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Something I Never Thought of as True Until I Said it

by Ron Gephart



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Shards

ronaldlgephart@gmail.com

My brother asked my mother when she first thought something was wrong with dad and she said, “before you were even born.”

“1952??!”

“You think?”

“First I’ve ever heard of it.”

“Hmmm. Something I never thought of as true until I said it.”

Now, as I sift through his teenage love letters to Mom, I have a sense of what she was talking about. She’s gone now so I’ll just have to make my best guess based on the evidence. He was only 53 when he was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease, so I can barely remember him when there didn’t seem to be something wrong. I know it sounds heartless, but I once complained to Mom that other boys had dads who helped them buy and fix up cars and move into apartments, and travel. Mom looked at me and cried. She didn’t defend him or lecture me, reminding me about all the things he did with me when I was very young. She just cried.

She threw her own letters away. The ones she tried to write almost every day in reply to his persistent letters. I can’t fault her. He was in no condition to make the decision (even though in his letters he had said that he had thrown out hundreds of letters from other girls but would keep Mom’s forever and read them over and over. Except for a couple he couldn’t bear to look at again.) But she kept his. I found them in a box in the garage by the trash cans, as if she figured it would be someone else’s decision if they got tossed. They seemed to be calling for help after crying themselves to sleep 70 years ago. So almost as an afterthought, I placed them on the backseat of my car as I prepared to head back to Memphis after the funeral.

Maybe he should speak for himself. 1962.

“Let’s take a look at this essay before you turn it in tomorrow, son. Seems like a pretty big assignment for a third grader. I read it over twice. You have style, Charlie. We need to work on punctuation and grammar, though. Your teacher might not notice your style because she’ll be distracted by the lousy spelling, you know what I mean? Remember your piano recital last month? You played “Mama’s Little Baby Loves Shortnin’ Bread.” I know how mad you were. Ha, ha! Yes. And nervous. The old auditorium upstairs at Old Main must have seemed like Carnegie Hall to you. Did I ever tell you that I played my recital there when I was in college? Well, anyway, Ms. Charlotte made you slow it down and you made mistakes. You and I know that you did better if you could move along at your own tempo. And I know, you proved it during your lesson, but sometimes teachers just want you to do it their way for no good reason at all. Better to not upset the people in power, unless you’re ready for the consequences. Anyway, I know you weren’t trying to gloss over mistakes. Ha! You really wanted to rock that shortnin’ bread. But you want to make sure that the good stuff is there for the final cut.

And you do have good stuff here in your essay. Now you need to make sure that your teacher sees it. It’s not enough to just do the assignment and turn it in; you need to stack your deck a bit by making it looks like it wants to be read. You know, I think I’m improving. I’d correct your mother when she misused a word in her letters. I even complained when she addressed me as “Dearest” rather than “Darling.” I’m not sure what my point was. Maybe “dearest” seemed like a reprimand of some sort. Like, ‘my dearest son, I know you can do better than this.’ I hated college. Also, I wasn’t the sharpest tack in the box. Bad combination. I told your mom that I had the looks and she had the brains. See, I wasn’t too bright, was I? Stupid thing to say to anyone, especially someone you planned to marry one day. Besides, she has looks *and* brains. Don’t forget it. I almost went back in the Navy. She saved my life. And yours.

One of these days you’ll have a family of your own and you’ll probably move far away. I never thought I’d stay in this town for so long. I’ll write you letters. I used to write to your mom almost every day in the summer and over the Christmas vacation when I was in college. I wrote to her every day when I was in the Navy, also. You’ll need to be able to spot the good stuff without my help. Be clever but be safe. You can hurt yourself or others if you don’t take time to study your mistakes. But don’t dwell on them too much. Some can be fixed, some can’t. Move on.

When my dad died, that would be your grandfather who of course, you never knew, I thought I’d caused it. I think he thought I was going to go back into the Navy. Go to Korea. My brothers were so young. Wait. I’m confusing you. I don’t want to be confusing. Or confused. Ha, ha! I was still in college. Your mom and I were married. I was thinking of reenlisting, though. My mom, your grandmother, assured me that he was very pleased. For 8 years I was their only child. I hope your mother has taught you my good points. I know I’m far from perfect. That’s a subject for another day. It’s easy to see her good points, and bad, come to think of it, but I have, well, I have, I don’t know, I have trouble seeing how things are supposed to go. Maybe I am confused. But let’s get back to your essay.

I like the way you started out writing about our fishing trip. I’ll show you how to trap muskrats, too. I picked up some pretty good cash with my buddy Luke back in Wooster when I was in high school. Sorry, what was I saying? Oh yeah, the fishing trip. It’s sort of a metaphor. I guess they probably don’t teach you that in 3rd grade. My sixth-graders know what a metaphor is so it won’t be long. When we go fishing together remember, the key word is “together.” I even signed one of your mom’s letters, “must close. Gotta go hunt some worms.” Romantic, huh? But she was quite the “catch.” Ha, ha. More than one of my buddies would have cast his line her way. Some did, I’m sure. I’ll even take your sister fishing when she’s old enough. We always thought she would be our first child. We even had a name picked out for her in 1947. It probably would have been better if she was the oldest, but God had other plans. Your mom may not like cleaning the fish, but she sure knows how to fry them.

So, back to the metaphor. We cast our lines out into darkness when we go to the reservoir, trying to be sure that we don’t have that dreaded backlash. We carefully sense whether we have a fish or a snag, or maybe even a turtle. We know what to do because of the vibrations in that thin clear string. As we wait, we talk about lights, falling stars, getting a motor boat or a tiller for my garden. We talk about making a compost pile: a place for nutrition for the garden and a place to have nightcrawlers for fishing. I talk about my coin collection. You tell me about your stamp collection or your Nordal’s shard collection. We talk about the Country Club across the water and the dandy people who go there. Hmmm, maybe we should get to know some of them. Now that I think about it, one day you might have the opportunity to mingle with some fine people and you won’t know how to act. Ha, ha!

We have our minnows in a bucket called, “Old Pal.” Remember when you thought it said, “Old Pail?” You said, “who’d buy a thing with that name?” Maybe you should think of going into marketing. But I like it. “Old Pal.” That’s how I’d like you to think of me. Your old pal. Bait is very important for fishing. Our compost pile for earthworms. Minnows and crickets, we buy. I’m not big on lures. Mainly because I never have much luck with them. Nothing like threading that nightcrawler by lantern light, is there? Pump that valve 70 times and light it with a big whoosh that make you jump back until the glow pulsates steady and bright. I’ll always remember your curious eyes in the glow of it when I turned it off, our faces fading in the dull yellow rayon mantles. We’ll watc each other flicker away as the country club music floats across the reservoir. I’ll put my arm around you as we tote our tackle boxes to the car.

My friend Winston Webster says we can fish at his club as guests. It’s a fishing club, not a country club. Although he’s rich enough to join the country club if he wanted to. By the way, some people who can’t really afford it join anyway. The fishing club has a pond stocked with fish that they bought, I think. I guess I’m not really interested in joining even if we could afford it. It closes before dark, so we won’t need our lantern. Keep Mr. Webster in mind as you get older. He can probably get you a job at his plant or maybe get you sports uniforms and equipment. I was never that good at sports, but when we were dating, I tried to impress your mother when the coach from the college wrote to me. In my mind at least, I was being recruited. You need to be more like Randy. Watch how he swings. I was a little guy. You’re stockier. Mr. Webster could probably even help with your writing. His plant has a print shop. Wouldn’t that be something? Publish a book or something. There aren’t many shortcuts, but it pays to build relationships. Cheating only cheats yourself. Live within your means.

No. I only played intramural sports in college, but I sure liked the idea of traveling with the ball team. I don’t think I would have liked being away from your mother too much. Also, the guys on the team tended to be a little wild. I never drank. But I did smoke. I stopped when your mother and I were getting serious because I didn’t want to set a bad example for our children someday. That’s you, bub. I had a heck of a time persuading your mother to stop smoking. One time a burning cigarette butt in the seat of my dad’s car almost burnt up the whole car. We had to tear out the seat and replace it with one from the junkyard. Dad and I worked quite a bit on cars because we could never afford a new one. We were always getting someone else’s problems. Back in those days we were always getting flat tires. Everyone did. Seemed like every time I hitched a ride, I’d end up helping some poor slob change a tire. Dad was handy, though. He was a machinist for the Kennedy Manufacturing Company in VanWert before he went into the ministry. He made my tool chest and fishing tackle box. Your mom and I hadn’t even been married a year when he died so I started off with a pretty good collection of tools. That reminds me, we need to pick up those clothes Mrs. Nesler made for your marionette. You don’t want him naked when you take him into school. Ha ha. Did I tell you that I made the paper-mache head on the marionette when I was in school? Scary, huh? That fellow sure looks scared and creepy.

Truthfully, I hated college. I almost dropped out and went back into the Navy. Did I tell you that? Your mom talked me out of it. She’s always been my lifesaver. Believe it or not, I knew her when she was about your age. I met her at church camp. She was engaged to some other guy when we started dating seriously when she was 17. That made me nervous. If we got engaged maybe she’d start seeing some other guy behind my back. I’d dated a lot of girls but suddenly when I was 19, I couldn’t think of anyone but her. It took a lot of persuasion and a little charm to get her to break her engagement. I’d already served my time in the Navy and I was in college. You don’t need to go to college if you don’t want to. We’ll never be able to pay for it, anyway. Learn to fix stuff. It’s money in the bank.

But on your essay, you need a transition when you start talking about having girls in the cub scout pack. That’s quite a subject for an 8-year-old Bobcat, by the way. I guess cubs are girls as well as boys or we’d never have any new bears. Ha, ha! Your mother is getting big on women’s rights. Did she give you this idea? Ha, ha, I wouldn’t doubt it. That’s something I’m not very good at. Transitions. You want to move on to the next thing, but you still want a little of the thing you’re leaving to hang on. Like when we move. We take a lot of our old stuff with us to remind us of the other place. Sometimes we sort of leave a trail of stuff so we can find our way back if we need to.

Don’t worry about moving far away. I almost reenlisted in the Navy so I could move to California with my new bride. So, you might have been on Lassie if your mom hadn’t talked me into finishing college. I’m just teasing you. But if you want to move away, it’s ok. I’d enjoy learning new places with you. But remember, your mother has the final word. She’s awfully hard on herself, like you, but she’s a lot smarter and more organized than I am. She knows how to plan. And she’s like Santa; she knows when you’ve been bad or good!

But, as you move from Bobcat, to Bear, to Wolf, and then into Boy Scouts, you’ll be making transitions. It’s orderly and each level leads to the next. Your sister can be a Bluebird. Or, maybe a Cub Scout, if your campaign goes well. Ha, ha! I should go camping with you boys. There’s a new Boy Scout camp south of town. I was in Scouts when I was a kid, too. When you get older and we’re making better money, maybe we’ll get a travel trailer and go to the Grand Canyon. I could even show you where I was stationed when I was in the Navy. Wouldn’t that be grand? All five of you in the station wagon with a slick camper behind us?

But I’m glad you’ve stuck with scouts, even after those boys beat you up. It was great that you stuck up for your brother when you knew it would make those guys mad. I don’t really hit you. Well, we spank you. It’s different. Yes, not *much* different. I feel bad about it. It confuses me. Yes. You should have told me. I could have gone to their parents. Or something. I don’t want to spank you. I know your mother does. I don’t mean that she *wants* to, I mean I know she spanks you, too. I try not to spank you when I’m frustrated or angry. Never mind. I’ll tell you more about it when you’re older. That and other things about girls you should know. When you’re older. I dated 59 girls. Not at the same time. Later. I’ll tell you more about it later. Hitting and girls. Later. When you’re older.

Your grandfather hit you? With his fist? I didn’t know that. Did you get mouthy with him? Did he tell you he was sorry? Has he hit your cousins? Never mind. I’ll talk to your mother about it. Maybe. Let’s wait. He’s going to help us with the wooden display cases for your brother’s shard collection. Those egg cartons are getting worn out. There’s a man on Osborne Avenue, Don Smith, who can help identify the patterns. Nordal has done a good job keeping notes about where he found them. Mr. Smith is mainly interested in the ones from where the old factories were. But the ones from the old dump are more interesting to me. I like to think about how they came to be there. I wonder about the people who might have enjoyed a glass of wine in the broken goblet. Ok, I’ve tasted wine. Some of my buddies were drinkers. But you won’t ever see liquor in our house. Anyway, sometimes the other stuff that was thrown out makes the glass shard more interesting. A little treasure surrounded by chunks of discarded life. Kind of like fossils of a story. Don’t you think? I guess that doesn’t make much sense.

I also like the melted pieces. Maybe there was a fire in the factory. Maybe it’s just slag that was shoveled out at the end of a work day when they cleaned the furnaces. The colors and the bits flower or animal designs are the best. Like an insect caught in amber, or distorted faces petrified in ancient Pompeii.

But there’s plenty of time. Plenty of time. No matter where you move, you’ll always be able to go to yard sales or flea markets and search for pieces of Findlay glass. You can tell your children about how the glass was made in your hometown. Maybe we can even go to sales together and I can tell my grandkids about how we lived in a house that built over an old dump, so we found old glass when I plowed my garden. Glass just like the stuff that was shipped to Denver, Seattle, San Francisco, or wherever life leads.

I only knew my mother’s mother who died right after you were born. My grandfathers and my grandmother on my dad’s side were all dead before I was born. In fact, my dad’s parents died when he was a kid about your age. Don’t worry, I’m going to bug you for a long time. Ha, ha! I’m not sure what happened to them. My dad was raised by his grandparents. There was an unmarried cousin named Bill who was living with them when they died. That old bachelor cousin was close to my dad. He worked on the railroad, traveled around the country in his young days. Maybe a traveling working beatnik, going wherever the railroad took him. He’d come back and stay with my grandparents for a while, and then head back to the trains. I never saw him again after my grandparents died, although I heard he later made a name for himself in the cement business. I have his pocket watch. You can have it when you’re old enough. Maybe my dad might have been left a little money. He put himself through college and became a minister while I was in grade school and still in school when both your uncles were born so he must have had a little cash to work with. But, then, he was a hard worker. Might be why he died so young. Good people. I’m broke most of the time so don’t count on me.

Your essay reminds me of my own writing from years ago. I haven’t written anything lately. Maybe you should move away some day so I can write you letters. I started writing when I was about your age. I kept a journal of our first vacation. That was in 1934. Before either of my brothers were born. Oh, was I excited! We went through West Virginia and to the east coast. That was just before my dad went to college and became a minister so maybe they had a little more cash then. Just Mom and Dad and me, taking in the Blue Ridge Mountains, Delaware Water Gap, and even Washington, D.C. Each little town different from the other and me keeping track of every nickel we spent.

Dad was lucky to have a good job at the machine shop making metal tool chests. He wasn’t an engineer or anything. Just a guy working in the shop. Went to school at 28. He was a minister for 9 years and died. You know, I even considered going into the ministry. I testified a few times at camp meetings. But I was a little too interested in girls, I had to be honest with myself. If I had to choose, I’d go with the girls. I wonder if Dad might have been like Billy Graham if he’d lived longer? I guess he spent all his machine shop savings going to college. He sure left my mom in a pickle. My brothers only 11 and 14. She had no skills or much education. Sometimes we all need a little help. Nothing to be ashamed of.

Your mother’s mother, Grandmother Alexander, she teaches Mexican migrant students every summer. Your grandpa shouldn’t have hit you. I’ll talk to him. Don’t ever make fun of people. Even Mexicans. He’s like my own father, in a way. My dad died so young. I’m not questioning the way he musters discipline. I don’t want to hit you or your brothers. Or your sister. Don’t mouth off to your grandfather.

I wish I didn’t have to work summers. Most teachers do, though. We need the extra money. But I like it when I come in from working all night at the Kodak Plant, early in the morning, long before you wake up. I always slip in and kiss all 4 of you before I sleep a few hours. I know it’s tough for your mom to keep all of you quiet during breakfast before she can get you outside to play while I sleep. She only works part time in the summer at the college. I try not to doze off too much while I’m looking after you. I don’t mind. I like hearing all of you shushing each other so daddy can sleep. But it’s a good summer job. Those big tin cannisters that your mother puts snickerdoodles in are from the Kodak. They stored film reels. And the rubber bands that have the little tabs so you and your brothers can snap each other. Stings a little, huh? Not like a hit or a spanking though, right? I can usually paint a couple of houses, too. I learned to paint houses while I was in college, during the summers. I just painted your grandma’s kitchen last weekend. Whew! I kind of made a mess of it. I’ve lost my touch a bit.

When I was in college, I also worked summers at the brick factory. I operated machinery and fixed it when it broke down. I even trained other guys to operate the equipment. I don’t have to operate machinery at the Kodak plant. I mostly work in shipping. I thought that college would put all that behind me. I sort of miss the Navy. And even the brick factory. But teaching has its own rewards. I’m pleased with your work in school. I’d say “proud” but it’s not about me, is it? You’re making your own way. I’d like to think that I have a little to do with it, but it’s not about me. I’m just the courier. Ha, ha!

I’m glad that you go to church with us each Sunday even though you don’t have much of a choice. Still, you never complain, except about that scratchy wool suit. That’s a heck of a rash on your legs. Maybe we should have Dr. Galbreath check it out. Might be some kind of allergy. We’ll keep an eye on it. The other boys aren’t having a problem and all the suits are the same.

I hope you always stay friends with your brothers and sister. I’ll visit you so often that you’ll have to tell me to leave. Ha, ha! And if some of you move far away, I’ll still visit and write letters with lots of questions, so you’ll have to write me back. We’ll visit farm museums, zoos, famous houses, and maybe even take a cruise together when I’m retired and all of you kids are grown up with kids of your own. And we’ll go to church together and take up 2 pews with all the grandchildren. Even if you’re a Buddhist or an agnostic or just some nature boy sitting by a river meditating. I’ll sit right beside you and meditate right along with you. Even Catholic. I’m ok with even that, now.

I might even write a poem about it. Did I ever tell you that I used to write poems for your mother? She has them in a box somewhere. You can read them after I’m gone. Or maybe we can read them together and have a good laugh when I’m old and gray. I’ll find them and mark the box, “DO NOT OPEN UNTIL I’M TOO OLD TO BE EMBARRASSED,” ha, ha!

And if your mother goes before I do, we’ll read one of her letters after each one of mine. Won’t that be swell! Your mom and I wrote back and forth almost every day. I didn’t want some other fellow stealing her away from me.

Remember, girls appreciate little personal things like letters. Just don’t go overboard. I did and you almost weren’t here. You notice how your mother keeps the things you make in Scouts and Vacation Bible School? That’s because she loves you and wants to be reminded of you when you’re not around. That will always be true. I’ve got to do better but I’m getting lost. I get her kitchen gadgets instead of jewelry and love notes. I need you to help me out. Show her love. Whew! She almost seemed mad when she opened that hamburger press I got her for Christmas. I’m messing up big time. You’ve got to at least pretend to like gifts, no matter what they are. But be careful not to act too excited about someone else’s gift that they didn’t like or you might find one in your own stocking next year. Like that watch your brother got. Santa thought that’s what you wanted, too. Showing appreciation can be tricky but you have to make the effort.

When I tell you that I like what you’re working on I mean what I say. I admire you. Even when you’re frustrated and cry. I like it that you’re thinking hard about things. Just don’t be too tough on yourself like your mother. I tell her that we’ll be all right. She likes her new job. She’s tough on the students. Just like she’s tough on you. But you know what? She’s toughest on herself.

Some couples might not like working at the same place, but it’s great for us. Each morning we pick up Martha Bryant and we all talk about our plans. Dreams for our families. Well, Martha isn’t married and doesn’t have children. But she sure is a peach when she talks about you kids. She knows a lot about local history and has a fabulous glass collection. Nordal would enjoy seeing it someday. We’re too tired to talk much on our way home, but oh, that half hour drive to school each morning is filled with dreams. It really helped when your mother took the job at school with me. I could quit working summers and we had more income. She just squeaked into it. Mrs. Thomas changed her mind after she had resigned but it was too late. Your mother was already hired.

I don’t want you to worry too much about money, though. There will be plenty of time for that later. That was a little awkward in the toy store when we were getting Dave Dietsch’s birthday present. I didn’t realize that you wanted the snorkel mask for yourself. I was embarrassed that I couldn’t afford to buy it for you and still get a gift for Dave. Maybe Santa will bring you one for Christmas. That would be a dandy thing to have at the lake. We’re sure lucky that your granddad got that place for the family. Not every kid gets to hang out with his cousins swimming and fishing. Hang on to those memories. I know I sure will. When I load you kids up in the station wagon and head up there for a week, I’m in heaven, I tell you. It would sure be good to get a new car. I don’t think the Plymouth is going to make it another year.

I was 19 when I bought my first car. I borrowed a little from my dad, a little from the bank, and got it for $650.00. It turned out to be a lemon. It was supposed to have come from an old lady who hardly drove it, but it seemed like there was always something wrong. But I was glad to have it sometimes. Lots of times I hitchhiked to Findlay and Ottawa from Wooster and back. Although your mother was born in Detroit while your grandfather was teaching there, she lived in Ottawa when I first knew her. No, that’s wrong. I think she lived in Fostoria and maybe another little town. I’d met her at church camp. But the first time I visited her was when she lived in Ottawa. That I’m sure of. I went to Findlay College. I probably should have stuck with the hitchhiking. I’d get awful sleepy driving since I had long hours at the brick factory. One night I ran off the road. Scared me to death. I couldn’t afford to get my car fixed so I was broke again and back to hitchhiking. Your mother didn’t want me to get the car right from the start. I mostly got it so I could visit her more often. But she knew I hated the job at the brick factory. She was afraid I’d quit and the bank would take the car back. You’re probably too young to need to know all this. But there you are.

Maybe I could get a job in a big city like Detroit or Toledo. Would you like to live in a big city? I don’t guess that would work very well for us. We do pretty well right here. I’m thinking maybe some day we could get about 20 acres near VanBuren. It might be a little farming community but it’s practically a suburb of Findlay. You won’t be a city slicker if we have a place like that. Still, Findlay’s a pretty rich little city. We could have the best of both worlds. Your mom’s cousins, the Alexanders, are able to move to some pretty interesting places. Smart bunch. And they love to travel. Your mother has a bit of that in her as well. Not me so much. Maybe we could go to Washington, D.C. someday. Or the Grand Canyon. But moving to a new place? I don’t think so. Sorry. No, I like the idea of 20 acres near VanBuren. I like our garden here. I was lucky that Dusty Miller let me garden on his lot after the Winebrenner built their nursing home where my other garden was. But I’m afraid they’ll take over my new garden, also. If we owned our own land out in the country, I wouldn’t have that worry. Plus, your mom and I would be close to school. Mrs. Bryant will have to find another ride. Boy oh boy, won’t that be something? Corn, snap peas, lima beans, eggplant, carrots, radishes, strawberries, potatoes, sweet potatoes, watermelon, muskmelon, more watermelon, more muskmelons, and you kids can have the biggest pumpkin patch! Of course, you’ll need to set up a stand. You won’t be able to tote them around in your wagon like here in the city. We’ll grow almost all our own food. Heck, you think the coal room is full now, wait ‘til we have 20 acres! I know, you call it the “cold room,” but it’s really where they used to store coal for the furnace back in the old days. Dirty stuff. Won’t your mom have a grand time with all that canning! There won’t be any stopping me. I’ll chop wood and have at least two fireplaces. And we’ll have bonfires and hayrides in a wagon pulled by our own horse. And maybe even sleighrides. Hey, I’ll bet we could even have a small fishing pond. Swimming in the summer and skating in the winter. And ice fishing! All our grandchildren will visit us there and we’ll play horseshoes, croquet, and get lost in our very own woods. Even if you move to Portland, Oregon or England you’ll always know where to find your old pal. And mother, of course. And when our college friends have moved away to start jobs in new cities, they’ll always have a place to visit when they come back for college reunions. We could even have some of the reunion activities on my “ranch”! Wienies, hamburgers, homemade ice cream, horseshoes, and paddleboat rides on our pond.

Maybe we’ll even have a big party for the new college students each year! Half your family went there, your mother worked there for ten years, and your Uncle Jerry is working there now. My head is spinning just thinking about it.

Oh my goodness! A workshop. Won’t I have the best workshop and garage? I’ll make toys and furniture and all kinds of things for you kids and your children.

I haven’t thought about all this since your mother and I started getting serious back in 1947. I was pretty thick with a girl named “Pat.” I’d been thinking of your mother more as a kid sister who I could give advice to and share my troubles with. I didn’t realize how that might charm her. Ha, ha! Maybe that was my plan all along. It wasn’t long before Betty was my steady and we were both in the same class together at Findlay College since I’d been in the Navy. I wrote her almost everyday when I was stationed in California and Virginia. Sometimes twice a day. And I wrote her from Wooster, too, when I was working during the summer breaks. Mom and my little brothers, Dad with his church, oh those were happy days. And your mother wrote back to me, too. Not every day. No way she could keep up with me. But if I bugged her enough, she wrote often.

One letter I kept but didn’t reread was when she wanted to break it off with me. Whew! I had to go into overdrive, or I wouldn’t be talking to you today. I don’t know if my sorrowful poems won her over or the other fella broke it off with her, but it was a close call. I was a pitiful suitor, but she came back around to me. Thank you, Jesus. My life would have been over. Seriously. My brothers were so much younger than me and I couldn’t talk to my mom or dad about it. I was crushed. Lost. Empty. Brothers a very special but Jerry was only 9 years old and Myrl was 11. Much as I loved them, they couldn’t help me with my broken heart. I was their big brother in his dapper Navy uniform. I missed action in the service but if I’d been on the battlefield, I would have been thinking about them every minute. When Jerry was hit by a car I was almost as big of a basket case as Mom and you know what a nervous Nelly your grandmother is! Jerry could be a pest, but I sure loved that kid. And your Uncle Jerry sure loves you, Charlie. I hope this VietNam mess is over before you boys are old enough to serve. If you get drafted, you won’t have much of a choice. But don’t feel that you have to enlist just because I served. If you have a chance, pick your battles carefully. I know you and Junior have your differences, but you need to try and get along. One of these days long before you’re both in your rocking chairs and have your own grandkids taking you on errands and I’m long gone, I promise you’ll be best of buddies. Just like your uncles and me. But it was good the way you helped Nordal on his science project. He said he got an “A.” Yes, I probably helped a bit too much. I’m a teacher. I should know better. But I get excited working with you guys. One of these days you’ll bring your kids over to my shop and help them with their projects. I hope I’m able to help, too. We’ll have sawdust in our pant cuffs, varnish under our fingernails, and splinters for grandma to pull out with tweezers. I’ll have a lathe and we’ll turn wood to make lamps, and bowls, and who knows what else. Maybe your mother will have a big sewing room. She’ll make clothes and quilts, and things to send oversees with the church missionaries. You kids can look after our place while we’re gone. I don’t know where. Maybe to France, England, Ireland, Australia, or maybe even Russia, if things get better between our countries.

I might even learn to play the piano. I can’t carry a tune in a basket, but I could play the piano while your mother sings. I played when I was a kid. I could pick it up again. Your mother has the voice of an angel and when she sings with your Aunt Dee, you’d think it was the Andrews sisters.

Hey! How about that? We’ll have a big garden, a workshop, a sewing room, a pond, and a music room. Won’t that be quite a place for grandkids to make memories? When I was a kid we were just trying to recover from the Great Depression. That knocked everyone for a loop. You kids won’t have to worry about anything like that, I hope. But we’re very careful with our money. Practical family cars, vacations to your grandparent’s place in Michigan, canning our own food, and, no need to remind me, very simple gifts. And practical.

All this to say, I like your essay. You think a little hard on things but that’s not necessarily a bad thing. I like what you said about your sister, that you felt bad about lying to her. Telling her to go back home when she was following you because mommy had “nee-nee” for her when you knew darn well there was no candy for her. I like it because you thought it through and realized that your sister would feel tricked and disappointed. Don’t tell lies to anyone unless you have a very, very good reason. You left me off a little easy for spanking you. I shouldn’t have done that. When I say that it hurts me as much as it hurts you, it’s not quite true. It hurts me *more* than it hurts you and I’m going to quit doing that. I already told you that, didn’t I? I don’t know why I repeat things. Your mother has been nagging me about that since before we got married. But I sure love her. Well, that’s enough. I’m getting another headache.”