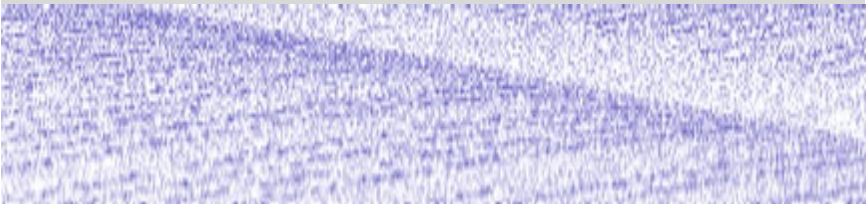


ONE-PAGE STORIES

No. 16 — AUGUST 2021

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Cheapest Date in the World

By TOM DUFFEY — REYNOLDSVILLE, PA

I THOUGHT IT MIGHT BE AN OUTRAGEOUS IDEA, to take my wife on the “cheapest date in the world.” It was Saturday afternoon in the small Pennsylvania town where she grew up and we moved back to 50 years later to make our forever home.

So, evening fell and we set out for this momentous date – the date to top all others. We started out with no car. Just casual walking downtown to find a bench for a brief time.

We found the perfect bench in front of our local library. It was interesting watching traffic which included trucks, a bus or two and a vast assortment of automobiles followed by gangs of motorcycles some of which tested our hearing. Our bench was facing what was once known as the “lakes to sea highway.” For those with US maps this would be Route 322. It starts out in Philadelphia and runs across the state all the way to Lake Erie. We are in Reynoldsville which is about 10 miles from Punxsutawney, home of that famous groundhog who comes out every February to predict six more weeks of Winter or an early Spring.

We followed the bench sit with some window shopping where there are still stores that fix up their front sidewalk windows. By the way, spring was in the air, wonderful for walking and meandering. Perfect weather for holding hands during a pleasant walk. No gas required for this date.

Fortunately, we made many good and decent acquaintances during our time here so every so often on Main Street we were greeted with a friendly beep or a friendly “hello” by passersby.

One of the townsmen had opened a genuine candy store with milk shakes and ice cream. He also had a case with penny candy. We took our time picking out our treat because I had all of 2 cents with me. A penny for my wife and a penny for me – with no thoughts.

Our choice made, we left for the balance of our date with an all day sucker for each and enjoyed the taste of our chosen flavor.

I am not going to send this to Guinness for the record but I think we came close to a record with this date.

When a Step-Dad Becomes a Dad

BY TOM DUFFEY — REYNOLDSVILLE, PA.

THE CAR WOULDN'T EVEN TURN OVER. It's two o'clock in the morning on Saturday night. My friend Rodger and I were parked in the area of swamps where drivers go for privacy. We had a six-pack of beer to put a cap on what was a "drive around" night. Buzzing drive-ins trying to get the attention of a car of girls. No dice.

I was just 16 and Rodger was 17. He had a driver's license and his own wreck of a used car. At least it ran but was no "chick magnet." We had been talking over the non-events of the evening and sipping beer. Nothing too crazy. When it came time to go home, the car would not start. It wouldn't even turn over. There was no hill to go to and try to pop the clutch. It was an "Oh, shucks!" moment.

I walked to a shopping center over on Route 30 and found a phone booth. Called home in hopes that Joe, my step-dad would answer. No such luck. Mom thought the worst and figured something like an accident had happened. I quickly disabused her of that notion and asked if she would please put "Dad" on the line.

He came on with a groggy what's wrong voice and I explained to him in the most innocent of terms that we needed a car start and where we were. Naturally, he would wonder why two guys would be parked in an off-beat place with no girlfriends.

I was able to explain my location at the phone booth and said I would wait for him to show up. I was there for what seemed an hour waiting for him to show up. I had some chewing gum and was chewing like mad to help mask the smell of Carling's Black Label. He was a smoker so his sense of smell was somewhat muted.

After he showed up, I was able to guide him to the car where Rodger was parked. He knew what we were up to without any explanation even though we had gotten rid of all the evidence including cigarette butts and beer cans. They all went into the weeds.

We raised the hood and he was able to hook up the jumper cables and the car started right up. Rodger went on his way and I rode home with Dad. I knew this was a really extreme case of being pulled out of the fire and in my most grateful voice told him "Thanks, Dad."

He replied, "That's what Dads are for."

The Gift

BY TOM DUFFEY — REYNOLDSVILLE, PA.

IN THE D.C. BUS STATION WITH A SUITCASE and not much else. Found a room in an Alexandria, Virginia, rooming house. This was really “starting over.” This was one particular Christmas past: single, broke and life on a downhill slide. Sitting in a house about to be repossessed, my Christmas tree a single piece of tinsel found on the floor, left over from last year’s tree. It was hung on the curve of a bent coat hanger serving as rabbit ears for a little black-and-white table-top TV.

Flash forward 25 years. I now sit in a paid-off four-bedroom brick house on a beautiful corner lot with seven giant pines and a host of maple trees with a beautiful, dutiful wife. We are now celebrating 35 years of marriage. So much for which to be thankful every day.

Moving from the big city to this small town, where my wife was raised, we joined many worthy local volunteer organizations. One was Meals on Wheels which we served for over 12 years. Another was the Salvation Army for more than 12 years. This entailed ringing the bell in all kinds of weather in front of the one grocery store in town. The folks in this area were always very generous. A highlight with the SA was putting together a week’s trip to a first-class summer camp for young boys and girls.

There were three brothers who were only a couple of years apart in age. They lived in a run-down house and made do with what they had. A strip of dirt ran in front of their house between the sidewalk and the street. One of the brothers had started a tomato plant in the middle of the strip and my wife mentioned to him that she really liked tomatoes. The comment was forgotten.

One day, later in the summer, we were sitting on our front porch and along came one of the brothers on his bike. Wrapped around the handlebars was a brown bag. He came up onto the porch and handed the bag to my wife. She opened it and resting inside was a beautiful red tomato. This is the kind of place we live in.

Little things do really matter. Blessings *do* sometimes come to those who persevere.

Timing Is Everything

By KATHLEEN J. ZWANZIGER — COLUMBUS, OHIO

THE TEST RESULTS WERE CLEAR: I WAS PREGNANT. I could hardly wait to go home and tell my husband. Wait a minute! I had not been married for twenty years. How could this be? I knew of only one immaculate conception – and Mary had been visited by an angel. I should see my doctor.



(Image from Medical News Today website)

In the examination room, I showed the doctor my swollen feet and told him the test results. As I lay on the exam table, he poked and prodded, trying to ascertain what my body was saying. Then he took a huge syringe and plunged it into my right side, withdrawing a large amount of liquid. He spit into it and was puzzled by the result. I barely had time to even think “That’s an odd test,” when he showed it to me: the spit was not mixing with the bodily fluid. It looked like the corona around the sun, two completely separate layers. The doctor stepped out of the room.

A few moments later he returned with another doctor who looked like a cross between B. J. Honeycutt and Anthony Bourdain – tall, slender, and unruly hair. A knowing look passed between them, and a feeling of dread washed over me.

Before I could ask what was wrong with me, I awoke.

For a few minutes I just lay there as I realized I was not about to die. That meant neither was I pregnant. For a moment I questioned if that made me happy or maybe a bit sad. Many couples these days are overjoyed and have “reveal” parties to notify families and friends they are expecting a child, even the sex of that child. Forty-five years ago, I was overjoyed to hear the words, “You’re pregnant!” But at my age today, those words would not necessarily be good news.

About thirty years ago, a son wanted a pair of white jeans. At last, I found a pair and surprised him with the gift. He was not thrilled: he no longer was interested in white jeans. Like a pregnancy, what a difference timing can make.

With Wally in Rome

BY DON LUCK — COLUMBUS, OHIO

I MET WALLY DROTTS – NEVER WALTER OR WALT – when we both pursued post-seminary studies in that bastion of contemporary Calvinist theology, New College at the University of Edinburgh. He was notably outgoing and affable. We quickly became friends and eventually roommates when we both signed up for a tour of the Holy Land over Easter break.

We boarded a DC3 for a night flight, landing in Rome in the late morning. We settled into our hotel room and then came down to a wonderful meal featuring some of the best spaghetti I have ever tasted. Wally and I eagerly ordered seconds not realizing it was only a prelude to the entree, so when everyone finished their desserts we were still eating our salad. In addition we dawdled in our room so the tour bus left without us. I assumed the group was headed to the Forum. Summoning a taxi, I confidently said “Il Foro” and off we went.

As our driver navigated crowded, frantic, swerving traffic, I carefully studied the transparent schedule of rates posted on the rear windows: so much per number of people, so much for luggage, etc.. So when we reached our destination, I had the fare in hand—three people,* no luggage plus tip. (* Wally and I had been joined by another laggard, an older mousy deaconess from Glasgow.)

I handed the driver his fare and he immediately became irate and I could see he was insisting we owed more. “No, no, no,” I responded, pointing to the schedule in the window. He was adamant; so was I. He wasn’t dealing with a genial Midwesterner or a timid Glaswegian; he was dealing with a tested New Yorker. His tone shifted from confronting to pleading. He showed me a photo in his wallet. “*Mi bambini*,” he said with a long face. I was unmoved.

As this exchange was going on, some passers-by stopped to see what was going on. Soon it became a crowd. And began taking sides. A *poliziotto* who was attracted by all the commotion immediately became the focus of the two arguments for justice. Noticing all eyes were on him, I silently signaled to my companions and we unobtrusively slipped out the rear. It was worthy of a scene by Woody Allen.

With Wally in Jerusalem

BY DON LUCK — COLUMBUS, OHIO

WALLY AND I HAD MISSED THE TOUR BUS IN ROME but I chose not to join the group one day in Jerusalem. The schedule called for an all-day drive to Mount Nebo and then back to the hotel. According to the story, an incident of Moses' disobedience meant he could not enter the promised land but on top of Mount Nebo he was allowed to see a panorama that stretches as far as Jerusalem and some of the Jordan valley. I chose instead to follow in rough fashion the path of Jesus in his final days. When I told Wally my plan he immediately said he'd join me.

Our hotel was east of Jerusalem, not far from Bethany so we headed there enjoying the signs of spring along the road. Our plan was to alternately read aloud appropriate passages from the Bible. When we reached Bethany, we read of Jesus finding hospitality there at the home of his friends Mary and Martha. Then, as we walked up the hill whose other side would set us on the road to Bethpage and the Mount of Olives, a voice hailed us. A young Arab couple with two small children welcomed us and offered us cups of the strong sweet coffee found throughout the Near East. We stumbled because of the language barrier but through my meager French we learned their girls enjoyed daily milk rations from the Lutherans. Like Jesus, we came to Bethany and found hospitality.

We continued our pilgrimage and as evening fell I fancied the idea of eating in a second floor restaurant, an "upper room," so we set off to get a recommendation from Mr. and Mrs. Mottar, the caretakers of Jerusalem's only Protestant "shrine," the Garden Tomb beneath Gordon's Calvary. Scholarly investigation has debunked the claims of British Major General C. G. Gordon that a rocky knoll whose face resembles a skull was the genuine Calvary, aka Golgotha—the place of the skull. A tomb at its base has a trough in front of it within which a rolling stone might close its opening. Despite scholars' demurrals, Protestant piety believes it is the tomb of Jesus. I understand the careful arguments, but I preferred effect of the place rather than that of the dubious and over-built official sites.

The Mottars were amazingly welcoming and instead of a recommendation they issued us an invitation to dine with them. More unexpected hospitality. And their dining room was on the second floor of their home.

With Wally in Egypt

BY DON LUCK — COLUMBUS, OHIO

WALLY AND I HAD STRUCK OUT ON OUR OWN — once by accident, the other by design. It happened again in Egypt.

The plane flying us from Jordan to Egypt could not accommodate all of us so volunteers were called for to arrive on a later flight. Always agreeable, Wally chose to remain. When he arrived at our room he was more ebullient than usual.

True to his outgoing nature, he had struck up a conversation with none other than the captain of the Cairo airport police. So taken was he by Wally that he invited him — and any others from the group — to be his guests that evening at nothing less than the nightclub that King Farouk had installed in his palace. Gamal Abdel Nasser had not only deposed Farouk but nationalized his palace as well. Moreover, Egypt's Number Two belly dancer would be performing that night.

Wally asked around but I was the only one to take up the offer. The rest chose to meet the head of the Coptic Church. The captain, Wally and I joined three others and had a wonderful time, particularly when the star of the evening singled Wally out for special attention. I have a photo of us all roaring with laughter as Wally leaned back as far as he could on his low hassock to escape her gyrations.

I don't know whether he made the decision before or after that evening, but when he returned to the United States, Wally left his conservative pietistic denomination and became a Presbyterian.



A 2014 clip from an NBC News story on belly-dancing in Egypt. (Web image.)

“What Will Become of Me?”

BY BILL BOYS — COLUMBUS, OHIO

HIS QUESTION HAUNTED ME THEN, AND IT STILL echoes in memory. Aniedi was a young man employed in our mission compound at Obot Idim, and he asked me that plaintive question on the day all us white, expatriate missionaries with in-hand passports to the United States were assembling for our evacuation caravan, hoping to leave and reach Onitsha, on the Niger River, before nightfall. (See “The Shotgun Shell” story in this issue.)

Now suddenly Aniedi had no job. He was of an age to be drafted into the Biafran army, which was now being rapidly formed in the aftermath of the secession of our Eastern Region of Nigeria, which led to this breakaway nation and a civil war which had already turned hot on the northern border. He was of the Ibibio tribe, which was not so enthusiastic about the secession, but the dominant Igbo tribe was calling the shots.

Even if he was not drafted, or managed to evade Biafran army service, everyone in Biafra was in danger by simply being in a war zone. When armies come through, anything can happen. All our personal belongings that were left behind in storage were looted when that happened at Obot Idim. Aerial bombardment was a threat even behind the lines. Food insecurity; starvation. When Biafra lost the war, as international pundits predicted, the aftermath would be chancy, both in terms of military action and occupation, disruption to civil society, and ordinary human criminal acts. Aniedi’s question was entirely, fearfully, reasonable: “What will become of me?”

How many times has that been asked in all the wars, genocides, authoritarian repression and even natural disasters we have witnessed in just our lifetimes? Millions; millions. I remember watching on TV as the helicopters lifted refugees off the roof of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon in the final collapse of the Vietnam War. Ruth and I later hosted two refugee brothers, Phat and Phuoc, in our home until they could get on their feet. They had been translators who worked with the U.S. Army, but had been left behind. They managed to escape on their own, knowing what fate they faced if captured. As I write this story, news has been swirling about whether we will evacuate Afghan translators who worked with U.S. forces. How will America respond to this particular instance of answering “What will become of me?” It seems to me to be a moral, ethical question.

The Shotgun Shell

BY BILL BOYS — COLUMBUS, OHIO

ARMED MEN BLOCKED OUR EVACUATION road in a stretch of rain forest east of Onitsha. We had no option but to stop. We were now in Igbo territory, and this roadblock had a hundred men not in any uniforms; they were suspicious at least, and they were armed. Earlier, in Ibibio territory, military, police and civilian roadblocks along the road had been passed without trouble.

Our small caravan of cars and a VW minibus was trying to reach the Niger River city of Onitsha before nightfall. We had left our mission compound at Obot Idim at noon that day. The wives and children had safely evacuated by air from Port Harcourt in June. But air traffic between Nigeria and breakaway Biafra was now halted. Now (July 13, 1967) we had to try to leave by ground travel via the still-open Niger River ferry to enter Nigerian territory. The mile-long bridge there was closed, defended by opposing troops on either end.

This new roadblock in the rain forest was tense. Our Ibibio drivers were suspect and were treated rudely. We had to get out and let our luggage be searched, often chaotically by four or five men at a time. They were looking for evidence that we were mercenaries, not missionaries as we claimed. Propaganda on both sides claimed that the other side had brought in white mercenaries to fight for them. We were fortunate that one man in our group spoke Igbo – not that they listened to him – but at least it was unlikely that any newly-imported white mercenary would be fluent in Igbo.

The men also searched our vehicles. That's when one of them found a shotgun shell. No gun, but the shell must have gone adrift in the car once when the missionary who was a hunter used it. Now they had a piece of ammunition, evidence of weaponry. As they examined it, I knew this could be real trouble. This was my scariest moment ever. I began to feel faint – enough so that I bent over to keep blood flow going to my brain. Good; I didn't pass out. Several of the men passed the shell around and examined it. None of them recognized it for what it was! The only ammunition they must have known were *bullets*! They returned it to us and finally let us pass. We didn't get to Onitsha until after dark, and were picked up twice by police and interrogated, but our papers were accepted in the end. After a second night in Onitsha we ferried across the Niger River, were admitted to Nigeria, and on our way to Lagos and flights home.

But . . . What Could I Write About?

BY BILL BOYS — COLUMBUS, OHIO

WELL, HERE ARE ALL KINDS OF TOPICS that people wrote about in just the previous four issues alone:

A mix-up in preparing a meal.
A hobby that means a lot to me.
A surprising encounter with police.
Appreciating the strength of some women in troubled times.
Being threatened for doing certain work.
Being mistaken for somebody else.
Celebrating a spouse.
Deciding I was too old for a hazardous sport anymore.
Experiencing danger on an outdoor outing.
Going to the state fair.
Going back home overseas and finding a love for a food dish.
Having a complex medical diagnosis/procedure.
Having a relative who got into serious trouble.
Having an automobile accident.
Having funny/embarrassing car trouble.
Helping in an animal rescue.
How a gift photo rekindled family ties.
Losing something financially important.
Memories of foreign travel.
Pretending something as a teenager that wasn't true.
Remembering childhood in a time of war.
Remembering a prayer that was meaningful to grandmother.
Remembering homesickness as a child.
Remembering a childhood neighborhood.
Remembering a sport from my youth.
Remembering a family object from long ago. (2x)
Remembering a pet.
Remembering a childhood country school.
Thinking insightfully about myself.
Visiting a historic site.
Witnessing a traumatic event.
Writing as a dog talking about its owners.
Writing about unusual aspects of my childhood city.

Maybe you've got a story along one of these lines; maybe something entirely different? Why not share it? (Details on page 12.)



Write for ONE-PAGE STORIES?

You don't have to be a member of NAPA to submit pieces, although members are definitely invited. (Here's an easy place to practice and present your short-short story writing efforts.)

HOW MANY WORDS? About 350 to 400 words. Less if you have a photo or graphic to go with your story.

WHAT KIND OF CONTENT? Original prose – fiction or non-fiction. Personal narratives, anecdotes and memoirs would be especially welcome, but other genres would be considered as well, as long as they are your own original pieces.

CAN I GET SOME EXTRA COPIES FOR MYSELF? Certainly. Just let me know how many you would like.

WILL I GET FEEDBACK? I'll be happy to share with you any feedback I get from others about your story.

NOTE TO READERS – I'd love for you to send me comments about any of the stories. The authors like to hear reactions.

WHERE DO I SEND A SUBMISSION? To Bill Boys either by email at williamboys@att.net (preferred, to save retyping) or by postal mail to 184 Reinhard Ave., Columbus OH 43206-2635.

Tips on writing – I'll help as I'm able

Almost all of us who write for *One-Page Stories* are not professional writers. We're amateurs who do this for creative enjoyment. You needn't feel you have to be a polished writer. I will work with you to get your narrative into the best, most interesting and well-crafted shape I can. Here's how it works: After I get your story I send you a short page with my editing comments and suggestions. We may exchange drafts several times during this process, until we're both satisfied your story is ready to print.

So how about it?