

# Weeping Willow

By

Geoff Hoff and Steve Mancini

A Special Bonus eGift

*This book is a work of fiction. Places, events, and situations in this story are purely fictional and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.*

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**(Should we put a little smiley face icon every time we have a joke? No, Steve.)**

## Installment One

Geoff's Title: "Welcome to River Bend"

Steve's Title: "Gone with the Wind"

*(That's been used.)*

Steve's Title: "Installment One"

*(Sigh.)*

Lee Harris needed to get drunk. He had been in the motel room for three days in sweats, his suitcase open on the second bed, the contents still neatly folded. The rest of his possessions were still packed tightly in his car which was filled to the roof with everything he could fit into it from his eight year marriage. His music, some clothes, an autographed photo of Danny Bonaduce, and a power tool or two. When he couldn't fit anything else, he decided what didn't fit, he didn't need. He sat watching the television (a show about Jakarta, Indonesia, but that has nothing to do with this story). He had been mindlessly watching similar fare for nearly the entire three days. He rested his foot on his knee and noticed that the bottom of the white sock was gray from the hotel room floor. For a moment he didn't even care.

Suddenly, he stood. He had to do something. A shower. Definitely a shower. It was easier not to think about it if he were doing something. Go somewhere. Close, so he could walk because, he realized suddenly, he intended to get sloppy drunk. He wanted to be around music and women and noise and booze. And women. And booze. Anything to anesthetize his brain. As he moved toward the bathroom, he kicked the wheel on the bed frame with his stockinged foot.

“Damn...” he shouted through clenched teeth and hopped the rest of the way, his abused toe throbbing.

The water was hot and felt good. The cologne was strong and masculine. He took care to shave closely and dressed in the best that was clean and handy. Then he sat back down. He had used most of his energy reserve just getting ready. Maybe this town had a liquor store that delivered.

After the shower, he realized that the air smelled musty, like a locker room. Or an English kitchen. He finally stuffed a twenty in his shoe for cab fare back and bolted out of the stale room.

The evening was cool, pleasant. The sky was a clear, deep cobalt blue with traces of tangerine on the horizon, and the air was clean. Cleaner than the air in Chicago ever was. As he breathed it in, it cleansed the smell and taste of the room and the past several days out of his head. This is good, he thought. It'll be a good evening. He bumped into a street-lamp.

“Sorry,” he said, then darted his head around, scanning to see if the moment had been witnessed.

He then breathed in deeply and started humming. Greensleeves. His head hadn't felt that clear in a long time. The air tasted sweet, with a hint of fireplace smoke. It felt good listening to the occasional dog bark, the distant train whistle instead of the swirl in his head he had been listening to for the past few weeks. The small downtown area was quaint, and it wasn't long before he saw a neon sign that said “Cocktails.”

The bar was called The Office. Cute, he thought. Hi, honey, I'm at the office. That would have been a great place for her and the Jerk to go. He stood on the sidewalk for a moment, almost turning back toward the motel when he heard a boisterous cheer coming out of the tavern. It could have been for a ball game on the television or a great pool shot or a drinking contest. The young, carefree voices that mingled with the smells of grilled burgers and fries drew him closer, and the sound of music and women and noise and booze drew him in.

When his eyes adjusted to the room, he got his bearings. On the right was a row of six or seven little round tables, on the left, a bar lined with stools. The crowd was young. There wasn't much neon. A chalk board hung on a post behind the bar with drink specials; that night's were lemon drop shooters and buck shots for a dollar each. There was a television on, a show about Jakarta, Indonesia, but that has nothing to do with this story, and young men and women everywhere, hormones raging. Loud music emanated from the juke box and several couples were dancing in a rhythmic frenzy on the floor between the tables and the bar.

Good. The atmosphere felt good.

There were only two unoccupied barstools and they were at the other end of the bar. Lee sat down on one and felt grateful for the elbow room provided by the other. When he turned on the stool, his elbow knocked a cocktail napkin off the bar. He leaned down to pick it up.

“What’ll you have?”

He sat up quickly, bumping his head on the bar as he rose.

“Son of a ...”

“Careful,” the bartender said, pointing to the “Cuss Jar” that was filled with quarters.

The bartender was tall, with wavy jet black hair, ice blue eyes and a handsomely rugged face that would have been the pride of any movie star. Great, Lee thought. How am I going to meet anyone with him in the room? Well, it would certainly be a good place to watch people.

“What’s popular?”

“Strawberry Colada.”

“Gin and tonic,” Lee said. “Tanqueray.”

“Right up,” the bartender said.

“Want to see my ID?”

The bartender regarded him briefly with quiet amusement.

“Sure,” he said. He could indulge a customer for a better tip.

After scanning it, he picked up the Tanqueray bottle with a flourish and poured it backhand into a highball glass. Lee paid and tipped him then got settled in and took a whiff of the environment. It was energizing. A combination of college cologne, spilled booze and sex. Several people were already four sheets to the wind. Everyone was drinking slammers and whammers and shots, and it was a nice change from the stuffy bars in Chicago. Even though he was much older than most of the crowd, he didn’t feel very much out of place. :- ) (*Stop it Steve. Sorry.*)

From his vantage point, he could be the observer, keep one eye on the television, one on the room, and one on the reflection in the mirror behind the bar, a straight shot of the blond girl with the exposed midriff. She was already several shooters into her evening, twenty one or two, five feet four, fairly long, straight blond hair parted in the middle. She wore snug blue jeans, a tightly fitting cotton top, light blue which matched her eyes, and had alabaster skin. She was pretty. Her laughter made her prettier. Being young, her drunkenness and freedom made her even nicer looking, almost innocent. A clean hippy. If she sat next to him, he probably would end up with her. She probably wouldn’t end up alone in any case. There was an equal chance of her going home with someone, throwing up, or both. She was amusing, refreshing. He wasn’t ogling her, really, it was nice to

see a young, bright-eyed, fun person letting it all hang out. Okay, he was ogling her.

He still sat, drinking his third or fourth gin and tonic, observing, watching. He liked the theater of it; bits of conversation, not rehearsed, not forced. The best kind of theater. He sat, invisible, enjoying the show. Once in a while, while looking at the young blond girl's reflection, he would catch his own reflection and it was a strange wake up call - after nine years with someone - to see himself sitting in a bar alone. He had gone to bars without Beverly, but not with the possibility of going home with someone. It was odd. He hadn't gone specifically to meet or pick up a woman. He had money, and the bar had booze, and his main objective was to drink and drink heavily, but if the possibility of sharing his bed presented itself, he wasn't going to shy away.

A few gin and tonics later a girl sat down on his "elbow room" stool, the last stool at the bar. She looked like the college aged girls, but had a maturity that made it look as though she probably wasn't in college. The bartender asked what she wanted. He acted as if he knew her. He was much more charming to her than he had been to Lee, which shouldn't have been surprising, but that made Lee feel somehow left out.

Lee sat facing forward, nursing his drink. He'd been out of the loop for entirely too long. Not only had nine years passed, but times had changed. A lot of things were going through his mind. If he did meet someone, he needed condoms. And he hated condoms. Condoms were like taking a shower with your socks on. He'd never been a great pick-up artist, but had done okay before he met Beverly. What flirting skills he had had waned. The bartender brought her the drink.

"Thanks, Headline," she said.

He watched the woman out of the corner of his eye. She looked very much like the girl he had been looking at in the mirror; tight jeans, close fitting top, except, he realized, she was a woman. His mind swirled with things to say. He was about to offer to buy her a drink, but thought that it might make her feel like a cheap hooker, so he said nothing, almost ignored her. He tried to decide if she'd sat there because he was there or if it was because it was the only seat available. At least he knew he smelled good. She wasn't drinking shooters, but something brown in a high ball glass. When she moved forward, Lee noticed the skin, now exposed, at the small of her back. It was smooth and young and slightly tan, and he liked noticing it. He didn't stare, just noticed it. Okay, he stared. He hadn't noticed the small of any woman's back except Beverly's for a very long time, and it felt good.

Occasionally one of them would say something. Not a conversation, really, she would say something, or he would say something, and she would laugh. He wasn't planning on what next to say. It was almost as if they were both observers at the same play, just sharing the watching. Beverly had always called him the sardonic observer. Now he was sharing that with a stranger. Fuck Beverly, he thought, then handed the bartender a quarter for the "Cuss Jar".

As the bartender set another drink in front of Lee, he turned to the woman.

"Going to be in the next play, Kim?"

"No," she said. "I'm stage managing this one."

Lee asked her what they were talking about and she handed him a photocopied piece of paper.

"The Willow Lane Theater proudly presents," it said, "The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds, Directed by Miss Agnes Livingstone," then went on to list the cast, dates and times and a phone number to call for reservations.

Lee lost count of how many drinks he had. He just kept pulling out crumpled bills. Give him a twenty, give him a five. He had plenty, and didn't have to worry about spending it all because of the twenty in his shoe for the cab ride back.

Eventually he had to pee. He still hadn't bought her a drink. They'd still said very little to one another. A small joke, a comment about another patron, a laugh. The observers observing each other. He really had to pee. And he hadn't yet gotten the courage to offer her a cocktail.

"If you save my seat," he said to her with a small smile, "I'll buy you a drink."

She returned the small smile. He stood up and suddenly the gin gave him an uppercut to the jaw. He didn't want her to see that he was that bombed, so he steadied himself and very carefully wended his way around the bar through the crowd to the bathroom. Of course there was a line. By the time his turn came, he felt like his entire midsection was going to explode in a cascade of painful embarrassment. He stood leaning against the wall at the urinal, trying to steady himself, hoping he didn't pee on his shoe or fall on the bathroom floor. He still wavered, but managed not to attract too much attention. There were, of course, others wavering just as much as he was and some of them were peeing on their shoes.

There was a vending machine on the wall that dispensed cologne and condoms. Hey, you never know, he thought and pulled out a quarter (dropping several pennies on the floor and a quarter in the urinal) and put it

in the machine. Better to have a condom and not need one than vice versa. And she had sat down next to him. And he did smell good. There were several interesting choices from “glow in the dark” to “ribbed for HER pleasure”. He selected one, pulled the lever and was rudely sprayed in the face with cologne. Damn, he thought. And it’s Brut. It had to be Brut. How could they call something so sweet “Brut”? He reached back in his pocket, which was empty of coins, then saw his last quarter in the urinal. Leaning against the wall, he stared at the quarter. Even the word “urinal” was objectionable. Lee wondered if anyone would notice if he reached in to retrieve it. He wondered if he would ever be able to scrub his hand clean again if he did. He wondered why he didn’t travel with tongs. He thought about getting change from the bartender. Or a fellow patron. But she would hear him asking the bartender, and he wasn’t about to go up to a strange man in a public toilet and ask for change for the condom machine. Sighing deeply, he pushed away from the wall.

He washed his hands, and left the room, staggering back through the crowd. As he made his way, he worried at the possibility that she would be gone, or that someone else might be sitting on his stool. Someone who looked even better than the bartender. He was really drunk, and not very good at this. He only had one shot. Even if he did smell good. Her or nothing. Except for a big jar of Vaseline® and a handy-wipe named Betty. He focused hard. She was still sitting, sipping her drink, with her hand lightly resting on his bar stool. He puffed his chest slightly when he saw that. I still got it, he thought, and tripped over his own shoe. As he steadied himself, he caught sight of two young women looking at him and giggling.

“What’re you looking at?” he asked and they burst out laughing.

He made it back somehow, thanked her for saving his seat and bought her the drink.

“Thanks,” she said. “I’m Kim.”

“My name is Lee,” he said. “Lee Harris.”

“Oh, last names?”

“Sorry,” he said through the haze in his head. “I haven’t done this in a while.”

She smiled.

“Okay,” she said, realizing he probably wouldn’t even remember.

“Anderson. Kim Anderson. Like Loni.”

“Nice to meet you Loni.”

She laughed.

“It’s Kim,” she said. “The Anderson is the ‘like Loni’ part.”

“I had a teacher named Loni,” he said, not sure if the words were coming out in the order he intended them to. “He...”

“He?”

“Yeah,” he said, “Sorry. He was a good teacher.”

Sometime between then and the end of the evening, she left. He was sure there had been more to the conversation, but couldn't remember it. He couldn't remember her leaving. He couldn't remember if he had ordered another drink. He couldn't remember if he had been pleasant. He was fairly certain that they never exchanged numbers. He could barely remember her name. Loni something. He couldn't remember... He...

Then, somehow, it was almost closing time. He told the bartender he was going to go get a cab. The bartender told him to be careful.

“Got a twenty in my shoe,” he said grandly, then said bye and stumbled out.

It seemed like one moment he was lurching through the front door of the tavern, and the next he was leaning against a cop car with his hands behind his back, being cuffed. It was as if they had been waiting for him. For him alone.

He tried to tell them he had purposely not driven so he wouldn't have to drive drunk, but they were zealous defenders of justice and the American way, and put him roughly into the back of the cop car, making sure he didn't bump his head. It was weird riding back there. When you get that drunk, and you get arrested, you have a lot of feelings going through your head. Of course, you're angry, because your night is pretty much ruined. But you are also darkly excited about being part of that police scene, even though you're on the receiving side of it. There's the shotgun and the lights, and the radio, and, even though you're only being arrested for public intoxication, they treat you like you're evil. Lee's sense of dark drama was fully engaged. His sense of time was not.

There were, perhaps, twenty officers at the station. They took the cuffs off him. He guessed they no longer considered him much of a threat with those odds. There were flyers for bailbondsmen everywhere. And one for an all-night pizza place. He knew his wife was, at that moment, fucking another man in another bed, and he was the one getting screwed. He couldn't even have fun right. He couldn't even be bad good. This made him belligerent. He glowered as they took his picture, took his watch and wallet, his keys, and gum. They fingerprinted him, which he hated because it was so messy. They made him wash his hands in some sludgy gunk, and he did it for about five minutes, even scrubbing under his nails, until they got mad and told him to stop.

The burly guy who was booking him handed him the phone and said he had one call. Lee squinted at the man's name tag. It said "Officer Bacon." Lee smirked drunkenly, then looked at the phone, trying to think who the hell he could call in a strange town at two in the morning. He reached into his pocket and felt a crumpled piece of paper. It was the flyer for "Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds" that Loni Anderson had given him.

He put the paper on the counter and tried to smooth it out.

"All you'll get from that number is a recording with show dates," Officer Bacon told him. "They just did Chalk Garden. It was compelling, did you see it?"

Lee waved him off, picked up the phone and dialed.

After two rings, the other end was picked up and he heard a strange sound that reminded him in his drunken state of fingernails on a chalkboard. He had called a fax number.

"Shit," he said, and Officer Bacon presented a "Cuss Jar" filled with damp quarters.

"Fuck it," Lee said and pulled the twenty out of his shoe and stuffed it in the jar. "What's with this town?" He slammed down the phone, then picked it up again.

"Sorry, Pal. Only one."

He stared in disbelief as they led him to the small cell.

"But it was a fax machine!"

"If you'd dialed correctly," Officer Bacon said, "you would have found out about Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds, but it wouldn't have helped you much here. I wanted to go to opening night, but I have a double shift that day. Their season is satisfyingly diverse. I go whenever I can. I acted a little before the academy. Did the Artful Dodger. 'Consider yourself at home.'"

"Who are you?"

Lee stood in the small cell, his arms outstretched, Christ-like, his hands clutching the bars. He pressed his face forlornly into the metal.

"Welcome to River Bend," he said.

**Will Lee get sprung?  
Will he settle in to this welcoming town?  
Why the hell is the bartender named "Headline"?  
Will Loni Anderson remember him?  
Will Rogers?  
Or Hammerstein?**

**To find the answers to these and other conundrums,  
tune in to our next installment:  
“No Shirt, No Shoes, No Kidding”.  
(Just call it “Installment Two”. *Straight men.*)**

**The story thus far: Lee Harris goes out for a drink and ends up in jail. If you want the details, read *Installment One*. Sheesh.**

**(We should work the word “tart” into this episode. *Why, Steve?* Okay, never mind.)**

## Installment Two

“No Shirt, No Shoes, No Kidding”

**(How original, Geoff. *It was your idea, Steve.* Brilliant.)**

Lee needed a shower to wash the jail off of his face. Looking through the cab window at the drizzle only made him feel dirtier. It was depressing, but at least it wasn't perky. A perky sky would have sent him over the edge. A perky cab driver would have been worse, but this one was mercifully grim. Lee was tired. Hung over. Angry. And he had a court date in a week and a half. And he hadn't eaten. For a very long time. And he probably couldn't if he tried. And he was hung over. And tired. He needed coffee. His mouth tasted like an English kitchen. He reached into his shoe to get the twenty he kept there as “inebriation insurance”. Lot of good it did him; he still ended up in the hoosegow. When he found ten toes but no twenty, he had a vague recollection through the lace doilies in his brain of putting the twenty into the police station cuss jar for expressing the vulgar form of two separate bodily functions in rapid succession. He looked around the cab to see if there was a cuss jar here. There didn't seem to be.

“Shit,” he said.

The cabby reached under the seat and pulled out a jar.

“No, I spent all my ready cash at the police station last night,” Lee said. Or at least he hoped that was what he said. His mouth and brain seemed to be going through an ugly divorce and weren't talking to each other.

“Could you maybe swing by an ATM?” he added slowly, then waited for the cabby’s response to make sure he understood.

The cabby made a sudden turn. He understood. Either that, or he was bringing him back to the police station. That didn’t make any sense, but the sudden turn made the juices in his stomach lurch so he didn’t think about it much. The cab driver came to a sudden stop which made the churn in his stomach swirl. He was also hoping the motel wasn’t far. The motel bathroom. The toilet in the motel bathroom. Lurching churning swirling juices could erupt in either direction without any notice. He looked in the pocket on the back of the seat in front of him for a barf bag, then remembered he wasn’t in an airplane. He shut his eyes to calm the swirling lurch, then looked around to get his bearings and saw the ATM machine.

He groped for the door, stumbled out, and tripped over the curb. He stood in front of the machine, focusing hard to aim the card into the slot. He wasn’t used to drinking, and really wasn’t used to a hangover on no sleep. The card slipped out of his hand as the machine accepted it, and the brightly colored readout perkily asked for his PIN. Lee looked up, bewildered. He leaned forward and rested his forehead against the machine in order to think. The lens of the little security camera was right at eye level, so he pushed away. The drizzle started to seep into his hair.

Come on, he thought. I’ve used that stupid number a million times. Maybe if I just let my fingers go for it. He lifted his hand and let it hover above the keypad, but nothing happened.

“Damn it, damn it, damn it, damn it, five two six... (**Geoff, don’t give out his PIN!** *It’s fiction, Ishmail.*) one.” He punched the numbers and it beeped perkily, then the perky options appeared. It took a moment to process his request for sixty dollars. Finally, the readout said “Unable to process your request at this time. Please enter a smaller amount,” which really means “Just walk away, loser.”

Lee tried to remember if he’d taken out the maximum the night before. He hadn’t even gone to an ATM the night before. He asked for forty and got the same message. He panicked. How was he going to pay the cabby? In twelve hours, he’d been arrested for the first time in his beige life, and, because he couldn’t get any money out of a stupid ATM, was probably going to die in debtor’s prison, and, even worse, was going to do it in underwear he’d worn for more than a day. He breathed in to calm himself and then thought to check his account balance.

Nineteen dollars and ninety-nine cents. He could almost hear the machine laughing at him. He started to hyperventilate. There was at least two thousand dollars in there.

“Any trouble?”

He whipped around to the sound and almost fell over from dizziness. The cabby was right behind him. Lee stuttered and tried to make his hungover mouth form an intelligent sentence at the same time that his hungover mind was trying to figure out what had happened to all his money. The result of this effort was a strange sound coming out of somewhere near his mouth.

“I,” he said. “It... ”

The cabby glanced at the monitor on the ATM and saw what the balance was, reached into his pocket and handed Lee a dollar bill. Lee was confused.

“Deposit it,” the cabby said very slowly as if talking to a child. “Then you’ll have enough in there to take out twenty, and you can add the one to what you owe me when we get to the motel.”

Lee did as he was told, and held the resulting twenty tightly in his fist as he numbly stumbled on the slick curb and fell into the back seat of the car.

“Eighteen-fifty, plus the buck,” the cabby said as he jerked to a stop in the motel parking lot.

Lee handed him the precious twenty, telling him to keep the change, and blundered across the parking lot to his room.

“Tart,” the cabby said to him. (*Stop it, Steve. You never let me have any fun.*)

“Hussy,” Lee shot back. (*I mean it, Steve.*)

Lee flopped down on the bed, exhausted, but the night played too loudly in his mind and he couldn’t sleep. He stripped and went into the shower, but while the soothing hot water was streaming down his body, he suddenly remembered his bank account. Where the (he looked around the shower for a cuss jar) hell did two (again) fucking thousand fucking dollars fucking go? Fuck. Beverly. She cleaned him out. No. She just needed to pay bills. For once in her stupid life, she paid her bills on time and left him penniless. Well, not really penniless, she did leave him nineteen ninety-nine. Kind of like leaving a dime tip. That had to be on purpose. No, just because she was in love with the Jerk, didn’t mean she would flick him quite that hard in the Dockers™.

He dried himself and tried to sleep, but the buzzing in his mind and body made it impossible. He was so exhausted and hung over and angry that his adrenalin had kicked into overdrive. I’m supposed to be TIRED, he shouted to the inside of his face. After several minutes he lurched out of bed, stubbed his toe, pulled some clothes on, stubbed his toe again, went out and hopped into his car, bumping his head. His wallet pressed

into his rump in a very uncomfortable way, so he pulled it out of his back pocket and threw it into the glove box. The wallet, that is. He thought he remembered seeing a diner on the way back from the police station, and drove in that direction.

He'd remembered correctly. The diner was called "Twain's". He parked and sat in his car leaning against the steering wheel trying to calm the buzz in his limbs. It didn't work, so he went in and sat on a stool at the counter. There were tall booths along one wall with impossibly red leather or leatherette vinyl set off by little silver upholstery tacks along the seams. If Lee hadn't been trying so hard not to vibrate off the stool, he would have found them fascinating. He would have found the little raised platform with a microphone and stand on it in one dark corner of the room just plain weird.

A very disheveled guy was sitting on the edge of the steel sink behind the counter reading the newspaper. He looked like he hadn't washed his hair or changed his tee-shirt or apron in days. He seemed annoyed. The place was quiet except for the sickening gurgling sound of the coffee brewing. The fresh smell of the perking coffee both enticed and nauseated Lee. He chose to listen to the part that was enticed and was about to order some, when he remembered his present financial embarrassment.

"Do you take credit cards?" he asked.

"Five dollar minimum," the guy said brusquely. It was almost as if he was annoyed that someone had come into the diner before he had had his first cup of coffee. "No American Express. It's a stupid card."

Lee sighed. "All right. Coffee. And I guess I'll have two eggs, over easy, toast and bacon. How much is that?"

The guy pointed to the menu on the wall above his head. It was three forty-five. And coffee was ninety-five cents. Lee was much too hung over to add that in his head, but was fairly sure it wouldn't come to five. Juice, he thought. He searched the breakfast menu. Okay, Tang, I guess, he thought, and ordered. The coffee was still brewing, so the guy quickly replaced the pot with a white industrial coffee cup, let that fill, then put the pot back. He set that and a glass of tap water in front of Lee, then leaned down under the counter and produced a single-serving packet of Tang and dropped it next to the glass.

Lee shook his head. "You must be Twain," he said, making one of those spontaneous connections that only an exhausted, pickled, adrenalin-filled brain can make. He figured no one would hire the guy, he must be the owner.

Twain nodded brusquely.

"Named after Mark?"

Geoff Hoff and Steve Mancini

“My grandfather.”

“Your grandfather was Mark Twain?”

“No, Twain Newton. Just like me.”

Even in his present state, Lee couldn't help laughing. He did have the good graces to be embarrassed about it, though. Twain went back into the kitchen. Lee could see him through the serving window as he scratched his butt and sniffed his fingers, (*Steve! Sorry.*) fired up the grill, then came back out, sat back down on the sink and picked up the paper. Lee watched the cream swirl into the dark liquid in his cup, wondering if he would actually be able to drink it. He stirred it, then carefully brought it to his lips, ready to set it down if his gorge rose. He sipped it. So far, so good. He swallowed the sip, then, when he was sure it wasn't going to react exothermically with the gastric juices and gin, actually allowed himself to taste the coffee. He was shocked. It was really wonderful coffee. In a place like this. He was about to comment on it when Twain spoke.

“Hey,” Twain said. “Is this you? Lee Harris?”

Lee scowled inquisitively, and Twain handed him the paper. It was open to the police log. There, in black and white, was his mug shot and the details of his arrest including the fact that he had used his one phone call to call the fax machine at the Willow Lane Theater. And it called him a transient.

“Transient!” he said through the terrycloth in his head. “My God, this must have been printed before I even got out.”

“Public intoxication,” Twain said. “Should've taken a cab.”

“I...,” Lee said emphatically, which made his stomach slap his brain upside the head. He sighed painfully. “How long is the food going to take?”

“It's an old grill.”

Lee asked where the men's room was. He found it and stood leaning against the wall. He found himself in this position all too often of late. When he looked around the room, the first thing he noticed was a poster for the Willow Lane Theater. Was that all there was to do in this stupid town? The next thing he saw was a poster of the Partridge Family autographed by Danny Bonaduce. The “Danny” effectively hid David Cassidy's face. The “o” in “Bonaduce” neatly encircled Susan Day's belly button.

“I'll be damned,” he said, and looked around the bathroom for a cuss jar.

When he got back to his stool, Twain was breaking eggs onto the grill. They hit with a satisfying sizzle, and the smell of them cooking made Lee's mouth water. The aroma of bacon was heavenly, and the smell of

the toast was almost more than he could stand. He tried to remember the last time he had eaten. Did they have peanuts at the bar? That would have been it.

Twain set the steaming plate in front of him. He picked up a fork full of egg and put it hungrily into his mouth. Big mistake. The taste was an out of control Winnebago rumbling toward the nitro in his stomach. A roadblock formed in his esophagus to derail it. The ball of yarn in his head began to unravel. He chewed the egg laboriously, not wanting to spit it out, unable to swallow. It just changed in his mouth. It actually got bigger. He finally forced it past the roadblock before it was able to expand beyond the boundaries of his mouth. The yarn strangled him. He pushed the plate out from under his nose. He felt as if his neck and face were slowly turning pale green and cold damp sweat broke out on his forehead. He breathed in and out several times very deeply, trying to convince his body that it wouldn't be a good thing to throw up right at this particular moment in this particular place. Water. He needed to sip water. He picked up the glass of Tang and brought it to his lips. He couldn't bring himself to put the foul liquid in his mouth.

His body convulsed. He breathed it back down by force of will. His heart beat frantically, trying to get out of the way of the coming conflagration. Finally, somehow, he gained some mastery over his rebellious gut. He sat for a moment to be sure this wasn't just the tremor before the main quake, then reached to his back pocket for his wallet so he could pay and leave with the last few atoms of his dignity. It was, of course, in his glove box. The wallet, that is. He told Twain he needed to go out to get it.

“Uh, huh,” Twain said.

“I'll leave you my keys,” Lee said, dimly aware that he had just been suspected of running out on a five dollar tab by someone who had just read empirical evidence that he couldn't be trusted. “Oh,” he said meekly. “I need them to open the car.”

“You locked your car?”

“I'm from Chicago. I'll leave my... uh... ”

Twain just waved him out. Lee tripped over the door jam as he left the diner. It was still drizzling, just to annoy him. He unlocked the driver's side door, and leaned across the seat to open the glove box. As he placed his hand on the wallet, out of the corner of his eye he saw a piece of paper on the windshield. It was a flyer for the Willow Lane Theater that had been stuck under the windshield wiper, glued to the glass with the drizzle. And under the other wiper was another, larger piece of paper, perfectly dry. He extracted himself from the car and extracted the paper from the windshield. A ticket. A parking ticket. For twenty-five dollars. For parking in a red

Geoff Hoff and Steve Mancini

zone. He looked down and focused his blood-shot eyes on the curb. The zone was, indeed, red. His front tire was a foot into it.

“Fuck!” he shouted. He was getting very fond of that word. He tried to think of another one that would work, but that was the only one. He said it again. (We won’t.) “Fuck!” (*Steve! I can’t help it, Geoff. Yes you can, you just don’t.*)

He was used to watching things happen, not having things happen to him. He threw the ticket onto the floor of his car, got in and put the keys in the ignition, then sat contemplating starting the car and getting the hell out of this town. He thought about it for a very long time, but he had a breakfast bill to pay. He really wished he could be bad. Just once.

“Fuck,” he said for good measure (and for Steve), got out of the car, slammed the door and went back into the diner, tripping over the jam.

“Poor feet management,” Twain muttered.

Lee calmed himself, pulled a card out of his wallet and very carefully handed it to Twain. Twain swiped it through the slot on the reader. Lee listened to the little electronic squeal as Twain’s card reader talked to some bank somewhere out there. Then there was a strange beep. Twain looked at the little LED readout.

“Declined,” he said, looking back up at Lee, whose face turned red and whose eyes grew ten sizes and filled with water.

“BEVERLY!” Lee shouted in anguished rage.

**How will Lee pay for his eggs?  
How much will he pay for his hangover?  
Will we ever actually visit the Willow Lane Theater?  
Why is there a microphone in the corner of the diner?  
Will we ever find out why the bartender was named “Headline”?  
(See Installment One.)  
Will Lee say f\*\*k again?  
Will Smith?  
Or Wesson?  
And who will buy the pink tutu?**

**To find the answers to these and other brooding mysteries,  
tune in to our next installment:  
“There’s No Home Like This Place”**

**The story thus far: Lee Harris arrives in River Bend after splitting with his wife of eight years. After an embarrassing brush with the law, he discovers he no longer has the financial means to pay for breakfast. If you want the details, all the installments are listed in the table of contents.**

**(I'll bet I can work a dong reference into this installment. *Don 't even try, Steve.* )**

## Installment Three

“There’s No Home Like This Place”  
(Insert humor here)

The steam billowed up from the deep stainless steel sink filled with soapy water, and the alcohol infused sweat poured down Lee’s face, dripping into the suds. He stopped washing the pot, rubbed the sweat from his forehead with the back of his soapy wrist, and grabbed the tall glass of water from the counter. It tasted good, and was the only thing he had gotten down in several hours. He set the glass down, rinsed the pot with steaming hot water, set it on the counter to drip dry, where it hit with a clang of finality. He wanted the clang to be satisfying, but it only made his head hurt. He dried his hands on the soaking, dirty apron and looked at his watch. Just over an hour. He had paid his debt to society. Well, at least to Twain. He hadn’t worked for five dollars an hour since he was in college, and hadn’t been paid to wash dishes since high school. And he had NEVER not been able to pay for a meal. And he hadn’t even eaten the meal; the garbage disposal had.

When Lee came out from the back, Twain was sitting on the edge of the counter reading the newspaper. There were two men sitting at the counter.

One wore a John Deere™ hat and was eating scrambled eggs. One had on a fedora, was eating scrambled eggs, and reading Time Magazine©. One wore a beard and was eating cinnamon Pop Tarts®, but that has nothing to do with this story. (*That's a reference from the first installment, think they'll get it? You have no faith, Geoff.*) Lee caught Twain's attention.

"I'm done," he said. "I'm outta here. Fuck the ticket. Fuck the court date. I'm taking my hangover and driving it the hell out of town."

Twain nodded, and Lee stumbled out of the diner. He opened the car door and defiantly sat, put the key in the ignition and turned it. He pressed the gas pedal angrily to the floor. The engine revved to a satisfying roar which was suddenly joined by a loud chaotic thwacking ruckus emanating from under the hood that shook the seat under him. He turned the engine off quickly and the thumping rumbled grudgingly to a stop. He got out of the car, tripped on the curb, opened the hood of the car and pinched his finger when he put the support rod into its little support rod holder hole.

It was immediately obvious what had caused the thwacking ruckus. A long, black, snake-like belt was entwined and entangled around everything but the pulleys where it belonged. He grabbed it by a frayed end and pulled it up and out. As it untangled from the guts of the car, Lee had an overwhelming sense that he had seen it somewhere before. It actually looked like the snake he had seen on a television show about Jakarta, Indonesia, but that has nothing to do with this story.

Twain looked up as the bells on the front door clanged. It was Lee, standing forlornly, almost in tears, holding a long black thing in his outstretched hand.

"Serpentine belt," Twain said. "That'll cost you."

That did it. Lee let his arm drop, and he turned and walked toward the door, dragging the serpentine belt behind him.

"Hey, Lucky," Twain said just as Lee got to the door. He turned back, the serpentine belt following him dutifully. "Where you going?"

Lee didn't know. He did know he couldn't afford to stay in the motel room for another day, and said so. Twain shook his head in wonder at the extreme patheticness of this guy. (**Is that a word?** *You know what it means, it doesn't have to be in the dictionary.*) He looked around his diner for a moment.

"Look, Lucky," he said. "My high school help wants less hours. Band or football or something. Give you a hundred bucks a week."

After cringing at being called "Lucky" for the second time by a guy who didn't even know how to bathe, Lee said he couldn't even afford to eat on that. Twain brushed that off and said he'd give him a discount. He also said that there was a room above the diner that had needed cleaning

for a very long time, and Lee could start there. Then, when it was clean, he could stay there. Everybody wins.

Lee was spent. He was numb. His ears buzzed in a strange way, and there was this long thing hanging from his hand. And the serpentine belt. (*Steve! I had to. You 're thirteen.*) He couldn't think. He couldn't decide. It was that or go back to Beverly. Maybe he could call her and have her send enough to get the car fixed. The notion that that thought could even cross his mind made his sorry ass brain hurt.

"Look, I can't stand here all day," Twain said. "Sleep on it." He took him down the hall to the bottom of the stairway that led up to the room. Lee stood at the bottom stair staring up at what seemed to be an utterly insurmountable number of old, dirty steps. He stared numbly at the stairs. The stairs stared back. Twain stared at Lee.

"I have to check out of the motel," Lee said, forlornly.

"So call."

"I left my suitcase there," Lee said, despairingly.

"Have them keep it in the office until you can get it."

"There's nothing on my credit card. I can't wash sheets and blankets," Lee said pathetically.

"Didn't they pre-approve it?"

Yes. Yes, they had. Pre-approved. The night he had rented the room, the night he had actually spent in jail, was already effectively paid for. He'd paid for a room he hadn't slept in and worked for a meal he hadn't eaten. What would be next, renting a video he wouldn't watch? As long as he checked out before noon, he wouldn't go to debtor's prison. For that, anyway. Twain led him to the phone and he made the arrangements with the motel, then he went back to the bottom of the stairs and looked up. He looked back at Twain.

"I'm not like this," he said desperately, trying to convince not only Twain, but himself. "I'm not helpless. I'm not a transient. I'm not a jailbird. I'm a successful accountant. I work at a brokerage firm in Chicago." He sighed despondently. "At least I did. I have a wife." He put his hand on the railing. "At least I did. I have a life." He put one foot on the bottom step. "At least I did." (**Stop it, Geoff, art is knowing when to stop. Are you done? At least it was. Art. See?**)

Twain shrugged. Lee nodded, sighed again, and climbed the stairs. Slowly. It took a huge effort of will to have the grace to put one foot in front of the other, pushing his weight against gravity to force it up to the next step and again up to the next. When he finally got to the top, he opened the door. If he'd had any energy left, he would have been horrified at the state of the room. Actually, he was horrified right through the buzzing in

his eyes. There were boxes and piles and cobwebs and stuff everywhere, and it was all covered with a film of greasy dust. And no where to sleep. Maybe Beverly wasn't really sleeping with the Jerk. Maybe he had left too hastily. Maybe she hadn't meant to clean out his accounts. Maybe she had used the money trying to track him down because she was so stricken with worry. Maybe he could just fall backwards down the stairs and become Martha Stewart.

Despite the energy it took to move his head, he looked around the room again. At the far end, under dusty, cobwebby, greasy boxes, he could see by the thin, dusty late-morning light from the tiny dusty window on the wall, a dusty green vinyl couch. He pushed and tripped his way through piles and boxes and cobwebs, pushed stuff off the couch, and fell into it. As soon as his head hit the icky green Naugahyde™ cushion, there was a loud ruckus from the diner as if a huge party had just arrived with jack hammers and fudge. God, he thought, I can't even sleep!

He tried to lift his head, but his cheek was glued to the couch. There was a puddle of drool on the cushion which was starting to seep over the edge. The room seemed darker. With an effort he pulled his face away. It felt like part of his skin was left behind when he was finally able to separate himself from the vile vinyl with a sound like ripping linen sheets. He sat up to get his bearings. It was darker. Somehow, he had actually slept. Deeply. For hours. And it felt like nothing. The kind of sleep you get from watching *The English Patient*. Completely non-refreshing. By the gray light from the window, he assumed it must be dusk. He was still exhausted, and now he was famished. Ravenous. Over the gurgling in his gut, he could hear the crowd in the diner, and over the dust in the room, he could smell the comforting odors of sage and ketchup from the baking meatloaf mingling with the margarine in the mashed potatoes and the distinct aroma of boiled canned green beans.

I gotta eat, he thought. If I'm going to eat, I have to work. If I work here, I might as well stay here. But how the hell can I stay here? I have to until I can afford to get my car going. And if I stay that long, I have to pay my ticket. And go to court for being drunk. I should have punched a cop. Or pissed in a bush.

He sat immobile, the twirl in his mind was taking all the energy he had left. He couldn't go down to what sounded like a full diner looking like a three day bender in slept in clothing smelling like a goat who hadn't shaved. **(Goats don't shave, Geoff. That's the point. Huh?)** But he was so hungry. He looked around the room. There was a lot of junk in it, but there was also, in the far corner, what looked like a metal standing shower stall. The idea of a shower was almost more appealing than the idea of

eating. This must have really been an apartment, once. He could shower before he went down, but the thought of having to put the same clothes back on once they were off made his skin recede into his bones. He looked around again. Maybe there were clothes in one of the boxes.

On a pile just to his left was what looked like a cereal box. He picked it up. Wheaties! An open box of Wheaties. He pulled the flap open and unrolled the inside bag. Then he noticed that the athlete on the front was Joe Namath and stopped. He was about to set the box aside when his stomach grumbled again. Namath must be a hundred by now. He wondered what the shelf life of a Wheatie was. He reached into the box and pulled one out. It still felt like a Wheatie. He examined it. It still looked like a Wheatie. He put it to his nose. It still smelled like a Wheatie. What the hell, he thought, I'm hungry, and he put it to his mouth, but the fact that it still looked and smelled new after more than thirty years gave him pause. He couldn't. Not even if he hadn't eaten for a month. He gently put the Wheatie back into the box, rolled the inner bag, closed the top and put it back in its pile. His stomach whimpered sadly.

He looked at the shower stall and sighed deeply. Might as well get to work, he thought, and started to clean his way toward the shower.

The bustle and noise that aroused Lee from his ineffectual slumber wasn't from a full diner. There was one full booth and two men sitting at opposite ends of the counter. The two men were both eating the meatloaf special, one smothered in gravy, the other in ketchup. The meatloaf, not the men. The booth was filled with members of the Willow Lane Theater (foreshadowing) who were on a dinner break from rehearsal. The energy of the group was scattered, but somehow still focused on, or perhaps pulled in, like moons to Jupiter, by a small woman in her sixties. She would have been considered slight were it not for her ample bosom which preceded her in any conversation, and which she still used effectively to hold the attention of those in her thrall. (**Ample bosom, I like that.** *She's sixty, Steve. I just like saying it.*)

Matt, the sixteen-year-old who worked part time at Twain's, set the red plastic basket of french fries on the table, the thin paper lining soaked in grease.

"We'll need more napkins, dear," Agnes said, her sixty-year old hand resting gently, perhaps even suggestively on his arm, then she turned back to the group to continue holding court. A sudden loud commotion coming from somewhere above momentarily interrupted their conversation.

"Hey, Twain," the robust man sitting at the table said, "You got rats?"

Twain stood at the grill behind the window and flipped the burger instead of the finger he thought about flipping. A few of the people at the

table laughed. The two at the counter didn't seem to notice. Twain set the plates he had been preparing on the ledge under the heat lamp and tapped the stopper on the little dome bell which rang with a high dissonant tone. Matt looked over at him then went around the counter to pick up the order: two burgers, three orders of meatloaf and a piece of delicately poached sole for Agnes, brushed by a subtle hollandaise sauce with the slightest hint of lemon, accompanied by baby asparagus tips and new potatoes with herb butter. Hungry, yet?

The rat-like noise had been Lee, dropping a box and tripping backwards over a pile of three others when a spider scuttled over his arm. If it had only scurried, he wouldn't have been so freaked. He tried to stand at the same time he was frantically brushing at his arms and hair, then noticed that one of the boxes he had fallen over was full of neatly folded old clothes. Although they smelled a little musty, they were clean. He pulled out a pair of overalls that were, perhaps, a bit big for him, but would do in a pinch. Just under them was a threadbare tee shirt with a faded picture of the Partridge Family on it. The box under that one was full of flyers for the Willow Lane Theater's 1976 production of *Godspell* directed by Agnes Livingstone. That stupid theater's flyers were so ubiquitous they were beginning to haunt history. He closed the box so he didn't have to see them, but one was taped to the box itself to identify the contents.

He turned away from it, and realized he had cleared enough away from the shower that he could finally use it. He had found a case of dish soap and was planning on using that, but there was an old bar of soap-on-a-rope shaped like a worn out, gaunt Fred Flintstone hanging from the shower faucet. It was dusty, but soap is self cleaning, so he shed his rank clothing, wadded it into a knot and hid it under a box before getting into the shower. He turned on the faucet and the spigot squealed, then sputtered and spit and exuded muddy brown water in uneven spurts that smelled and sounded like a rusty Model T engine trying to turn over while going uphill. He jumped out with a yelp and let the water run clear. And warm.

He showered for nearly twenty minutes to get the dust and grease and work and hangover and muddy brown water off, then dressed in the overalls and tee shirt. He took an exaggerated step to make sure none of him was attempting to peek too obviously from around the contours of the oversized clothing, then bent and looked at the open side slits of the overalls to make doubly sure. He remembered seeing a roll of duct tape and considered looking for it again, but thought that might be too much. To ease his mind, he did a jig and a jump just like Fred Astaire. Nothing revealed itself, which made him feel confident. And, yet, strangely inadequate.

He was feeling almost like a human, if a hungry one, and had done enough work to warrant some food. This wouldn't be so bad. He could do this for a few weeks until the debt was paid, the court was satisfied and the car was repaired. Beverly be damned. I might even get to like this town, he thought as he descended the steps.

The fellow who had made the crack about rats went up to the counter. Twain, done cooking, was again perched (gefilte fished?) on the edge of the sink reading the last page of the paper. He looked up as the stout man approached the counter.

"What can I get you, Peter?" Twain asked.

"Change for a twenty?" he said and plopped the wrinkled bill on the counter. There was a phone number and the word "pismire" written in red ink on one corner of it, but that has nothing to do with this story.

Twain reached into the till just as Lee rounded the corner from the hall. Peter looked up and saw him.

"Who's that?" Peter asked Twain, glancing surreptitiously at the side slits of the overalls.

Twain handed him the police sheet from the newspaper. Lee saw the guy glance at the article, then up at him with an odd expression, and knew exactly what must be going through that guy's mind.

"Don't you people have anything better to do?" he said.

The room fell strangely silent. Lee hadn't realized he'd said it out loud.

He sighed deeply, and sheepishly turned and went back up the stairs.

Twain took the paper from Peter's hand and threw it in the trash.

Lee lay back down on the ugly green couch hugging the box of ancient Wheaties with one hand while he ate from it with the other.

"Help me, Mr. Wizard," he said around the Wheatie crumbs. "I don't wanna be helpless anymore."

But no one dweezle-dwazzled him home.

**Will Lee hide in the attic eating Wheaties until he can afford to leave town?**

**Will he ever be able to afford to leave town?**

**Will Peter get his curiosity satisfied?**

**Will Lee accept Twain's offer?**

**Will the judge throw the book at him?**

**Will anyone get the Tooter the Turtle reference?**

**Will & Grace?**

**And why the Hell is the bartender called "Headline"? (See  
Installment One.)**

**To find the answers to these and other perplexing dilemmas,  
tune in to our next installment:  
“Another Opening Night, and I Ain’t Got Nobody”**

We hope you enjoyed your special bonus preview  
of **Weeping Willow: Welcome to River Bend**

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