



Missed Opportunity

Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).

Monday Morning Bus Stop

She was ten, plain face, matted hair, crooked teeth, soiled dress, tar-paper shack, father out of work, our nearby neighbors, next stop for school bus.

We too scraped by, hand-me-down coats, darned socks, "farmers" the town kids scoffed, though ourselves looking down on that pecking order of low-down dirt-poor poverty beneath us.

Monday morning, three kids running, a long rutted driveway, two brothers ahead.

Books in her arms, shoes untied, panties falling down. We all laughed as she dropped books awkwardly pulling up underwear.

O, to take it back, to somehow take it back, to suck up that decades-old sneer, to travel back in time to that very bus, to do it over, to relive my 12-year-old shameful self, to beckon that sad, sniffling girl to come sit by me and taste a teaspoon of tender mercies.

After I wrote this poem some years ago, I knew I had to try to track down Sharon. I wanted to tell her how much I had missed by not seeking her friendship.

So I began my online search, first finding the obituary of her mother Ruth, having known she was killed in the same 2001 tornado southwest of Spooner, Wisconsin that took the life of my cousin Sylvan.

Ruth, I discovered, was survived by her sons and daughter Sharon (and Tom) Warren of Ashland City, Tennessee.

After hours of searching online I called the county library in Ashland City. I was given an old phone number. The trail was getting warm.

After several daytime calls, I got an answer late one evening. Yes, he was Tom. Sharon no longer lived there.

Maybe divorced, I wondered. Did he know her phone number? Annoyed, he asked what I was calling for, what I wanted with her, why I was bothering him. I identified myself as a childhood friend.

That sparked a warmhearted half-hour conversation.

Sharon had died the day after

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Christmas in 2009, after having walked the dog out in the fields along the nearby Little Marrowbone Creek.

She had sugar diabetes, he told me, and had been putting on a lot of weight. He missed her so much. They had been happily married 26 years.

Her story spilled out: she had worked her way through the University of Wisconsin after a painful childhood—sleeping at night in the attic, crawling through a trap door, no heat, no insulation, bitter cold Wisconsin winters, abuse, wretched poverty.

I listened, stabbed by guilt and shame. She had remained single until she was 37.

And then Tom walked into the

truck stop cafe where she was working.

Tom told me how much he loved Sharon and how proud he was of her—one time running for a seat on the Ashland City council, losing by only 24 votes.

She was a licensed minister, active in the Baptist church, preaching every Sunday afternoon at a nursing home. And she was proud of him: a Grand Ole Opry star.

Well, maybe not a real star. Tom (some twenty years older than Sharon) was a musician who had played bass fiddle and guitar for Lonzo and Oscar, a comedy-singing duo.

He had been acquainted with the young George Jones and was a friend of Hank Williams, Jr., his hunting buddy.

As his story unfolded, I felt relief—and a missed opportunity.

My Dear Sharon,

How I wish I could have shared your sorrow, your success, your joy and contentment.

I am poorer for not seeking your friendship, for not offering you tender mercies when you most needed them.

Tom tells me you died with a beautiful smile on your face, his only consolation when he found you warming yourself against the wood stove. You'll never ever be cold again. Rest in peace. □

—Ruth Tucker