

SHERMAN HIGH CLASS OF 1989

By William Burleson

I tell her my name, but she doesn't recognize me.

"Here you go, Gary. Here's your nametag and program. Have a good time."

"Thanks, you too." What a dumb thing to say. She probably has to work at the check-in table half the night, how much fun can she have? I'm surprised she doesn't remember me. Have I changed that much? Sure, twenty years of hair loss, twenty years worth of spare tire, but I don't think I've changed that much. I remember her, even though she's gotten fat. Barb Tillman. I knew it before I saw her nametag. She sat in front of me in pre-calculus. I think she was a cheerleader, on the dance team, something like that. Now she looks like Rosie O'Donnell.

Who'd guess a fancy hotel ballroom could look this plain. Little bunting here, some streamers there, hire some loser with a DJ setup and *voila!* Instant high school reunion. At least there's food, and, even better, a bar.

"Gary Ruddle! How the hell ya doin', Ruddle? I haven't seen you since the ten-year."

Can't I just get a drink before I have to do all this? "John, good to see you. Did you just get here?" What a stupid thing to say. Who gives a shit. Man, I need a drink. Who's the twenty-year-old?

"Yeah. Let me introduce you to my wife." She's stunning: tall, French looking, little black dress, with cleavage that sucks eyes down from her face. Meanwhile, John keeps droning on. "Gary's the worst wide receiver Sherman High ever had." He laughs. Asshole.

"Pleasure to meet you, Gary," she says, a little smile starting in one corner of here mouth.

I put my hand out first. Her hand is small and cold. "How do you do, Leah." I can't believe the prick said that shit about me as a wide receiver. He's just showing off in front of his trophy wife. Cradle robber. Fact is if he could have learned to pass, I could have caught more of his balls. I need to get him back for that comment, ASAP. "Have you two known each other long?" Stupid. Stupid, stupid. How could they? She's like ten.

"We met at Cornell," she replied. "John was my philosophy professor. After I graduated we happened to meet again, and here we are." I wonder if she got a good grade? No, I don't wonder.

John really looks old but trying hard to be young. "Are you alone, Gary? Where's that beautiful wife of yours? What's her name again?"

"Donna. She was going to come, but she's not feeling well."

"How about Allen? Is he coming?"

No way. "I don't think so," I reply. We shuffle our feet a bit, looking around. "I hope you'll excuse me. I just got here, and I'd like to get a drink."

He slaps me on the shoulder. "Sure, Gary. Later."

I'm surprised by how many people are already here, dancing, eating, drinking. Maybe this won't be so bad. I did need to get out. Maybe it will be good to reconnect with some of these people. I have to be positive. That's what people call me: Mr. Positive.

Come on. Bobby Brown? Really? Sure, they are playing it because it's from twenty years ago, but still, no one really needs to listen to *My Prerogative* again.

At least the bar isn't crowded. "Give me a vodka-tonic."

"Gary! I'm so glad you could make it." Charlene Jones, a one-woman welcoming committee. I bet her whole life revolves around coordinating our class reunions.

Now *she's* gained weight. I wonder if she had to get on a ladder to hang all the streamers. I thank her for her hard work.

"Thanks, my pleasure," she says, leaning on the bar. "It's just so much fun seeing everyone. I really look forward to it. What are you doing now?"

"I'm still at Capital Bank. I'm in charge of new accounts." Well, I was in charge until the bloated Huns who ran the place bet the company on derivatives built with mortgages of properties on the dark side of the moon. Now I spend my days in my robe doing something I like to call "consulting."

She tells me all about her husband, who is now blah blah blah. I ask her about her children. It seemed safe from her matronly carriage that she has lots of kids.

"Well, Thomas went off to Augsburg and is doing great. Cindy...have you heard about Cindy? She got in a car accident. She was sixteen and had just gotten her license. She suffered a brain injury and is disabled now. I'm taking care of her full time."

Stupid, stupid, stupid! Why the hell did I ask? Now she's going to get emotional.

"It's hard, but we do alright," she says, all composed. "Hey, where's that wife of yours? Donna, isn't it?"

"She's not feeling well," I look off over her head for a better conversation elsewhere.

"Oh? I noticed she wasn't registered."

"Yeah, I must have forgotten." Mind your own fucking business.

She picks up the end of a red streamer I accidently knocked off the bar and reattaches it.

"I thought maybe you were coming with Allen."

"Allen's coming?" No way! It can't be!

"Sure. He's registered, anyway."

Allen is coming. My god, I never imagined he would be here. Not in a million years.

“Aren’t you still in touch?” Charlene asks. “You two were so inseparable. Frick and Frack. Simon and Garfunkel...”

Man, it is SO time to escape. “Yeah, well, sure we’re still friends. I just thought he had something else to do tonight.” Stupid, stupid. He has nothing else to do, not ever again.

“Oh, Gary, would you excuse me? The registration desk is backing up, so I better help out.” Off she goes.

I can’t believe Allen would come. What could he be thinking? Maybe Charlene is mistaken. Maybe Charlene is nuts. I bet that’s it. “Bartender, give me another vodka-tonic.” I hate this. What the hell am I doing here? I like to keep my life simple. I relax, watch a little TV, I putter around the house and search online for jobs. That’s Gary’s life in sum. I come here and I can’t be who I am. I either have to be who I was—which is certainly not who I am anymore—or I have to be someone I never was nor ever will be. Oh, Gary, what ever are you doing with yourself these days? Why, I’m a fucking astronaut, if you must know. Didn’t you hear? I cured cancer, just the other day. Oh, I’m not doing much; I just spend quiet time with my wife, Jennifer Aniston. What have I been doing, you ask? Why I’m exploring some exciting opportunities in recliner technology. I’ve been honing my savant-like skills of guessing the retail price of Rice-a-Roni on the Price Is Right.

I suppose I should mingle; I feel a little conspicuous leaning all alone on the bar. God, the music. I’m glad the Bobby Brown is over, but I don’t think Gloria Estefan represents much of an improvement.

I head off into the crowd, trying to move like I’m going someplace, but not so fast that I end up across the room in 15 seconds.

“Hey, Gary! Long time.”

Jason. Finally, someone I wanted to see. We exchange pleasantries. He looks pretty good for someone our age: tall, fit, nice suit. Jason’s all right. He’s not some phony like so many other people these days.

“Lookin’ good, my man,” I say.

“Yeah, you probably don’t have more than 20 or so pounds extra and you even have most of your own hair.” He laughs. *Et tu*, Jason? “Just kidding, Gary.” He takes a drink of his vodka Gimlet. Good party, eh? I love the old music.”

“Me too, Jason. Good to hear some of that Bobby Brown crap again. Have you seen any of the old crew yet?”

“Just John over there. How do you like his new wife, eh?”

“I got the scoop on that,” I reply. “She was a student of his and one thing led to another.”

“I bet she got an A.” Jason sucks down the rest of his drink. We start to drift instinctively back to the bar. “So, Gary, I hear Allen’s coming.”

Then it’s true. Or, no, maybe it’s just a rumor started by that busybody Charlene. “I guess he registered. I can’t imagine he would come, though.”

“I hope so. I haven’t seen him in a long time, maybe at the fifteen-year. I remember him doing a great imitation of coach Swindall. That was the best.” We arrive at the bar, Jason starts waving money in the air at the bartender who ignores him. “It was so sad hearing about Allen getting Lou Gerhrig’s disease. What’s it called, ASL?”

“ALS. Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis.”

“Anyway, it’s just too bad.”

“Really. Too bad.”

“I can’t imagine what it would be like to know I had only a few years left to live. Losing control of my body. Man, that’s tough.”

“Yeah. Tough.”

“It will be nice to see him tonight anyway. Good guy.”

“Sure. Good guy.”

“Where’s Donna, Gary?”

“I forgot.”

“You forgot? What does that mean?”

“I mean, she’s sick.” I rub the top of my head.

The bartender gives in and comes over. Jason orders another vodka gimlet. “Oh. Too bad. If you don’t mind me saying so, Gary, your wife is a real looker. And sweet, too. You’re a lucky man.”

“Thanks, Jason. I am.” I am not. She left me. One year ago, she left me. Bitch. I can’t fucking believe it. She was my life. Didn’t she know that? I did everything for her. She worked at a diner when we met. I was the first real man who ever paid attention to her. I wasn’t some sweaty boy hoping to get in her pants; I just graduated from college and was on my way to a good career. We got married right away. She just turned 19 and I was 25.

Our lives were great. We never had kids—we thought it too soon—so we always had cash to travel and enjoy the things we wanted. Eventually, Donna went to college and became a Pharmacist. I can see now that was the start of the end. Our life together wasn’t good enough anymore. She said I limited her. She said I was closed in, that I couldn’t express my emotions. Believe me; she doesn’t want me to express my emotions. She couldn’t take my expressing my emotions. She would rue the day I expressed my goddamn emotions.

“Gary, are you OK?” Jason says.

“What do you mean?”

“It looked like I lost you there for a second, buddy.”

“Oh, I think I must be coming down with Donna’s bug.” I have got to pull myself together. Right now. “Would you excuse me, Jason? I see someone I have to say hello to.”

“Sure. Later, man,” he says, looking around for the next conversation.

I make a beeline over to the appetizer table and devour several crab cakes in a row.

“Hey, Gary! Great party, man. Look at all the food. Not bad at all.”

“Hi, Lonnie. Long time.” All his hair has fallen out and he’s packed some pounds on his short frame.

“Having a good time, dude?”

“Sure man, sure. I’m having a great time.”

“Me too, man. Hey, a couple of us are going to take off in a little while and smoke a number for old time’s sake. You in?”

I guess Lonnie hasn’t changed much. We used to smoke weed in the parking lot after school. He probably still goes there every day to get high. “Na. I have a bit of a cold coming on.”

“Alright then. Hey, did you hear Allen is coming?”

“That’s the rumor.” Shit. Why did I assume Allen wouldn’t come? Stupid, stupid, stupid. Here’s a guy at the prime of his life, making the big bucks as an investment banker for Goldman-Sachs before the crash, every bit the jet setter, and then this. Just watch: he’ll come just to be some kind of hero. Some sort of ALS poster child. Would he ever stop to think about someone else? Would he ever consider how hard it is for those around him?

“Great. I haven’t seen him in years,” Lonnie says. “It will be nice to see him. I hope he’s doing OK with that Joe DiMaggio disease.”

“Lou Gehrig’s disease.”

Using his fingers, he loads a paper plate up with little fried things. “Yeah, that. He’s a tough guy. Allen’s the type who would never let some baseball disease get him down. I remember the time during the game against Springfield he broke his wrist diving into a pile for a fumble. He didn’t complain one bit. He was right out there the next week with a cast on his arm. Nothing’s going to stop Allen. No way.”

“Yeah. Can’t stop Allen.”

He slurps on a buffalo wing. “Gary, I remember how you two were always hanging out. You were inseparable. I remember the time in our junior year that one kid—I can’t remember his name, but he had only one brow and a full beard—beat you up at lunch. After school that day, Allen tracked him down and gave him the licking of his life. Kicked his ass in front of his girlfriend and everything. Man, that was a fun fight.”

“Hey, I didn’t just get beat up. I got some good shots in.” Unfortunately, I remember the day quite clearly. I felt so humiliated.

“Yeah, OK. Anyway, you two were the best of friends. Don’t you still hang out anymore?” Lonnie says, licking his fingers.

“Yeah, sure we do. I’ve just been so busy is all.” What am I supposed to say? I haven’t seen Allen since he got sick two years ago. Until then, we were best friends. We weren’t living in the same city since Allen had moved to New York to become a bond trader, but we talked and Emailed all the time. He’d come to town regularly since his folks are still here, so we could hang

out then. We'd even go hunting every fall. Yeah, he's been my best friend since elementary school. Now he's going to die.

"Hey, Gary? Everything OK, man?"

"What do you mean?"

"You look like you're crying, dude."

"No, no, no. I'm not crying. It's that cold. Maybe I shouldn't have come tonight."

"Well, cold or no cold, it's great to see you, man. We should stay in better touch, you know?" He piles about ten more buffalo wings on his paper plate.

"Yeah, sure, Lonnie. Sure. Hey, I'm going to go get a drink. I'll see you later."

That's what I need: a drink. I don't know what's wrong with me. I have to pull myself together. I'm strong. I don't get all emotional like some people. I can handle it. Time to pull myself together.

"Vodka-tonic." Yeah, that hits the spot. I'll just lean on the bar for a while and relax.

Now they are playing *Lost In Your Eyes*. Just great.

I have to focus. What am I going to do when Allen gets here? The last time I saw him he told me he had ALS. I had to look it up on Wikipedia. Then I finally understood. A couple of weeks later we were supposed to go hunting, but I didn't show up. I called and told him Donna was sick. Then when he came to town over Christmas we were going to get together, but I couldn't. I just couldn't. At first, I made excuses, but eventually I just quit taking his calls. Donna said I was a complete asshole. Maybe, but what am I supposed to do?

"Hey, Gary. You look like you lost your best friend."

"What did you say, Charlene?" I didn't notice her sneak up.

"You look miserable. Aren't you having a good time?" She touches my arm.

I consider pulling back my arm, but I don't. "Yeah, I'm having a great time. It's just I'm getting a cold. Maybe I should leave."

How am I supposed to live without my wife, without Donna? What am I supposed to do without Allen, my best friend in the world?

"Ah, don't leave so soon. You just got here. The dancing is just getting started. I'm sure Donna won't mind if we dance a few songs," she says, backing up and doing a little two-step by herself. "What do you say?"

"Sure, Charlene, sure." I don't dance. I never dance.

"Alright, then. I'm holding you to it." She drifts back into the crowd.

The party is in full swing now, people laughing and drinking and having a good time. Quite a crowd, too. Just about everyone is here. Hey, maybe Allen isn't coming! Yeah, maybe I can relax after all.

No. There's a commotion up near the check-in desk. I can't see what's going on, but I know.

The guy next to me at the bar sees the hubbub, too. I don't recognize who this guy is, but he turns to me and says, "Hey, is that Allen Onstad?"

"Yeah," I reply. "It sure is."

"Who are you?" He says, looking at my nametag. "Hi Gary. I don't remember you off-hand."

"Yeah, but I know you: Ted Accetta. You beat me up in eleventh grade." He looks exactly the same: Cro-Magnon.

“That was you? Ha! Man, what a bunch of punks we were. I remember you called me a caveman and a knuckle-dragger and we went at it. I seem to recall you got a few good licks in. Yeah, in fact, wasn't it Allen Onstad...”

I ignored him. Allen doesn't look well. Allen's father pushes Allen in a wheel chair. Allen moves around spastically, his face contorted. He draws quite a crowd; Charlene practically hangs all over him. It's quite the grand entrance.

What do I do now? Should I leave? Should I go up to him and say hello? Should I stay right here and make believe I don't see him? Goddamn it, all I wanted to do was have some fun tonight. Allen looks occupied, so that's good. He's one popular guy. He hasn't even seen me yet. Or could it be he's not looking at me intentionally? It's hard to tell. Maybe I'll just lean on the bar and just pretend nothing is wrong.

“Hey, Gary.” John again. Damned, people here sneak around quietly.

“John.”

“Barkeep: whiskey seven and a mineral water.” He turns back to me and leans on the bar.

“Having a good time, Gary?”

“No.”

“No?”

“Yes. I'm just kidding, John,” he says. “Of course, I'm having a good time. How about you?”

“Well, yes and no. It's fun seeing some old friends, don't get me wrong. But I think these things can be a drag. All the posing. So many people trying to sell themselves as big shots. What's that for? I don't understand why people can't just relax and be who they are. No offence, Gary. You're not one of those people.”

“Thanks, John.” I wave at the bartender, “Bartender, give me another vodka-tonic.”

“I guess I shouldn’t throw stones. Someone could see me with Leah and think she’s some sort of trophy wife. That I bagged a hot young college coed. But do you know what really attracted me to her?”

“Her magnificent breasts?”

“Watch your mouth, Gary. Her intellect. We would talk for hours and hours about Sarte, Camus, Kirkegaard, and Kafka. She’s brilliant. Leah has a great career ahead of her in academia. Any college professor can bang beautiful students, but how many of those students can deconstruct existentialism?”

“Intellect: got it. Scratch the boobs.”

“Gary, do yourself a favor and lay off the booze for the rest of the night.” John stalks away.

I yell, “And you’re a for-shit quarterback!” Several people turn and look at me like I’m crazy or something. I shoot them back my best fuck-you look.

“Gary?” It’s Allen’s father! “Gary? Can I talk to you a minute?”

“Certainly, Mr. Onstad.”

“Gary, I just wanted to say how much Allen appreciates all you’ve done for him this last two years. We all appreciate it. It’s been so hard on us all. It’s been hard on his mother and on me, but of course it’s been hardest on Allen. He’s told me how much he values your support through all this.” He reaches out and puts his hand on my shoulder. “I realize it’s not easy for you to travel to New York with your job and sick wife and all, but your calls and Emails really cheer him up. You wouldn’t believe it, Gary, but so many of his friends have disappeared since

he's gotten sick. Sure, everyone is nice to him here, but if it weren't for you, he wouldn't be talking to anyone. Anyhow, I just wanted to tell you how much I, we, all appreciate it."

"Thank you, Mr. Onstad." And he's off to the food table.

What the hell? What just happened?

Across the room, Charlene wanders off to the next victim, so Allen is finally alone. I walk over to where he's parked. "Allen? How are you, Allen?"

"Hey, Gary. Long time, buddy." He has trouble speaking, slurring his words. He's so thin! I can't believe this.

"Hey, Allen. Good to see you. How are you doing?"

"Not too well. I have ALS, you know."

"Of course I know. Your dad just talked to me. He thanked me for being such a good friend to you."

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"I don't want to worry him. He keeps trying to get me to go to a support group but I can't think of anything I want to do less. So I tell him I have friends and all the support I need."

"Do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Have friends? All the support you need?"

"Gary, are you fucking kidding me?"

We just stand there, not knowing what to say. I hold onto my glass, sucking on an ice cube. I look around the room, begging in my heart for someone to come up and interrupt us.

"Have you been here long?" Allen asks.

“No. I mean yes.” I mumble over the ice cube, and then spit the cube back in the glass.

“I’m actually leaving right now.”

“You’re leaving?”

“Yeah. I have to. Donna’s sick,” I reply.

“Oh, too bad.”

“And I’ve got a touch of it, too.”

“Well, see you then. Say hi to Donna for me.”

“Will do. See ya.” I start toward the door. But I have to say something. I have to. There has to be something. “Hey, Allen?”

“Yeah, Gary?”

“How long are you in town? Maybe we can hang out and catch up? It would be great to go to the bar like we used to. Remember going to Mickey’s? Remember all the trouble we’d get into, how we’d flip coins to decide who gets which girl? Remember how we used to drive down Broadway, back and forth, all night long? Just hanging out? Remember the last time we went hunting? You bagged a big buck. You were the only one in the party who got his deer that weekend. Remember, Allen? What do you say, Allen, maybe we can go to the Pizza Palace, just like we used to? We can get one with everything, OK?”

“I’m flying out on Monday, and I’m really busy until then. Maybe next time, eh?”

“Yeah, sure, next time, Allen. We’ll do that for sure. Take care of yourself, OK?”

“You too, Gary, you too.”

I walk out the ballroom doors, through the hotel lobby and out into the parking lot. It’s a warm night, and people huddle in groups smoking cigarettes. I walk through the lines of cars, the world sloshing back and forth. I consider screaming, but can’t find the focus. As I get to my

eight-year-old Ford Taurus, I see Lonnie and Cro-Magnon man behind a pickup. They appear to be smoking a joint.

“Hey, Gary. Want some?” Lonnie says, holding out the joint as I walk up.

Without breaking stride, I haul off and hit Cro-Magnon with my absolute best haymaker right in the face. He is surprised but barely moves. Three quick punches to the face—two more than needed—and I’m spread eagle on the asphalt. I look up at the stars.

I feel great.

