lyle said.

“Well, how come you laugh about everything?” the Jewish man asked.

“I’m not sure I laugh about everything.”

“Well, I hear you laugh about everything. How long you been in this business?”

“I don’t know that those are the kinds of questions that you need to be asking me.”

“So, you’re just a punk kid running this business.”

Lyle didn’t say another word and watched the elevator doors until they opened. He brought the Jewish man into the largest of the five rooms where seven women were standing in the room.

“Which one’s the best?”

“They’re all number 10,” Lyle said.

“I’ll take that one,” the man said pointing to one of the girls.

“You don’t have enough money to have her. What you have to do is leave.”

“What do you mean?” the Jewish man asked.

“You’re a smart ass,” Lyle said. “You’re a wise guy. I only deal with gentleman. Wise guys are people who think money can buy them whatever they want. Gentlemen are willing to give money and be grateful for a woman even to say ‘hi’ to them. So get your ass downstairs and get out of here.”

The Jewish man went downstairs to the lobby and Lyle followed him. Walking out of the elevator, Vince pulled him over, “Hey, what the fuck Lyle?”

“Vince, your friend’s a wise guy. He’s a fuckin’ punk. He laughed at me, insulted me all the way up in the elevators. We got up there and he thought he was just going to pick a girl. I don’t know if he was going to beat her ass or what but your friend is a dog and I don’t want anything to do with him.”

The Jewish man was sitting at the hotel bar with a glass of liquor when Vince rushed in, grabbed him by the necktie, and dragged him through the revolving doors to the parking lot. With one hand holding the man’s necktie and the other pointing a finger in his face, Vince shoved his Jewish friend and returned to the lobby.

“He’ll never bother you again Lyle.”

Icy snow was rising in powdery drifts and falling in thin waves across the Fox’s Den parking lot. Every few minutes, thousands of tiny ice crystals struck the outside of Lyle’s office window and fell to the ground, or were wisped back into the frozen winter air.

Lyle was managing mobile home deliveries and sorting through paperwork when he heard someone pounding at the door. A young attractive woman was in the doorway. Her long hair flowed under a red winter hat that was partially damp from melting snow. Lyle thought she looked like a woman looking for a job so he let her in.

“Does my dad know about this?” the woman demanded.

“About what?” Lyle asked.

“You know what you’re doing here,” the woman walked towards the room with the bed.

“What are you doing? You can’t go in there.”

“I’m telling my dad and I’m calling the cops on you.”

“Just calm down and tell me who you are,” Lyle said.

“I’m the daughter of the man who owns this warehouse.”

“You need to leave right now.”

“I’m going to call my dad.”

Lyle picked her up, opened the door, and threw her into a snow bank. He shut the door and pulled the shades down over the windows. The woman pounded on the door and screamed, “You’re going to pay for this you fucking asshole!”

The next morning men were throwing everything from the Fox’s Den into a dumpster. Lyle calmly drove to the main office where he found the owner, his daughter, and wife standing outside.

“What are you doing Lloyd?” Lyle asked.

“If I would’ve known you were running this kind of business I would’ve never rented it to you. You’re lease is done. You don’t owe me any money. Get the hell out of here.”

“Ok,” Lyle said. “I’ll see ‘ya later.”

Eight new pickup trucks were parked in front of Lloyd’s office. With a six foot log chain, Lyle came back in the middle of the night and broke all the windows out of Lloyd’s trucks and office.

A week later, Lyle walked into Lloyd’s office and saw that some of the trucks hadn’t been fixed yet.

“What happened here?” Lyle asked.

“You should know what happened here,” Lloyd said.

“I just came back to see if my rent is done. You must have a lot of enemies around with something like this happening.”

“You’re nothing but trouble, get the fuck out of here,” Lloyd yelled, pointing a finger at the front door.

After the Fox’s Den closed, Lyle delivered his girls to wealthy customers living in apartments, houses, and condos throughout Dane County. It seemed like the wealthier the customers, the more complex their sexual desires.

Lyle noticed that most people, no matter who they are or what they do, have a different side especially when they’re in a bedroom with beautiful woman. Since he didn’t have sex with any of his girls, they all trusted him and would often talk about their sexual experiences.

Lyle picked up one of his girls from a west side Madison condo where she serviced an architect from New York.

“Lyle you wouldn’t believe what this guy wanted me to do.”

“Do I even want to know this time?” Lyle asked hesitantly. “What did he do?”

“He had a dog leash chain that he had me put around his neck and then he wanted me to pull him into the bathroom by the chain. When he refused, he wanted me to whip him on his ass with the leather strap of the leash. After whipping and dragging him, he licked water out of the toilet and masturbated.”

“He paid you for that?” Lyle asked.

“Yeah, I didn’t even have sex with him.”

“I don’t know if I should trust these kinds of guys.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’d be glad to whip a man for $150.”

A few weeks after the Fox’s Den closed Lyle was getting high at his apartment with Nick. They were laughing about all the crazy things rich people do when they’re bored when the phone rang.

“Hello.”

“Is this Lyle Wildes?”

“It is, what can I do for you?”

“I just found out that my girlfriend's been hookin’ for you.”

“I don’t believe that’s possible.”

“She came home last night with hundreds of dollars’ and told me where it was from.”

“So why are you calling me?”

“I should come up there and kill you for whoring out my girl.”

“Do you know where I live?” Lyle asked.

“My girlfriend knows where you live. “I’ll find ‘ya.”

“Come on over, we’ll be waiting for you.”

The man hung up the phone.

“He says he’s coming up here to kill us,” Lyle said to Nick.

“So what are you going to do about it?” Nick asked.

Lyle went to his closet and got a .30-30 rifle and a .357 Magnum revolver.

“You stand over there on the right side of the door. I’ll stand on the other side so when he comes in I’ll be the first to see him. If that mother fucker shoots me, you take him out Nick.”

After around 20 minutes of silence, a knock came at the door. Lyle and Nick raised their guns and pointed them at the door.

“Come in,” Lyle yelled.

A short woman in her 30s stepped in. She froze, noticing the barrels of two guns pointed at her. “Oh my god, What are you doing?” she exclaimed.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Lyle said as they lowered their guns. “Come on in.”

“I just came in to ask for a stick of butter.”

“No problem,” Lyle said. “I’ll go get that for you.”

Handing her the stick of butter Lyle smiled, “so what are you cooking tonight?”

“I’m baking chocolate chip cookies.”

“Mmmm that sounds good,” Lyle said. “Do we get to have any?”

She laughed and said, “I don’t think I’m coming over here again.”

When she left Nick said, “You almost had me shoot a woman. It’s time for me to go home.”

The man never showed up, but his girlfriend stopped talking to Lyle.

A few months later Lyle was in his office writing payroll checks for his drivers when the phone rang.

“Hello this is Lyle.”

“Lyle, this is Vince. I got a deal for ‘ya. I need you to meet me in Walworth.”

“When?”

“The sooner the better.”

Lyle drove 66 miles to meet Vince at a restaurant in downtown Walworth. They sat across from each other at a booth.

“So how’s your aluminum business doing?”

“It’s doing great Lyle and I want to thank you again for being my first customer.”

“So what’s the deal you got for me today?”

“I’m going to be straightforward with you about it. We want to buy you out. We want to buy the names of your clients, we want to buy your girls, and we want you to work with us.”

“So why would I do that?” Lyle asked.

“Because we’re in that kind of business and you can’t be.”

“What happens if I don’t sell?”

“You’re probably going to get busted,” Vince said.

“I think I understand, but I have to think about it. I have to go back and talk to the girls. I don’t know that the girls would want to come and I don’t know that I would want to work for you.”

“Ok Lyle, you call me. Let me know.”

Lyle told a few of his girls about Vince’s proposition.

“Lyle we don’t want to work for them unless you do.”

“I’m not going to work for them,” Lyle said.

“Why not?” a girl asked.

“Because if they get violent or try to hurt you I couldn’t do anything about it.”

“That’s why we won’t work for them unless we work for you,” the girl said.

“I’ll tell them you’re not interested.”

A few days later, Lyle called Vince.

“Vince, we’ve made a decision. We’re not going to accept your deal. The girls don’t want to come and I’m not coming to work for you.”

“Then I want the names of all your customers.”

“That’s all you were really interested in this whole time isn’t it? I won’t give you a single name. I don’t keep a list, they’re in my head and I’m just going to forget them.”

“That’s probably a good idea Lyle. Just forget them and get out of the business. It’s probably a good idea that you don’t work for us anyways because you’re not Italian and you’re not one of us. You’re not worth a plugged nickel to us. I’m glad you decided to get out.”

Lyle told his girls they could continue but he was done. He was disappointed it ended, but relieved. With the extra time on his hands he pulled houses more often and missed the excitement that came with escorting women. He often thought about how he could create a dating service in a way that wouldn’t get him in trouble.

Every week, Lyle had coffee with his friend Marion Balousek who was a pioneer of TV advertising in the Midwest. The broadcast tycoon often bought lunch for Lyle and listened to his stories about girls, Donnie, Vince, and Nick. Marion owned a big house in Downtown Verona that he called “The Mansion.” One week they were eating lunch at Marion’s restaurant, the Cozy Inn.

“So Marion, is anybody renting your mansion?” Lyle asked.

“No I’m just using it for storage, what do you have in mind?”

“I’d like to use it for a unique idea.”

“What’s your idea?” Marion asked.

“I want to start the UnChurch in your mansion.”

Marion laughed. “What’s the UnChurch?”

“It will be a place for singles to meet and build interesting relationships. It will be an inviting place that’s flexible and not hold beliefs frozen from times past. My UnChurch will be an opportunity for people to deal with life’s problems in a way that doesn’t involve the dogmas and rituals of religion.”

“In other words, a dating service?”

Lyle smirked, “You could say that.”

“And you’d want to run that out of my mansion?”

“Yeah, Your house is perfect. Singles could meet in the park, have lunch in the house, and get to know each other in a really nice place.”

“Let’s meet at the truck stop for coffee in the morning and go down and take a look at it,” Marion said.

The next morning after coffee Lyle met Marion at his mansion. The house was made of jagged grey stones with four white pillars. A red tile roof hung over a wide oak deck. A long flower garden wrapped around the house to the right. Maple trees dotted a park that stretched 440 feet to the left of the house and wrapped around behind it another 440 feet, making it the largest lot in Verona.

The house had been empty for 10 years, but was well maintained. The front doors opened to a wide room with solid walnut floors, walls, and ceiling. Through the door was an even bigger room with a sky blue shag carpet. The left wall was lined floor to ceiling with mirrors. Four large windows filled most of the front wall with plates of glass separated by horizontal pieces of cast iron. “This is where your office should be,” Marion said.

Through a door to the right was a wide kitchen leading to another walnut room with a 16 foot conference table studded with long back chairs. Behind the table was a brick fireplace. The upstairs was filled with Mexican ceramics that Marion used to sell to tourist shops around the state.

“Marion, you have a really nice place. It would be perfect for the UnChurch.”

“So how’s this going to work?”

“First thing next week I’m going to put an ad in the paper. People will pay for a membership that will give them access to activities and parties to meet other singles. We’ll play board games in the conference room so people can get to know each other better. I’ll put picnic tables in the park so people can take walks and have lunch. This will be huge. So Marion, give me an idea of what you want for rent.”

“You don’t have to pay a dime for this Lyle. Just have lunch with me once a week and tell me how things are going. I’d love to hear the stories. I’ll

provide your first secretary and she’ll be ready to work when you have the place set up. I think this will be a great opportunity for you and be good for a lot of singles in the area,” Marion said.

Lyle advertised in the Capital Times and a Madison radio station. Nearly 100 people joined the UnChurch within three months allowing Lyle to hire another secretary. Professionals and everyday people from throughout Dane County became members. The small parking lot was almost always full.

A few months after starting the UnChurch a gorgeous redheaded dental assistant came to the house. Lyle interviewed her to see if she was membership material.

“I have a couple of questions for you to see if a membership here is right for you,” Lyle said. “What kind of guys are you looking for?”

“I’m looking for a young professional, someone who’s nice and knows how to treat a woman.”

“What are your interests?” Lyle asked.

“Well, I like movies and dancing. I don’t drink or do drugs and I want to meet a man who preferably doesn’t have any kids.”

“Do you have kids?” Lyle asked.

“No.”

“So tell me why you came here. Why are you interested in our services?”

“Because I don’t go to bars, I don’t drink, and I’m not going to go to church to meet somebody. When I heard about the UnChurch, it sounded perfect for me.”

“I have a couple people in mind,” Lyle said. “I’ll let you know when I get you a date. Leave your phone number in the membership application and I’ll give you a call within a week.”

Lyle hooked her up with a young handsome firefighter who said he was divorced, didn’t drink, or have any kids. He seemed like a really nice guy. After setting up a time they could meet, Lyle introduced them to each other at his office and they seemed comfortable with each other. They left for dinner and a movie in Madison.

A few days later, Lyle called the firefighter.

“So how did it go?” Lyle asked.

“I’m not sure she’s my kind of woman.”

“Why?”

“She just wasn’t that much fun, but I’d be interested in going out with someone else,” the firefighter said.

“Ok,” Lyle said. “I’ll see what I can do.”

He hung up and called the dental assistant.

“So how did it go?” Lyle asked.

“I don’t think I’m ever going to use your services again.”

“Why? What happened?”

“We never did go to a movie,” she said. “While we were eating, he got drunk and tried to get me to go to the bar with him. He wanted me to go to his house and when I refused, he said he thought that’s what he paid for.”

“That’s not the way I’m running this business. I don’t know why he would’ve ever thought that. I’ll revoke his membership and give you a refund on yours if you want.”

A few weeks later, a medical doctor and his wife came to the UnChurch from Newton, Iowa.

“I have a few questions for you before you fill out an application for a membership here. What brings a married couple like you to a dating place for singles?”

“My wife and I have kind of an interesting relationship,” the doctor said. “My wife wants to have sex more often than I can offer it to her. Do you have any members who would want to have sex with my wife?”

“I don’t know if I want to get into something like that,” Lyle said.

“So how about you?” his wife asked. “Are you married?

“Are you serious? This is the UnChurch, not the house of prostitution. So if you want to do this, after it’s done, you don’t get a membership. You just walk away.”

The doctor and his wife agreed and Lyle called Nick. “You won’t believe what just happened. A woman wants to pay me to have sex with her while her husband watches. I’m meeting them at a hotel downtown and I need you to wait in the lobby for me and watch for anything suspicious.”

“You’re fucking crazy Wildes,” Nick said.

“Will you go with me?” Lyle asked.

“You pick me up. I’m not driving down there.”

Nick got in Lyle’s Thunderbird. “Here,” Lyle handed Nick a few hundred dollars. “If these are cops you bail me out.”

“I got your back, I’ll do it for ‘ya buddy.”

When Lyle entered the hotel room the doctor’s wife was lying on the bed naked. The doctor was sitting in a windowsill in a suit drinking a beer.

“So here’s the deal. Put everything you got in your pockets on the bed right now. Empty your purse and put it on the bed,” Lyle demanded.

They emptied out their pockets and laid everything on the bed. There were pictures of their families, their lives in Iowa, address books, receipts, and wallets.

“So now what the hell do you want?” Lyle asked.

“My wife’s a nymphomaniac and I can’t screw her enough,” the doctor said putting his beer on the windowsill. “So we hire men to have sex with her and I watch. How much do you want?”

“$300.”

The doctor counted $300 cash and gave it to Lyle. He took his clothes off and had sex with the doctor’s wife. The doctor seemed bored as he watched and sipped his beer. While she was giving him a blowjob, the doctor said, “Don’t mess up her hair.”

After she was done she said, “You’re the fifty-first we’ve hired for me to have sex and I want to come back and see you again. Do you have any friends that want to have sex?”

“You mean today?”

Lyle went downstairs to the lobby where Nick was waiting.

“Nick, come upstairs. You can get laid if you want to.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s a beautiful woman upstairs that wants to have sex with you. Here’s the deal, they’ll pay me and I’ll give you $50 to have sex with a beautiful woman.”

“You’re shitting me. You’re fucking with me Wildes.”

Lyle smiled and brought Nick upstairs.

“Nick, this is her husband. This is Nick. He wants you to have sex with his wife while he watches and I’m going to sit here and watch too because I’m not leaving.”

When they were done, Lyle thanked everybody and they thanked him. The couple left and went back to Iowa.

A few weeks later the doctor’s wife called the UnChurch.

“Lyle, is there any way that you could come to Iowa? We really like you and I trust you.”

“No, I can’t come down there, but I know a friend who might.”

“Is he a trustworthy?” she asked.

“Yeah he is.”

“What’s his name? What does he do?”

“He owns a Maytag dealership and his name’s George. He’s a pretty clean cut guy. You’ll like him. He’ll get the job done.”

“What’s his phone number?”

“I’ll call him and have him call you,” Lyle said. “It’s going to be double this time since we have to come to you.”

“That won’t be a problem.”

George came back the next week and gave Lyle half the money.

“This is unbelievable Lyle,” George said. “I just can’t believe a woman so beautiful will pay to pleasure men. She is just so beautiful.”

“Don’t fall in love. This is strictly business,” Lyle said.

“Oh yeah, ok, of course. Let me know if she wants me to come back.”

Around a month later, the doctor’s wife called Lyle.

“I don’t know if you’re aware of this but George has been down here twice, uninvited.”

“Really?” Lyle said. “Did you pay him?”

“We did once, we paid him $150 the second time he came down.”

“I think I’m going to have to have a little talk with George.”

“Lyle, he’s creeping us out because the last time he said we didn’t need to pay him. We’re really uncomfortable with this, I think he likes me and my husband doesn’t like it.”

“Do you want him to come back?”

“No.”

“He will not be back down there again,” Lyle said. “I guarantee it.”

Lyle and Nick went to George’s house and knocked on the door. He came to the door in his Maytag uniform.

“You got any beers?” Nick asked.

“Yeah, c’mon in.”

Lyle and Nick sat on the couch and George brought them two bottles of beer.

“So Wildes, you got any more dates for me?” George asked, wide-eyed.

“Maybe,” Lyle said, “but how did the last one go?”

“It went alright,” George said.

“Did you ever go back down there again?” Lyle asked.

“No,” George said. “I wouldn’t do that unless you asked me.”

“So why would it be that she called me and told me that you’ve been down there twice and she paid you $150 and I don’t have any money?” Lyle asked.

George sank in his chair. “Ok, I did go down there.”

“So why didn’t you tell Lyle?” Nick asked.

“I don’t know, I just had a weekend free and I went down there and they were glad to see me.”

“So I got good news and bad news for you,” Lyle said. “George, the good news is that you’re not going to get your ass beat today. The bad news is, if she calls me and says that you called her, I’m coming over here, beating your ass, and burning your house down.”

“I won’t do that,” George said. “I’ll never do it again Lyle, unless you call me.”

“George, I consider you a snake,” Lyle said. “If you go back down there again, you’re not going to enjoy your life. Don’t even think that this is something that you can wiggle through. This is the end George, right now.”

The UnChurch had been running without a hitch for more than a year and a half. It had nearly 200 members and the vice president of the Dane County Chamber of Commerce had offered to invest in the dating service. A few weeks before the UnChurch was going to be added to Chamber of Commerce, Lyle was on the phone when one of his secretaries ran into the room.

“Lyle, the police are here.”

“What do they want?”

“I don’t know, but a bunch of them just pulled up.”

Lyle walked to the door as an officer came up the steps. Verona police and Dane county patrols were scattered around the house.

“Are you Mr. Wildes?” The officer asked.

“What’s on your mind?” Lyle asked.

“Mr. Wildes we have a little problem here. We’re not saying anything illegal is going on, but we’ve had some reports that some high profile criminals have been here and we want to look around. If you don’t’ let us come in, we’ll have to call and get a search warrant.”

“I don’t own the building. So I can’t give you permission.”

“How do we get ahold of the owner?” the officer asked.

“I’ll call him.”

Less than 10 minutes later Marion was at the house.

“What’s all this about?” Marion asked. “What are you looking for?”

“We just want to look around,” the officer said. “We just want to know what you’re doing in this building.”

“Lyle is there anything going on here?” Marion asked.

“Absolutely not.”

“Well then we’ll let them look around,” Marion turned to the officer. “I’ll take you anywhere you want to go.”

Marion led them through every room in the house. Three cops searched the house while an officer interviewed the secretaries. After about a half hour, Marion walked up the basement steps followed by officers pulling cobwebs from their coats and faces.

“Mr. Balousek, we think Lyle is running the UnChurch as a front for something else.”

“A front for what?” Marion asked.

“We can’t give any more information at this time,” the officer said. "Thanks for your cooperation.”

“That was weird,” Marion said to Lyle. “What do you think that was about?”

“I have no idea.”

“Well then we’ll see what happens.”

A few days later, a community paper ran a story on the front page with the headline, “UnChurch under siege, local business under investigation.”

Nearly all of the members called Lyle and quit. Lyle was out of business within a week of the article. He demanded an apology from the community paper. They printed a follow up with quotes from him, but no apology. Lyle was in his office packing up when two men walked in the house. One was in a suit and the other looked like a big farm boy.

“There’s no need to get up Mr. Wildes,” the suited man said. “We’re just here to deliver a message.”

“What’s the message?”

“We’re going to be real clear about this. You have 48 hours to be out of this office and out of this area.”

“Or what?”

“We will tar and feather you,” the suited man said.

“Yeah right, you guys are fucking crazy.”

“We represent the Posse Comitatus and we don’t like what you’re doing to our community. We want you out. If you’re not out of town in 48 hours, we will tar and feather you.”

“Ok,” Lyle said sarcastically. “I heard you.”

They left and Lyle called Marion.

“Hello?”

“Yeah, two guys just came in the office and threatened to tar and feather me.”

“Who were they?” Marion asked.

“One of them had a suit on and the other one looked like a big farm boy. They told me they were with some kind of posse.”

“Posse Comitatus?” Marion asked.

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“That’s a local vigilante group,” Marion said. “There was a business in town a year or two ago that was thought to be a front for dealing drugs. The Posse Comitatus closed down their business and ran them out of town.”

“It’s probably time I find a new address.”

“I think you’re done with the mansion then right?”

“Yes, I’ll talk to you later Marion.”

Lyle dialed Donnie’s number.

“Hey bro,” Lyle said.

“Now what’s up?” Donnie asked.

“I’m packing up everything and moving to the Dells area, and so I’d like to start pulling houses again.”

“Good, we’ll get you booked next week. Call the secretary when you’re settled in and she’ll get you some loads.”

“Ok bro, I’ll call you next week.”

He moved into the woods near the Wisconsin Dells and liked the beauty of the area. It was far enough from Verona for his comfort.

In the summer of 1978, Lyle went to pull a mobile home from the Twin Oaks Mobile Home Park on the outskirts of Whitewater. While getting it ready to move, an attractive blond with a rose tattoo on her lower back walked out of hers next to the one Lyle was pulling. A few weeks later, Lyle was scheduled to repo another house on the other side of where the blond lived. She walked passed Lyle and they said “hi” to each other.

Donnie’s secretary asked Lyle to deliver a mobile home to the same empty lot he had repossessed next to the blonde’s. Lyle wondered why he was randomly exposed to this woman so many times in just a few weeks. A man with a blue uniform walked to where Lyle was setting up the new mobile home.

“Hey do you know who’s moving in here?” The uniformed man asked. “I live in that place right over there.”

The blond stepped out of her house and walked passed Lyle and the uniformed man.

“What's the story with her?” Lyle asked.

“She's divorced. Her husband left more than a year ago. She's a decent lady.”

After a few minutes, the blond strolled over to check out the new mobile home.

“Do you know who’s moving in here?” the blond asked the uniformed man.

“No I don’t,” he said. She turned to Lyle.

“Don’t you think it’s kind of odd that you’ve had so many homes to pull out of here?”

“Yeah, that does seem strange,” Lyle said.

The blond walked back to her mobile home.

“Man she is an attractive woman,” Lyle said to the uniformed man. “What’s her name?”

“Her name’s Nancy. You should ask her out. She’s a nice girl.”

“I can’t ask her out like this,” Lyle was covered in mud from setting up the house.

One sunny Saturday, Lyle decided to see the blonde in Twin Oaks. He shined up his grey 1976 Thunderbird with suicide doors. He bought two bottles of wine, found a copy of the Bible, and rolled a couple of joints. He practiced his introduction. “Hi, my name is Lyle Wildes. I have a bottle of wine, a bible, and a joint in my car, which would you prefer so we can get to know each other?”

Once in Twin Oaks he knocked on the door of Nancy’s mobile home and she appeared with bobby pins in her hair. He didn’t recognize her.

“What do you want?” She asked.

“Is your mom here?” Lyle asked.

“Who are you looking for?”

“I’m looking for Nancy.”

“I am Nancy.”

She looked half Lyle’s age, he began his pitch and she interrupted him.

“I know who you are, you’re the trailer guy.”

Caught off guard, he continued, “I brought a Bible, a bottle of wine, and a joint with me and was wondering which one you’d like to use so we can get to know each other?”

Nancy frowned and looked down. It felt like an hour when she finally said, “Bring in the wine. I have my own pot.”

Lyle dashed to the car, retrieved the wine, and returned to knock on the closed door.

“C’mon in,” Nancy shouted.

Inside a handsome man was sitting on the kitchen counter, Nancy seemed to enjoy Lyle’s discomfort. Her eyes twinkled as she asked, “What’s your name again?”

“Lyle,” he could barely get it out.

“This is my husband.”

“H-h-hello,” Lyle stammered. “I feel like a fool. I don’t solicit married women. Your neighbor told me you were divorced.”

“Well, we did break up but now we’re back together again,” Nancy said.

“That’s great, I’ll just excuse myself. Sorry for the misunderstanding.”

Nancy turned to her husband. “Do you have a problem with Lyle staying for a drink?"

Her husband laughed and said, “I think we could all use a drink.”

Thoughts rushed through Lyle’s head whether this was going to be another one of those unique arrangements. The wine was corked but they didn’t have a corkscrew. The three of them spent the next few minutes gouging and chipping the cork before pushing it down into the bottle. Nancy poured three glasses of wine.

"Lyle, why did you want to meet me?"

"I thought you looked interesting."

"What do you mean by interesting?" Nancy asked.

The phone rang. Nancy walked across the room and answered it. She was wearing tight blue jeans and a short blouse.

"Hello? Oh hi. Yeah, he's here. The phone is for you," Nancy said, handing the phone to her husband.

“Hello. Yes? I know. I’ll be there shortly.” Nancy’s husband hung up the phone and returned to counter.

She tipped her head back, emptying the last of the wine.

“You have another bottle?” she asked.

“Yes I do,” Lyle said and he dashed outside. When he returned with a second bottle, Nancy ran her tongue along the top of a rolling paper, sealing a joint. She held a flame to the squeezed end, rolling the joint between her thumb and pointer finger. Smoke rose into the air, pouring underneath the particle board ceiling. The phone rang. Nancy gave her husband the joint and answered the phone.

“Yep, he’s still here,” she turned to her husband and smirked. “It sounds like you’re in trouble now.”

He handed the joint to Lyle and picked up the receiver. “Yep, yep, I will.” He hung up and turned to Nancy. “Looks like I have to go now.”

"I'm leaving too,” Lyle said. “I appreciate the conversation."

"Should we tell him the truth?" Nancy asked.

"Yeah, we put him through enough.”

"This isn't my husband, he's my brother-in-law. He's here to pick up my mobile home tires because I’m selling my mobile home. While you went to get the wine I asked him to stay, I didn’t know what you were up to.”

Her brother-in-law went outside, loaded the tires, and left. Lyle tipped the glass and took a long drink.

"Would you like to go out for dinner?" he asked.

"I have a date tonight but we could do it another time," Nancy said.

A blue 1978 Buick LeSabre pulled in front of the mobile home.

"Shit, my mom’s here,” Nancy said. “What am I going to tell her about you? She hates beards and long hair."

"Since you have a for-sale sign in your window,” Lyle said, “tell her I am here to look at your house. I'll leave, but can I have your number?"

Nancy scrambled to find a piece of paper to write her number down.

“Just repeat it to me,” Lyle said. “I can remember it." She said the number out loud.

Walking outside, Lyle gave Nancy’s mom a quick, “Hi.” She didn’t respond and walked into the house.

Lyle overheard her ask, "Who’s that creep?"

"He stopped to look at the house.”

"He can't even afford a shave or a hair-cut."

A few days later Lyle called Nancy from a payphone.

“Hi, Nancy?”

“I didn’t think you remembered my number since you had been drinking and didn’t call back.”

Lyle laughed and asked, “Will you go out with me Friday night?”

By 1979, most of the trailer parks that had been built over the past decade were full. Many of the lots Lyle and Donnie pulled for no longer needed their services. When demand for mobile home transportation fell, Lyle and Donnie laid off 18 of their employees and let the leases expire for 11 of their tractors. Most of the homes they pulled were 14 by 70 feet. Their tractors weren’t prepared for the 16 by 80 homes that now filled the market.

When President Carter signed the Motor Carrier Act in the summer of 1980, Lyle could no longer control the price of delivery. Anyone with insurance and the right equipment could enter the mobile home transportation business. Lyle’s remaining drivers could pull homes on their own if they wanted to. The number of licensed transporters doubled and competition in the transportation industry greatly reduced profits.

After making a delivery from Madison 54 miles north to Montello, Lyle stopped at a small bar by his house outside the Dells. It was dimly lit with cigarette smoke lingering between people crowding the short bar. Lyle filled an open spot between a hefty middle aged woman and a rough looking older man. The bartender was a big man in his 50s and had short, grey hair.

“Lyle, having a brandy?”

“Sure.”

The bartender put a thick glass on the wooden bar in front of Lyle and popped ice into it with his other hand. He pulled a liter of dark brandy off the shelf and filled the shallow glass so a little spilled over the side. Lyle sipped off the rim and sighed.

“Hey Lyle did you decide to come work for us or not?” the hefty woman asked.

“How much money could I really make selling camp memberships?”

“How much do you want to make?” She asked. “What’s your goal?”

“I want your job,” Lyle smiled and took a generous sip of brandy.

“That’s what I like about you Lyle,” she laughed, taking a small sip of her screwdriver. “You’ve got to come work for us.”

“Maybe one of these days I will.”

“Well you just let me know. I’ve got to get something to eat,” she left more than half the glass of vodka and orange juice on the bar.

Lyle called Nancy after setting up a mobile home in Delevan, 19 miles south of Whitewater.

“Hey Nancy, I’m just finishing up in Delevan.”

“Are you going to stop by on your way home?”

“Well, that was the reason I’m calling.”

“I’m just fixing supper, would you want to eat here?”

“That’s sounds like fun. I’ll be there in 20 minutes.”

Lyle and Nancy sat across from each other at a small round table eating spaghetti and meatballs. A nine month old infant sat on Nancy’s lap with sauce splattered across his bib.

“I think my mom sold my house,” Nancy said. “I’m gonna be moving within a month.”

“Where are you going?” Lyle asked.

“I don’t know yet, but I’m sick of Whitewater.”

“Can I have some more spaghetti?”

Nancy stood up and put the baby in Lyle’s lap. She scooped noodles onto a plastic plate in front of Lyle.

“Hi Jed, I think he likes me but you can have him back,” Lyle handed the infant to Nancy. “Would you ever consider moving to the Dells?”

“Where would I live?”

“You could live with me for a while if you want to.”

“Why would you want me to live in the Dells?”

“Nancy, you’re a beautiful woman and I think the Dells would be a really nice place for you. You’re welcome to stay with me for as long as you like.”

“What about Jed?”

Jed wonderingly looked around with thick orange drool hanging from his mouth to the table.

“Wherever I go,” Nancy said. “He goes.”

Lyle’s dispatcher called him about a University of Wisconsin math professor who wanted a 16 by 80 foot mobile home set up on a five acre plot of land. It was the first time he would be pulling such a big home to a private lot. When he got to Monticello, it was sunny and hot.

He saw the math professor waiting on the side of the highway and slowed the massive trailer. As it came to a stop, Lyle noticed a freshly cut trail between tall rows of sandy pine forest. He got out of the truck and met the professor in front of the wide trail.

“Do you expect me to put that house in that opening?”

“If you’re a good driver it will fit because I’ve made all the calculations here on paper,” the professor said.

“Ok this is what I’m going to do,” Lyle said. “I’m going to start to back this house into your opening and I want to show you some reality here.”

He backed up until the end of the mobile home was at the mouth of the professor’s trail. If Lyle would’ve gone any further, it would’ve run into the trees and ruined the back of the mobile home.

“Can you see now that this isn’t going to fit in here?” Lyle asked.

“I can’t believe it,” the professor said. “How many trees do you think I’m going to have to cut?”

Lyle walked down the trail and counted at least 50 trees that would have to be removed to get the mobile home where the professor wanted it.

“Right now, we’re going to have to figure how many trees will have to be cut just to get the house off the road,” Lyle said. “It can’t just be sitting on the road. You got a chainsaw?”

The professor walked down the trail and got a chainsaw out of the back of his Bronco. Each time he cut a tree, Lyle moved the mobile home back a few inches. Nearly an hour and10 trees later, the mobile home was off the road. Lyle disconnected the house from his truck and got back on the highway.

“You’ll have to get a big farm tractor to move this monster because my truck’s too small,” Lyle said. “When you get the house where you want it, call the sales lot they’ll send someone to set it up for you.”

“If I would have known this was going to be this big of a project, I would’ve never bought this damn house.”

“I just need you to sign this fright bill saying there’s no damage to the house and I’ll be gone.”

When he got home, Lyle went into the bar by his house. “Hey Lyle,” the hefty woman said.

“Marge, you’re just the person I was looking for.”

“C’mon over and have a drink,” Marge said.

“You won’t believe these new mobile homes. Delivering these 16 wide mobile homes is ridiculous. I buried one in the sand today.”

She laughed, “So does that mean you’re going to come work for us?”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Lyle said stoically, “I’m burnt out Marge. How do I start?”

As the Dells grew into a vacation destination, investors from all over the world were turning campsites into membership resorts. A company that owned several throughout the Midwest bought the 20 acre Arrowhead Campground three miles from downtown Dells. More than 100 hook ups for campers, an eight lane concrete pool, baseball diamond, walking trails, tennis courts, and a poolside bar were included. Although it wasn’t located on a lake, many admired its beauty and said it was nicer than other lakeside campgrounds. The resort kicked off their opening summer by giving away $200 television sets to anyone willing to sit through an hour presentation about the new resort.

On his first day, Lyle walked into the waiting room full of people waiting to get their TV. A healthy looking man in his early 70s and a wrinkled, petite woman in her 60s were looking out the waiting room window, waiting for something they could’ve bought ten times over. Marge smiled when Lyle walked into the room.

“Hi Lyle, this is Jack and Bev from Madison,” Marge smiled. “Jack and Bev, this is Lyle, he’ll be your representative today.”

“Glad to meet you Jack and Bev,” Lyle shook their hands and walked them into a room scattered with other representatives and customers. He sat with at an open table.

“Can I ask you two a couple questions?”

“Yeah, sure,” Jack said.

“Are either of you offended by the fact that I wear a beard?”

“Well my husband wears one,” Bev said.

“Do you like his beard?” Lyle asked.

“Yeah I like it,” Bev said.

“So Jack, do you wear one because Bev likes it or do you like beards?”

“No I like my beard,” Jack said.

“So there would be no reason you wouldn’t buy from me today because I have a beard?” Lyle asked.

“No of course not.” Bev said.

“Have you heard anything about campground memberships before?” Lyle asked.

“No not really,” Jack said.

“So I’m going to tell you a little bit about campground memberships and if you decide you want to be part of this, would you say yes today if you really liked it?”

“We didn’t come up here to buy anything.” Jack said. “We just came up here for the TV. Our daughter is getting married and we wanted to give her the TV as a wedding present.”

“I understand that,” Lyle said. “But if you saw something here that you really like would you buy it?”

“It would have to be really special,” Bev said.

“So what do you two enjoy doing together?” Lyle asked.

“Well, we like to golf, we like to ride bikes,” Jack said.

“Jack loves to play softball,” Bev said. “And I love watching him play.”

“Do you like to swim? Do you like to play miniature golf? Do you like to dance? Do you like to sit around a campfire and have a few drinks?”

“What we really would enjoy doing is sitting around a campfire having a few drinks,” Bev said. “But we can’t do that in Madison.”

“Do you have any children?”

“We have two kids and they’re both gone,” Bev said.

“Do you think your kids would have fun playing volleyball, softball, swimming, and having a few drinks around a campfire?”

“I suppose,” Bev said.

“Do they go camping?” Lyle asked.

“Yeah but most of the time we come to the Dells, the campgrounds are always full,” Jack said.

“So if you could go camping here any time you wanted and your kids could come here anytime they wanted and their kids could come here anytime, would that be something you would like to do? If you could go camping at any of 450 sites in the nation anytime you wanted wouldn’t that be something special?” Lyle asked.

“Yeah but that would probably cost us 20 grand,” Bev said.

“Would you pay that much for it?” Lyle asked.

“No we wouldn’t,” Bev said.

“How about you Jack, would you?”

“No,” Jack said.

“Alright, if this opportunity was available for three generations of your family, what would you pay for that?” Lyle asked.

“It would probably cost $10,000,” Jack said

“Would you pay $9,999?” Lyle asked.

“No I don’t think so,” Bev said.

“Would you pay $7,500 for something like this?” Lyle asked.

“Ok Lyle, how much is it?” Bev asked.

“Before I tell you how much it is, I just want to remind you that when you become a member here, you’re going to be coming up here and I’m going to make sure that you have fun. I’m going to get Jack on a softball team. We’re going to get a good seat for you Bev to watch. We’re going to build some campfires, tell some good stories, and have a couple of drinks and you’re going to look forward to coming up here every weekend.”

“Ok how much is it?” Jack asked.

“If the price is right,” Lyle said. “Will you buy it today?”

“If the price is right,” Bev said.

“Is it about price or is it about fun? If I tell you the price, do you think you’ll have fun up here with me?”

“Yes of course,” Bev said.

“Jack would you be on our team?” Lyle asked. “We like to win all the time.”

Bev smiled. “I’m sure he would.”

“Would you really have time to come up here?” Lyle asked.

“We had time to drive 50 miles for a television,” Bev said.

“You’ve had fun today?” Lyle asked.

“So far, but we don’t know how much this is going to cost,” Jack said.

Lyle took a ballpoint pen and wrote on a blank piece of paper “$4,950.” He turned the paper so they could see the number. “Are you going to be members today?”

Jack and Bev looked at the paper and looked at each other. “That’s better than I thought,” Jack said. “That’s a pretty good price.” After a long silence Jack asked, “Is there a golf course nearby?”

“Christmas Mountain is less than three minutes away,” Lyle said.

Another long silence went by and Bev turned to Jack. “You know we’re just going to be giving money to our kids so let’s give $5,000 and have some fun with Lyle at the campground.”

“I was hoping you’d say that,” Jack said. “Who do we make the check out to?”

Lyle leaned forward with his outreached hand. “Welcome aboard.” He stood up and announced, “We have two new members, Jack and Beverly in Madison, Wisconsin.” Around 20 representatives and customers smiled and applauded.

Sales came naturally to Lyle and he was averaging three memberships per week. A campground owner wanted him to manage a resort in California, but Nancy wouldn’t leave Wisconsin. Instead of sharing his wealth with her, Lyle said he had to work weekends to make extra money. In reality, he spent the excess in Madison, bought cocaine, and hung out with girls from the Fox’s Den. Several months after becoming top salesmen, he met Nick at Mr. Robert’s for a beer.

“Nick there’s something I want to tell you that I haven’t told anybody.”

“You sure I want to hear this?”

“It’s nothing I’ve done in the past, it’s something I’m going to do.”

“So what is it?”

“I don’t want to tell you here,” Lyle said. “I want to go for a ride in the car.”

“Oh fuck, I don’t know if I want to hear this right now,” Nick said.

“When we finish our beers, let’s go for a ride.”

“Where are we going?”

“I want to talk to you in my car not in the bar.”

They pulled away in Lyle’s black 1979 Firebird.

“You ‘wanna get high?”

“Not ‘till we’re done talking,” Lyle said.

“So what’s the secret?”

“For ten years I’ve been thinking about what it would take to make synthetic cocaine.”

“*Synthetic* cocaine?” Nick squinted his eyes. “There’s tons of cocaine around here.”

“I’ve never found cocaine that matched the stuff the doc gave me when I got a new nose. The best stuff I ever got from Chicago or Florida doesn’t even come close to what Dr. White gave me,” Lyle said, “and I will have that experience again.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because everybody needs an accomplice to talk to.”

Nick looked down at the floorboard, lifted his head, and turned to Lyle.

“How are you going to do that?”

Lyle opened the console between them and pulled out sheets of white paper folded together.

“Before you open it, you need to know that no one can ever know I have this.”

He nodded his head and said, “Of course.”

Nick unfolded the papers, one layer at a time.

“You’re really going to do this huh.”

“I am, I’ve been dreaming about this for ten years.”

Stepping out of the legitimate, legal world Lyle became a fulltime underground chemist. He networked for the necessary chemicals and equipment involving various teachers, professors, doctors, and pharmacists. He purchased a few pieces at a time until a lab was ready to operate. The consistency and beauty of science fascinated him in anticipation of the psychological orgasm that would soon come to fruition.

Lost in the wonder of his new adventure, he didn’t realize unexplainable absences were mounting layers of distrust and stress to his relationship with Nancy. After spending a few weekends in Madison, she sat down with him in the kitchen.

“Why are you spending so much time in Madison?”

“Why what’s wrong?” Lyle asked.

“I was reading the paper and saw your name for a parking ticket saying that you live in Madison.”

“I gave them a Madison address so no one would know where I live.”

“Why would you care about people knowing where you live?

“I had a little trouble when I lived in Verona, but nothing’s going to come of it. I’m just being safe.”

“Ok, that’s all I was wondering. I just wish you’d spend more time with us.”

“I have to go to Madison this weekend, but I won’t have to go back again for a while. I’ll be here all next weekend, I promise.”

That Saturday, Lyle met Nick at Mr. Roberts and took a long draw from a thick mug of Wisconsin beer.

“So what’s going on Wildes?”

“You want to try some blow I brought today?”

“Is it that synthetic shit?”

“Not yet, but I have some pretty good stuff.”

“What are you doing in town?”

“You remember that girl that kept waving to us in that south side hotel?”

Nick frowned and set his mug on the bar.

“And we took that fat construction worker’s money because he couldn’t get it up?” Lyle asked.

“Oh fuck man, I can’t believe you’re still seeing those girls,” Nick said.

“Not really but I’m going to stay at her house tonight.”

“Are you fucking nuts?” Nick asked.

“Why?”

“Nancy knows you’re trying to make cocaine and you’re fucking around on her?”

“She doesn’t know anything.”

“What the fuck Lyle, the lab’s right in your back yard and you think she doesn’t know?”

“She thinks I’m making a diesel supplement for my Volkswagen so it won’t gel in the winter,” Lyle giggled.

“You’re playing with fire Wildes.”

Sunday morning Lyle was in bed with Tonya in an apartment on the south side of Madison.

“Is that girl still living with you in the Dells?” Tonya asked.

“Yes.”

“Does she know that you’re here with me?”

“No, not a chance.”

“So why are you living with her?”

“I don’t know why, but I’m really connected to her son. I’ve never liked kids before but there’s something about him that… I just love him. Maybe he’s the son I never had.”

“You met my kids and you didn’t get attached to any of them.”

“I don’t understand it, but I like him and I want to be his dad and help him understand the world.”

“Are you still going to come and visit me?”

“I don’t know “I told her I’d be home by noon. No worries, I’ll call you later this week. I forgot how much fun we have together and I promise we’ll do it again soon.”

After developing one of the precursors to cocaine, Lyle walked from his lab to the house wearing a black respirator mask. When he took the receiver off the wall, Nancy was in the living room reading. She put her book down and listened to Lyle talk on the phone.

“Hi this is Lyle. I’m all right.”

“Well, I have a little problem. The bread spoiling on the shelf and I can’t get it to rise.”

So you don’t think it’s cold enough?”

“Yeah it goes up and down a little bit. So what do ‘ya think, I have to stir it slower?”

“I can do it, I just need you to tell me what to do with the way I have it.”

“Yes the bread is spoiling like two hours later every time.”

He paced back and forth between the island and the kitchen sink.

“Ok I’ll do that. Yep. Goodbye.” Lyle hung up the phone.

With more than 70 flasks, several separators, magnetic stirrers, and more than 40 chemicals, Lyle had been working hard for months. He had sent more than half of his lab to Kansas City where an investor was going to help finish the project. Once synthesized, he would have enough material to sell millions of dollars’ worth of cocaine.

After a hard day of work, Nancy pulled in the driveway. She was drunk and furious.

“You son of a bitch,” Nancy slurred.

“What are you so pissed about?” Lyle asked.

“I just came back from that address that was in the newspaper and saw you’re long, dark haired beautiful girl friend.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Tonya,” Nancy said with pursed lips. “She’s beautiful. “She’s so beautiful.”

She walked to the house, Lyle followed her inside, and she poured a full glass of vodka on the kitchen counter.

“I’m going to have a drink and then I’m going over to my friend’s house and I want you out of here when I get back.”

“I think you’re too drunk to be driving anymore tonight,” Lyle said.

“Fuck you,” Nancy said.

Lyle saw the keys on the counter and put them in his jacket pocket. Nancy’s face was distorted from the harsh liquor.

“You fucker give me my keys.”

“You’re too drunk to drive,” Lyle said. “You’re not going leave tonight.”

“Give me my keys or I’m calling the cops.”

“What are you going to do? You’re going to call the cops and they’re gonna thank me for keeping you from driving drunk?”

In frustration she slammed the glass on the counter picked the receiver off the wall.

“Go ahead, call the fucken’ cops, what are they gonna do?”

Lyle walked downstairs to the garden level where Jed was sleeping in his bedroom. After a few minutes he walked upstairs, thinking she hadn’t called the cops. With a glass of vodka in her hand, Nancy sat on the couch crying.

“You fucker,” she sneered. “I wasn’t enough was I? Couldn’t have just settled for me.”

Before he could respond there was a hard knock at the door. “This is the police.”

Nancy opened the door and the officer saw that Nancy was drunk.

“You step over there,” the officer said to Nancy, “and you step outside,” he said to Lyle.

Lyle wasn’t worried because he knew the officer would see that Nancy was drunk and wouldn’t believe anything she said. Lyle was leaning on the hood of his car when the deputy came outside.

“Go in the house Mr. Wildes, your girlfriend wants to talk with you.”

Nancy was standing in the kitchen with her arms folded and her eyes pink from crying.

“Lyle either give me my keys or I’m telling him about the lab.”

“Fuck you Nancy. Do what you want.”

“Ok,” she said and walked outside.

After a few minutes the officer walked in the house. “I don’t know what’s going on here but if you just give Nancy her keys I can be out of here.”

“I don’t know where her keys are,” Lyle said.

Nancy pushed the kitchen door open as hard as she good. The officer frowned and walked outside. Less than 15 minutes later, the Dane County sheriff pulled in the driveway and arrested Lyle on “suspicion of manufacturing a controlled substance.” He spent the next few days in the Juneau County Jail, posted bail, and was court ordered to stay away from Nancy.

Since Lyle was friends with the Juneau County attorney, the case was turned over to the state because of a “possible conflict of interest.” The

assistant attorney general ordered the state drug task force to investigate allegations against Lyle.

They searched Nancy’s house and took Lyle’s .357 Magnum, .300 Savage, 20 gauge Remington semi-auto shotgun, .44 long barrel, .32 short barrel colt revolver, a .38 Special, and a 9 mm Glock. The task force also found the formula, most of the chemicals, and equipment. They couldn’t find enough evidence to prove Lyle was making cocaine so he was charged with “attempting to manufacture a controlled substance.” He pled not guilty and signed a waiver which postponed the trial. Jed asked for his dad until Nancy gave in and had Lyle pick him up on weekends.

A few weeks after posting bail, Lyle got an apartment in New Lisbon where he poured basements with Donnie. Lyle would often drink with Donnie his friend John Tally. One day after work, Lyle drove Tally a couple blocks from the bar and delivered a pound of weed for $1,500.

The following Monday, Juneau County called Lyle to pick up his guns. He was arrested at the courthouse and charged with “aiding and abetting in the delivery of a controlled substance.”

The state used the marijuana case for leverage, but Lyle refused to consider any plea agreement. He lost the cocaine trial and was sentenced to three years and six months in the Wisconsin Department of Corrections.

The Department of Corrections Admissions processes all prisoners throughout the state in Dodge County. A few hours after arriving at the

facility, Lyle was assigned a case manager who was a former classmate from Platteville. He sat in disbelief as the man skimmed his file.

"Huh, very interesting, you had a lab for manufacturing a controlled substance and you refused to cooperate with the authorities. It looks like they’re going to designate you behind the walls."

“I was convicted of *attempting* to manufacture a controlled substance,” Lyle said. “I never manufactured any illegal drugs. Therefore, I didn't have anything I could say."

"The convict attitude huh?" his former classmate laughed, "We’, versus ‘they.’ I'll deny all of this if ever asked, but if we can get you into a drug treatment program, you will walk out of here in less than two years. Participating in one of the D.O.C.'s programs is essential to justify an early release. Let’s see what works for you. You're not a drug addict, are you?”

“No,” Lyle said.

"Do you drink?"

"Yes, I've been known to have a few drinks a week.”

"That's good enough Lyle. I can get you into the 10 week program in Winnebago. You'll be behind the walls for about a year. This has nothing to do with you not cooperating with the authorities. Next, you'll go to Fox Lake for a few months. While you're there you will see the parole board, but you will not be granted a parole.

"Why not?"

"Everyone gets to see the parole board at certain stages throughout their sentence, it’s just a formality. It doesn't mean anything. For the last stage of your incarceration, you will be transferred to the drug program at Winnebago. There you will again see the parole board, but this time you will be granted parole upon completion of the program. If you keep a clean record, I can give you an approximate date for your release."

“How do you know my approximate out date?” Lyle asked.

“We don't evaluate each case. We have a formula that tells us our population flow. You will not go to the ten week program until you’ve give us some time. Incarceration is a business, you know we can't efficiently look at each case…” he laughed and leaned back in his chair. “That's just the way it is. After all, look where they designated you.”

Lyle was locked in a cell 23 hours a day with a concrete bed, sink, toilet, and a narrow window near the ceiling that he couldn’t reach or see out of. The door was solid steel and had an opening at eye level that could only be opened from the outside. There was a second opening where guards slid trays of food. For an hour each day, Lyle was allowed outside to a large fenced in yard with grass, pull up bars, and a narrow walking track. A wide ditch surrounded the track, fenced in by razor wire, and watched by armed guards. Around 100 inmates were roaming around the sunlit area. Lyle kept to himself and slowly walked around the track. As he circled the yard a tan, muscular man standing by the pull up bars yelled, “Hey Lyle! Over here!”

When he got closer, Lyle recognized the man as Richard Wheeler from Lime Ridge.

“What the hell Lyle?” Richard smirked. “What are you in here for?”

“Drugs, what are you doing in here?”

“They gave me life for murdering my wife.”

“Oh my god Richard, you shot your wife?”

“I didn’t. The guy said I hired him, but I didn’t Lyle. I didn’t kill her.”

“So why are you in prison?”

“They think I contracted the murder.”

Lyle looked at the ground a few moments and lifted his head smiling.

“You know I still remember when you were leaving black marks on Highway S with that blue two door hard top.”

“Yeah that Pontiac was the best car I ever had,” Richard smiled and looked up at the sky. “How much time do you have?”

“Four years.”

“You won’t be in here long.”

A voice came over several intercoms ordering the inmates back to their cells. Lyle sat on the concrete bed thinking about how different their lives were in Lime Ridge. He later heard that Richard was being punished for hiring a man who shot his wife in the face in front of their two daughters.

A few weeks after arriving in Dodge County, an officer slid open the eye level steel slot in Lyle’s cell.

“Pack up, you’re being transferred.”

“Where to?”

“Waupun.”

All of the jokes, rumors, and portrayals of prison he had heard throughout his life surfaced as he trembled in fear and worry.

“Wildes, come up to the door and stick your hands out!” the guard ordered.

He stuck his hands out of the steel door and they were cuffed. The door opened and Lyle was ordered to lean with his hands against the wall. With his ankles shackled, officers turned him around and locked his hands to a chain wrapped around his waist. Two guards led him out of the Dodge County facility to a white van with no windows in the back.

After a short, silent ride Lyle stepped out of the van with guards holding his arms on each side. They walked towards a massive, ancient looking stone wall that blocked out the sky. Two wide iron doors opened to an entrance with four stone archways sealed by thick black bars. As they walked ahead the iron gates slowly opened and then closed behind them. The guards led Lyle into a dimly lit, ten foot wide tunnel closed off by another stone archway. The fourth gate opened to a wide marble hallway illuminated by bright fluorescent lights. As the hallway curved to the left, bullet proof glass windows revealed a broad room with officers working at desks. One of the officers with Lyle walked up to the glass and pushed a button.

“We got one coming in,” the guard said, “Wildes.”

Another stone archway opened to a dimly lit concrete room that reminded Lyle of a medieval dungeon. The shackles were removed from Lyle’s legs and the chain was disconnected from his waist. An officer then led him down a short set of deteriorating wooden steps to another dimly lit tunnel.

“Follow this to South Unit. There’ll be someone at the gate waiting for you.”

He walked down the dark concrete tunnel, pockmarked from more than a century of age. A guard waited under a stone archway.

“Wildes!” the guard shouted.

“Yes.”

“What’s your number?”

“170037”

The rattling of iron keys was followed by the clanking of iron bars. The constant hum of voices was accompanied by loud metallic pangs, which reverberated from wall to wall and became entangled with a distant harmonica moaning the blues. The iron doors opened to a 400 foot concrete warehouse with a five story building enclosed inside.

“Wildes go to the third range, cell 311,” the guard said.

Lyle walked to the third landing of an iron staircase that smelled like an ancient basement. Each tier was lined with cramped, dimly lit cells. There were two tiers above and two below that could be seen through grates in the iron walkway. He passed narrow cells closed by iron bars, each one with a prisoner. The inmates he did pass were quiet, sleeping, or reading. As Lyle approached 311, a guard behind him at the end of the tier yelled, “Inmate, step in!”

The guard pulled a lever and the bars of the cell slid open. Lyle stepped in, the bars closing behind him. The cell was roughly five feet wide by eight feet long. It was dark and cold, the concrete walls marked with damp holes. A stained porcelain toilet and a dingy sink were against the right corner of the cell, both yellow from age. An iron bed was hinged against the left wall. When it was folded down there wasn’t enough room to walk or use the toilet. It had a spring frame that sagged in the middle from years of use.

He sat on a torn plastic mattress lying over the springs. Looking through the bars of his cell he could see the imposing warehouse wall thirty feet from the tier railing. The windows that lined the wall across from Lyle’s cell didn’t admit enough light to read by. A black and white chord hung from the ceiling with a dim 40 watt bulb. A few hours crept by when an inmate wearing a khaki uniform walked in front of Lyle’s cell.

“Here’s your sheets, blanket, and pillow,” the inmate said forcing linen through the bars. “I’m the tier tender. I pass out movement passes. I have access to the phone and I can get it in order if it’s available. I make rounds regularly so don’t ever yell for a guard to do something for you.”

He covered the thin dirty mattress, pulled up a wool blanket, and closed his eyes. When he opened them, it was nighttime. The warehouse had bright lights that cast shadows through the bars in Lyle’s cell. He could hear inmates below and above him crying, talking, whispering, and praying. He listened to a deep, penetrating voice in the distance.

“God, my appeal is before the judge. Please god, touch the heart of the judge and have him rule in my favor. If you do this, I promise I will never break the law again. I’m so sorry for what I’ve done. Please forgive me and break the chains that hold me in prison. I ask this in Jesus’s name. Amen.”

The deep, thick voice gave way to the constant murmur of other inmates. A higher pitched, younger voice yelled, “Let me out of here! You fucking idiots, let me out of here. I’m going crazy! I can’t take this anymore. I need to get the fuck out of here!”

Another voice shouted, “Lie down and shut up! Your day is coming. We all want to get out of here.” Brief laughter and commotion scattered around the tier. As the night wore on, the noise softened and Lyle could now hear a man’s desperate whispers.

“Heavenly father, please protect me from harm,” the man trembled. “Protect me from violence and hatred. Please, heavenly father protect me behind these walls. Lift my fear and give me peace.”

Lyle fell asleep listening to man’s troubled prayers.

The next morning the tier tender walked by Lyle’s cell. “Excuse me,” Lyle said.

“What’s up?”

“How do I get some books? Is there a library? And if there is how do I get there?

“Here I’ll give you a pass,” the tier tender reached through the bars. “Fill it out and I’ll give it to a cop to sign and then we’ll see if we can get you to the library.”

The following afternoon the tender told Lyle he would be let downstairs to get a library pass. A few minutes went by and a guard yelled, “Lyle! Step out!” The bars slid open and Lyle walked downstairs. A guard gave him the pass.

“Walk through the tunnel you came in here from and go outside. Once you get outside, walk straight ahead and you’ll come to the library.”

Outside the warehouse, 50 foot walls surrounded the compound that blocked out the morning and afternoon sun. To Lyle’s right, five concrete buildings were in front of a fenced in running track and recreational yard. Four towers rose above the wall with armed guards watching over the entire prison. He walked to the building furthest from the cell block. After a guard demanded to see his pass, Lyle checked out books and was given another pass to return to the cell block. An industrial building was behind the library where inmates manufactured all of the license plates for the

state of Wisconsin. Amongst the other buildings were arts and crafts, the cafeteria, and the gym.

Words from the book “The Profit” and “Being and Time” allowed Lyle to ignore the nightly torments of the mentally ill. He was reading in his cell one afternoon when a voice whispered his name.

“Get in bed and pretend you’re asleep,” the man ran away before Lyle could see who he was.”

Lyle unfolded the bed and got under the covers. The hair on his neck stood straight up. An unusual calm made time creep slower than usual as the faint aroma of gasoline filled Lyle’s nostrils.

“No!” a voice shrieked, piercing the silence. Lyle heard a splash followed by a hollow roar. A warm amber glow danced across the wall in front of Lyle’s cell, distorted by the tier’s bars and iron grates. Violent screams filled the warehouse. Desperate wheezing and heavy coughing faded until silence again consumed the tier. The thumping of heavy boots and rattling keys echoed through the cell block as guards rushed into the cell. A siren was blaring throughout the warehouse as a smoldering gurney passed by Lyle’s cell.

Days later Lyle overheard the tier tender talking about the incident.

“I’m not sure…” the tier tender said. “I heard there were two balloons full of gas thrown into the guy’s cell. I don’t know what he did. They haven’t caught ‘em yet.”

It was a stark reality for Lyle to be in a place where people were willing to kill. He wondered how it was even possible for a fire to break out in such a secure facility.

Inmates were assigned jobs for the daily maintenance of the compound. Lyle was making $23 a month in the kitchen when he heard the arts and crafts clerk was being transferred to another prison. Lyle talked to the supervisor of the arts and crafts department where he was hired as the new clerk. Cleaning up the art room and checking out supplies was a much better job than cleaning food trays for more than a thousand inmates.

From the arts and crafts room, Lyle saw a unique world of creativity. He watched many prisoners develop talents they were unaware of before being incarcerated. He was impressed by the quality of music, literature, and art that was produced by inmates.

The building had a large open space with a series of small rooms where inmates could play guitar and harmonica. There were slanted drawing tables, pottery wheels, and a kiln. The walls were dark and old, devoid of color or decoration. The art supervisor was an attractive woman in her early 30s who worked at the prison because she wanted to make a difference. She was an artist who taught inmates drawing, sketching, and perspective.

A few weeks after Lyle got the job, the supervisor was granted approval to paint a mural on the largest wall of the arts and crafts room. A 19 year old prisoner named Billy insisted that he should paint the mural. Billy was known by other inmates for his beautiful nature paintings. Billy explained to the supervisor that he wanted the mural to be a first person perspective of the ocean and a bay from the Starboard side of a sailboat. Despite his impressive paintings, Lyle doubted the young man would be able to complete the 30 foot mural.

The art supervisor ordered all the paints, brushes, sandpaper, scaffolding, and plastic. It took a week to outline the scene Billy imagined on the wall. He was so focused that he seldom took time for lunch. Lyle was overwhelmed by Billy’s imagination and creative talent.

Most inmates savor every moment they get to look at an attractive woman. When the supervisor walked next to the wall, examining Billy’s outline, she never caught his eye. He would lie on the floor to stretch his arms, shoulders, and legs after bringing out the detail of each square inch. She put plastic behind him so no one could bother or comment on his work.

Lyle had been calling Nancy in hopes she would bring Jed to visit. He argued that Jed needed know his dad was safe. After a few months she finally agreed, but only if Lyle promised not to cause a scene.

The visiting room had 10 tables that held around 50 inmates, visitors, and staff. Nancy and Jed were sitting at a bench when Lyle walked in. Seeing

his dad in prison filled Jed’s face with sadness. Nancy looked very attractive. Her short, tightly-fitting yellow dress drew stares from other inmates and guards. Lyle gave Nancy and Jed hugs and sat between them.

“I never intended it to end up this way,” Nancy said. She put her head in her hands and began to sob. Lyle knelt down in front of Jed.

“I’m really glad you came today Jed.”

“Me too dad,” Jed cried.

Lyle pulled his khaki collar open and said, “See Jed, daddy’s not hurt. I’m going to get out of here and we’ll be together again. Nothing’s going to happen to me.”

“Okay,” Jed said, wiping tears from his eyes.

Crying even harder, Nancy got up and went to the bathroom.

“Jed, can I tell you a few things about prison?” Lyle asked.

Jed’s face lit up. “So let me tell you a couple things about where daddy works. I’m a clerk in arts and crafts, so I get to meet some really unique people.”

“Like who dad?”

“Some of the people play harmonicas some make colorful beaded jewelry. Some do ceramics, there’s a guitar player and there’s this really unique guy named Billy.”

“Does he play the guitar daddy?”

“No he’s a unique artist. He’s drawing a giant painting on one of the walls in the arts and crafts room and Jed, it’s going to be nine feet high and 30 feet long.”

“What’s he drawing?”

“He’s drawing a mural on the wall that’s of you and me sitting on a boat looking at a beautiful shoreline. He’s got stores in the background with tables sitting out in front of the stores. The floors where the tables are, come out like this,” Lyle pulled his outstretched hands forward. “The floor drops down to the beach where the water comes rolling in. Billy set up a bright spotlight to be the sun setting behind us as we’re watching it. People’s scarves and hair were blowing in the wind, droplets of water were being pulled along the floor, and the sun cast shadows, all in the perspective Billy made.”

“Wow,” Jed exclaimed. “Can we see it dad?”

“No,” Lyle smiled. “We can’t go in Jed. Maybe you can see a picture of it. There are some news reporters who might be coming down for the unveiling. Everyone just loves it.”

Nancy came out of the bathroom exhausted from crying. She sat next to Jed and ran her hand through his hair. A guard stepped in front of them, “You’re time is up Wildes,”

“So is everything ok in school?”

“Yep,” Jed said.

“Dad will be out soon,” Lyle said with tears forming in his eyes.

“Yep,” Jed said.

“So you stay happy,” Lyle said.

Jed hugged Lyle and said, “I love you Dad.”

“I’ll see you when you get out,” Nancy said as she grabbed Jed’s hand.

As they walked away, Lyle was enraged about Nancy turning him in.

The veil was pulled from the mural and an audience of news reporters, inmates, and prison staff stared in disbelief. They were impressed that such a young man, and a prisoner at that, could paint such a realistic scene. The mural was alive with detail. Lyle could almost hear the water splashing against the shoreline. Beautiful men and women walked along the beach, shading their soft skin. A man was sitting at a table reading behind the backdrop of colorful stores, streets, and houses. Another man stood at a table waving at the audience. Billy explained how the breeze blowing across the surface of the water was the same speed through a lady’s hair. He even mentioned the time of day and talked about mural from a cultural perspective. The newspaper took pictures of his paintings and everyone praised Billy for his artistic talent.

As the days wore on Billy seemed more anxious than usual. His attention span was short and he became easily frustrated. When someone complimented his work, he seemed irritated. A few days after the unveiling, the supervisor was going from table to table making suggestions to each inmate about their drawings.

Billy was sitting off alone in a daze. It only took a few minutes for everyone to notice he was masturbating. He stood and ran around the room stroking his erect penis, making animal-like sounds, and shouting gibberish. All the other inmates sat frozen in disbelief. The supervisor pushed the button on her radio and signaled for help. Billy ejaculated into the air. He stood there frozen as his energy faded, suddenly embarrassed. When the guards came into the arts and crafts room, Billy was sobbing, his body limp, drained from exhaustion. The guards dragged him across the floor as if he were a dead body. After collecting herself, the supervisor left the room and the guards came back to return the inmates to their cells. Billy was the talk of the compound for months. Lyle never saw the supervisor again.

Lyle sat in his cell wondering how the best and the worst could appear in one man. He recalled the stories Billy had told him about his childhood. How his parents would blow pot smoke into their dog's face until the dog stumbled and laid down, only able to look up in confusion. How his parents would blow pot smoke in his face when he was a toddler to make the world distorted. They would also feed him beer and LSD so they could laugh when he tried to walk. He remembered laying on the floor unable to get up, while his parents sat on their sofa laughing. When Billy came to prison as a teenager he was confused about which state of consciousness was reality. Billy told Lyle he didn't know “the right way” to act in any social situation. Looking down at deteriorating concrete floor wondered, “Did a genius get thrown into a human junkyard?”

As his case manager had predicted, Lyle was transferred to the medium security prison in Fox Lake where he could see the sun the whole day. Although he was assigned a cellmate, living conditions were much cleaner than at Waupun. There were also fewer guards and more opportunities for recreation. Fox Lake had a large running track, baseball diamond, and a schooling facility. There were no towers or armed guards and there were tables where inmates could spend time with visitors. Lyle spent much of his time at Fox Lake crocheting, lifting weights, and working in the kitchen.

Since he had never lifted weights, the gym clerk, Nels Carlson, coached Lyle. They soon became friends and workout partners. Lyle often traded

filter less Camels for time in the gym. They passed a lot of time learning about each other’s families. At the library, Lyle read an article about the mega-mall in Edmonton, Canada, and envisioned building a similar structure in the Dells.

He spent hours doing research and found that more than a million people had visited the dells, but most of them during the summer. Lyle read that more than five million had visited the mall in Edmonton and realized if he could control the weather in the Dells, it would year round destination.

In 1987, the number one reason tourists come to the Dells area was for its natural beauty. Lyle decided any structure built in the Dells would have to match its majesty. He envisioned a glass dome hundreds of feet in the air, covering a huge area of the landscape.

The time had now come for Lyle to go in front of the parole board. They denied his parole, but sent him to a drug treatment center in Winnebago where he completed the program in two months. Lyle again saw the parole board and was this time released. He moved to Milwaukee, about 125 miles from Nancy and Jed. She didn’t say much when Lyle picked up Jed on the weekends. Jed was the only reason Lyle didn’t take revenge on Nancy.

The 13 months spent in maximum security prison and the six months in medium security only reinforced Lyle’s attitude towards dealing drugs. He returned to an illegal lifestyle, certain he wouldn’t get caught this time. A month after his release, Lyle was arrested because a urine test revealed traces of cocaine. He was held in the House of Corrections on the south side of Milwaukee and was released after a few days.

Lyle saw the Mitchell Park domes in every light. He saw how the morning sun glanced off them, how the midday sun pierced through them, how the evening sun set behind them, and how they glowed from within. As Lyle stood in their presence, he imagined thousands of people walking through his dome in the Dells. Lyle told Jed about his dream and Jed thought the idea was "so cool." They often talked and visualized about the mega dome in the Dells. Every weekend they searched the area for the right location.

“Dad, we better not tell mom or anyone at school what we’re talking about, they’ll never believe us.”

“That’s true Jed, we won’t tell anyone.”

Lyle discussed his dream with Jed from the very beginning. Jed took Lyle’s last name and considered himself a Wildes. He was the core of Lyle’s life and his true business partner. In every spare moment, Lyle and Jed talked about the dream. They travelled many miles talking, looking, wondering, and asking questions. After meeting so many people that doubted his dream, Lyle realized that only a child had the imagination to visualize such a magnificent project.

Lyle was taking a different way back to Jed’s house one afternoon when he saw a for sale sign, "43 acres for sale by owner," with a number to call. Jed asked, "Dad, is that big enough?"

"That's a great question Jed. Is 43 acres enough for a project the size we’re discussing? Well, the mall in Edmonton is 137 acres. So, we need 100 more Jed.”

"Now what Dad?"

"If he wants to sell 43 acres maybe he'll sell 100 acres."

Driving amongst sandstone cliffs and jagged rock formations, Lyle wondered if he should call the number, “Is this a sign that I should begin developing my dream? I know if I don't start somewhere it will never get underway and if it never gets under way, it will never become a reality.”

Lyle rehearsed what he would say and called the number from the sign.

"Hello, Mr. Timm speaking."

"Hi Mr. Timm, my name is Lyle Wildes and I have a dream. I would like to use some of your land to develop it. Would you be interested in hearing more about my dream?"

Mr. Timm chuckled and asked, "Where are you calling from?"

"Downtown Dells."

"Have you checked out the property?"

"I drove passed it, but I didn't feel comfortable driving on your property.”

"Why don't we meet at Perkins restaurant?" Mr. Timm suggested.

They sat across from each other in a large U shaped corner booth. Mr. Timm was about 50 years old with a round mid-section. He looked tired.

“Tell me about your dream Lyle.”

I want to put a clear dome over a large mass of land and build a city under it. I want to help make Wisconsin Dells a destination as well as a retirement area.”

Mr. Timm leaned back and took a deep breath. "That's quite a venture. Do you have access to that kind of money?"

Lyle leaned forward, “I don't have it today, but when I find the right property, I will get it.”

"So you think my property is it?"

"I think so. It has the right access from the interstate. It’s on the outskirts of the Dells, yet close enough to utilize the city's services.”

Mr. Timm took a sip of his coffee and looked over his glasses. "How do you intend to generate that much money?"

"I intend to ask someone who is interested in helping develop my dream. Someone who sees the future of the Dells the same way I do. Right now, I need to find the perfect spot and get access to it."

“All you have to do is come up with the money and you can have access to my property.”

Lyle stroked his beard and nodded. “I have a unique deal for you.”

“I’m not interested,” Mr. Timm said. “I don’t want any unique deals. I just want to sell my property. I don’t want to get involved with anymore projects.”

"Great, all I want to do is buy it.”

"Well, do we have a deal?"

“What kind of down payment are you looking for?”

"I think that ten percent is fair.”

“$25,000 is a substantial piece of change just to hold the land for a year,” Lyle said. "Can I make you an offer?"

"What kind of an offer do you have in mind?"

"I will not argue with you about your price. If you will let me give you a small down payment and then you give me six months to raise the rest of the money. If I can't generate the money in that period of time, I will give you another small down payment if you agree to extend the period for another

six months. However, you can increase the price of the property by 10 percent after the first six months for giving me additional time, if I need it, to raise the money."

"I'll give you ten days to ask someone who believes in your dream," Mr. Timm laughed.

"Mr. Timm, you know we will both win if I can put this project together.”

"Sure, but I just want to sell my land today.”

"Here is my proposal for you, but before I present it, I would like to ask you a couple of questions."

"Go for it," Mr. Timm said with a smirk on his face.

"How long have you had the land listed?"

"I'm the broker, plus I own the land. I've had the sign up about two years now. It seems that the Dells are developing south and not so much this way, to the North."

"That's what I am thinking, plus, you have had to pay the taxes on this piece of property each year, right?”

"Yeah...but..."

"I'll give you $1,000 as a down payment and you give me six months to raise the money."

"You're crazy Lyle. That's not even one percent. Why would I do that?"

"Because no one is going to buy that property in the next six months.”

"How do you know?"

"Do you even have any nibbles on the property at this time?"

"Well no..."

"Well then, let me pay some of the taxes and you give me six months to find investors.”

"When would I get the thousand dollars? Or do you have to ask someone for that too?"

"Today, right now, I have $1,005 in my pocket. I even have enough to buy our coffee. I came ready to deal."

Mr. Timm sat back and laughed, "I don't believe you think I would ever consider tying up that much real estate with only a $1,000 down."

"Mr. Timm, listen, the deal gets better.”

"Really?” Mr. Timm raised his eyebrows. “How much better?"

"If I haven't generated the necessary funds in six months you can keep the $1,000 and I'll give you an additional $500 and you can increase the price by 10 percent, but then I ask that you give me an additional six months. At the most, this would give me a full year to find investors. If I don't generate the money in that length of time, the property goes back to you and you keep the fifteen hundred dollars."

Mr. Timm got up from the booth. "I will have to talk it over with my wife before I can give you an answer."

"That's fine, but let me give you the $1,000 today and you give me a receipt, if your wife doesn't object then we can draw the papers up later this week. Would that be okay?"

After a moment of silence Mr. Timm looked at Lyle. "You're really persistent, aren't you? I will write you a receipt, but I still have to talk it over with my wife.”

A few days later Mr. Timm called Lyle.

“My wife’s on your side Lyle, we have the papers ready to sign. You want to stop by our house?”

“No let’s meet on the property.”

Mr. Timm, his wife, and Lyle met to sign the papers on the hood of Mr. Timm’s pickup. When Lyle had the signed papers he asked, “Would you be interested in hearing about another good offer?”

"An offer on what?" Mr. Timm asked.

Lyle was leaning on the hood of Mr. Timm’s pickup truck overlooking the interstate from his new property.

“There’s a beautiful home on Rocky Arbor Lake. The one with a garage, a breezeway, and a 20 by 20 stained deck. Do you have that one listed too?”

“It’s listed, we own it,” Mr. Timm said. “The renters left last fall and we haven't been able to rent it out since. Once school begins again this fall, we anticipate renting it to a school teacher.”

"How much are you asking for rent?"

"We have been collecting $650 a month.”

"May I make an offer?"

"What's on your mind Lyle?"

"Well, since I'm going to be looking for exclusive investors, I should have a nice house to meet them in, don't you agree? Since I have some very nice furniture, I would like to make an offer on that house.”

"What's your offer?”

"I will move thousands of dollars’ worth of furniture into your house and pay you $350 a month, starting a month from today. I'll agree to rent it for one

year. If I haven't lived up to my agreement with the land, I will move out and leave you a house full of expensive furniture."

Mr. Timm backed away from the front of his pickup. "I'll be crazy to do it at that price."

"But Jimmy,” his wife said. “We haven't had any income from it for over a year now. At least someone would be living in it and we would have $350 a month to pay the taxes and at $350 a month we could put the rest on our loan payment."

"Honey, whose side are you on here? You're not interested in renting that property for that, are you?"

"If Lyle doesn't live up to his agreement we would have a house full of nice furniture,” his wife said. “Besides, it would probably rent faster with nice furniture. It seems Lyle is willing to risk everything. Remember when you had a dream honey, we should at least give Lyle a chance."

Mr. Timm looked at Lyle. "What kind of furniture do you have?"

"I have cork lamps, brass and glass end tables, a beautiful kitchen set, china hutch, an elegant bedroom set, and a very nice love seat and sofa.”

"Where are they?"

"In a warehouse near Lodi, we can go look at it right now if you want."

"No, that won't be necessary.” Mr. Timm sighed and looked at his wife.

"Good,” Lyle said. “You write up the agreement and I'll go get the furniture. If you give me the key today, I will have everything arranged so when you come over with the papers you can see the furnishings. I know you will like it, but if you don't, I'll move everything out. How's that for confidence? Do we have a deal?"

"Let’s do it Jim," his wife said.

Mr. Timm stood for a while. "I think this hot sun has affected our thinking honey. I don't believe we're renting our home on the lake for $350 a month without any cash up front or even a security deposit. Have we gone crazy?"

“Can I have your attention for just a moment?” Lyle walked so he was standing between Mr. Timm and his wife.

"Listen folks, I'm not a con man, but rather a man with a dream in which I am willing to put everything on the line for an opportunity to succeed. If I can't generate the money needed to pay off this property and home, how will I ever be able to generate something like a hundred million to develop my dream? All I'm asking for is this one opportunity. If you work with me on this, I'll give you my word that I will never take advantage of your kindness, compassion, and good business sense.

"What good business sense?" Mr. Timm asked.

"Do we have a deal?" Lyle asked.

Mr. Timm’s wife put her arm around her husband. "What do you think honey? Let’s give Lyle a chance to build his dream."

"Lyle, do you promise not to cause us any problems?” Mr. Timm asked. “We really don't want to get involved in anything negative at this point in our lives. Will you promise us that?"

"Not knowing what the future will hold, I assure you folks that if I fail I will pick up my pieces and leave without any problems to you."

"That's good,” Mr. Timm said. “We're going to trust you. The house is yours for one year."

Overwhelmed by the way his dream was unfolding, he settled in his new home in search of investors. Lyle was sitting on his deck overlooking Rocky Arbor Lake when the phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Lyle? This is Nels.”

“Wow, you’re out?”

“I just got out three days ago. I’m living with my mom. I told her all about you, we want you to come down to Racine so we can take you out for dinner.”

“Sounds good Nels, I can do it Friday night.”

“Friday night sounds good.”

At a small, first floor house in Racine, a short elderly woman greeted Lyle at the door.

“Let me get Nels for you.”

She went to a door leading to the basement, “Nels, your friend Lyle is here.”

“Send him down,” Nels shouted up the stairs.

Muscles were bulging through Nels’s t-shirt. There was a small gym set up in the corner of the concrete basement. “Looks like you’re still lifting weights.”

“Not really, I’ve just been working, but I see you have been.”

“So this is where I live for now,” Nels said. “My mom has all this set up for me. How do you like it?”

“It’s better than Fox Lake.”

They walked up stairs and Nels introduced Lyle to his mother.

“Nels has told me a lot about you,” the elderly woman said. “He really respects you Lyle.”

“Awww… that’s so nice. I really respect your son.”

“That’s why I wanted to invite you out tonight,” Nels said. “I want you to meet my sister. Would you be interested in meeting my sister?”

“Yeah, why not?” Lyle said.

“Ok mom we’re going to go and see Lynne.”

They drove a few miles to Lynne’s house where she was sitting on her living floor trying to get her VCR player to work. She had light brown hair, brown eyes, and an hourglass figure.

“Lynne, this is Lyle,” Nels said.

Lynne stood and turned around with an inviting smile. “Nels has told me a lot about you. It’s really nice to finally meet you Lyle.”

“Nels told me he has a really great sister, now I know what he means. I’m really glad too that I finally got to meet you.”

Lynne smiled and said, “I’m sorry I’m not all dressed up, I don’t know where you want to go out to eat, but I need to get ready.”

“I don’t think it matters what you’re wearing,” Lyle said. “You’re beautiful enough to go anywhere.”

Two weeks before the six month deadline was up, Lyle got an appointment with Jack and Bob Van Metre, two highly respected investors in Madison. A young woman opened the door for Lyle in a stretched white limousine. The driver had shoulder length brunette hair and a sensual stroll that sent eyes up and down her beautiful body. She was full of energy.

"Good morning Mr. Wildes. My name is Terri. I'll be your driver today."

“Thank you Terri, nice to meet you.”

She rolled down the main window that separated the cab from the rest of the limo.

“This is my first time escorting a group for an entire day.”

“This is a pretty unique group of guys,” Lyle said. “I hope they don’t harass you too much.”

She laughed, “I’ll probably enjoy the attention. I assure you, I can handle myself.”

Terri pulled the limo into a cul-de-sac near the capital, parked behind a row of cars, and opened the door for Lyle. He ran to a building and up a flight of stairs to the Van Metre Law Office and retrieved Jack and Bob. They brought along John Gresens, another potential investor. These three gentlemen had no idea that Lyle’s deadline was only two weeks away.

As the limo pulled away, Lyle said, “I want to thank all of you for taking the time to come and look at this land with me. This is one of the most beautiful parts of the Dells. This is going to be a really special day for all of us.”

“Ok Wildes, it’s time to tell us what you’re really up to in the Dells,” John said.

“The reason I wanted you to come is that the Dells is in need of transition and we will be the ones to initiate that transition.”

“What’s the transition?” Jack asked.

“My research tells me that 60 percent of the people who end up in the Dells on Friday did not know they were going to go Thursday.”

“And why is that?” Bob asked.

“That’s because weather is a major factor for people going to the Dells. There’s no place for them to go when it rains.”

Lyle spoke into the intercom. “Terri take exit 92 through the Dells.” He looked at Jack. “I’m going to show you what I’m talking about.”

The limo passed outdoor water slides, roller coasters, and open faced stores. It was raining and there were very few people on main street.

“See how no one is outside?” Lyle said. “On a sunny day there would be thousands of people at each event.”

“So how are you going to change that?” Bob asked.

“If there was a huge indoor area with waterslides, stores, and hotels, people would come hear regardless of the weather. I’m going to put all of these key things under one huge roof the piece of property we’re looking at today.”

“How much do you think that would cost?” Bob asked.

“More than $100 million.”

“Isn’t that an awful lot of money to spend in the Dells?” Bob asked. “No one else has spent that much in the Dells.”

“That’s because no one else noticed the potential but me,” Lyle said. “Tommy Bartlett told me that anyone who spends more than five million

dollars in the Dells will go broke. He said the Dells can’t support it. I told him, ‘No disrespect Mr. Bartlett, but that’s old thinking.’”

“So what makes you think this will work?” John asked.

“They built one of these in Edmonton, Canada, hoping to get 400,000 people to come to that desolate town,” Lyle said, “The first year they got 900,000 because weather was the controlling factor. Just imagine, right now the Dells are only attracting a very small portion of the market. Within one tank of gas away there are more than 30 million potential customers and only one point five million came last year.”

Lyle spoke into the intercom, “Terri I want you to turn on H and take a right on Old Sauk Road.”

“So this is the property we’re looking at?” John asked.

“Yes,” Lyle said, “This is the beginning of it.”

After ascending Old Sauk Road, Lyle asked Terri to turn right at the entrance to a hayfield camouflaged by low hanging branches with thick leaves. Terry stopped the limo at an open field overlooking the interstate and opened the door.

The rain had stopped but the grass was slippery and wet. The stood in the midst of trees, birds chirping, and frogs croaking, all in agreement that it was “a beautiful piece of property." They finished their cigarettes and walked towards the limo. Lyle knew if their excursion ended, they would never invest in the property. He stepped in front of the door.

"Hold on gentlemen, we're going to take a walk down this ledge to the cliffs below that overlook a valley."

They laughed and said, "Some other time Lyle, but not today."

"You know how difficult it was to arrange a time when all four of us could get together? We have to do it today."

"Why?”

"Because you must experience the wonder, beauty, and peace that reside in the midst of these trees and cliffs, the beauty of the Dells is the number one reason why so many people come here, and now, I want you to experience it with me. If you aren't overcome by this experience, I will pay for cleaning your clothes."

"I am wearing an expensive suit and a costly pair of wing-tips,” Jack said. “You don't expect me to climb down into that wet, tangled mess dressed like this do you?"

"Yes I do gentlemen. You should have come here dressed for such an event if you were serious. After all, that is why we came up here, right?”

“How do we get down there?" Bob asked.

"Just follow me.”

“I’m staying up here,” John lit another cigarette. “Someone has to stay up here to call a doctor in case someone has a heart attack.”

Everyone laughed and followed Lyle into thick woods. They trekked down a tree covered hillside where they descended into the plush and rich forest of rural South Central Wisconsin. Their hands clung to bushes, twigs, and small limbs to keep from falling down the hillside. They stopped in awe at sheer sandstone cliffs overlooking an old river bed. There was a majestic island centered in the middle of the river bed with a huge pine tree that stood as a sentry on guard. It was a moment of pure wonder. Lyle realized it had happened. These men were caught in the beauty, wonder, and peace surfacing in the midst of pristine nature. "I would love to stay here all day, it is so peaceful," Jack said.

"How are we ever going to get back up out of here?" Bob asked.

"Don't worry,” Lyle said. “We’ll go out an easier way.”

"Why didn't we come in that way in the first place?" Bob asked.

"If we had come in the other way,” Lyle said. “You would have missed all this beauty."

Climbing out of the forest, the investors looked like they had lost a major battle. Their shoes were covered with mud and burrs were stuck everywhere. Jack and Bob complained as they picked off hundreds of burrs. They got back into the limo and Terri drove off the property.

“Let’s see this house on the lake that you rented Lyle,” John said.

When the limousine pulled into Lyle’s driveway, every curtain flew back in his neighbors’ houses. The investors were impressed by the house, unaware that Lyle had stolen the expensive furniture years earlier during a staged robbery. Sitting on the deck, Lyle offered to fix them a drink. They sat among towering pines as the sun reflected off the surface of the lake. No one said a word for some time until Bob asked, “Lyle can we meet with the realtor today?”

He walked into the house and called Mr. Timm, "My investors are asking to meet with you."

"When?"

"Now.”

Lyle, Mr. Timm, and the three others met at the Brother in Laws bar in downtown Dells.

“We’re interested in the 43 acres you have for sale through Lyle,” Jack said to Mr. Timm. “You give me your final price and we’ll say yes or no.”

Mr. Timm looked at Lyle in disbelief and asked Jack, “When would you be paying for this?”

“We’ll give you a check today.”

Mr. Timm pulled a pen from his pocket, wrote $185,000, and slid the paper across the table. Jack looked at Bob and said, “I think we have a deal.”

Bob pulled a checkbook out of his inside coat pocket and wrote the full amount to Mr. Timm. After handing him the check Bob asked, “So how much is the house Lyle’s renting from you?”

Mr. Timm looked perplexed. “Are you serious?”

“Just give us your bottom number Mr. Timm,” Bob said.

Mr. Timm wrote $95,000 on a piece of paper and another check was cut.

“Have we bought enough property for your project?” Jack asked Lyle.

“Yes sir, thank you very much.”

“Well, we’ve got everything done here,” John said. “Let’s go.”

They drank champagne in the limousine on their way back to Madison. Since Jack and Bob didn’t get high, Lyle and John dropped them off and spent most of the night discussing the miracle that took place.

Lyle invited Lynne over to celebrate. He had paintings of naked women throughout his house, their extremities disguised by shading and long hair.

"Are these paintings of people you know?” Lynne asked.

“I don’t know any of the women in these paintings.”

“Would you be willing to replace those paintings?"

"Why do you ask that Lynne?"

"What if someone else wanted to live here with you?”

"Lynne, who are you thinking might want to live here with me?"

"I might want to, if you asked the right question."

Lyle asked Lynne to marry him and introduced her to his investors. Jack immediately liked her and during one of their visits Jack said, "Lyle and Lynne, Bob and I want to give you all but $20,000 of the value of your house for your wedding present.”

Lyle and Lynne sat speechless.

“We’re going to budget $25,000 for you to get the property cleaned up for architects to look at it,” Jack said. “You have a month to get it ready.”

Lyle and Lynne enjoyed a quiet evening with wine and a candle lit bath. Lynne was the only woman he had ever been faithful to. He was now developing a legal lifestyle, but not fast enough. Lyle would often disappear for an entire day without explaining his absence.

If she became too stressed over Lyle being gone, he would come back with a convincing story. She wondered what Lyle did when he was away, but

trusted him with her future. They wrote out more than 100 invitations and planned their wedding and reception for June 10, 1989.

An architect worked with Lyle and the investors to map out the topography of their land in the Dells. After making some phone calls to various landscaping and construction companies, Lyle stopped at John Gresen’s office a block from the capital.

“I have a friend who is getting some cocaine from California that’s supposed to be excellent,” Gresens said.

“Who’s that?”

“His name is John Sebert. He owns the Blue Fox bar in Sun Prarie and needs to make some quick money to pay off some overdue liquor bills. He’s on his way here with a sample.”

“Can we buy half a pound?” Lyle asked.

“I’ll ask him when he gets here.”

A meticulously dressed man showed up at Gresens’s office.

“John Sebert, this is Lyle Wildes. He’s my new business partner.”

“Nice to meet you,” Sebert said with an outstretched hand.

“So let’s see what you got.”

Sebert cut four lines of cocaine on the table. “Wildes you go first.”

Lyle snorted two lines with a $100 bill, “It’s not the best I’ve ever had, but it’s good.”

After taking a line Gresens asked Sebert, “So Lyle would like to pick up six ounces. Can you handle that?”

“I’d need $5,000 up front to do that.”

“I don’t have the cash on me,” Gresens said. “How about you Wildes, you got any cash on you today?”

“How do I know I’m going to get it back?”

“I’ll guarantee the loan,” Gresens said. “Sebert will get you back, if something happens I’ll give you the money.

Sebert took off his Rolex for collateral, Lyle went to his car, and put $5,000 cash on the desk next to the gold watch.

May 24, 1989, Lyle was waiting at Gresen’s office at 7:30 p.m. when Sebert called saying he was going to be an hour late.

“What’s that about?” Lyle asked.

“I don’t think it’s anything to worry about,” Gresens said. “He just said he’s going to be an hour late.”

Another hour went by and Sebert called Gresen’s office, Lyle answered the phone.

“Hello?”

“I’ve got your money and the plywood.”

“I’m here, just come on by the office.”

“No, I’d rather meet you at the Shamrock.”

Lyle thought it was strange to meet at a pub, but agreed, “I’ll be there in 15 minutes.”

The Shamrock was less than two blocks from Gresen’s office. Lyle ordered a shot of brandy and sipped it from a chilled, shallow glass. Two shabbily dressed men walked into the bar, one came through the front door and the other came in from the back. Sebert walked in wearing a grey sweat suit as the two men sat on opposite ends of the bar from Lyle.

“Hey what’s going on buddy?” Sebert asked.

“How are you?” Lyle asked, he noticed Sebert was nervous.

“I’m fine, c’mon let’s go in the bathroom.”

“No let’s go out back.”

“No, can’t we just duck in the bathroom? I have to get going.”

As the bathroom door closed Sebert pulled a grey box from under his sweatshirt and shoved it into Lyle’s belly. “Here’s your drugs man,” Sebert hastily said as the box fell to the floor.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Lyle exclaimed.

The door swung open behind them. “This is the police! Get your hands behind your back.” An officer rushed into the bathroom, pushed Sebert into a stall, and shut the door.

Before Lyle could turn around his hands were cuffed behind his back and a gun was pressed against his head. A second gun tapped the left side of Lyle’s head and it fell into the sink along with a sliver badge.

“My gun fell in the sink!” a voice yelled.

“We’ve got him cuffed, don’t worry.”

As the three cops pulled Lyle out of the bathroom Sebert yelled from the stall, “Wildes! What’s going on?”

Lyle was silent in the back of the squad wondering if Gresens had anything to do with his arrest.

SECTION THREE

*“There is a dim light shining behind the prison walls that can reveal some insights on this matter. I have spent more than a decade in federal prisons in all levels; maximum, medium, low and (at present) minimum (camp), which has offered me "field research" which could not be duplicated from outside the walls and fences of these institutions. I have met and interacted with literally thousands of prisoners from all races and social backgrounds - and have observed firsthand the despair and rage our current approach to corrections brings, on the men themselves, their families, and anyone connected with "the system." I have heard men pray, cursing their abandonment and isolation, as they cry themselves to sleep. I have seen men attempt and commit suicide, utterly convinced that life retains no meaning and redemption is impossible. I have seen men wilt from hopelessness. I have seen men gain 250 pounds in two or three years, eating themselves into morbid obesity, believing that food is their only comfort. I have met killers, true, cold blooded killers that society must be protected from.” –* Lyle.

From a cell on the seventh floor of the Dane County Jail, Lyle could see construction workers scattered around Gresen’s office. He used his one phone call to talk with Lynne.

“Hello?”

“Hi Lynne.”

“Hi Lyle what are you doing? Why aren’t you home?”

“I’m in jail Lynne.”

“It’s not for drugs is it?”

“It is, but they tell me I have an arraignment tomorrow and I’ll find out what’s going on.”

“Ok,” Lynne said through a choked up voice. “I’ll call Jack in the morning. Do you want me to call Helma and Jed?”

“I would really appreciate it if you would do that. I’m really sorry Lynne.”

“Goodnight Lyle.”

The next morning, a guard told Lyle that he had visitors. They brought him to a small concrete room with bullet proof glass separating two tables with a phone on each side. Jack sat down on the other side of the glass with another man in a suit. Lyle and Jack picked up the receivers.

“What were you and Gresens thinking?” Jack asked with a red face. “You’re in serious trouble Lyle. I don’t think they’re going to let you bail out.”

“I thought it was going to be quick and safe Jack.”

“If you needed the money why didn’t you talk to us?” I can’t represent you because I’m on a continuous retainer with Gresens. This is my friend Marty Hanson and he’s agreed to represent you.”

Lyle didn’t know what to say other than, “Thank you.”

“Right now you’re charged with a conspiracy to purchase a controlled substance with the intent to distribute, Marty said. “And there’s probably more charges coming. There’ll be an arraignment this afternoon and I’ll represent you at that hearing.”

As they got up to leave Jack said, “If I was in your situation Lyle, Marty’s the attorney I would want. He’s the best defense attorney there is.”

They left and Lyle was brought back to his cell. A few hours later he was taken to the Dane County Courthouse for his arraignment hearing. Marty met him in a holding cell next to the courtroom.

“Here are the charges they got you for,” Marty said reading from a stack of legal documents, “A Conspiracy to Possess with Intent to Distribute Cocaine and Unlawful Use of Communication Facility to Facilitate the Commission of Possession with Intent to Disturbed Cocaine.”

“What does that mean?”

“Federal guidelines put you somewhere between 20 and 25 years in prison. They’re going to ask you if we want to plead guilty or not guilty. As your attorney I’d recommend you plead not guilty to this.”

“What do you think it’s gonna’ cost to bail me out?”

“Probably over a million dollars.”

An hour passed and a police officer brought Lyle into the courtroom.

They pled not guilty and a trial date was set. He was transferred to the Rock County Jail pending his trail. Lyle’s wedding day came and went. He didn’t hear anything more from Jack or Bob.

Lyle learned he wasn’t the only one the feds snared the night of his arrest. While pacing during hour of recreation, two young men called him over.

“Are you Lyle Wildes?”

“Yeah who are you?”

“My name’s Kenny and this is my friend Elder. Sebert’s agent busted us before they got you.”

Lyle’s eyes squinted. “So you were the guys that Sebert’s friend was bringing the drugs into town for?”

“Yeah but Sebert’s friend turned out to be an agent,” Kenny said.

“I gave Sebert $5,000 to get me drugs that night,” Lyle said.

“He couldn’t do that after he got busted with us,” Kenny said.

“Oh, so that’s why his handcuffs weren’t even warm yet before he set me up to get out of his mess,” Lyle said.

“I wish there was a way we could get Sebert.”

“I don’t even know him,” Lyle said.

“Sebert always calls me when he wants to make some quick money,” Kenny said.

“Really…”

A guard announced over the intercom that their hour was up.

“We’ll talk again Lyle, we’ll figure this out and get that little fucker.”

“I appreciate your help Kenny.”

Walking back to his cell, he thought about asking Kenny to testify that Sebert never actually had any drugs.

Marty visited Lyle the following week.

“Wildes I ought to quit your case today.”

“Why? What happened?”

“Did you talk to *anyone* about your case?”

“Oh yea I wanted to tell you I talked with Kenny and Elder, they were involved with…”

Marty interrupted, “Now they want to take you in front of grand jury and give you more charges.”

“How can they do that?”

“One of the guys you talked to is going to testify that you told him you were involved in other criminal activity. If you lose a grand jury trial you could get life without parole. I told you not to talk to anyone about your case.”

“I don’t even know those guys and I didn’t tell them anything about my case or any other crimes.”

Marty looked down in frustration. “I don’t know. We’ll have to find out when it is. Call me next week. We’ll probably have an answer about the grand jury.” Marty left the visiting area.

Thoughts of Lynne, their wedding, his dream, and Jed vanished. Lyle’s days were filled with worry, thinking about the possibility of dying in prison. After seven long days, he called Marty.

“Marty Hanson.”

“Marty this is Lyle.”

“Lyle I’ve got good news. The grand jury has been called off. They don’t think there’s any validity to Kenny’s story, but I tell ‘ya if he didn’t have such a long criminal history they could’ve indicted you.”

“So what does that mean for Kenny?”

“He’s going to get at least 25 years Lyle. They’re making sure you guys never cross paths in prison. They made a note in your file so that you’ll never be in the same facility together.”

Lyle thought about beating Kenny to death if he ever saw him. “I hope that mother fucker gets life.”

“Your jury trial is set in three weeks. It’s very important that you look clean because we have a really weak case. I’m telling you that coming in the door. This is all about convincing the jury that you didn’t intend to buy drugs. You know anyone who can get you a suit or some nice clothes?”

“Yeah, I’ll have Lynne bring some dress clothes.”

“It’s absolutely important that you don’t look like a drug dealer in that courtroom. This isn’t going to be a very complicated trail. It’s going to be all about getting them to believe you over the evidence.”

“That’s great because I didn’t do a fucking thing.”

“Alright, I’ll talk to you later Lyle.”

Through his pinched mouth, a short and stocky guard with narrow eyes called out names for the federal court agenda. After passing through a few names, the guard announced, "Wildes, get ready for your big day." He smirked at Lyle and walked the corridor, flipping pages on his clip board.

With a haircut and a good night sleep, he looked fresh, innocent, and respectable. Lyle was escorted to the bright, lacquered courtroom where Federal District Court Judge John Shabazz presided over jury selection. The jury pool of about 30 carefully studied him as he walked in. Lyle gave them a courteous nod and walked past the prosecutors to the far end of the room where Marty was sitting at a table with pitchers of water. He glanced at the three men who wanted to convict him and whispered to Marty.

“They have three prosecutors?”

“It’s just one prosecutor,” Marty murmured. “They have a witness expert, a paralegal, and the prosecutor.”

The jury was a mixture of young, middle aged, and elderly men and women.

“Man they sure look uptight,” Lyle said. “It doesn’t look like they like me very much.”

“The country is very much in an anti-drug mode today. It’s going to be hard to find a jury that’s open minded about drug dealers.”

Shabazz walked through a door behind his bench and seated himself. He was in his 60s with thin, white hair. He looked stern and impartial as he slid horned rimmed bifocals to the tip of his nose. After a few instructive comments and administrative matters, Shabazz called for jury selection to begin.

There were a couple who were favorable towards drugs, but the prosecutor had them removed immediately. After around an hour and a half, the pool was narrowed to 12 plus an alternate. The jurors that Marty and Lyle wanted were all eliminated. The jury now consisted almost entirely of people who were favorable to the prosecutor’s questions. Before the trial started, the prosecutor spoke with Marty.

“Marty we want to close this case today. We’ll offer eight years to Lyle if he pleads guilty.”

Marty turned to Lyle and said, “Lyle they’re offering you eight years.”

“They can take their eight years and shove it up their ass.”

Marty denied the plea agreement and the prosecution laid out their extensive collection of witnesses. They called arresting officers, the drug task force, federal investigators, the undercover agent, and Sebert to the stand. Marty cross examined each witness, but the jury seemed captivated by the prosecutions expertly weaved story. The prosecutor attempted to prove Lyle’s nefarious intentions and motives by illustrating his criminality to the jury. After the last witness was cross examined, the prosecutor played a tape recording of Sebert saying, “Here’s your drugs man.”

Before the closing arguments, Marty called Lyle to the witness stand.

“Can you tell us how you got involved with John Sebert?” Marty asked.

“I got involved with Sebert through a friend I was working with on a project that would’ve created thousands of jobs for the state of Wisconsin. We would’ve had the biggest dome in the state right in the Dells.”

Shabazz interrupted Lyle, “This has nothing to do with the case Mr. Wildes. Does the defense have any other witnesses?”

“We have no other witnesses your honor,” Marty said.

The jury was enthralled with Marty’s closing arguments, but looked like they felt sorry for him. The deliberations ended and the jury was given their case. When they began leaving the courtroom Marty said, “There were no cracks in their case Lyle but don’t worry, we’re going to be okay. You never know how a jury’s going to vote.”

After six hours of deliberation Lyle was taken back to the courtroom.

“Has the jury reached a decision?” Shabazz asked.

“We have,” the foreman read the verdict. “We find the defendant guilty on count one. And on count two, we find the defendant guilty.”

Shabazz set a date for sentencing and court was dismissed. Lyle was handcuffed and taken into custody. They walked him through the federal building to an inside garage where a van was waiting to take him back the Rock County Jail.

The van door opened. Lyle was shocked to see Sebert sitting inside. When the van arrived at Rock County, officers locked Lyle and Sebert in the same holding cell and took off Lyle’s handcuffs. Lyle looked at Sebert still handcuffed and wanted to beat him to death, but realized if he attacked Sebert he’d get another sentence for assaulting a federal witness. After a short time, security took Lyle back to his cell.

Over the next six months, Lyle and Marty fought and lost every sentencing issue. The day of sentencing, Lyle was taken in front of Judge

Shabazz. Marty argued a sentence of no more than 80 months. The prosecution was asking for a sentence between 240 and 300. Judge Shabazz sentenced Lyle to 96 months, but the prosecution argued that it was statutory law and the judge had to follow the mandatory 20 to 25 year sentencing guideline.

Shabazz amended the sentence and gave Lyle 264 months. Marty wrote on a piece of paper, “twenty-two years.” Lyle looked at Hanson’s writing and thought, “22 years. I'm 43 years old. That would make me 65 upon my release.”

The marshals handcuffed Lyle and turned him facing Helma and Lynne who were sitting in the back of the courtroom. "Well Wildes, by the time you get out of prison your elderly mother will be dead, your gorgeous fiancée will be married to another man, and your son won't speak to you. More importantly, your life will be wasted in a prison cell. Is there anything that you would like to tell us? You see, something can make your sentence go away if you're willing to help us. Is there anything you want to say?"

Lyle looked at his mom and Lynne. He saw their bodies trembling as they cried tears of agony, loss, and defeat and was filled with confusion and hatred. He looked at the marshal, "Yeah, let’s get these 264 months behind us."

The Marshal grabbed Lyle’s arm. "Okay wise guy, let's see how tough you are in prison." They were pulling Lyle out of the courtroom faster than he could walk. Shackles were cutting into his ankles, but he didn't make a sound. He wasn't going to give them any satisfaction. They returned him to the seventh floor of the Dane County Jail.

A couple days later, Lynne visited Lyle. She was wearing a tight pair of blue jeans and a blouse that revealed her tummy when she raised her arms. She had a purse hanging from a strap over her right shoulder. Lynne wore designer framed glasses that were a perfect complement to her soft smile and sparkling eyes, which were red from crying. She showed signs of exhaustion and worry. As she walked toward Lyle her hips gently moved the way he remembered from moments of intimacy. She picked up the phone and said, "Hi Lyle."

As their eyes met, Lyle knew she had cried hers dry. She put the phone between her ear and her shoulder freeing her hands, putting her palms against the glass between them. Lyle slowly lifted his heavy hands to meet hers. He could feel the warmth of her hands through the thick glass. Their eyes remained locked as she spoke, "Lyle, I came to tell you I love you, but I can't do this time with you. I gave you my hand and you dropped it. I gave you my heard and you broke it. I believed in our hopes and dreams and you shattered them all. I don’t see any reason to stay by you. I’ll keep in touch with your mother and I wish you the very best."

Energy drained from his body. Unable to hold his hands up any longer, they gradually fell lifeless. Somehow, he found the strength to say, “I am so sorry, honey.”

He now felt the stark reality of his actions and the devastating affects they had on Lynne, Nancy, Jed, Jack, and Helma. In some ways they had all invested some part of their life in him.

Tears welled up in both of their eyes. She hung up the phone and pulled her purse strap over her shoulder as she rang the bell for permission to leave. When the guard released the lock, the door snapped open. She looked back over her left shoulder and blew a kiss from her left hand. This was the last time he saw Lynne.

Lyle wanted to scream, but had no voice. Something had been pulled from his soul. He turned away from the window utterly defeated. His body was shaking. The next few days passed in a smearing blur. It was Lyle’s first experience with complete and total helplessness.

The following Friday Lyle was strip searched and given clothes with no pockets. He was handcuffed, shackled, and transported to the 76th truck stop on the north side of Madison. U.S. Marshals transported him by bus to downtown Chicago where all federal prisoners are processed in the Midwest. The Metropolitan Correctional Center (MCC) is a triangular shaped, 28 story skyscraper with an exercise yard on the rooftop.

As the bus backed into the MCC garage, armed guards stood on both sides of the internal walkway. Lyle was moved from the bus to an elevator where he was taken to the 23rd floor. The elevator doors opened to a fenced in area with around 60 bunks lining two of the three walls with security cameras scattered everywhere. Food was delivered so that there was no reason for inmates to leave. The elevator was controlled from a remote location. There was no way out.

Lyle was immediately concerned about his safety, sleeping amongst so many inmates of different security levels, but the worse thing he saw was an inmate smashing his head against the floor. He sat up in his bunk every night worrying about his safety. The image of a man stabbing him to death in his sleep haunted Lyle for months until he was designated to the federal prison in Milan, 450 miles from his family and friends.

The stories about Milan began to filter into Lyle’s ears. Milan was said to be loaded with gang members from Detroit, DC, and Chicago. Lyle’s priorities were instantly lowered to the second level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. He had food, air, water, and clothes but was so disturbed by his lack of security he couldn't think straight.

The day he was to leave MCC, he went down the elevator to a holding cell awaiting his departure. Lyle and six other inmates were herded into a small holding cell. A white man in his fifties walked over to Lyle.

"I hear you're headed for Milan.”

“I guess so,” Lyle said.

“You’ll love it there. It’s a good facility. I’m on my way back there from federal court. The name’s Bill, how much time did you get?”

“22 years.”

“That’s why you’re going Milan. You’ve got a lot of time to do. You should get a job at the Chapel. It’s the best place to work on the compound besides .”

“What’s UNICOR?”

“They have two to three shifts everyday making furniture for the state and federal government, but I recommend working at the Chapel. Father Dinger is a great person to work for, you won’t make as much money as UNICOR, but it’s a great place to serve a long sentence.”

“Is that where you work?”

“Yeah, but I’m going to be released in six months. Maybe I can get you my job.” The cell door opened. “Talk to me when you get to Milan.”

Lyle’s legs were shackled. His hands were cuffed under a black box holding his arms and wrists stationary. He felt like he was being treated like

a killer. The ride to Indiana was long and exhausting. The next four weeks at Terra Haute were the slowest in Lyle’s incarceration. He was locked down 24 hours a day in solitary confinement, waiting to be transferred to Milan. As the days crept by, Lyle’s fear about Milan grew.

The day of departure, a group of about 30 inmates were herded into a secured garage and loaded onto a bus. Lyle was shackled, cuffed, and transported to the Terra Haute International Airport. As the bus pulled up, Lyle watched an F-16 pull out of a nearby hangar, fire up, and roar out of the airport. A 747 Conair came into view and landed. The end of the runway was blocked with smaller planes sitting crossways on the airstrips.

Lyle sat in the bus for half an hour as the F-16 circled the skies around the airport. Inmates were lined up outside, shivering in the cold December afternoon. The marshals checked and rechecked the numbers on their human inventory making sure they had the right cargo. They were even checked a third time before being loaded on the Con-aircraft. Inmates sat black boxed next to each other along two rows of seats. A guard stood with an assault rifle protected by a black iron cage at the back of the plane. Other guards were stationed throughout the plane. Lyle was surprised by the show of force by the federal government. After an hour in the air, the plane landed with thick fog covering the Detroit Metropolitan Airport. Lyle then rode the bus 50 miles to Milan, Michigan.

The federal prison at Milan was an overwhelming sight. Double fences, gun towers, razor wire, and pickup trucks patrolled the perimeter of the 3,000 by 1,000 foot wide prison. As Lyle sat in the bus waiting, hatred filled his mind. He hated Nancy, his attorney, the judge, the prosecutor, the guards on the bus, and the new war on drugs that enhanced his sentence from what would have been 33 months to 22 years.

As the bus pulled closer to the prison Lyle could see a 25 foot brick wall that was nearly a century old. The bus passed under a 50 foot gun tower

with a guard who could see for miles in every direction. Lyle and the other inmates were held as guards with loaded guns formed an arching circle from the bus to the prison entrance. Several trucks took position behind the standing guards and a few dogs were added to the already imposing brigade. Lyle assumed the heavy security meant he was amongst some very violent people.

When it was time for prisoners to exit the bus he felt a fear he had never experienced in his life. He was bracing to face dangerous, violent men. Looking down at his hands he thought, “You’ve laid stones, moved homes, held Jed, helped others, and were basically kind, but today I am asking you to kill a man if necessary.”

He looked at his feet and realized they too had taken him on many journeys. “Now I need to know that you’re willing to kick a man in the guts, testicles, or even his face.”

Lyle harnessed the darkness within himself and his confidence grew. Fear was no longer present, as it had been replaced with complete and total apathy for his new surroundings. He looked out the driver’s window at the menagerie of prisoners walking around the compound. Some of them had long hair and beards. Others had tattoos and huge muscles. Many of them walked with their shoulders hanging as if fatigued.

Lyle looked down at his hands and feet and said, "It may be here at Milan that we die, but I will not be extorted, raped, abused, or mistreated. I will literally use you to fight, to kill if the need arises. Are you ready to drip with blood, if necessary?" Lyle looked at his overgrown finger nails and imagined human skin caught under them, fighting for his life. Lyle was shocked that such an experience could bring forth this side of him.

The bus parked with its grill tightly against the prison wall next to the admissions door. As the door opened inmates were ordered to walk slowly, silently, and in single file into the prison.

Lyle was one of the last inmates to walk through the thick iron doors into a large room with holding cells lined along the left wall. All 30 inmates were led into the first of three cells where they stood wearing shackles. Inmates were called out in groups of four in alphabetical order. Since Lyle’s last name started with a “W,” he was one of the last to be called. He walked out of the large holding cell into a wide hallway where his shackles were removed. He went into one of two smaller holding cells with benches and bars instead of walls. Once inside a smaller holding cell, inmates were called one at a time to be assigned their housing unit.

After a couple hours a Mexican man, no older than 19, was brought from inside the prison to the intake building. Lyle watched the young man through the bars of the holding cell. A lieutenant in his 50s with a white, button up shirt walked through the door and approached the cell Lyle was in.

“You guys need to quiet down!” the lieutenant yelled. “This isn’t a god damned saloon.”

“You’re the one who should shut the fuck up old man,” the young Mexican yelled from the bench.

The lieutenant picked up the young man by his shirt and punched him in the ribs. The young man fell to the floor and spat at the lieutenant. The lieutenant kicked the young man in the ribs, a loud groan filling the air as he rolled over onto his handcuffs.

“Any of you have a problem with this?” The lieutenant shouted to the inmates, and walked off. After a few minutes two guards picked up the young man off the floor and carried him away.

After hours of waiting Lyle was finally called. He walked out of the holding cell, across the hall, and to a counter where a guard put down a cardboard

box with personal hygiene items. Lyle picked up his belongings and was escorted out of the intake building.

A pair of tall iron doors opened to a 25 foot high wall lined with barred windows. Century old brick walls spanned a 450 foot square foot area with grass, sidewalks, and two tall trees. The massive walls made up two and three story buildings that lined the yard. Lyle was taken past a three story concrete building with narrow, barred windows to a two story portion of the wall. A large iron door opened to “E” unit.

The building was full of stale cigarette smoke and had gray iron walls with black ceilings. An officer sat at a desk, chewing tobacco, and watching the news under bright florescent lights.

“We’ve got one for ‘ya,” the officer who brought Lyle in said.

“Working late tonight huh?”

“Yeah we had 30 come in today.”

The officer at the desk shuffled through some papers and looked at Lyle.

“What’s your name?”

“Wildes.”

“What’s your number?”

“02915-090”

The officer ran his finger along a sheet of paper and said, “You’re in room 111.” He pointed to his left. “Right through that door and on the right, an orderly will get you sheets and a blanket.”

Lyle walked through the door down the hall to cell 111. He opened the heavy iron door to a cramped cell with a toilet, sink, and table. To the right of the room were two bunks. A massive, nearly seven foot tall Cuban man

was lying on the bottom bunk. The broad concrete façade of a guard tower took up most of the view through a small barred window in the back of the cell.

“Hi,” Lyle said.

The enormous man nodded his head. “Hi.” He got up from the bunk and shook Lyle’s hand.

“How are you?” Lyle asked.

“No speak English.”

An orderly walked to the cell and gave Lyle sheets, a blanket, and pillowcase. Lyle made the top bunk and put away his soap and toothpaste and crawled into bed. Sleep eluded him most of the night. He could hardly fathom being locked up in that cramped cell for 22 years. After dozing off for a couple hours, he was awakened by a loud voice that filled the entire prison, “The compound is open for movement!”

The Cuban was lying on his bed already dressed.

“What’s going on?” Lyle asked.

The Cuban stood up and walked out of the cell, “Chow.”

Lyle scrambled to get his shoes and socks on. He stepped into the iron hallway and followed a few inmates outside across the compound to a large cafeteria with yellow cement block walls. Two long lines were formed to get food on both sides of the kitchen. Lyle stood for a few moments and noticed one line was mostly black inmates and the other was mostly white. He walked to the back of the white line as casually as possible. After a few minutes he picked up a tray and got bacon, eggs, and potatoes. He was surprised at how decent the food was compared to the county jails and holding facilities he’d been in.

Along the back wall of the cafeteria, four officers and a lieutenant were talking to each other. A few others in street clothes were standing amongst them. Hard plastic tables with steel frames were bolted to the floor with four short, round stools protruding underneath the tops. Lyle sat at one of the many empty tables, eating the best meal he had in nearly a year. After finishing, he walked back to “E” unit and watched an officer lock the outside door. An announcement then blared over the loudspeaker.

“The compound is now closed. All inmates report to your assigned areas.”

“What does that mean?” Lyle asked an officer.

“There’s no movement on this compound,” the officer said. “There are only ten minute movements once an hour.”

Lyle went back to his cell and went under his covers. After about an hour another announcement came.

“The compound is now open for movement.”

Lyle left his cell and walked up to the officer’s desk.

“How do I get to the library?”

“Ask an inmate,” the officer said irritated. “But you have to sign out everywhere you go.”

He signed the clip board and walked outside, talking to the first inmate he saw.

“How do I get to the library?”

“That’s where I’m going,” the inmate said. “Just follow me.”

Lyle followed the inmate to an open set of solid steel doors to the right of the intake building. He went through a short brick hallway to a wide sidewalk between a 30 foot razor wire fence and a long brick building.

Towards the end of the sidewalk Lyle could see a large recreation area beside the library. He walked through one of four large glass doors into the educational complex with intersecting hallways and two solid steel doors. Halfway down a 200 foot hallway, Lyle walked into a small library. There were two wide wooden tables between bookshelves and the library clerk desk.

A tall man Lyle’s age was pouring over a thick law book with papers and books stacked around him. The man looked up at Lyle.

“Did you just get to Milan?”

“Yesterday,” Lyle said.

“Who was your judge?”

“Shabazz.”

“Oh I’ve read all of Shabazz’s cases. He’s a notorious judge. How much time did you get?”

“22 years.”

“Oh fuck you got more time than I did.”

“How much time did you get?” Lyle asked.

“I got 17 and a half. You must’ve had sentencing issues.”

“I did.”

“What were the issues?”

“The consolidation of prior state convictions,” Lyle said.

“That’s a popular issue today because of new federal guidelines. How much were you enhanced?”

“10, 15 years.”

“That’s worth fighting for,” the man said. He stood up from the table. “The name’s Jimmy Rumler, I’m going outside for a cigarette. We’ll talk again.”

The next day after breakfast Lyle walked to the guard’s desk. “You don’t have to sign out anymore,” the guard said. “You’re on a callout sheet.”

“What’s a callout sheet?”

The guard handed Lyle a clipboard with a stack of names. “This is the callout. It shows where you’re supposed to report to. Today it says you’re to attend Admission and Orientation at the chapel.”

“Thanks.”

Most of the 30 other new inmates were already in the Chapel when Lyle arrived. The A and O consisted of five hours sessions for three days straight. Each department on the compound instructed the new arrivals on everything from commissary to punishment. Staff from the kitchen, landscaping, maintenance, auto mechanics, and education, were there to explain their departments. On the last day of A and O, Father Dinger gave a long, boring presentation on religious services. After he was done, Lyle introduced himself to the Father.

“Father Dinger?”

“Yes.”

“My name is Lyle Wildes. Did your clerk Bill ever mention me?”

“Yes he did,” Father said. “As a matter of fact I was going to put you on callout so you just watch the callouts and we’ll talk then.”

A couple days later Lyle was transferred to “F” unit that was aged as “E” unit but bigger. “F” was two stories with four large open pods that were lined with bunks. Lyle was assigned to a second floor pod with 40 bunks, each separated by open iron walls. After supper, Lyle waited for a movement and walked to his new bunk in “F.” The small area had two short tin lockers. A rough looking man was sitting on the bottom bunk when Lyle came in. The man was in his 40s but looked like he was 80.

“I see they finally sent a guy my age,” the man slurred through his tobacco stained gums. “I’m sick of dealing with all these young ‘mutha fuckers.”

Lyle paused, studying the man’s sunken face and was relieved his bunkmate wasn’t a threat. “I’m Lyle.”

“My name’s Vern. They call me the Quaalude Man.”

“Why’s that?”

“Cause I have a script for ‘em.”

“Do you have a prescription for them in here?”

“I wish I did but those mother fuckers took them,” Vern said. “But man I got meh dick wet with those fucken ‘qualudes man. Teenage girls sure don’t give a fuck about me… once they hooked they’ll do anything. Good way to spend my retirement.”

Lyle turned, put his things away, and made his bed while Vern laid down, rambling on about teenage girls and Quaaludes. It was hard for Lyle to imagine anyone, especially a woman, finding any redeeming qualities in

this man, other than the fact he was a human being. Lyle put in a request that day to be moved to a nonsmoking unit.

The following Monday Lyle was on callout to the chapel. He walked into religious services where Father Dinger was sitting in a large office lined with book shelves full of religious texts.

“C’mon in Lyle, have a seat.”

Lyle sat in a comfortable chair next to Father.

“So why do you want to be a clerk?”

“I want to be clerk because I used to teach college level philosophy and I’d like to be in this kind of atmosphere. I want to be a clerk because I’m not on some kind of religious mission, and I could be impartial to all of the religions practiced here.”

“Who’ve you been talking to?” Father asked.

“Bill, he told me you have problems with clerks servicing other religions.”

“We have a little of that here, yes. What religion are you?”

“I don’t have one.”

Father Dinger sat back in his chair, poking his cheeks with his fingers, breaking his dentures loose and biting them back in. After clicking his dentures in and out a few times he said, “Well I can’t tell you today, but I’ll think about it. Watch the callout.”

Lyle thanked him and went back to his pod. Vern was lying on his bunk with a filter-less cigarette, slowly exhaling a blue cloud from his crooked nose.

“Boy if I was out right now I’d have one of those teenage girls sucking on my cock.”

A voice shouted across the pod, “You sick old fucker.”

Vern’s wheezing laugh was cut short by a series of deep curdled hacks. When he was done coughing he said, “Fuckin right sick, real sick but that’s what I’d be doin’. Oh man those young soft lips, waiting right there for a Quaalude. If I live through this hell hole that’s what I’ll be livin’ for, those young dumb bitches just beggin’ for a Quaalude.”

“Vern I don’t want to hear you talking about teenage girls, Quaaludes, or sex anymore,” Lyle said sternly.

“Oh fuck,” Vern said. “You don’t want to hear about that? Nothin’ better in the world.”

“It just sounds too sick for me. You know I’m trying to get a job at the Chaplains office and those aren’t the kinds of things my mind should be filled with right now.”

Days passed and Father hadn’t called for Lyle.

“They assign you to the kitchen yet?” Vern asked. “Ya know that’s where those cocksuckers will put ‘cha if you don’t got no job Wildes.”

“This inmate said he was going to get me a job at the chapel, but it hasn’t happened yet,” Lyle said.

“Well fuck,” Vern said. “Did you get that ‘mutha fucker anything from the ‘fucken commissary?”

“Why would I do that?”

“Fuck,” Vern grumbled. “You don’t know a fuckin’ thing about prison. Don’t you know you have to sweeten the cock sucka’ up if you want to get anything done in this ‘fucken place?”

“What does that mean?”

“You can’t get anything done in this fucking place if you don’t pay ‘fur it. You go to commissary tomorrow and get him a jar of Folgers, some

cookies, a couple of packs of fucking cigarettes, and probably a ‘fucken protein shake too, that fucker, and you see how fast you get that ‘fucken job Wildes.”

Lyle found out Bill was in “G” unit and went to find him the next day. After breakfast, Lyle went to the commissary building next to the cafeteria. He bought a jar of Folgers, a bag of Oreos, and three protein bars. Lyle crossed over to the modern part of the compound towards “G” unit. Lyle asked an inmate leaving “G” to find Bill. Bill came out and Lyle swiftly gave him the food, knowing it was against the rules for inmates to give anything of value to each other.

“Bill, get me the job.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Bill walked inside.

Lyle was on callout for the Chapel the next day. He walked into Father Dinger’s office.

“Lyle I’m having you assigned to the Chapel.”

“Thank you very much Father.”

“However, I’m going to assign you as an orderly. You’ll be sweeping, mopping, and buffing my floors every day.”

“I’ll be glad to do it. It will be much better than working in the kitchen.”

“We’ll see how you do.”

After buffing floors for a few weeks Father Dinger called Lyle to his office.

“Lyle c’mon out here let’s take a look at these floors,” Father said walking out of his office. “Now let me ask you something. You think these floors look better or worse than when you started?”

“You want me to lie or tell you the truth?”

“Well, I hope you’re a better clerk than an orderly. I’m going to have one of the short-timers polish the floors.”

“So what are you saying Father?”

“I’ve been watching you and I think you’ll make a good clerk. It’ll be nice to have someone in here that isn’t pushing their beliefs on other inmates. C’mon let me show you where you’ll be working.”

Father Dinger walked to a small office next to his. It had a desk, a tin locker, and a half door with a counter. There were two other clerks sitting at the table working with typewriters. Lyle worked seven days a week preparing and signing out religious materials to inmates practicing 21 different faiths. Lyle’s duties included keeping records of the number of religious services each month, the inmates that attend each service, and the total hours attended by inmates during the month.

On his first day of work, Lyle unfolded a glossy piece of paper from his shirt pocket that he had carefully torn out of a magazine. The paper opened to an advertisement for summer dresses. Two gorgeous women were shown laughing and smiling with wind blowing through their hair. They were skipping down a white sand beach with full length silk dresses hugging their beautiful bodies in the sun.

It had been nearly a year since anyone visited Lyle. Nancy wouldn’t bring Jed to visit him and he was feeling disconnected from the outside world. One lonely Saturday morning he made a collect call to Helma. He picked up the receiver and dialed the number.

“What is your name?” the operator asked.

“Lyle.”

“Hello?” Helma asked.

“You have a collect call from Lyle will you accept the charges?”

“Yes I will.”

“Go ahead sir,” the operator said and disconnected from the call.

“Hi Mom.”

“Hi Lyle how are you?”

“I’m just really sad.”

“I’ll bet you are,” Helma said. “Have you heard from Jed

“I talk to him every week, but Nancy doesn’t want to bring him to visit me.”

“How’s he doing?”

“He really misses me,” Lyle said. “It’s really tough on him.”

“I know I shouldn’t say this to you now, but you have no idea what it’s like to have your youngest in prison for so long, and so far away that you can’t even visit him.”

“I’m going to beat my case mom and get out of here.”

“I hope you do,” Helma’s voice weakened. “I hope you do, and when you do get out I hope you’ve finally learned your lesson.”

“I know they’re charging you a lot of this call so I’m going to let you go.”

“I love you,” Helma said. “Take care of yourself and call me next weekend.”

The Chapel clerk’s chair gave Lyle a unique perspective on religion and its function at Milan. He watched hundreds of instructional videos about dozens of different religions. He watched 47 videos on Hinduism alone including lessons on the Mahabharata, and the Ramayana.

Marty Hanson had been working on Lyle’s appeal since the day he was sentenced. After a few months, Lyle called Marty.

“Marty, its Lyle I just wanted to see how our appeal is going.”

“I have good news Lyle. The Seventh Circuit is going to start arguing your case August the eighth.”

“Finally, I’ve been waiting for this since the day I was sentenced. This might be it.”

“I know, but Lyle you know this is a long shot. If they agree that your state cases were consolidated in 1985, you’ll get resentenced.”

“How long do you think that will take Marty?”

“There’s no way to say. They might come back with a decision in a week, it could take a year. I would say it would likely come within a couple months.”

“How much of a long shot Marty?”

“Well the appeals court will order you back in front of Shabazz and it will be up to him and I’d say you’d be there within a month after the appeal, but he could still go outside the guidelines on you. However, Shabazz is known as the most overturned judge in the system.”

“But there still is a possibility that I won’t sit here for 22 years right?”

“Absolutely Lyle, and I’m doing everything I can to get you out of there. If we lose, I won’t charge you a penny to take the case to the Supreme Court.”

“You’re the best Marty.”

“I want you to call me every Monday and Friday because this could come down any day.”

“Ok Marty, have a good weekend.”

Bureau of Prisons policy requires one chaplain for every five hundred inmates. Milan had three chaplains consisting of Protestant Reverend Larry Brooks, Islamic Imam Mateen Sabree, and Catholic Priest Claire Dinger. When Lyle was working in the chapel there were around

1,200 inmates at Milan. Since he didn’t trust any of them, Lyle didn’t have anyone to vent to except for his mother.

Since Father Dinger was head of religious services, it was his responsibility to notify inmates of any outside tragedy. Because the prison consisted mainly of inmates with high risk profiles, it felt like Father was calling them to his office nearly every day.

Lyle could see and hear much of these tragic sessions from the clerk’s chair through the windows of Father’s office. After working for a couple months, an inmate named Chris was paged to the chapel. Lyle watched as the tall, good looking young man sat next to Father.

"What's up?" Chris asked.

"Your family wants you to call home.”

"What happened?"

"I don't know, you'll find out when you call home. Sit down and I will dial the number." Father dialed the number and handed the receiver to Chris.

"Hi Mom, what's up?" Chris gradually lost grip of the receiver, letting it fall to the floor. He slid off his chair and was lying on the floor next to Father. He cried out in agony, crunching into the fetal position.

Father swung his chair around so his back was facing Chris. There were two red spots in Father’s cheeks from habitually breaking his top plate loose. He knew Chris' sister had been gunned down in a drive by shooting, but offered no condolence.

Lyle got out of the clerk’s chair and pressed his hands along the outside of the office windows. Father poked his face, breaking his upper denture plate loose and bit back down to reseal it. An inmate walked up to Lyle. happening in there?" the inmate asked. “That’s my codefendant.”

"I am not sure,” Lyle said, “but your friend is really crying."

Chris’s codefendant rushed into Father’s office.

“Those fucking son of a bitches said they would protect my family! I snitched for those mother fuckers and they didn’t do a fucking thing!” Chris shrieked.

“Chris it will be ok,” his codefendant repeated. “It will be okay. Chris it will be okay.”

Suddenly, Chris stood up, began screaming and pushed a stack of books and papers off Father Dinger’s shelves.

“They’re all going to fucking die and I can’t do a fucking thing about it!”

The screaming chilled Lyle’s blood.

Chris’s codefendant tackled and knocked him into a chair with tall arm rests. He begged god to give Chris peace of mind as he held him down with all of his strength. Now in a frenzied rage, Chris broke free from the codefendant’s grip and was tipping over chairs. Father picked up the phone and dialed for emergency help.

"Father please don't call.” Lyle pleaded. “He'll be okay in a minute."

"They killed my sister and my mother is next!" Chris screamed.

Father paused with the phone in his hand, “It better be ok right now,” he said and slowly put down the receiver.

Everything seemed like it was under control, but Chris lashed out again, this time throwing his codefendant into a wall. His eyes were red, glowing with rage. Father grabbed the phone again.

"He is hurting and the guards will only beat him up,” Lyle said. “Doesn't he have enough pain?"

The codefendant got up and charged Chris again. This time he held Chris down in another chair with his shoulder buried into Chris's chest. As his fists beat down upon his friend's back, he shouted, "They killed my sister because I testified!”

Eventually Chris stopped struggling and collapsed into the chair. “Thank you Jesus,” the codefendant whispered. They were both crying. Father picked up the phone and moments later medics came in and gave Chris a shot.

"What did they give him?" Lyle asked.

"Something to keep him peaceful."

“But Father, what did they give him?"

"It was a shot of Thorazine."

“Why are they treating him pharmacologically rather than offering him love and support? Isn't that unethical?"

Father walked out of his office without commenting as the medics rolled Chris off in a wheel chair, too drugged to walk. Lyle said under his breath, "A Christian watch dog for justice has failed again.”

Lyle saw Chris a few times on the compound, his eyes glazed over, walking as if in slow motion. Inmates call it the "Thorazine shuffle." Lyle realized similar episodes must have been behind why so many inmates share Chris’s gait.

Lyle saw Father Dinger’s office as a revolving door of pain, agony, and defeat. As time wore on, thoughts of Lynne, Jed, the project in the Dells, and his pending appeal were manifesting physical symptoms. Lyle had panic attacks, fits of lethargy, irritability, shaky hands, ringing ears, and moments of disorientation.

A few weeks after Chris was hauled off the compound, Lyle was eating breakfast alone at a table bolted to the floor. Suddenly, he felt an earthquake shaking the cafeteria. He lost his balance and was disoriented as he tried to stay in his chair. The earthquake shook the ground and Lyle grabbed another table to regain his balance. A prisoner pushed Lyle’s hand off the table and said, "You better get your life in order or you’re going to die in prison."

It took Lyle a moment to regain focus. He saw that no one else in the cafeteria was affected by the earthquake. “Yeah, I’ll be ok.” Lyle said as he sat down, realizing the earthquake had manifested inside of himself. He regained composure the best he could and walked to the Chapel. Father Dinger wasn’t busy so Lyle sat down in his office.

“Father you wouldn’t believe what happened in the chow hall just now.”

Gripping his teeth back in place Father asked, “What happened?”

“I was eating breakfast and an earthquake was shaking the chow hall. I was wondering how an earthquake could be happening in southeastern Michigan and then I realized it was happening inside my skin. It almost knocked me on the ground.”

“You have too much stress in your life Lyle.”

“I’m just really worried about my appeal. I checked my heart rate and it was 101 beats per minute. 101 beats per minute father. I can’t live like this. If I keep on having earthquakes I’ll die in here. I don’t want that.”

“Only about point zero percent of people win their appeals Lyle.”

Lyle laughed, “Oh thanks a lot Father, that’s really the answer to all the stress in my life.”

“Well, you’re smiling,” Father grinned.

“Father, can I call my attorney on the next movement. It’s the only way I’ll feel better right now.”

“Well you can’t do anything around here stressed out like that, you might as well.”

Lyle went back to the unit and called Marty’s office. His secretary Shirley answered the phone.

“Hanson, Gasiorkiewicz, and Weber.”

“Hi Shirley this is Lyle.

“Oh hi Lyle, Marty wants to talk to you.”

Lyle’s stomach churned in excitement.

“Good morning Lyle.”

“What was the ruling Marty?”

“We lost Lyle,” Marty softened his voice. “I am very, very sorry.”

“Damn Marty,” Lyle said with tears welling in his eyes.

“This case has really created some bad law. How are you doing right now?”

“I’m alright Marty. I’m going to be alright.”

“You know, since this is all about a sentencing issue, I’m willing to go back and attack your state cases and I’m willing to do everything pro bono. Don’t give up Lyle, because I won’t.”

“I really appreciate that Marty, but I have to go.”

“You can call me anytime you need.”

After pacing back and forth across the unit for nearly an hour, Lyle went back to the Chapel and walked into Father’s office.

“I lost my appeal Father,” Lyle’s hands and voice were trembling.

“How much time does that mean you have left?”

“20 years.”

"Lyle always remember you must blossom where you are planted. For now you are planted here at Milan. We're always planted in fertile soil. Even with limits, we have to do what we can. It’s better than doing nothing.”

“How the fuck can anybody blossom in a place like this? How am I supposed to blossom in here?”

Father handed Lyle a black hardcover book with yellow letters, “Dark Night of the Soul.”

“You can start by reading this.”

Lyle saw that it was a religious text and said, “Whatever.”

“Can you promise me you’ll read it?”

“Well I think I’ll have the extra time,” Lyle smiled. “I’ll read it Father.”

Lyle went to his office utterly exhausted. He closed his eyes, slowly pushing himself away with his feet against the desk. He opened his eyes to beautiful women on the beach. He studied their long, toned legs. The muscles of their feminine calves were pressing into the ground with tiny particles of sand whisking away in the ocean breeze. Shapely pelvic bones softly silhouetted through their thin colorful silk. Their sculpted jaws were

open with happiness, basking in what looked like the most breathtaking place on earth.

Lyle realized he would never see what the young women were looking at. He recognized the people, places, and things he could never see were the root of his unrelenting stress. He accepted that his only chance of survival was to amputate any attachments to the outside and look for the soil Father was talking about.

After living with the Quaalude man for nearly six months Lyle was finally moved to “H” unit, a nonsmoking facility that was the most modern on the prison compound. “H” had microwaves, a pool table, and four TV rooms. At seven by ten feet, Lyle’s cell was the biggest he had seen in prison. The window in the back of the cell overlooked a flower garden near the front doors of the unit. His cellmate was a handsome middle aged man who was serving eight years for making meth. Like the Cuban and the Quaalude man, Lyle’s new cellmate was lying in bed when he introduced himself. He noticed his new cellmate’s clothes were piled next to the bunk. A large pair of underwear was lying on the top of the clothes with what looked like feces smeared everywhere.

“What the fuck man?” Lyle exclaimed, putting his hand over his nose.

“Awe… I got ‘cha!” Lyle’s new cellmate laughed. “That’s just Hershey’s bar. I knew I had a celllie coming and I had to fuck with ‘ya. I’m Rodney.”

“Man that’s messed up,” Lyle said shaking his head. “So Rodney, what do you do to pass the time besides pulling pranks?”

“I’m either, sleeping, eating, or I’m working out. I don’t mingle much on the compound because I don’t like the people in here. They’re all a bunch of fucking idiots.”

Rodney was repeatedly clenching his hands into fists and releasing them.

“Is that an isometric exercise?”

“What?” Rodney asked.

“Your fists,” Lyle said.

“No, when I’m doing this I’m thinking about how I’m going to kill my wife.”

Lyle looked at Rodney’s hands. “How much time do you have left?”

“About a year, I just can’t stand it. I left her with my money, my yellow Corvette, my Stetson cowboy hat, my long horned belt buckle, and my elephant skinned boots. Now I just talked to my brother and my brother said he saw another man driving my Corvette, wearing my Stetson hat with my wife in the passenger seat. That bitch is spending my money on him, a year before I get out. That’s just not right.”

An officer announced, “mail call,” over the intercom. “You’re a funny man Rodney,” Lyle said. “I’m going to see if I have anything.”

Downstairs there was a large room with a pool table where around 50 inmates gathered for mail call. After a few names were announced, a guard yelled, “Wildes.”

“Pass it!"

The guard tossed a manila envelope on the pool table. Another inmate picked it up and handed it to Lyle. He ripped it open and pulled out a single

sheet of paper with nine paragraphs of legal jargon. Lyle skimmed to the last paragraph where Seventh Circuit Judge Easterbrook wrote, “Not by the wildest stretch of the imagination,” would he consider Lyle’s state cases consolidated, which would effectively have overturned the enhancement of his federal sentence.

After “H” unit was released for lunch, Lyle went to the library where Jimmy Rumler was sitting at a table surrounded by legal documents.

“Jimmy, don’t you ever take a break from this place?”

“There’s a key to the outside in these law books and I’m going to find it.”

“So I got the ruling in the mail today and you said you want to read it.”

“I’ll read it tonight and we’ll talk about it tomorrow,” Rumler said.

Lyle went back to the library after lunch the following day.

“The judge boxed you in pretty tight Lyle. The only relief I see for you is if you can get back into state court.”

“What does that mean?” Lyle asked.

“If you can get your state cases dismissed or get your sentences to reflect consolidation, you could get resentenced” Rumler said. “If you can do that the enhancement of your federal case will go away.”

“How long would it take to do that?”

“You’re probably looking at four or five years to get that done. You’re going to be here for a while with me Wildes. I’ve read most of the legal books in this library, if there is a key for you in here, I’ll tell you as soon as I find it.”

A week after getting the ruling in the mail, Lyle called Helma.

“Mom I got the ruling on my appeal.”

“And what was that?”

“They affirmed my conviction in federal court, but it looks like I have a shot of taking this back to state court to straighten all this out.”

“I hope so Lyle.”

“I really like this new unit mom.”

“Why?”

“It’s clean, it’s quieter, and I have a good bunkie... He just has an anger problem.”

“How are you dealing with your anger Lyle?”

“Well I’ve kind of let everything go mom. It just makes it easier to do time.”

“I’ve raised you to know the difference between right and wrong, but you were never the same after that accident so I don’t think it’s your fault.”

“So that’s the slippery slope of failure.”

“Lyle If you don’t use this time constructively, you’ll stay right on the slippery slope.”

“I hear ‘ya mom.”

It had been several months since Lyle put up the picture of the women in his office when Reverend Brooks walked in.

"Lyle, you have to take those pictures down. We can't have suggestive pictures like that in the chapel."

"What do you mean by suggestive pictures?” Lyle asked. “They represent sophistication and freedom."

Brooks didn't want to discuss the pictures and reached up to tear them down as Father Dinger walked by.

"Father come here,” Lyle said.

Father Dinger saw Brooks and said, “What’s going on?”

“Reverend Brooks wants to tear these pictures down,” Lyle said. “Do I have to tear them down Father?”

Father Dinger looked at Brooks who was red faced, nearly shaking with anger. “What’s wrong with the pictures?” Father asked Brooks.

"These pictures are much too sexual to be associated with the chapel," Brooks said.

Father leaned in and took a closer look at the ladies. "Reverand Brooks, Those two ladies look quite innocent and playful. I don't see anything erotic about them at all. They can stay."

The next day, Father visited Lyle in the clerk’s office.

“How are your ladies doing?”

“They’re doing good!” Lyle laughed. “They’re my Baptist ladies.”

They both laughed, but Brooks saw no humor in the situation.

For months, Lyle had been helping Father with the religious services segment of the weekly Admissions and Orientation. At one particular A&O session, there were around 40 new arrivals.

"I'm Father Dinger, the department head of religious services. If you want to do a confession, I hear them on Friday nights. Your confessions are confidential." To this most of the prisoners laughed. "The only exceptions are if you tell me about a murder or that you were going to hurt someone or yourself while at this facility or upon your release. Otherwise, everything else is confidential. There's also a Protestant Chaplain and a Muslim Imam for you to practice your religious preference. Other religious needs are being met through outside contractors. Now let me tell you why I am a chaplain. I am a chaplain because I know there are lots of difficult times in prison. I started at the Ohio Pen that was a much more violent place than Milan. I don't know any of you in this room, except for my clerk, but I know each one of you is a good person. My religious beliefs tell me you're all good people."

An elderly black man stood up in the back row and interrupted the introduction. "Padre, are you saying I'm a good person?"

"Yes you are a good person," Father Dinger said.

"Why don't you tell the federal prosecutors and judges that?" The room broke out in laughter.

Father waited until the laughter faded. "I wish I could tell the prosecutors and judges, but it is probably more important that I tell you you’re a good person"

The elderly man sat down and Father continued his lecture. When he was ready to wrap up, the elderly black man again stood. "Padre, are you saying I am a good man?"

"Yes, you're a good man. You may have done some bad things in your lifetime, but at your essence, you're a good person. You see sir, you can't change your goodness, but you can change your bad behavior. If you don't like what you’re doing, you can change it, but you don't need to change your goodness. Don't confuse your essence with your behavior."

The elderly man stood there in awe as the rest of the prisoners sat motionless.

"You're telling me I'm a good man?" The old man asked.

"Yes…"

"You're the first person in my life that ever told me I was a good person. My dad told me I was no good. My mother often said she should’ve aborted me and my friends told me I was the worst kid on the block. I have always seen myself as a bad person."

"Do you know what bad people do?" Father Dinger asked.

Tears streaming down his wrinkled face, tilting his head to the ground, he quietly said, “bad things."

A few seconds of silence passed. "If only someone would have told me years ago that I was a good person, I wonder if I would have had to spend all these years in prison?"

"Probably not,” Father said.

After the room had cleared, Lyle said, "Father that was an awesome moment, but there’s something I really need to ask. If he learned to be bad person and that’s all he knows, why is he being punished for it?”

"Someday you'll understand," Father said, and walked off.

A few weeks later Lyle was on his way back to work from lunch when he saw a flyer in the entrance of the educational complex. “Positive Mental Attitude classes offered in the psychology department, send a request form to Doctor Welsh.”

He requested that his name be added to the callout sheet for PMA class. By that next Tuesday, Lyle was on a callout to the psychology department. Milan’s head psychologist Doctor Welsh was going through inmate files when he found Dan Bayes who was a professional motivational speaker. The doctor asked Bayes if he wanted to develop a positive attitude class to reduce violence. Lyle was among the first of 15 inmates to take the class.

PMA met every Tuesday for 20 weeks. Dan Bayes selected four materials for the class. An instructional video called “The Train,” the short film, “The Miracle Man,” Og Mandino’s book “The Greatest Salesman in the World,” and a workbook encouraging inmates to engage in the class. Lyle spent large amounts of time studying the concepts of the class; the common theme being that thoughts and habits are the stairway to success or failure.

During the third week of class, Bayes showed “The Miracle Man,” the story of Morris Goodman, who survived a plane crash in 1981 and made a full recovery against all medical odds.

Morris Goodman’s story convinced Lyle that he could take the negativity of prison and turn it into a positive opportunity. Lyle also realized that he was susceptible to crime and that was the main obstacle he had to overcome.

Eight weeks into PMA, Bayes was having an open conversation about how belief systems are “caught rather than taught.” Lyle asked if he could tell a story about Jed, and Bayes let him take the floor. Lyle gained control of the room with intensity.

“I came home one night and there a huge storm brewing. The clouds were really dark and it was really a bad situation. I go running in the house and my son Jed comes running across the living room with his arms up in the air and wants me to pick him up. I picked him up and he gives me a big hug, ‘Hi Jed,’ and I just held him so tight and he goes, ‘Dada.’

I walk to the back of the house, open the back door, and Jed’s mom was out there in our rose garden fixing the roses. I said, ‘Nancy you better come in. The storm could get bad. You could get hit with branches and sand.’ It was a bad storm.

Just as she starts to come in, Bang! Lighting struck in the backside of the house and boom ba da boom boom boom! The thunder just hit and the house just rocked. I got goosbumps. I thought, ‘This is really something.’

Jed grabbed my beard and pulled me around. I was looking him right in the eyes and it felt like he was asking me, ‘What’s going on?’

I waved my right arm across the sky, ‘Jed, look, beautiful!’

And he let loose of my beard and lightning is striking, winds blowing, and I don’t know if the house’s going to get blown over. Jed was in my arms going, “oooooooo! Oooooooo!” He thought it was just so beautiful.

I never thought too much about that until we were in Madison. I was down there with my friends John and Tina and they had a daughter, Pricilla that was exactly Jed’s age. I’m down there and a storm comes and we’re outside. Pricilla runs to Jed, grabs him by the hand, and runs into the house.

‘C’mon Jed, it’s gonna’ storm.’

She takes him in her bedroom and tries to get Jed to go under the bed too. Jed comes out and asks me, ‘Dad, why does Pricilla want me to go under the bed?’

And it was at that moment I realized I had taught Jed to like storms and John had taught Pricilla to fear storms. I remember Tina telling me that John would put a pillow over his face and yell, ‘These fucking storms are ‘gonna blow our house over some day. These damn storms scare me.’

Jed learned to like storms and that girl learned to hate storms. Lyle paused and said to the class, “How do you see storms?”

After the room cleared Bayes asked Lyle if he would be willing to co-facilitate the next PMA class. For the following three months, Lyle took notes on everything Bayes taught. He read “The Greatest Salesman in the World,” several times before the next 20 week course.

Lyle was reading at a small desk in his cell when Rodney came in. By this time Rodney could bench press more than 300 pounds. He was Lyle’s height, but at least 50 pounds heavier.

“I’m getting out Wildes. I know the exact day I’m getting out.”

Lyle glanced at Rodney’s fists tightening up. “That’s really good news Rodney. How much time do you have left?”

“37 days,” Rodney said releasing his hands. “37 days.”

“That’s great Rodney. That means I have to find a new cellie.”

“Are you still mad at your ex-wife?”

Rodney looked at Lyle with piercing eyes. “I’m going to get her when I get out.”

“Don’t you think it would be a good idea to let her go?”

“I suppose I should… I’m moving in with this other woman now and I hope I never see that bitch again.”

“And what if you do?”

“It wouldn’t be good Lyle, it wouldn’t be good,” Rodney clenched his fists. “Someday I’m going probably get her and her boyfriend.”

“I highly recommend you let that go. Rodney, you’ve got to let that go.”

“Could you forgive her if it happened to you?”

“If you don’t, you’ll be driven by hatred your entire life.”

“I don’t think you know what it’s like to have resentment towards a woman like this.”

“Oh I do, believe me, I do. You know it’s taken me a long time to realize this, but when I got to Milan I told myself I’m serving 20 years because of a woman and it’s hard, but now I realize the reason I’m in here with you is because of my behavior. It all falls on my shoulders, no one else’s.”

“That’s probably true Lyle but some things are just unforgivable.”

“I hate to see you leave Rodney. You’ve been a good cellie.”

A few days before Rodney was released Lyle looked up from his typewriter and saw Rumler at the counter in the chapel clerk’s office.

“Lyle I got it. I found the case you can use to help you on the consolidation of your state cases. I didn’t print it all out for you because that’s all your attorney will need is the case number.”

Rumbler wrote the case number on a sheet of paper and handed it to Lyle.

“I’m going to call him next movement Jimmy. Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

Lyle went to Father’s office.

“Father I want to go back to the unit and call my attorney,” Lyle said. “We just found a great case.”

“Another one?” he asked.

“I know,” Lyle said, “but this one’s good. I’ll be back in ten minutes.”

“What’s your lawyer’s number?” Father dialed the number and handed the phone to Lyle.

“Hanson, Gasiorkiewicz, and Weber.”

“Shirley, this is Lyle. I need to talk with Marty.”

“He’s here, just a second.”

“This is Marty.”

“Marty I just found a great case in the seventh circuit dealing with consolidation.”

“I already have it, there was a case just ruled on two months ago and unless there’ve been any others in the past eight weeks, I have all of them.

We’re going to file your argument with the state next week. Remember, nothing is ever for sure, but this is looking better for you than I ever predicted, I will be surprised if the state doesn’t reconsider when they see the evidence we have for your consolidation. This will, at the least, get you back in front of Judge Shabazz.”

“That’s great!”

“Before I go I want to tell you I’ll be in a walkathon this weekend to raise money for a children’s hospital in Racine.”

“That’s really nice Marty, but I have to get back to work. I’m calling you from the Chapel.

“Call me Monday,” Marty said.

Father hung up the phone.

“We’re filing my case next week Father,” Lyle said with a wide grin. “My attorney said we have a shot at another appeal.”

“There’s an inmate at your office door get back to work,” Father said. “We’ll see what happens.”

Lyle called Marty the following Monday and Shirley answered the phone.

“Hanson, Gasiorkiewicz, and Weber.”

“Hi Shirley! It’s Lyle. Can I speak to Marty?”

Shirley gasped. "Oh Lyle, you don't know, do you."

"Don't know what?"

"Marty died Saturday morning at a walkathon," Shirley said through choked words. “He had a heart attack.”

"Don't joke with me Shirley."

"Oh Lyle, I am so sorry, but it’s really true. I'm not joking.”

“Oh my god,” Lyle stammered. “I have to go.”

Taking a few deep breaths, Lyle went back to his cell and buried his head in his pillow. After his despair turned to a deep sense helplessness, he called Helma.

“Hello?”

“Hi Mom.”

“So how are you doing?”

“I’m still doing time.”

“How’s your appeal coming?”

“As a matter of fact my attorney died Saturday. He was going to file papers this week that could’ve got me resentenced. Marty’s the only person who knows my case and I feel really alone. I don’t know what’s going to happen Mom.”

“Oh I’m so sorry Lyle. I pray for you every day, trying to understand why you’re in prison.”

“Mom I don’t pray about this, but I’m just trying to figure out why this is happening to me. I have to go Mom, I’ll call you Saturday.”

“I love you Lyle.”

“I love you.”

Lyle turned away from the phone and saw staff and inmates running out of the unit. He cautiously walked down the hallway when a high pitched emergency alarm went off that made Lyle cover his ears. As he got closer to the entrance, an obscene smell filled the unit and strengthened into the intense scent of death. People were gathered outside the unit like a fire drill. Dan Bayes was talking with a small crowd of inmates.

“What’s going on?”

“I don’t know the unit just filled up with this putrid smell,” Bayes said. “I don’t know if someone’s spraying something or what it is. The smell just got so intense that everybody left.”

An inmate ran out of the unit with a large plastic bowl in his hands. As soon as he hit the grass he threw down the steaming container.

“What is it?” a guard yelled.

“Someone boiled a bunch of shit!”

“What do you mean shit?”

“Shit!” the inmate yelled. “Someone took a shit in a bowl and put it in the microwave.”

An enormous black man with a muscular body and huge bald head sat, convulsing in hysterical laughter. A few guards swarmed in, handcuffed him, and walked towards the intake building. He was the talk of the compound for months.

Lyle was 10 weeks into co-facilitating his first PMA course with Bayes. The longer he spent teaching, the more he looked forward to Tuesdays. PMA had grown to 40 students. Most of them had great insight and especially enjoyed the “Miracle Man.” Dr. Welsh invited a Milan High School teacher to be the guest speaker for the PMA graduation ceremony. Afterwards Dr. Welsh thanked Lyle and Bayes for doing a good job with the class and informed them that he was retiring. Michael Pierson, the supervisor of the reentry program at Milan, would be the new staff sponsor of PMA. Lyle saw that inmates thoroughly enjoyed the graduation ceremony so he asked Mr. Pierson if he could invite outside speakers to be a part of PMA. Pierson granted the permission and Lyle wrote to the Miracle Man, inviting him to Milan.

Lyle had been calling his mother every Saturday morning for the past five years. He didn’t know why, but he was compelled to call her one Friday night. The phone system had changed from unlimited collect calling to 15 minute, inmate paid calls. Lyle waited in line for an hour to make the call.

“Lyle, I’m really happy you called,” Helma’s voice was weak and tired.

“Mom I have to tell you, we only have 14 minutes to talk because they changed the rules on us.”

“Am I ever glad you called,” Helma said. “The doctor said I’m going to be dead on Monday.”

Lyle laughed and said, “Geez mom you can’t be joking around like that.”

“I’m not joking Lyle. My doctor said my body’s full of cancer. They’re giving me until Monday. I am very sick.”

“Why didn’t you let me know you were getting sick?”

“I’m sorry I just didn’t want you to worry about me. I know you’re going through tough times.”

Nearly a full minute of silence went by.

“What does a son talk to his mother about when there is only 13 minutes of phone time left before they are disconnected forever?”

“Well I don’t know. What do you need to talk about Lyle?”

“I am glad you are my mother… You’re a good mom.”

“I know son. I knew you always loved me and I always loved you. Do you remember what I told you years ago when you asked me for three things I could trust in if I ever died? Do you remember what they were?”

“Yes, don’t ever marry a woman you wouldn’t kiss right after she had your baby, but Mom, I never understood what that meant.”

“When the midwife laid you on my chest, I just wanted your Dad to kiss me and tell me that he was going to help me raise you, but he was outside and you came by surprise.”

“Oh my god I never knew that story Mom. There’s so much I don’t know about you. The other two things you told me to remember were that I will one day be an old man and make sure that old man has a lot of good memories.

“That’s right Lyle. You must’ve been listening.”

“You’re going to die and there is so much about you I don’t know. Oh mom, I am so sorry we didn’t talk more.”

“I have a parting gem for you son. Remember that everyone you meet is carrying as much confusion and insecurity as they can handle so do not cause anyone anymore pain.”

“I can do that Mom.”

“There’s a second part to it Lyle. If you should be so fortunate as to lift off as much as a feather of their pain, they will smile and it will spill over into your life. Maybe your class will give you that opportunity.”

Lyle checked his watch and saw that they only had a few minutes left.

“Mom can I change the subject?”

Helma whispered, “Sure.”

“I am sorry that I’m still in prison Mom. I wanted you to die in peace about me.”

“I am at peace son.”

“How is that?”

“You see son, sparkling diamonds are created under extremely high pressure. I know you’ve been under a lot of pressure lately. I’m going to die and it will be up to you to find your way through the pressure of the upcoming darkness. You’re either going to come out of prison with a sparkling personality, or a shattered, broken man. And I know you’ll be ok son.”

“I am Mom. I am going to come out of this ok.”

“I know you will. Your Dad and I have planted the seeds of goodness in both of you boys and it will grow in the field of time and you always say when you call that you’re still doing time.” Helma’s voice had weakened to nearly a whisper. “Ok son, I’m really tired. I have to go now. It’s all up to you.”

Silence filled the phone line.

“Mom? Mom?”

The crackle of Helma fumbling with the phone filled the line as she got it to the receiver. Lyle listened to the dial tone for a few seconds then walked past the dozens of inmates waiting to use it. He walked to a small room in the chapel, which would be the only place in the compound where he could find silence and darkness.

He took a chair in the middle of the room and realized it was the pain of being alone that made it likely to reconnect with his religious past. Christianity was deeply ingrained in Lyle, but he saw it as an empty shell. His eyes welled up and tears streamed down his cheeks. No one had visited him in five years. The only two people who talked with him from the outside besides Jed, were now both dead.

“Where can a man find meaning and purpose in life when everything is being stripped away? Am I not worthy of human attention? Am I a reject that should be kept away from society? What did I do that requires living alone in this human junkyard for so many years? Okay, I am locked behind fences with men in gun towers so that I can't escape. It also happens to be true that no one can get inside to bother me either. I have no phone calls interrupting me. I only experience a sense of loneliness eating away at the cords of my existence. I am driven into this little room in search of peace of mind. If this is the way the gods work then I am sitting here ready to listen.”

Lyle sat in silence and nothing came.

“Okay, I can't figure it out and the gods are silent, now what do I do?”

After waiting for a few minutes, he started to get angry. Lyle wanted to yell at the gods and complain about their silence when an intense stream of awareness planted a seed that Lyle would carry through the rest of his life.

“Could there be something important I must learn while living behind these fences at Milan? Maybe, I should quit thinking about why and start asking, ‘What now?’”

Lyle was certain he was not where he wanted to be, but maybe this was where he needed to be, to grow. Taking a deep breath, he stood up, and walked out of the darkness.

\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*

Many prisoners came to the chapel searching for peace of mind. Some found serenity, others didn’t. One day an inmate in his thirties leaned his elbows on the counter that separated the clerk’s door into two halves. He had glassy eyes and looked like he was on the edge, close to giving up.

"Is there a chaplain here I could speak to?” the young man asked.

Lyle saw that the man was exhausted from crying. “Yes sir, I’ll take you to him right now.”

He led the saddened man to Reverend Brooks’s office, since he was the only chaplain on duty.

“This young man needs to talk with you right now,” Lyle said.

“Tell me what’s going on,” Brooks said.

“My wife just came to visit and I don’t think she’s going to bring my kids to see me anymore.”

Brooks took the inmate’s hands in his. “What’s your name son?”

“Ron.”

“Well let’s pray Ron.”

“Our Heavenly Father, we come before you today asking that our brother Ron can have peace of mind. We pray thy will be done and Ron can accept putting it in your hands and trusting you. God, Ron’s heart is troubled today. We pray for understanding for his wife and children and for the pain that Ron is now experiencing. We ask this in Jesus’s name. Amen,” Reverend Brooks opened his eyes and released Ron’s hands.

“Ok Ron, let’s just put this in God’s hands.”

Ron left the chapel at a brisk pace. He looked more upset now than before coming to the chapel.

“Ron,” Lyle called after him. “Do you want to talk about this?”

“No, there’s no need to talk anymore.”

Ron walked towards the entrance of the educational complex. Lyle waited for Ron to get out of sight before following him. He went into the bathroom and locked himself in the first of three stalls. Quietly, Lyle moved into the stall next to Ron and listened to him sob.

Tears dripped on the cold concrete floor beneath their feet.

“How could the gods be watching us now and care so little?” Lyle thought.

As he refocused, he noticed the soles of Ron’s shoes were worn off. Suddenly a splash of deep red blood splattered on the floor. As a pool of blood crept outward, another gush hit the cold concrete. Lyle bolted into the main corridor and screamed for help. Two guards rushed into the bathroom and leaped over the stall, one of them ordered to Lyle, “Get back to work!”

Brooks was coming down the hallway.

“So you put it in god’s hands Reverend Brooks, and now he’s gone.”

Brooks looked stunned.

A Lieutenant standing in the hall yelled, “Get to your designated area Wildes or you’re going to the hole!”

Lyle sat in the Chapel clerk’s office with his head in his hands. “I was sitting 18 inches from this boy and I couldn’t help him. There was just a thin wall of metal between us. I could’ve leaped over the stall and saved him but I didn’t. I could’ve saved his life but I didn’t.”

Lyle later found out that Ron had slashed both of his arms from his biceps to his wrists. He also heard that Ron was serving 10 years for a drug charge. After his appeal was denied, Ron’s wife came to Milan and told him she was leaving for good and was going to stop bringing their children to visit him.

Lyle had worked as the chapel clerk for more than six years when Father Dinger Retired. Reverend Brooks took Father’s place as the supervisor of religious services. Father’s fairness and openness to other religions was a great help for the prisoner's at Milan. Lyle was preparing himself for the change when Brooks walked into the clerk’s office.

“I’m now head of religious services and I want you to take those pictures down.”

“Is that a direct order?”

“That is a direct order.”

Calmly, Lyle took down the picture of the women and handed it to Brooks along with a written request to be released from Religious Services.

Brook was perplexed, “Why do you want to leave?”

“Because I don’t like working for you Reverend Brooks.”

“Well I’m really sorry that you want to leave the chapel. The men really like you here.”

“Well I know that, but I’m just going to be down the hall working for pre-release. That way I can be doing work that’s more closely related to the PMA class.”

With his new job as the pre-release clerk, he would give advice to inmates about how to get jobs upon their release. The pre-release chair gave Lyle a completely different perspective. Helping other inmates prepare for reentry gave him a chance to exhale. Lyle felt this was where he was supposed to be. In his free time, he had been reading 50 pages of non-fiction every day to supplement the PMA course.

During one PMA session, an inmate said, “There was a woman on Oprah this morning who was talking about the power of the mind and she sounded a lot like you Lyle.”

“Who’s that?” Lyle asked.

“Marlo Morgan, she wrote a book called ‘Mutant Message’ that’s a bestseller.”

“How would you like her to be a guest speaker for our class?” Lyle asked.

“Yeah that’s going to happen,” a few inmates laughed.

Lyle wrote a letter that day inviting Marlo to be the guest speaker for their PMA gradation. A few months later, an inmate asked, “So whatever happened to Marlo?” Several inmates laughed.

“I don’t know, my letter must’ve got lost in the mail. I’ll write her another letter this afternoon.”

“Good luck with that,” an inmate scoffed.

Lyle mailed out a second letter, inviting Marlo to prison. A few days later, he received a postcard with her home phone number. When he showed the card to his class they thought it was fabricated, so he called the number from Mr. Pierson’s office. The phone rang and a soft, kind voice answered.

"Marlo this is Lyle Wildes at the Milan prison.”

"Hi Lyle, I was waiting for your call. How is everything with you?"

“Great Marlo, things are going just great. I’m helping a lot of people. A lot of prisoners are really thinking about their lives.”

“Oh how wonderful Lyle. That’s just so good to hear.” How many people will be in the audience?"

"Approximately 200.”

"Oh my, that's wonderful."

"Lyle, can I send you enough copies of my book so everyone can have a chance to read it before I get there?"

Two hundred copies of Marlo’s book would well surpass the $500 limit on outside contributions to the prison, but Mr. Pierson made an exception. A few days later, Marlo’s books arrived. Lyle was ecstatic. Since Marlo was coming on a weekday, every prisoner who wanted to attend had to be put on callout. In total, 211 inmates signed up to attend Marlo’s presentation and needed to be added to the list. When Lyle submitted the names, Mr. Pierson put them on his desk and said, “I'll do it later.”

Days slipped by while the names sat on Mr. Pierson’s desk. If the names were not on callout, no one would be able to attend. That would mean Marlo would come all the way from Lee's Summit, Missouri, and speak to only a few people. Lyle tried not to panic.

Frustration surrounded nearly every effort he made to generate positive opportunities for inmates. It was down to a few hours before the names had to be entered in the computer for callout. Lyle went to Mr. Pierson’s office and saw he wasn’t entering the callouts.

“Mr. Pierson is there any way I can help you with the callouts?”

“Get out of my office and leave me alone,” Mr. Pierson pointed his finger at the door. “That is a direct order.”

Lyle went to the clerk’s office across from Mr. Pierson’s. He felt helpless; all of the effort that had been put into getting Marlo to come to Milan would be for nothing. After a few intense minutes, Mr. Pierson called Lyle back to his office.

"If I have to put these damn names in today, I want you to know that if one person doesn't show up, I'm throwing your ass in the hole. Sit down and

read these damn names to me. You see Wildes, I get paid just as much if I work hard or if I do only what I have to do. Your crazy ideas are making me do more than I have to. Do you understand?"

"I understand perfectly, but this is going to be a feather in your hat. Marlo is going to do an outstanding job."

"If she doesn't show up it's going to make me look like a stupid idiot,” Mr. Pierson said. “I don't like to look like an idiot because I trusted a damn inmate. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes sir, boss."

Hours passed and Marlo hadn’t arrived. Lyle paced the hallway, nearly in a state of dry heaves. He breathed slowly and imagined Marlo walking into the prison. He felt a rush of relief as an elderly woman walked toward him through the doorway.

“Are you Marlo?” Lyle asked.

She smiled, “Yes, are you Lyle?”

Lyle extended his hand, Marlo looked into his eyes and asked, “Do you hug?”

His knees nearly buckled as he stood in awe. Marlo gave Lyle a body to body hug. It was however, against the rules for prisoners to touch anyone but Mr. Pierson only looked on in disapproval. When they released each other, Lyle looked into Marlo’s eyes and said, “Marlo, thank you for coming to Milan. You're going to enjoy your experience here today.”

"I'm sure I will,” Marlo said. “Where do we go from here?

Lyle took her to the Chapel where the three retractable walls had been opened to accommodate the ceremony. He had gathered chairs from every department, allowing as many inmates as possible to attend. A banner with

Marlo’s name stretched behind the podium. A prisoner, who was a professional pianist, played classical music while inmates and staff arrived.

Her talk lasted for over an hour and every prisoner was respectful and conducted themselves as gentlemen. She held everyone captivated in her spell. When finished, Lyle gave her a surprise.

One prisoner had taken the elastic out of a pair of boxers to make lifelike petals of a rose. Another inmate had acquired some small copper wire from the electric department, without the staff's knowledge and created veins for the petals. Lyle handed Marlo the rose which was mounted on a polished wooden plaque along with a certificate of recognition.

“Marlo, we recognize your kindness, compassion, and generosity,” Lyle said.

Marlo accepted the rose in tears. She rose up on her tip toes and whispered in Lyle’s ear, “Keep doing what you're doing. You're on the right path. Follow it Lyle, and don't give up.”

A boost of energy surged through Lyle’s body, “Never, never, will I give up,” Lyle said.

Marlo stayed for close to an hour, signing copies of her book for the inmates. If Lyle hadn’t written a second letter, more than 200 prisoners would have missed that positivity in their lives.

That night, Lyle reflected on all of the positive opportunities he had created at Milan. He had co-facilitated 12 courses over the seven and a half years he had been in prison. Guest speakers included prison staff, business owners, a disabled man who ran a triathlon, a yoga instructor, a motivational speaker who called himself Dr. Success, and bestselling author Marlo Morgan. Milan’s volunteer coordinator was so impressed by PMA that she had him teach the principles of the class to more than 140 volunteers and contract workers hired by the BOP.

The day after the graduation ceremony, Mr. Pierson called Lyle to his office.

“Sit down Lyle, have a seat. I just want to let you know that was a really nice program yesterday. You and Bayes did a really professional job with Marlo.”

“Well thank you Mr. Pierson. All 211 showed up.”

“I know, everyone’s talking about it on the compound. I hate to tell you this Wildes, but you’re actually making a difference here.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’ve noticed a decrease in violence on the compound since you guys have been doing that class. In the 24 years I’ve been here, I’ve never seen an inmate have this kind of influence over inmates.”

“You know Mr. Pierson, it wouldn’t have been possible without your help.”

“Yeah right, get back to work. I don’t want your head to get too big.”

They had printed 75 workbooks in preparation for the next class and were organizing materials to teach three classes per week. A few days before classes started, Lyle went back to “H” unit after work. Lyle walked past the guard’s desk on the way to his cell.

“Hey Wildes,” the guard said.

“Yes sir.”

“After chow pack up, you’re being transferred tomorrow.”

“Where to?”

“I don’t know, you’ll find out tomorrow. Pack up tonight. You’re moving out.”

Lyle packed Sunday night and was on a bus for Elkton, Ohio, before sunrise Monday morning.

Inmates were needed to fill a low security prison that had just opened in Elkton. The Bureau of Prisons looked through their population for the best candidates for the new facility. Since Lyle had no incident reports, he was transferred to Elkton where he would be more than 600 miles away from family and friends. For the first time Lyle was transferred without shackles. Since the inmates moving to Elkton were classified as “low risk,” they were only handcuffed for the bus ride. An armed guard kept watch from the back of the bus and a chain link barrier protected the driver.

Lyle told a former PMA student on the bus, “If I obeyed the rules I thought I would be rewarded. I'm now being punished because I didn't receive any incident reports. It looks like I should have defied the rules if I wanted to stay at Milan.”

“Lyle, go to Elkton and see what's there for you. Look at this transfer as a part of your journey. You're the one that's always saying, 'Life is a journey, not a battle.' Just relax and enjoy the experience.’”

After a few hours the bus passed by a Methodist Church, around a dozen houses, a Mennonite grocery store, and a small post office marking the location of Elkton. The year before Lyle arrived, the community had around 50 residents until a flood destroyed 17 properties officially reducing the population of Elkton to zero. A large, cardboard sign was nailed to a tree on the side of the road with white spray paint that read, “The government stole this property.”

The bus pulled into the massive 21st century facility that was even bigger than Milan. It was built almost entirely of reddish brown cement blocks. The bus pulled into a parking lot outside the compound. Inmates were led by unarmed guards to the front doors. There were no gun towers, no trees, and no birds. Lyle felt like he was entering a walled-in desert. The bus of inmates Lyle was transferred with were the second group to arrive at the new prison. Officers greeted them inside the front doors and walked them through a tunnel under razor wire fences. A massive open area with grass and wide sidewalks led to three large units. He walked through the echoing halls of “A Unit,” a two story housing facility with hundreds of bunks, each separated by short concrete walls.

The first night at Elkton, Lyle stayed awake worrying about how he was going to develop PMA at the new facility. He waited for orientation to talk with the different department heads about his class. Lyle was directed to Doctor Caroline Frazer, one of three psychologists at Elkton. A few weeks after orientation, Frazer called Milan and talked with Mr. Pierson who strongly recommended the class. Another month went by when Frazer decided she’d sponsor a PMA class in the psychology department.

Bayes had developed PMA based on Og Mandino’s methods of becoming successful. By this time Lyle had clearly identified the strengths and weaknesses of PMA. He had read hundreds of self-help books including many about neurology. He wanted to transform PMA into a science based

program with the core belief that inmates can turn negative situations into positive opportunities.

Since Bayes named PMA after one of Napoleon Hill’s 16 Laws of Success, Lyle replaced PMA with the name Positive Attitude Development. He spent months developing the class by gathering books, videos, and constructing a new workbook. Lyle also wrote to the Miracle Man who hadn’t responded to any of the letters written to him from Milan. Around 20 inmates signed up for Lyle’s first class.

Since there wasn’t enough room to teach the class in psychology, Lyle taught PAD in the prison chapel. Lyle showed the short film, “The Train,” which portrays a man who wills himself to die a few hours after being locked in a refrigerated train car. The man thought he was going to freeze to death when in fact the refrigeration unit was broken. An investigator in the film said the man “willed himself to death.” After showing the video, Lyle spoke about the power of the mind.

“So what does this video tell you about the power of the mind?” Lyle asked the inmates.

“That the mind is very powerful,” an inmate said.

“Do you really believe he willed himself to die?” Another inmate asked.

“Well,” Lyle said, “I just finished reading the Ageless Body Timeless Mind by Deepak Chopra who wrote that the cells of your body eavesdrop to the thoughts of your mind and act accordingly. Your thoughts are very powerful. Let me give you an example of how powerful your thoughts really are. Imagine going back to your cell and taking out a picture of your girlfriend or wife who has on very few clothes. Now I want you to look at that picture and imagine all the wonderful things that you’ve done with her, that you’d like to do with her again, and how much you miss her. As you do that I bet the cells in your body are changing.”

Laughter broke out in the room. “Hell yes!” an inmate shouted.

“And she’s not even in the room with you, it’s just you, your thoughts, and a picture of her and the cells of your body are changing.”

An inmate in the back of the room raised his hand. “I understand what you’re telling us Lyle but it’s just hard for me to believe that someone could actually will themselves to die.”

“I’ve watched that video many, many times and I was skeptical about it too,” Lyle said, “until I saw it for myself.”

Every student in the room was now attentive.

“When I was at Milan I met this elderly man who had a 40 year sentence. He had served nine and a half years and was going in front of the parole board. His wife, his kids, and his grandkids were all excited about him being paroled. But Sammy didn’t think he was going to be paroled because he had said some really bad things to his judge. With the expectation of his family and his parole date coming up and not wanting to tell his family he wasn’t going to be paroled, Sammy was really stressing out. One day I went down to talk with him a few minutes before four ‘o clock count and Sammy was just staring out the window. I asked Sammy how he was doing and as he turned around I could see he was a dead man walking. I said to Sammy, ‘you better get a sparkle in your eye and a spring in your walk.’ Just then the officer yelled, ‘count!’ and we all had to go back to our cells. As soon as count was cleared, I went back to Sammy’s room and found a piece of cardboard over his window as if he was using the bathroom. So I waited a few minutes and I couldn’t hear anything going on in his cell at all. I got a officer to open the door and there sat Sammy on the stool, fully dressed, with his elbows on his knees, his chin on his thumbs, dead. Sammy had simply willed himself to die out of hopelessness. We never were able to find out if Sammy would’ve been paroled or not because he gave up before the decision was made.”

“He actually died?” an inmate asked Lyle.

“It was stated that he died for no medical reason. He simply willed himself to death and that’s why I still show that video and as the video ends I’m asking you, ‘where are your thoughts taking you?’

A couple months into the class Lyle was teaching a lesson about the power of letting go and forgiveness.

“I know many of you have unresolved issues,” Lyle said. “This week we’re going to be talking about letting go of issues that are keeping us stuck and forgiving others for things that you think are unforgiveable. Here’s a quote by Og Mandino that caught my attention some time ago, ‘muscle can split a shield and even destroy life but only the unseen power of love can open the hearts of men.’ So until we’re able to master this, we remain slaves to our anger and our hatred.”

“So what, we’re just supposed to forgive the people who fucked us over?” an inmate asked.

“Research tells us that anger and hatred is simply a justice issue. If you don’t think it’s fair, you don’t think it’s right. If we can look at the belief that we have that tells us it’s unfair we can reduce our anger. I’m not saying we shouldn’t get mad, that’s probably healthy, but when it turns to hatred and remains in your life for a long time it becomes pathological and dangerous.”

“What do you mean it becomes pathological and dangerous?” an inmate asked.

“Let me tell you about a guy I was in prison with. His name is Rodney Jones. It made perfect sense to me why Rodney was mad so let me tell you his version of the story. When he came to prison, he left his money, a yellow Corvette, his Stetson cowboy hat, his long horned belt buckle, and his elephant skinned boots with his wife. During his incarceration she decided to divorce him. Rodney heard she was spending all of his money and going out with other men. He even heard that her new boyfriend was driving the yellow Corvette and wearing his Stetson hat, belt buckle, and elephant boots.

“That’s cold man,” and inmate interjected. “That’s pretty fucking cold.”

“Man I wouldn’t forgive that bitch either,” another inmate added, “I’d kill that bitch.”

“Just hear me out,” Lyle said. “Rodney was my cellie for two years and during that time all he thought about was how he was going to kill his ex-wife and her boyfriend when he got out. He visualized it, he even figured out that he would sell her three cords of wood for the price of one so she would call him. And when he got there, he told me he was going to kill her and her boyfriend. So I’m telling Rodney he better let that go and just forget it and he says, ‘I can’t.’ So he was released pissed off and on his way. Two months after he left, I got a letter from Rodney asking me if I’d be willing to come out west to Utah and testify in regards to his character because he was being charged with first degree murder.”

“He killed her?” an inmate asked.

“The prosecuting attorney in Rodney’s case called me for information and I found out that Rodney didn’t kill his ex-wife, but spontaneously killed a past girlfriend. I watched the power of hatred unfold right before my very eyes.”

Lyle took a napkin out of his pocket and wiped his eyes. “Guys, that is why we have to let go and forgive others no matter what they did. If you hurt someone else and you ask for forgiveness, they don’t have to accept it. But if someone hurts you, you have to forgive that no matter what. Regardless of what they do, forgiveness is a gift you give yourself for freedom from hatred.”

“That’s some deep shit man,” an inmate said. The room was silent for a few moments.

“I completely understand the power of hatred and now I understand the power of forgiveness that you’re trying to teach us Lyle,” an inmate said. “But no matter how much I understand it, there is one unforgivable memory that’s impossible for me to forgive.”

“It’s not impossible,” Lyle said. “I know it’s possible because I’ve done it. If it wasn’t for the testimony of a woman that I loved and trusted I probably wouldn’t be here with you. I had to let it go and take responsibility for my own behavior before I can ever grow as a human being. If you don’t forgive others you’re on the same path Rodney took.”

Toward the end of the course, Lyle asked everyone to give a presentation about what PAD meant to them. The last student was a middle aged black man. He walked in front of the class and spoke with a powerful deep voice.

“I wasn’t going to say anything today. I just wanted to say how important this class really was for me. A few weeks ago when we were studying about emotions, I decided to call my family before class. When I called, my family was so upset and angry at me because I hadn’t returned their phone call. I come to find out that my dad had died two weeks earlier and they had notified the Chaplin and he forgot to tell me. When they told me that, I was instantly hijacked, and wanted to kill that mother fucker.”

Standing before the class, the man’s eyes filled with tears.

“When the movement came I had two choices, I was either going to go to class or at that moment I was going to go in and beat that fucker’s ass. When I came to class I sat in the back trembling with anger. Lyle was talking about getting hijacked by our emotions. I realized at that moment that I had been hijacked when I got off the phone. So I sat here in this very room and piece by piece, let the Chaplin go. But I want to tell you here today that I do not condone what the Chaplin did and I still think he’s incompetent, but I’m not going to let his negligence control my life. I’m sure that my dad understands why I wasn’t there. This class probably saved the Chaplin’s life.”

The room was silent. The black man gave Lyle a big hug and whispered in his ear, “Thank you Lyle.”

The next week Michele Matt Yanna came 750 miles from Des Moines and talked about her book “Attitude, the Choice is Yours,” which echoed the teachings of the new PAD class.

Lyle was ecstatic over the success of his first class and 30 inmates signed up for the next one. Lyle was preparing for the second PAD course when an inmate walked up to him with both his hands down the front of his pants, playing with himself. His clothes were wrinkled and looked like he had just woken up in them. What was left of his receding hairline was tangled and sticking straight up in the air.

“Hi my name’s Micky Monus and I see you’re starting another Positive Attitude Development class. I’ve done motivational speaking on the outside and I’ve been very successful in my life.”

Lyle frowned and saw that Micky hadn’t taken his hands out of his pants.

“Aren’t you that guy who lost a billion dollars over some kind of pharmaceutical scam?”

“Yeah but I’m putting all that behind me,” Micky said. “I have lots of skills that I think you could use to make PAD really take off.”

Lyle rubbed his beard. “I don’t think running this class would be for someone like you Micky, but you’re always welcome to sign up.”

Micky started arguing, but Lyle said “thank you” and walked away.

Throughout the second PAD course Lyle was struck by the good it was doing inmates and the effects it had on the compound. Various inmates and staff often commented on how PAD was reducing violence and saving lives. People often suggested to Lyle that he was so good at helping others that he should implement the class upon his release.

Jim Tressel, who was the head coach of the Youngstown State football team, would be the guest speaker at Elkton’s second PAD graduation. His inspirational speech to nearly 100 inmates and staff detailed his rise to college football prestige. Tressel took the team to the National Championship four times in seven years. He attributed the team’s success to positive thinking and encouragement. Later he went on to become the head coach at Ohio State.

Since Lyle had no incident reports and less than 10 years of his sentence remaining, his security level was dropped from “low” to “minimum.” This meant that he would be transferred to a minimum security facility within 500 miles of his release address in Cumberland, Wisconsin. A month after his security level was dropped he was transferred to the federal prison camp in Duluth, Minnesota.

Lyle’s case manager at Elkton, Ms. Burns, called him into her office. She explained the conditions of his transfer. He would be the first inmate at Elkton to be trusted on a Greyhound bus alone without a guard. Lyle was frightened by the responsibility of getting to Duluth on time as a “free man.” If he missed any of the buses, he would be considered a fugitive.

For the first time in more than a decade, Lyle was transported in street clothes without handcuffs. As the van left Elkton, Lyle became immersed in the scenery of the outside world. He experienced everyday things like cars, houses and businesses, as if he was seeing them for the first time. Despite being locked up for more than 10 years, Lyle quickly forgot about being in prison. As the miles passed, he felt he had awakened from a long sleep.

When the van entered the Cleveland Greyhound station, he was overwhelmed by confusion and panic. The station was bustling with people waiting to be transferred to cities all over the Midwest. Fear of getting lost or boarding the wrong bus almost caused another earthquake under his skin. For the first time in his life Lyle experienced the full effect of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. His anxiety went unnoticed. Ms. Burns pointed to the windows where he needed to buy his tickets to Chicago, Madison, Minneapolis, and Duluth. Getting out of the van felt like he was a child being abandoned by his parents. Lyle marveled at how short the line was in comparison to those at prison.

"A ticket to Duluth, MN, please."

After the van left, Lyle had a panic attack. His confusion and anger escalated. Everything slowed down and he was standing there with a series of tickets all connected together for his trip to Duluth. After calming down, an attendant pointed toward a departing bus.

“You’d better hurry if you’re going to catch that bus,” the attendant yelled.

Snapping out of his mental confusion, he rushed out of the station. He heard the diesel engine accelerate, propelling the huge Greyhound in motion. Lyle ran and banged along the side of the bus as it pulled away, leaving him in a cloud of exhaust. He waved his arms as a last attempt to

catch the driver's attention. The brake lights came on and the engine stopped. Lyle yelled, “Yeah!” as he ran up to the opening door.

"You better get aboard sooner next time buddy,” the driver said. “The next driver might leave you behind."

"Thank you and yes sir!" Lyle announced.

Lyle grabbed the railing inside the bus to catch himself as it roared back into motion. He made his way to an open seat and noticed everyone staring at him. He thought, “Does everyone know I’m a convicted felon?”

He collapsed into the most comfortable seat he felt in years. Lyle closed his eyes. The thrust of the bus's acceleration pulled the back of his head against the soft seat rest. Lyle exhaled in relief, “I'm finally on my way to Duluth!” More than 2,000 pages of research, literature, and notes were packed and awaiting him in the far northeastern Minnesota city.

A baby started screaming and Lyle’s eyes flicked open as he focused on the sound of the infant’s cries. He turned around and saw the baby’s distorted face, its mouth wide open emitting a scream that vibrated through Lyle’s ears. Entranced by the whaling he softly said, “Yes, I'm in the real world once again.”

The young mom saw Lyle staring at her baby, “I’m so sorry, she’ll stop in just a few minutes.”

"No No! Let your baby cry. I love it."

Lyle turned around and let the baby's screams caress his ear drums. He wondered what other deficiencies were in his life from being incarcerated and knew he had at least seven more years to do. Lyle enjoyed the momentary freedom of the outside world and dozed off.

When Lyle stepped off the bus in Chicago, he had another panic attack. The station was roaring with never ending lines of people waiting to leave the city. Overwhelmed by the crowded terminal, he wandered to an empty bench, put his head in his hands, and tried to focus. As his thoughts calmed down he heard someone call his name. He looked up and around in confusion.

“Lyle Wildes! Lyle Wildes!”

Lyle looked up and saw Frank Renzo, a former Milan inmate who had been free for a few years.

“Frank!” Lyle exclaimed. What are you doing in Chicago?”

“I’m back home in Schererville, I’m visiting some friends in Chicago. So what are you doing here?”

“I’m on my way to Duluth, I have seven years left Frank.”

“How long do you have until your bus leaves?”

“An hour maybe,” Lyle said.

“Well let me take you out,” Frank said. “We'll only be gone a few minutes. My car is parked at a Greek restaurant is right down the street, just a few blocks.”

Walking to the restaurant was surreal. He studied everyone he passed, wondering if any of them knew he was between prisons. Lyle was so used to prison food, the richness of the lamb and spanakopita overwhelmed him. He watched the bustling street outside the restaurants wide windows. It now felt like his time in prison had been a dream in place of the real world. Anxiety about missing the bus filled his mind, so Frank drove him back to the Greyhound Station.

Lyle was one of the first to board the bus headed for Madison where he had 15 minutes to spare. As the bus drove past his old stomping grounds, Lyle was overwhelmed with nostalgia. The bus went by the same motel where the girl waved for help through the window and the drunken construction worker couldn’t get it up. Lyle was brought back to reality when an attractive female asked if anyone was sitting in the seat beside him. His eyes swept her body from top to bottom in amazement.

“No one is sitting in this seat,” Lyle said trying to hide his delight. “You're welcome to sit down if you would like.”

As she put her baggage away her tummy became exposed between her short blouse and worn out, tight blue jeans. Her hair was short and parted down the middle so it hung over her eyes. She seemed to like turning her head to wave the hair from her face. They exchanged names and she asked, "Where are you going?”

"Duluth."

"Really, what takes you to Duluth?"

"I've been relocated to Duluth. I'm going to see if I like it there."

She smiled and said, "I heard it’s a nice town, but it’s too cold for me. I haven't gotten much sleep because I've been working the political scene in Madison the past few days. I'm going to try and get some sleep.”

She untied the sleeves of her sweater which were around her neck and laid it over her body like a blanket. When the bus passed by the Dells, her head kept falling one way or the other causing her to wake up. Her head fell a third time and Lyle spoke.

"Ann?"

"H-m-m?" she murmured.

"May I ask you a question?"

She looked up as if to say, "What?"

"Ann, if you would like, you can put your head on my shoulder. That way you can fall back to sleep."

“You wouldn't mind?” Ann asked.

“No, not at all.”

Her body readjusted and she placed her head on the edge of Lyle’s shoulder. He reached over and moved her head further on his shoulder so her hair was touching his neck. Lyle brushed her hair out of her eyes and put his hands in his lap. She cuddled and gave a groan of satisfaction.

“Do you mind if I rested my head against yours?” Lyle asked.

"Not at all."

It was Lyle’s first physical contact with a woman since his arrest in 1989. The testosterone that flowed through his body felt wonderful. He was filled with the scent of a woman. Her perfume was soft and refreshing. Despite being on a bus more than 12 hours, there was no way Lyle was going to miss any moment of it. He was filled with peace. The bus exchanged people at several stops in Minneapolis. Lyle savored his last few moments with Ann. The lights flashed at the final stop and she woke up. Lyle realized he had fallen asleep.

Part of Lyle’s soul that had been inactive for years was now awakened. Ann sat up and brushed her hair and straightened out her blue jeans and blouse. She tied the sweater sleeves around her neck and prepared to depart.

"What's your name again, did you say it was Lyle?"

"Yes."

"I want to thank you for sharing your shoulder. I sure feel rested even with that Greyhound seat,” Ann said.

"Me too,” Lyle said. “I guess we needed each other to refuel from our journeys."

Anne grinned, "Yeah, if you ever get down to Minneapolis give me a call. I'm listed in the Phone book.”

She gave Lyle her name and bent down and kissed him on the cheek. After a decade of not being touched by a woman, Ann’s kiss was the most sensual experience of his life. He wanted so badly to call Ann, but with seven more years to serve, Lyle knew they had no future. Lyle slept most of the way to Duluth and got off the bus to a freezing cold November. He walked to a taxi and asked, "Can you take me to the Duluth prison camp?"

Lyle was asked to empty his pockets and take off the street clothes Elkton had given him for the trip. Back in prison clothes he felt like he had never left. The guards were surprised at the amount of cash Lyle had in his pockets. Elkton had given Lyle $50 for food and extra expenses and had mistaking given him nearly $300 from his account. Despite Lyle telling the intake guards in Duluth that it was his money, they thought a friend had given him the extra cash or that Lyle had robbed someone during the trip. Lyle suggested the guard call Elkton.

“How much cash did you give Wildes?” The guard asked over the phone. "Are you people nuts? What if this prisoner had an addiction problem? He

could have bought drugs and lost his way.” The guard hung up the phone frustrated.

“You should have spent it if you didn't want me to take it,” the guard said.

The Duluth minimum security federal prison camp is located in an old wooden air force barracks with three units. One thing Lyle noticed right away was the absence of fences and walls. Seeing inmates driving vehicles around the compound was a shock to him. There was also walking amongst trees, a running track, handball courts, and a softball diamond.

Released to general population, Lyle was assigned to a room with four bunks. It was the first time he was incarcerated with no lockdowns or movements. The first morning, Lyle woke up to a thick fog surrounding the compound. He listened to birds chirping and fell back asleep. A guard announced over the intercom that the compound was open for a normal day. Lyle was perplexed, “What? How can that be? In higher security facilities they would keep us locked in our units for even a slight fog.” It was so foggy the birds were walking. Lyle walked outside and watched prisoners playfully wrestling. If that happened at Milan, there would be a warning, a warning shot, and finally a shot to kill.

In Duluth, when Lyle heard or saw people horse-playing, he tightened up in fear of someone getting killed. If someone ran through the bunkroom, he took a deep breath in fear. After getting used to the relaxed security, Lyle went to Mr. Miller’s office, head of the education department. With

references from Elkton, Mr. Miller assigned Lyle as a tutor and agreed to sponsor his PAD class.

After teaching the course for a few weeks in Duluth, Lyle noted differences in thinking at each security level. There were 10 principles that Lyle taught over the 20 week course. At Milan, the favorite principle was, “I will persist until I succeed.” At Elkton the favorite principle was, “I will be master of my emotions.” In Duluth, the favorite principle was, “I will laugh at the world.” What is constant in each level of prison is that incarceration causes inmates to focus on a particular principle depending on their security level.

In 2001, Ricardo Chavez was the warden in Duluth. Lyle saw him as an example of someone given unchecked power who doesn’t know when or how to use it. Chavez never adopted the thinking of a warden, but rather that of a micromanager and reactionary. He was unpopular amongst the staff and prisoners alike. Lyle invited Chavez to every PAD graduation, but he never responded.

After Lyle’s first PAD graduation, the University of Minnesota Duluth started a Master's Liberal Studies program. Lyle wrote to UMD and asked if he could earn his Master's degree from prison. Dr. James Fetzer was the coordinator of the new master’s program. Fetzer asked Lyle to write a three page paper about how he was going to change the world, which was the goal of the program. Lyle wrote about reducing recidivism through developing a positive attitude.

With permission from Mr. Miller and Lyle’s unit manager, Lyle paid the admission fees to UMD. After paying more than $8,000 for classes, Warden Chavez denied Lyle’s furlough request on the grounds that he was too far from his release date. Lyle offered to pay a guard to take him to class and sit in the classroom each week but Chavez wouldn’t budge. After leaving the warden’s office, Lyle was issued his first incident report in 14 years for not filling out his phone list properly. With an incident report on his

record, Lyle would be disqualified for being furloughed to school for the remainder of his incarceration.

After two successful PAD courses, Lyle invited Ruth Stricker, the owner of a wellness and health spa near Minneapolis, to be the guest speaker at a PAD graduation. After the ceremony, Warden Chavez interrupted Ruth who was handing out certificates to inmates that completed the five month course.

“Mr. Wildes and I are going spend a little quality time together.” The warden motioned for Lyle to go to the education department office.

“Mr. Wildes, I'm the warden here. Not you.”

“I've never doubted that for one second,” Lyle said.

Chavez picked up the graduation program. “Do you see my name on that program anywhere?”

“No sir I do not.”

Chavez opened the program and pointed to Lyle’s name as the class facilitator.

“Look Mr. Wildes, your name will not be on another program. You're only an inmate and I don’t want you to forget that. Do you have anything to say?”

“Yes sir I do. I am confused. This is the way the program has been done for 20 some graduations. I invited you to attend every graduation since I’ve been here, but you never came. Every other warden participated in each PAD graduation. I don't understand why you're so offended by my efforts. Is it not your goal to assist each prisoner in becoming a better person?”

“We have nothing more to talk about Mr. Wildes. Leave now!”

Lyle worried that PAD was in jeopardy. He didn’t know what Chavez was going to do. A few weeks after threatening the class, Chavez was transferred to be an assistant Warden at a different prison. When Lyle’s class was out of danger, he started his fourth PAD class in Duluth.

After more than 10 years of writing to The Miracle Man without a response, Mr. Miller called Lyle into his office.

“Morris Goodman left a message for you to call,” Mr. Miller said. Lyle was ecstatic. An enthusiastic voice answered the phone, “Hello?”

“Hi Morris! This is Lyle.”

“You sure are a persistent individual Lyle.”

“I learned that from your video Morris. We’d like to have you come here and speak.”

“I can do that,” Morris said.

Morris spoke to the general prison population on a Saturday in September of 2003.

“One reason I'm here is because Lyle wouldn't give up. When our phone rang, my wife would say, ‘Morris you answer it, it's probably Lyle calling, again.’ One day I told my wife, ‘You know, Lyle's probably going to get out soon and he'll come and get me to speak to his class, so I better go and speak to his class.” The audience of more than 200 laughed as Morris pointed to Lyle. The Miracle Man was the talk of the compound for weeks.

The new warden was so impressed by Lyle’s class he made it part of the prisons Admissions and Orientation. The staff in Duluth noticed an 80 percent reduction of incident reports by new arrivals at the prison camp. More than half of the 900 inmates in Duluth had taken Lyle’s class.

Throughout his time in federal prison, Lyle received more than 1,000 letters from inmates who thanked him for helping them turn their lives in the right direction. Many of the letters, however, were from inmates who seemed hopelessly lost in the system.

*My name is Christopher Hayes prison inmate #07021-067. I was born February 4, 1972, in Brooklyn New York in a single parent home. From my earliest memories life as I know it has been a constant struggle. From physical abuse to mental abuse to verbal abuse the stage was set for the life I now live. I am currently housed in federal prison camp Duluth for playing my part in what the government calls a “relatively small drug operation.” I received 19 years and seven months with an additional three years of supervised release for this “relatively small drug operation.”*

*I've been incarcerated my entire adult life. At times I feel as if I was not given a fair chance in life. I do not know my future but I can feel my past every day. My entire existence feels like a nightmare and I can't wait to wake up from it. Unbelievable as this may sound, some of my early memories are of my mother in a heated rage lashing me constantly with a thick leather belt. At times some of the beatings were so severe it hurt to sit down or wear clothes due to the bruises left on my body. My mother profusely employed profanity before, during, and after an act of abuse. There was no regard for age when my mother went on the war path. Belts, extension cords, switches, sticks, shoes, punches, and open hand slaps were some of the methods she'd use to chastise defiance. I had a brother and sister who would find themselves on the receiving end of one of my mother's ‘good old fashion beatings’ as she would call them. Although my siblings suffered abuse, I seemed to be my mother’s favorite choice.*

*At times it would seem like my mother enjoyed her assault on her children as she would prepare, at times, in advance. One of her prepared beatings was a time when she looked for a record suitable enough to play during her assault. An old disco song called “I'm Burning Up” was one of the songs she played. I must have been abused in some form more than a thousand times before I was 14. It was then I decided I would take no more. My mother was an alcoholic and most of the monies public assistance gave her to support my siblings and I went toward her addiction. I was around 13 to14 when I began to fully fend for myself. I was packing bags at the super market, going to the store for the older women in the neighborhood, washing cars and shoveling snow, but all this was inadequate. I went in search for a job but I was too young. I was once fired because they found out my age.*

*I helped a friend in his drug trade for a two weeks. I had found a girlfriend and wanted a better life myself.*

*My friend quickly made a name for himself in the drug business that drew the attention of the local authorities. They arrested and charged him but later turned him over to the feds. Because he had been in trouble before he cooperated with the government. He named everyone he knew, including me that had worked with him in the drug business. My two weeks involvement with him got me a sentence of 235 months. My life in prison has not been supportive. I have tried to better myself by pursuing an education. It has been difficult because there are not enough programs in the prison system. Every prison facility I've been in has denied me programs because of the length of my sentence. I will be released one day, however as of today I have no job skills and no education despite the fact that I have been in prison for over a decade. Why have I received such a harsh sentence and denied any reentry assistance? I don't know how I'm going to survive when I'm released from prison without returning to illegal behavior. No one owes me anything but that shouldn't stop me from improving myself while in prison. A chance to prepare for my reentry is all I'm asking for, just a chance, nothing more nothing less, but the prison system has been satisfied by warehousing me for the past 11years. Christener Hayes #07012-047*

About five years into Lyle’s stay at Duluth, he heard that Kenny had been designated to the Duluth camp. By this time, Lyle had taught his PAD course for more than 15 years, expressing the importance of forgiveness to hundreds of inmates. Over the years, many challenged Lyle saying it was impossible for them to forgive someone that ruined their lives. Despite years of teaching inmates the power of forgiveness, Lyle was filled with rage when he heard Kenney was being transferred to Duluth.

Since newcomers are housed in a different building, Lyle didn’t see Kenny when he arrived. A few weeks went by and Lyle heard that a new inmate was moving to his bunk room. Lyle was returning to his bunk after work when he saw Kenny who had already introduced himself to the other inmates. Lyle’s hair and beard were white and Kenny didn’t recognize him.

“I knew you from Madison,” Lyle said.

Kenny thought for a moment, “Wow that would have been a long time ago.”

“Yeah, a long time ago, it was. My name is Lyle Wildes.”

“Shit,” Kenny said and sat in a chair by the bunks.

The man who tried to save himself by giving Lyle a life sentence would be sleeping three feet from Lyle’s bed. Lyle looked out the window as violent thoughts flashed through his brain, “Should I fill a sock with rocks or locks and smash his skull in when he is asleep, or simply stab him to death?”

Lyle knew the principles and practices of his Positive Attitude Development class forwards and backwards. By the end of every course, most of Lyle’s students said they knew the power of forgiveness, but had at least one unforgiveable memory. Nevertheless, Lyle made a case for letting go and forgiving betrayal.

On the verge of rage, Lyle forced the question, “Do I truly believe in the power of forgiveness enough to apply it to my own unforgivable memory?”

Through the bunk room window, Lyle watched a few cars pull up to a building that was still used by the Air Force. A few soldiers in full uniform greeted a small group of civilians in the parking lot before walking in the military complex.

“I can let this go. I am going to let this go. I’m going to turn around and welcome Kenny to this room. Not only welcome him, but let him know he will be safe in this room.”

Lyle turned away from the window and looked at Kenny. “Don’t worry about anything in the past. You will be safe here and all is well.” Kenny looked as if Lyle hadn’t said anything. Kenny bowed his head and tied his tennis shoes. “I’m going outside to play some handball,” Kenny said as he got up to leave.

“Do you have a handball?” Lyle asked.

“I’m sure someone out there will have one,” Kenny said awkwardly.

Lyle walked over to his locker, pulled out a new hand ball, and bounced it to Kenny. He caught it and walked out of the room. After a few seconds, Kenny reappeared in the doorway. “Thanks Mr. Wildes.”

Lyle stood with tears forming in his eyes as he felt the true power of forgiveness. He sat down in the same chair Kenny had tied his shoes in and took a long, deep breath.

An announcement came over the intercom, “Wildes, report to your case manager’s office now.”

Lyle composed himself and walked to Ms. McDonald’s office, who was his case manager.

“Lyle I was just informed that a man who had planned to testify in a grand jury against you is now on the compound. Let me know if you have a problem with him staying here. You can request to be moved or request he be moved.”

Lyle looked perplexed. “How can you be so concerned when he was in my room?”

Shock filled Ms. McDonald’s face. “There’s no way that could’ve happened. There’s no way that should have happened.” She checked her computer and the color left her face. She reached for the phone to have Kenny removed.

“Don’t call anybody,” Lyle said. “Just leave him in the room.”

“Is he going to be okay in your room?” Ms. McDonald had attended some of Lyle’s PAD classes, but was amazed that he showed no animosity toward Kenny.

“It just seems like this has all come together to see if I can really walk my talk. I can tell you that I am walking my talk and it feels like something I would’ve never expected.”

As time passed, Lyle began to see many great characteristics in Kenny. Now working as a clerk in the psychology department, Lyle heard heavy, slow steps coming down the hallway. He wondered who needed help as Kenny appeared in the doorway.

“Can I talk to you for a minute Lyle?”

“Sure,” Lyle said. “Come on in. Have a seat.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Kenny said, “but things are really difficult for me right now because my mother just died. I know you had to deal with your mother’s death while you were incarcerated and I wanted to know if you could give me any advice on ways to handle this. My mother has been one of the most supportive people in my life.”

“You know Kenny, my mother told me something before she died that helped me walk through the darkness of these times. She said, ‘diamonds are made under extremely high pressure, so you’ll either come out of

prison with a sparkling personality or shattered and broken.’ My Mom told me what I’m sure your Mom would have said and that is, ‘I know you can have a sparkling personality when you’re released.’”

Kenny fell back in his chair and exhaled, “You know, that’s what my Mom would believe about me too.” Kenny stood up with tears rolling down his face and said, “That’s what I needed to hear Lyle, Thanks.”

As Kenny walked out of Lyle’s office, he repeated to himself, “Forgiveness fosters peace, love, and respect, and creates even more peace, love, and respect.”

Lyle now imagined Nancy walking into the room and wondered if he could forgive her the same way he did Kenny.

After Lyle’s release in late 2007, he was at his office working overtime on a Saturday. He was preparing for a PAD lecture he would be giving on Monday when his phone rang.

“Men as Peacemakers, this is Lyle.”

“Lyle, this is Nancy.”

“Nancy who?”

“Jed’s mom.”

Lyle felt the pain in her voice like the 25 years between them had never happened.

“Oh wow Nancy! I’m glad you called me back.”

“What do you want?” she asked sternly.

“First, I want to acknowledge all of the abuse that I have done to you. Second, I want to say how sorry I am for having done that. I can’t begin to tell you how embarrassed and regretful I am about the way I treated you.”

The phone was silent for nearly a minute.

“I’d like to know how to find Jed.”

“He doesn’t want to see you and I wouldn’t ever consider helping you, you bastard. Whenever I eat and I hear a song that reminds me of you, I puke my meal up. I fucking hate you Lyle.”

Lyle stood, holding the phone, wondering if he really was the person she remembered.



Upon release, Lyle Wildes worked for Men as Peacemakers in Duluth, MN helping hundreds of men process the obstacles of their reentry. He facilitates domestic abuse men’s groups, has given more than 600 speeches, and has written two books on Positive Attitude Development. He currently has a contract with the Bureau of Prisons helping parole officers and offenders successfully transition out of prison. When he’s not teaching PAD, Lyle loves to run, play hand ball, and listen to the blues. His post-prison goal is “to change the world by helping people to become the best they can be.



Joe Cadotte is the Reuter’s correspondent for Northeastern Minnesota and Northwestern Wisconsin. He has received 21 journalism and writing awards including a 2010 Public Radio News Directors Incorporated scholarship, one of the most prestigious broadcast writing awards in the nation. He has reported for Wisconsin Public Radio, Iowa Public Radio, and FOX 21 in Duluth, Minnesota. His writing has appeared in the Chicago Tribune, Yahoo News, NBC, and the international Pacifica network of Free Speech Radio News. In addition to journalism and literature, he also enjoys singing, playing guitar, and cooking.