

Travels with Maureen



The sun sets on the Big Muddy near Natchez, Mississippi

By Benjamin Alan Horwitz

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I have never met Maureen Dowd, the popular and well-known columnist for the *New York Times*. I would indeed like to meet her someday, but I suspect the likelihood of that ever happening is rather remote. Let's just say we probably travel in different circles – very different circles – and just leave it at that. This story is a complete fabrication and a fantasy. My fantasy – obviously. There are some facts contained on the following pages that are truthful. Others bear some semblance to the truth. And still others touch on truthful experiences. The vast majority of the facts, circumstances, personalities, happenings, occurrences, descriptions, conversations and the like are crafted purely from my imagination – and like I said, my fantasies. I recently turned sixty. And I think it's reassuring to many, both young and old alike; that even at 60 one can dream and imagine and not be considered a wacko or require deep and prolonged analysis. Although by the time you finish reading this you may indeed think a trip to Vienna, the birthplace of psychoanalysis, might be in order – for me. Certainly Ms. Dowd may think I need some serious help.

I refuse to apologize to anyone, including Ms. Dowd, for the following story. I cite the doctrine of “poetic license” as the basis of my legal right. Ms. Dowd is a well-known public personality and therefore in the public domain, and that fact alone allows me to use both her name and her person in this story. I believe I am on very firm legal ground with all kinds of literary precedence. If not – then I suspect Maureen Dowd will try to sue the crap out of me.

Benjamin A. Horwitz

Cleveland, Ohio: November, 2005

1. “I’m Nobody! Who are you?”

I am presently sitting in my two-bedroom, 1200 square foot, Cleveland Heights condo waiting for Maureen Dowd to get her cute little Irish butt into the parking lot so we can begin our journey to the West Coast and other points of interest. I’m nervous and pissed at the same time – a condition I have found myself in over the 60 years I’ve been on this planet more often than I care to admit. Mo (she absolutely hates when I call her that, but that’s what I call her when I am “perturbed” or feeling a little sassy; she usually answers with a “Yes, Davy baby”) is usually quite punctual. We were scheduled to leave from my condo before noon. She was driving up from Washington D.C. where she resides and couldn’t make it up the night before due to some stupid-ass literary function with one of those uppity New York magazines she said she had to attend. So she left early this morning from D.C. and should have been here before 10. It’s 11:30 and she just called from the Ohio Turnpike, so she should be here by one this afternoon, which means we will never make it to Iowa City, our planned first destination for the journey west.

I told her she should just fly to Cleveland, since we decided to take my Chevy Malibu on the trip instead of her Camry. But she insisted on driving from D.C. so she could claim that she traveled from coast to coast by car. (I offered to drive all the way back to Washington, D.C. from the west coast, drop her off and return to Cleveland, but she insisted on driving to Cleveland from D.C.) So now I find myself wandering over to the kitchen window every 10 seconds hoping to see her silver gray Camry pulling into the condo parking lot.

I’ve had ambivalent feelings about this trip all along (I’m sure Mo has too). “We haven’t really known each other long enough to spend 24 hours a day together all the way out to California. It’s a stupid idea to begin with. The odds are against us. We are both too old to act like giddy 20 year olds. It will never work. We’ll wind up hating each other. We’ll never make it to the West Coast – let alone all the way back East – without one of us leaving on a plane at the earliest convenience.” These were my suspicions, my private thoughts, leading up to this venture. And now that she was late and making me wait several hours, reinforcing all of those thoughts in my present mental state, I seriously thought about calling her on her cell phone and telling her to just turn her damn

car around and head back to Washington. It was nice to know that even at age 60, I was still capable of acting like a 20-year-old, immature, self-absorbed, self-pitying jerk. My cell phone was in my hand all set to dial as her silver gray Camry came wheeling into the drive of the condo parking lot.

I guess I'm obliged to explain how David Alan Cohen – a virtual nobody, as in the title of this chapter - would be waiting for the well-known popular author and *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd to appear at his modest 1200 square foot Cleveland Heights condominium parking lot so they can begin a two-month trek, by automobile, to and from the West Coast. I'll make it brief because a lot of the mystery should be cleared up within the text of the story to follow. But here goes:

For most of my adult and professional life, I have been a practicing chemical engineer. In fact, I still am. Even though my recently acquired quasi-newly found fame may indicate otherwise. I still consider myself a chemical engineer by profession. And at the present time, it's still the way I earn my living. Twelve years ago I quit the Arthur G. McKee Company, an engineering and construction company where I worked for almost 25 years. I decided, in a spur of the moment decision, to quit and try to see if I could work as a chemical engineer on my own. A few years after I declared my independence from McKee, I met an old girl friend at Wal Mart and we began seeing each other again. One Friday evening she dragged me to a play that her talented niece had written at the Cleveland Public Theater. I hadn't been to a play or theater since my college days, and I wasn't too keen on going over to the west side of Cleveland where the small theater was located – but I went and sat through the excruciatingly boring, confusing and cryptic production.

Afterwards my friend asked what I thought of the production and play. I responded honestly that I hadn't understood a damn thing that went on. (The play had something to do with two Greek gods.) My friend then assumed my lack of comprehension was due to me being a complete dolt, the result of an engineering education and career. I let the sarcastic, acerbic comment slide – I normally wouldn't have, but I wanted to get laid that night – and innocently commented that I thought I could write a play. “Oh sure you can,” she responded, again sarcasm dripping all over the words. “Go ahead, I dare you!” she

continued. And so that's exactly what I did. In fact, I began the following Monday. (I slept alone back at my condo that night.)

It took about 10 months to complete the play, titled *It's Twilight Time*, a semi-autobiographical account of my life from birth to death – a rather ambitious undertaking to say the least. A three-act play with an ensemble cast of over 25. There is proof enough that I knew nothing about writing a play that one might hope would eventually get produced. But that was never my intention. My girlfriend read the play, didn't say much, but then we never went out again after she read the play. She appeared nowhere in the play, but another old college flame did.

I sent the play to several friends who thought it was “fantastic” and encouraged me enough to have 25 copies made and sent out to various theaters and universities around the country. I got no positive responses and 25 rejections. One dramaturge from a New York City theater group made some encouraging comments about the play's “voice” but said the play would be way too expensive to produce. Too many characters, too many acts, and the cost of the music rights to the songs I incorporated would be prohibitive. So much for the possibility of fame and fortune. Back to distillation columns and reactors. And that was fine with me.

Then, a year ago, almost 8 years after I wrote the play, out of the blue, I get a phone call from the drama department at Wake Forest College inquiring as to the possibility of putting my play on with their theater group. Wondering how much I would charge for the use of the play. (Nothing, go ahead and perform it.) This was just last year, eight years after I wrote the damn thing. At first I thought it was some prank from some of my old college buddies who were sent copies of the play, but it turned out to be legit. And within three months I went to the first and what I thought would probably be the last production of *It's Twilight Time*.

I never even went to a single rehearsal. I saw the production for the first time at the “premier.” I was completely blown away. Regardless of the professionalism of the actors, seeing and hearing your own words sail back at you from an elevated, brightly lit stage and watching a darkened audience respond – in some cases actually begin to cry – I just had no idea how rewarding and fulfilling that could be. They even called me up on stage after the production, where I got a standing ovation.

Backstage, fifteen or so minutes after the audience had left the theater, the cast was preparing to go to a party and I was invited. One of the lead characters in the play – actually my old college flame – was played by a talented young actress with the name of Kathleen Dowd. I had never met any of the actors before because, as I said, I turned down all offers to attend any rehearsals. Kathleen introduced me to her proud parents, who then introduced me to her aunt, who happened to come to the theater to see her niece perform. Yes, as you probably guessed: I was introduced to Maureen Dowd.

I had no idea if this Maureen Dowd was the Dowd of *New York Times* fame, nor did I ask, nor did she volunteer that information as we all chatted for ten or so minutes. The Dowd contingent left the party, except for Kathleen, and I, in my introverted, non-social insecure way, moved through the group of actors and relatives accepting, graciously I think, their kudos and compliments for the play. It was really quite exciting, as I had never before been exposed to anything like this during my 40-year engineering career. I liked it. I liked the adulation. It was both flattering and addictive.

Just before I was about to leave the gathering, Kathleen Dowd came bounding up to me, paying me a nice compliment and thanking me for writing the play, and then in a very almost-innocent way she mentioned in passing, “Oh by the way, my aunt thinks you’re cute.” I thanked her for that compliment as well – I guess it was a compliment. I took it as a compliment and told her to tell her aunt I thought she was “cute” too. Then she mentioned who her aunt was – which I had suspected, having seen her on several cable news shows – and gave me her aunt’s Georgetown phone number and told me I should give her a call.

I left the university and headed back towards my hotel thinking this was a rather interesting turn of events: Ms. Dowd’s phone number scribbled down on a torn-off piece of the Playbill protruding out of my sports jacket breast pocket. I got back to my room at the hotel, sat on the bed, took out the piece of the Playbill with Mo’s phone number and wondered if I should call her that night or wait. I didn’t want to appear too eager, but she did “make the first move” I rationalized. Then I thought “Jesus Christ, I’m almost 60 years old and acting like some college freshman.” I immediately dialed the Georgetown phone number – she answered on the first ring.

She loved the play – thought it was great and wanted to help get it produced in the Washington D.C. area. She knew several people in the business and asked my permission to contact them. She was very professional during the course of the conversation, never indicating anything more than trying to get my play more visibility. So I was a bit disappointed and dismayed. I had conjured up this incredible romance with Maureen Dowd or at least the possibility of an incredible romance. But she was all business-like and enthused –not about me, per se– but about the play. So I thanked her for her interest and told her to contact whomever she wanted. I told her it was nice talking with her and was about to end the conversation when she said: “Oh, by the way, I’ll be in Cleveland next week giving a talk to your City Club. I’m scheduled to fly back to Washington late in the evening and thought we could have dinner before I go.” I accepted her invitation.

It was the week of Thanksgiving when Mo flew into Cleveland early Monday morning. She called me at 9 that morning apologizing that she had forgotten to formally invite me to the City Club Forum for her talk. I told her that I had already bought a ticket assuming that attendance at her talk was a requirement when I accepted her dinner invitation. She laughed politely and told me my assumption was right on the mark. I think we were both looking forward to meeting again.

One of the great assets the city of Cleveland, Ohio and its suburbs possess is the potential of unpredictable inclement weather in the month of November, especially around Thanksgiving. So when it began to snow that Monday morning, the weather people forecast bad lake-effect snow with the possibility of as much as two feet before the evening rush hour. By the time Maureen finished her City Club speech – which was hilarious, insightful, and most entertaining – it was four in the afternoon and the city and downtown traffic were a complete mess. Utter chaos. Cars stalled and stuck on all the main arteries into and out of the city. All flights into and out of the airport canceled. The airport would soon be closed, not scheduled to open until tomorrow. And best of all, the downtown hotels were getting booked by commuters who couldn’t get back to their suburban homes. I simply couldn’t have scripted a better or more opportune situation.

We had dinner at a downtown restaurant. The walk over to West 6th Street was a bear. Blowing wind, driving snow, frigid temperatures – she grabbed onto my arm as we

crossed over Euclid Avenue, not so much an overt friendly gesture, but rather just to be sure she wasn't blown over by the gusting winds. It was howling. As soon as we got into the restaurant, I suggested she start calling the local hotels to see if she could get a room for the night. One by one the hotels and motels were booked, and it wasn't yet 5 o'clock. As a last resort I suggested she could stay at my place and then I could take her to the airport early in the morning – she had already changed her plane reservation to Washington, D.C. She gave me a look like “we don't know each other well enough...” and thanked me for the offer but seemed assured she would find a place to stay that evening. I told her the offer was strictly honorable and without pre-conditions – and it was – but I got another facial expression that told me to drop it.

We lingered over our dinner for two hours. There really wasn't any place to go. She was having zero luck in finding a place to stay anywhere near the downtown area or near the airport. The restaurant was packed with other refugees who couldn't get back to their suburban retreat. I saw several people stare over at our table seemingly recognizing Maureen. She had been on several cable shows recently touting her new book about why men weren't necessary – my sister was reading it – but neither one of us talked about the book, her work, or her other accomplishments. I didn't bring them up and she seemed perfectly content not to bring them up during the course of our conversation.

I noticed that she was much prettier in person than on the cable shows. She wore very little makeup for her speech at the city club, and whatever she had on then was obliterated by Cleveland's notorious November weather. She looked much younger than her age. (Fifty-three, I checked her biography on the Internet.) After dessert someone came over to our table and introduced himself as an editor at the *Plain Dealer* – where her column appeared twice a week. This broke the ice a little bit and allowed me to ask her some questions pertaining to her work at the *New York Times*. She was very reluctant and even a bit shy about talking about her work and celebrity – almost embarrassed. This just made her even more attractive. Subconsciously, I was still trying to figure out how a schlaub like me was having dinner with Maureen Dowd.

It didn't appear there were any rooms at the inn available for Mo. By now the restaurant management was informed who was dining in their restaurant and the maitre d' came over to the table several times inquiring as to how everything was going and if he

could be of any assistance. He got to be a pain in the ass. She finally decided to use her celebrity status and asked if the restaurant could find a room at one of the downtown hotels. But by then they were all booked solid.

There didn't appear to be much choice, so she reluctantly accepted my offer to stay overnight at my condo in Cleveland Heights – which I assured her was only 5 miles from downtown and no more than 30 minutes from Hopkins International Airport. We left the restaurant around 8:30 and headed back towards the Terminal Tower where I had my car parked in the underground garage. The weather actually worsened. It was colder. It was blowing harder. And the visibility was almost zero. As we crossed back over Superior Avenue, a strong gust of wind damn near blew me over and did knock Maureen down on the ground. There wasn't any traffic to worry about, but she was drenched when she got up from the slush and salt that had been sprayed on the roads to melt the snow. She wasn't dressed or prepared for Cleveland's surprise November weather. She wasn't hurt, but we still had almost a half-mile to walk before we got to the car. She grabbed onto my arm for stability, but then, we both almost got blown away by another gust of wind. We just naturally embraced each other till we got near the protection of the Terminal Tower.

That was quite a first date with Maureen Dowd. She slept on my couch in an old sleeping bag. But first she removed her wet salt-laden clothes, showered and put on an old pair of my University of Pittsburgh sweat pants and a matching navy blue sweatshirt. Now she was really free of any makeup. She looked quite beautiful and I really had to try very hard not to act foolish or immature (Re: horny). She had to dry her hair with a towel and couldn't believe that I existed on this planet in the 21st century without an electric hair dryer. I assured her I did. She asked if she could get on my computer to check her email, which she did. I went to sleep, and fell asleep long before she quit using the computer. (Thank God.)

I made breakfast the next morning – Rocky Mountain toast – which she never knew existed and couldn't stop complimenting me about all the way out to the airport. On the ride back from Hopkins I thought about the last 24 hours. How easy it was to be with this woman I had, for all practical purposes, just met. Her behavior was so natural and unpretentious I didn't even think of her as this well-known, influential author and columnist. Just someone I wanted to get to know better. When I got back to my condo I

found an email from Mo that she must have sent from the airport. She commented on how pleasant a stay she had in Cleveland (it certainly couldn't have been the weather) and invited me to Washington anytime I could get there to pay me back for my hospitality.

Something was happening here, there was no doubt about that. Two kindred spirits? I wasn't sure what was going on. We were both old enough not to let infatuation cloud our sensibilities. Or were we? My engineering suspicion and general inquisitiveness began to creep into my thoughts. "What's wrong with this person? Something must be wrong. She's 53, bright, attractive, but still single. How could someone as attractive and talented and seemingly good natured as Maureen never have been married?" Of course I had the same profile as her –well maybe not as attractive or talented or good natured, and a little older – but I'd never been married either. She could be thinking those same thoughts about me.

That was almost 10 months ago. We had seen each other almost every weekend since last November. Maureen would either come to Cleveland or I would drive to Washington, D.C. She had a beautiful condo in Georgetown. The gossip columns hadn't really gotten wind of the relationship, and that was just fine with me and Mo. One report did mention Maureen Dowd was seen about town several times with the same "unidentified gentleman," who I assumed was me. My play was going to be produced and directed by a fellow associated with the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. But it would be performed at a well-known and well-respected Georgetown Theater. This was all due to Maureen's efforts. The first performance was scheduled around Christmas. Maureen never mentioned anything about the production to any of her New York, *New York Times* associates, and that was fine with me, although some rehearsals in Washington were attended by some New York critics. They mentioned, on several occasions, a potentially explosive new play premiering in Washington around Christmas. The mention of my name in the article brought several inquiries from both the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and the *Times*, but I respectfully declined any interviews until after the play came out. Occasionally my head would get a little swelled out of proportion after a brief

mention in the *Washington Post* or *New York Times*, but leave it to Maureen to bring me right back down to earth – quickly.

So that's really how it all began. I turned 60 that April and Maureen came into Cleveland to meet my sister and her kids, who were grown adults and it was then we discussed taking a trip together, which we hadn't done. Maureen was thinking of going to Europe for a week or two, but I suggested something more adventurous and daring – like driving out west together and spending a month or more traveling about like vagabonds –no real destination except to get to the Pacific Ocean. At first she thought the idea was crazy, and said she could never take that kind of time. But then I asked her if she ever read John Steinbeck's "Travels with Charlie," where at age 60 (no coincidence to my recent birthday) he took off with his French poodle, Charlie, to try and rediscover the land and people he had been writing so eloquently about for 40 years. I rationalized that Maureen in actuality wrote about America and Americans too, and was probably as unfamiliar with the rest of the country and its inhabitants as Steinbeck was. Her eyes began to perk up and she began to listen more intently.

The clincher was when I suggested she could get a book out of it, and probably still keep up with her twice-a-week column responsibilities. (God bless PC's and the Internet.) That was when she suggested I could likewise get a book out of the proposed venture and then everything began to take on a life of its own. The result being two books being simultaneous written as events occurred. One possibly titled "Travels with Maureen" (She nixed "Mo" instantly) and the other "Travels with Dave or David or Davy." I wasn't as sensitive or particular as Mo and didn't care which name she used.

The idea was intriguing. Two people set off on a cross-country trip and write independently about the same trip. The same circumstances. The same experiences. Both writing independent of the other, with no ability to examine on a daily basis what the other person wrote. Not even allowed to edit or read the other person's work, even the final manuscript. Separate editors for each author at the publisher, and even the editors couldn't see the other's work. The books would be marketed as a matched set. I wouldn't be able to read Maureen's book until it was actually published and came out in print. She would, of course, have the same restriction. I thought Maureen's concepts and

rules and regulations were brilliant. Now all she had to do was sell the idea to her publisher and her bosses at the *Times*.

She did and called me a month ago to tell me her publisher was ecstatic about the idea, but she had a little more trouble convincing her editors at the *Times*. She had just taken a sabbatical to write her recent book about why men aren't really necessary. (Oh yeah!) But she finally prevailed. We had several serious discussions (arguments?) about whose car we'd take and whether we'd take camping equipment and camp several days at a time. Maureen's idea of roughing it was bringing a sleeping bag into a weekend specially marked down room at the Waldorf. We each made separate lists of what we needed to take and compared them. This inspired other spirited discussions. But eventually we worked it all out. We thought we had it all neatly planned out and we pumped each other up every time we met or talked about the trip on the phone. And we did have it all well conceived and planned. All except the part about only knowing each other for barely 10 months, planning to spend 24 hours a day together for days, weeks, possibly months at a time. Living pretty much alone most of our adult lives. Doing as we pleased, when we pleased, most of our adult lives. I'm sure we both had private thoughts about these matters. But maybe that had been both our problems all these years: living like adults most of our adult lives.

2. “A word is dead when it is said...”

Maureen got out of her car looking splendid in a pair of designer jeans and a faded gray Catholic University tee shirt. She peered up at me staring down at her from my condominium kitchen window. She waved and smiled then turned around and opened the trunk of the car. She knew from my tone of voice on the telephone call from the turnpike that I wasn't happy about the delay and she was masterful at defusing any attempt that I might cop an attitude and turn moody or morose. Probably a technique she picked up as a reporter interviewing all those Washington politicians and an occasional movie star. She was incredibly insightful. Perhaps too insightful for her own good. I often joked that she should have joined the CIA. She would have made an incredible spy. She never found that observation amusing in the least. But I wasn't kidding when I said it. She was incredible at reading people and their intentions. She turned back from the open trunk, looked back up at me starring down at her, put her hands on her hips and gave me an: “Are you gonna stare at me all day or get your ass down here and help me get the luggage into your car?” look. I opened my garage door with the remote and went down to meet the lovely Maureen Dowd.

We embraced and I gave her a little peck on the lips. She backed me off to arm's length.

“Are you gonna hold it against me that I'm a little late. Or do I have to look at that facial expression all day?” She said, quite sternly.

“Well, aren't we in a cheerful mood?” I replied. “And I wouldn't call three hours ‘a little late.’”

“Dave, it's been a long ride and it started in the fog. I haven't eaten breakfast. Let's drop it. OK?”

“Fine,” I said. “I'll back my car out and we can load your luggage. But I suggest we get you something to eat pretty damn quick before you bite my head off.”

“OK, OK. I'm sorry,” she quickly answered, sympathetically. “It's been a long day already and I was nervous the whole ride knowing you'd be upset with my tardiness. And....”

I quickly interrupted her, “Mo, Mo it's no....”

She interrupted, “Dave, not Mo. Not now, please!”

“Maureen, its no big deal. I’m over it, see?” I smiled brightly showing my teeth and kissed her on the forehead. “C’mon, lets get something to eat. We’ll take your car.”

We got in Maureen’s car – she drove – and went to our favorite Cleveland breakfast haunt – Big Al’s Diner, just a couple miles from my condo.

(I can see writing this journal is going to be difficult. You see, one of the ground rules Maureen laid down was this: We would both write our stories simultaneously at the end of each day, or early the next morning. But that presents a problem with verb tense and first or third person and all kinds of stuff, like my 60-year-old memory. So I have to recall conversations as they happened even though I’m writing some of them after they happened. So I may switch verb tenses and first and third person. Maureen is probably much better at this than me, but I can’t consult with her once the trip started. So we’ll just have to see how this progresses.)

I would have thought pecan pancakes would have mellowed Maureen out a little bit – and me too. But almost as soon as we got back to my condo we started up again.

“Maureen, pull your car around and park near the garage and I’ll back out my car so we can transfer your bag. Then after we transfer your stuff you can park in my space in the garage.”

She spun the car in a U-turn to angle near the garage and almost threw me out of the car, but I refrained from making any comments about her driving skills. I could sense things were still a bit tender. So I wisely held my tongue. I got out of her car, started mine up and pulled along side her Camry. She opened her trunk again and I got out of my car to get her stuff from her trunk into mine. One look at the inside of her trunk and I guess the expression on my puss said it all. She had two of the biggest fucking suitcases I had ever seen - not to mention several smaller carry-on-type bags. It looked like she had packed for a year. She immediately caught my astounded facial expression.

“What? What? What’s the damn problem now?” She spun around and faced me directly.

I tried to be calm and collected and not provoke the situation any further. “Hey Maureen, seriously it looks like you packed enough here for several months.”

“Well, we’ll be gone for a couple months.”

“Well, yeah, but you don’t have to bring all that.” Then I made the mistake of getting sarcastic. “You have heard of Laundromats and coin laundries and dry cleaners, haven’t you?”

“You’ve got to be kidding me, Dave. We’re gonna take a vacation and do our own laundry. What the hell kind of vacation would that be?”

She had a point but I couldn’t let it rest.

“Ok, fine,” I said, showing great frustration then facing the trunk and holding my arms out, palms facing the sky. “Now would you mind telling me where the hell I put my stuff? The damn trunk is already packed with yours”

“Well where is your stuff? We’ll figure it out.”

“Luckily, I didn’t bring as much as you and it’s already in the back seat.”

She peered into the back seat and saw two small carry-on bags.

“That’s it! That’s everything you plan to wear for two months! You’re joking.” She started to laugh.

“No, no joking, that’s it. That’s all I need because I plan on doing my laundry when required.” I smugly responded.

“Fine, fine then, we got plenty of room still in the back seat.”

“Not that much after I put the tent and sleeping bag back there.”

“What tent? I thought we decided we wouldn’t camp out.”

“Now wait a minute, don’t start changing the ground rules now. We both decided that I would buy the tent and you’d give it a try.” I was pissed now.

“Ok, Ok calm down you’re right on this. I forgot I said I would try it, but just one night. And where’s my sleeping bag? I only see one in the garage.”

“That’s because there only is one bag – it’s a double bag. It sleeps two!” I winked at her.

She smiled, tilted her head down at a slight angle and looked back at me over the tops of her sunglasses.

“That reminds about something I wanted to discuss with you concerning exactly that.”

“Exactly what?” I played dumb.

“You know what I’m talking about”

“”Maureen be specific, will ya?”

“Sex, is that specific enough for you?”

“What about sex?”

“Look Dave, I don’t want to read about all the salacious details of our physical relationship and activities on this trip. These books were sold to my publisher as travel books. Get my point here?”

“Woa, woa, hold up her a minute Ms Dowd.” I was frustrated. “I thought we were both writing about our travel adventure out to the West Coast and whatever that entails. No preconditions. No discussions about what the other person writes. No editing. Remember? Everything kept secret until the actual book comes out. These were your rules. Not mine. Quite frankly I had no intention of turning this into a sex manual like I guess you’re intimating. But I have no idea what I will write about later this evening. ‘Salacious?’ That’s a good word. I hadn’t realized that our bedroom activities during this relation could be defined as ‘salacious.’”

“Look, Dave, all I’m saying is that some of our activities the next couple months should be off limits. I do have a reputation. I have a responsible position. I don’t think everything we do or say should necessarily find its way into one of our chapters.” She paused reflectively and continued. “Like this discussion we’re having right now. What are you gonna do, put this in the book too? Some of this trip has got to be private, Dave. I’m not eager to read a chapter in your book that details a sexual encounter in the bathtub of a Red Roof Inn. Get my point Mr. Cohen?”

I started to laugh hysterically.

“What’s so goddamn funny about that, Dave?”

I tried to suppress and respond through my laughter at the same time. “I’ll tell ya what’s so funny about that. First there isn’t a chance in Hell that you’d ever agree to stay in a Red Roof Inn, you’d rather camp in a tent. And second, it’s obvious you’ve never been near a room in a Red Roof Inn, cause if you ever saw a bathroom in a Red Roof Inn you’d know they’re so damn tiny a midget couldn’t even get a decent sitzbath in one of

their bathtubs. ‘Sexual encounter in the bathroom of a Red Roof Inn,’” I repeated under my breath, “give me a break.”

“Well if I can’t trust you to be responsible and prudent and careful about what you plan on putting in your book, I’ll just have to watch what I say the next couple of months.” And then as an afterthought she remarked, “And maybe we should hold off on the sex during the trip.”

“Oh that’s a great idea Maureen,” I shot back. “We’ll drive out to the West Coast and travel around for a couple of months – refrain from sex and keep the conversations to a minimum. Sounds like a splendid time. Sounds like a great idea for a Seinfeld show. Maybe we can hold a contest and see who can go the longest without ‘pleasuring ourselves.’”

We just finished transferring all her stuff into the trunk of my car and spun around to look at each other after my last sarcastic comment. We stared at each other for just a second and then we both let loose and started to laugh. The kind of laughter that eventually brings tears to the eyes. We suddenly realized how ridiculous we both had been sounding and we realized we were just releasing all our nervous tension that had been building, probably from the time we conceived the whole crazy venture. We embraced and she got in the car and I started it up and we headed west towards downtown Cleveland then Interstate 90 and eventually the Ohio Turnpike. But first Maureen had to stop at a McDonald’s for her twice daily fix – a large diet Coke.

(It’s presently 11 at night and we’re ensconced in our motel room. Maureen is at the desk typing away and laughing, at times hilariously. But every time I ask her what’s so damn funny, she reminds me about the rules of the trip. I have my laptop on the bed with me and I start laughing at nothing in particular, but just to see if I can annoy her. It’s not working. She refuses to take the bait.)

When we crossed into Indiana, I got tired and Maureen took over the driving. We stopped for a quick bite at one of the rest stops. Chicago was our destination. I started to doze off and must have started snoring because Maureen woke me and asked where we should stop for the evening. We would avoid the Chicago traffic and take the by-pass

around the city. I told her to stop anywhere she wanted. Neither one of us wanted to drive at night so around dusk, Maureen pulled off the Interstate just west of Chicago, so we wouldn't have any morning traffic problems. I had fallen sound asleep. It was about 9:30 in the evening. I awoke suddenly when she stooped the car and turned the engine off. We were parked in the motel parking lot. It was a Red Roof Inn. Just like in her column, when she gets sassy and irreverent, she couldn't resist sticking it to me. And yes, the bathroom and bathtub were exceedingly small, preventing any attempt at acting out any discussions we had had that afternoon. It's been quite a day. Good night Maureen!

3. “To make a prairie it takes a bee...”

It is 8 in the morning and I’m already at the PC typing away. Mo is in the bathroom getting ready for the day. I’ve finished with all my bathroom chores. It usually works that way with me and Mo. Since we’ve been together, going on 11 months now, living together for most of those weekends – either in Cleveland or at her place in Georgetown – we find ourselves with very similar biological clocks, in terms of our sleeping and waking habits. We haven’t tested this for more than a long weekend, so it will be interesting to see how compatible we are after a week or two of this. The initial jitters – if you want to call them that – seem to have passed and we are both excited to get on the road today. We have no destination in mind, nor do we even know how we’ll get there. We both decided that the Interstate highways would suffice till we crossed the Mississippi, but after that we want to take those “roads less traveled by” as the Frost poem goes. I’m studying the maps right now and it looks like we have a few hours on the road to get to the Mississippi River on Interstate 80. We should cross over near Moline, Illinois and Davenport, Iowa. After that we have a stop in Iowa City where Maureen wants to visit a friend who teaches at the well-known and well-respected Writers Workshop at the University of Iowa in Iowa City. Last night we had the maps out and discussed the possibility of heading north to Minnesota and then through South Dakota so we could see Mount Rushmore, but we may just forge ahead due west into Nebraska.

I can hear Maureen on the phone in the bathroom. This is her private phone time. She turns her cell phone off when we start for the day. Mine is off too, but with my phone it wouldn’t really matter that much. If Maureen left hers on, it would ring incessantly. I never asked her to turn it off though. This is something Mo just did almost from the first weekend we spent together.

I’m almost at the point in this relationship where I can forget about Maureen Dowd the well-known, influential, celebrity, *New York Times*, columnist – almost. But early in the relationship her constantly ringing cell phone was a constant reminder of just who this woman was I was dating. “Hello Senator,” or “Goodbye Congressman,” or “Yes Mr. Secretary,” or “I’ll get back to you Madam Secretary,” were constant reminders every time she was on her cell phone. Not to mention, whenever we went out to eat at even a

quasi-trendy restaurant in the D.C. area, every journalist, TV personality, congressman or senator would stop by the table to say hi or even worse, chat for several minutes. It was easy to develop an inferiority complex. I guess I must have withdrawn after several of these occurrences. And Maureen, being the perceptive person she is, saw me withdraw into this shell, which without trying to be too obvious, she would pull me out of by starting to talk about my play and where it was in the rehearsal process. I never had to ask her to turn off the phone when we went out. Distracting as it was, I never would have had the guts to do that. Being on the phone, talking to important people was part and parcel of this woman's job. But I never had to. Maureen just kept it off one time and that was it.

We also started going to restaurants that were out of the way, frequented by "ordinary" people – like me. But in D.C., Maureen was still often recognized. It took a while, but eventually I got used to her celebrity status – I think. I was curious and gave it some thought as to how she would handle all her cell phone activity on our little adventure. Evidently she would use the morning bathroom routine to catch up on important communication. She switched her cell phone off as soon as she came out – looking great as usual and ready for our first full day of driving. We had breakfast across the road from the Red Roof Inn at a local diner and we were on the road before 9. I drove.

Lots of corn in Illinois. On both sides of Interstate 80 – that's all you could see – corn. Not acres and acres of corn, but miles and miles. I doubted the scenery would improve in Iowa when we crossed the Mississippi. Isn't Iowa known for its corn, even more than Illinois, if that's possible? I'm surprised the turnpike commission doesn't allow the farmers to plant rows of corn in the narrow median strip between east and west Interstate lanes. But at least it was a beautiful day. The sky was a deep blue and the few clouds that appeared on the horizon were the high thin ones. Cirrus, as I recall from a geography course at Pitt. Maureen confirmed that. In a couple of hours we were on the bridge crossing the mighty Mississippi.

As we crossed the river – which wasn't as wide as I thought it might be – I looked over at Maureen and thought, "now the trip really begins." It was a feeling I'm sure those original settlers of the West felt as they crossed the mighty river before they hit the major trails leading through the vast stretches of prairie to the Rocky Mountains and the

West. I wondered aloud, “how the hell did they ever get those Conestoga covered wagons across the river?” Maureen guessed they crossed the river by boat and usually built the wagons from scratch on the western side. Saint Louis was a jumping off point, and here was where they probably built those covered wagons for the western journey. That made a lot more sense. We were in Iowa now, but the scenery hadn’t changed – corn, corn and more corn. To make a prairie it takes a hell of a lot more than a clover and a bee – and one has a hell of a lot of time for reverie. Occasionally we’d see other crops like soybeans.

In a little more than an hour we were pulling off the Interstate and driving through Iowa City and almost immediately we were on the campus of the University of Iowa. The Iowa River runs right through the heart of the campus, with dormitories and classroom buildings lining its banks. It’s really quite a beautiful setting, almost pastoral. There must have been quite a bit of rain in the area, because the river was raging through the campus – flooding some of the low-lying banks. We walked around the campus; Maureen had her arm tucked inside of mine. It felt right. It reminded me of when I was back in college. It felt quite natural. It felt good.

We asked directions for the famous writers’ workshop so we could meet Maureen’s friend Erin – that’s what she called her on the phone when we got off the Interstate. But Erin, turned out to be – Aaron, not a “her” but a 40-something very distinguished very handsome looking HIM. They embraced upon meeting as I stood there like the third man out.

Aaron took us for lunch to the University Club, a fancy club for professors and the like and we parted company and got back on the road by noon. I was pretty quiet during lunch and Mo berated me later for not being very sociable and friendly to Aaron. But all I wanted to know was who the hell this Aaron character really was and did he and Mo have a romantic relation. I thought of asking her outright, but neither one of us had opened up about our past relationships – which I thought was unusual having been together as long as we had. But I never broached the subject, nor did Maureen. We stopped at a local grocery store before we left Iowa City and bought some fruit for the afternoon ride to a destination we still hadn’t decided upon. But I was still driving and just headed north towards Minnesota on Interstate 380.

We sped past Cedar Rapids and Waterloo. Then I decided to get off the Interstate and follow some of the two-lane roads, thinking it would be infinitely more interesting, which it was. We drove through all kinds of little towns and farming communities which generally consisted of a crossroad, several grain silos, a railroad siding and a Redwing shoe store. We stopped for gas in a charming little town called Waverly. Maureen had been dozing off since we left Iowa City, but she perked up when I stopped for gas in Waverly.

“Where the hell are we?” She inquired in a somewhat confused state.

“The wonderful city of Waverly, Iowa,” I enthusiastically replied. “Beautiful isn’t it?”

“Charming, why are we stopping here?”

“It’s called a gas stop, Mo.”

“Why are we going North?” She asked looking at the road atlas – the two-page spread of Iowa resting on her lap.

“I just decided to head north to Minnesota and then head over to South Dakota to catch Mount Rushmore. Is that OK?” I was annoyed and she could sense that.

“Fine. Anything to leave the beautiful state of Iowa and all these damn corn fields.”

It’s not like Maureen Dowd had never been to Iowa. Maureen Dowd had been to Iowa more times than she could count, but that was always to cover a political primary. She’d fly in and fly out. Never saw the state like she was seeing it today.

“You haven’t seen all that much, Mo. You’ve been asleep since Iowa City.”

“Thank God for that!”

The general tenor of the conversation was slowly heating up and I didn’t help the situation.

“It’s really kind of charming.” I replied. “It kind of grows on you – all the corn and soy and barley fields. You should try and stay awake. You haven’t been very talkative. I’m feeling like a bit of a chauffeur. You sure seemed talkative during lunch. Maybe if Aaron was in the car you’d find the conversation more to your liking...”

“Ok. So that’s it. I knew there was something eating at you.” She shot back before I could utter another word. But the friction didn’t last long. Maureen quickly sized up the situation and told me to relax, Aaron was an old friend from her Catholic University

days. And besides, he was “quite gay.” “Not that there’s anything wrong with that,” she quickly remarked, referring to the famous line in a Seinfeld episode. (We were both addicted to Seinfeld reruns.)

That sure eased the tension, but we both knew before we got back in that car and headed towards the Minnesota border that we were both getting close to discussing our past romantic relationships. I was all for it. Mo still seemed a bit reluctant.

On the way out of town I spotted a Redwing shoe store. Redwing makes work and sports shoes and boots. They’re made in Minnesota. They have a tremendous reputation for craftsmanship, and I had purchased a pair many years ago, coincidentally, when I was working in Minnesota on a sugar beet plant start-up. I thought we would be doing a good bit of hiking and walking on this trip and convinced Maureen that we should stop and each purchase a comfortable pair of hiking boots. We pulled up in front of the store, parked and browsed around. We were the only customers, and the salesman was the quintessential, cordial, low-key Midwesterner. We started to gently needle each other as we were often prone to do. Nothing mean or vicious, just playful commentary and digs.

“You better get some good boots in case a rattler gets into our tent,” I said.

“If a rattler gets into YOUR tent, you’ll need more than boots,” she quickly answered.

It was impossible to beat Maureen Dowd at this game. This was how she made her living, so I took out my handkerchief and waved it in surrender. This seemed to amuse our sales clerk and finally he commented, “Your wife is very funny, she should write a column in a newspaper.” This of course surprised us both. First that he would call Maureen my wife. And then that he should be so perceptive as to recognize her infinite talents so quickly.

“Actually,” I said, somewhat startled by his perceptive observation, “she does write a column for a newspaper.”

“Yes, I know. I thought I recognized you when you came into the store. You’re Maureen Dowd, aren’t you?” He said. “I just saw you on C-Span. My wife is reading your new book about why we aren’t necessary.”

We spent 20 minutes in the store conversing with the salesman. It was a delightful time. Maureen offered to sign his wife’s book if he sent it to her Washington D.C. office, but instead he called her on the phone and within three minutes she was in the store with

the book. Waverly, Iowa is a pretty small town. We had a delightful chat with the Halls. Midwestern folk really are down to earth and unaffected, but it was already 2 in the afternoon so we excused ourselves, took our new hiking boots, threw them in the trunk, and left the lovely town of Waverly. Maureen was smiling brightly; so was I. Charlie Hall and his lovely wife Beverly, the proprietors of the Redwing shoe store, were part and parcel of why we were taking this venture out west. It was obvious Maureen Dowd would never be able to hide her persona or popularity on this trip. Thanks to cable TV. Even in Waverly, Iowa. So I had better get used to it. (Actually I was quite proud when Charlie Hall recognized Maureen.)

“Did you notice that both Charlie and his wife kept referring to me as your wife and you as my husband?” Maureen commented matter-of-factly as we pulled away from the store.

“I hadn’t really noticed,” I lied.

“Yeah, right!” Mo shot back. “Now let’s find a Mickey D’s. I need my diet Coke.”

We headed north on U.S. 218 and wove our way to the Minnesota border, going through one small farming community after another. Maureen took the driving responsibilities when we made a pit stop for coffee in Austin, Minnesota. It was getting very hot out on the plains. The temperature on the car thermometer was 94. I remembered when I was last in Minnesota starting up that sugar beet facility that the weather in August in Minnesota is as hot and uncomfortable as it is cold and uncomfortable in December. We continued on through the farm country of Minnesota. If we thought we’d be leaving the miles of cornfields behind in Iowa, we were sadly mistaken. It looked like Minnesota may have been more prosperous in corn than Iowa – if that was even possible. The farms appeared endless – not like the farms in Ohio. I remembered from those sugar beet days, farmers talked in the thousands of acres not hundreds. There were very few trees, except the few that were clustered around each farmhouse – for protection from the wind we were told later. Some of the land had signs that advertised they were growing crops for the Jolly Green Giant. These farms were very prosperous and the land was some of the most fertile in the world. Black, rich earth – it almost looked as rich as fresh coffee grinds – the top soil reaching to depths of 4 to 5 feet, precluding in some cases the need to even rotate crops. I guess I’m sounding like a

knowledgeable farmer, but all this info came from people we talked to when we stopped for gas or stopped when nature called. (I had a slight prostate problem – BHP it’s called)

Maureen wanted to know where we should stop for the evening. Looking at the two-page spread of Minnesota, (seems as though as soon as we crossed the Mississippi River, every map in the atlas required a full two-page spread, prompting Maureen to comment, “Boy these states west of the Mississippi are long-ass states.”) I decided to make our next stop in Renville, where, in fact, I had spent 6 months back in the 70s starting up that sugar beet facility. I knew they actually had a decent motel and a restaurant we frequented called The Sheep Shedde.

We continued to weave a circuitous path through southern Minnesota, passing through the towns of Mankato and New Ulm. New Ulm was located right on the Minnesota River, and the topography turned hilly and picturesque, as opposed to the flat prairie of southern Minnesota and northern Iowa we drove through most of the day. My impression of Minnesota was that it was populated with Scandinavians, mostly Swedes. But New Ulm was definitely a heavily populated little German enclave. Lots of storefronts and restaurants with Germanic names. It was such a charming little town we decided to stop and just walk around a bit. And best of all. There was a McDonald’s in New Ulm. We were tempted to eat dinner and stay in New Ulm, but I convinced Maureen we should stop in Olivia, where the Sheep Shedde was located. It was no more than an hour’s drive. And this late in the summer, we could easily drive to 8 or 9 at night before the skies would darken and dusk would set in.

The best part about traveling around like vagabonds with no real destination, nor a need to specify one, is that you’re never late – for anything or anyone. It was difficult that first day for Maureen to get used to that concept, what with deadlines for her twice-weekly column always staring her in the face. Me too for that matter. The engineering and construction profession would never be described as “laid back.” But we were both getting acclimated to it pretty quickly. We pulled up to the Sheep Shedde and Best Western Inn about 8 in the evening. Maureen seemed a bit perplexed, expecting Olivia, Minnesota to look like New Ulm. But it didn’t. Nothing at all quaint about Olivia. But the motel was clean and the restaurant was damn good – just as I remembered it from 30 years ago. We both had Walleye. In Minnesota farm country, that’s what you eat –

Walleye. It's got to be the state fish in Minnesota. If it's not –it should be! We both had it broiled, but in Minnesota you can get your Walleye fried, steamed, stewed, broiled, and every permutation and combination of the aforementioned cooking techniques.

4. “That it will never come again...”

(It is already 11 in the evening. I am sitting at the room’s small desk writing in my PC. Maureen’s in the shower attempting to sing one of the Paul Simon songs on one of the many CD’s we brought along for the trip. Tone-deaf does not quite describe this woman’s ability, or lack thereof, to sing. What’s that joke about the tone-deaf singer who somehow manages to find a musical key that lies somewhere between the spaces on the keys of a piano. That’s pretty much Mo’s singing prowess. But nothing can stop this woman in the shower.)

I have already rehashed most of today’s happenings. It has just dawned on me as I re-read some of my musings, that Maureen is likewise, or will be, writing about today’s activities. She will probably describe me and my almost perfect behavior, as not being as perfect as I see it. We almost never see ourselves exactly as others see us. Don’t believe a word of Mo’s description of today’s events or any negative comments pertaining to my exemplary behavior.)

Mo came out of the shower. I was still typing away and made the mistake of leaving the TV on. I wasn’t paying any attention to the program, and unfortunately I had the Fox News channel on and Bill O’Reilly was blabbering away on the rerun of his earlier show. My back was to Maureen when she came into the room so I couldn’t see her.

“Why the hell do you have that asshole on the TV?” She exclaimed.

I turned around to answer her and completely broke down laughing. I meant to tell her I had no idea what station was on, but one look at her bizarre outfit and I completely lost my train of thought. Mo was wearing a tee shirt (no bra) and panties, and she had put on her new pair of Redwing hiking boots – which came half way up her slender ankles. With her reddish-cast hair still wet, she looked like a dominatrix ready to hike in the Tetons.

I answered her through my laughter. “Mo I wasn’t even paying attention to the TV. When I turned it on, the Fox News channel came on. What’s with the outfit Mo? Are we

planning on that bathtub routine tonight? And since when did you start using that language. It's a good thing your mom isn't hear to witness that."

Maureen Dowd almost never used profane language. At least in the 11 months I've known her. She may have been a liberated woman, but the tentacles of her strong Catholic upbringing reached far and deep into her psyche. Catholic schools straight through high school. Then college at Catholic University. And a mother, who recently passed away, who attended Mass every day. (Maureen was still having difficulty getting over her mom's passing, not quite two years ago. She was extremely close to her mother, whom she called daily, no matter where she was in the world.)

"Well I make an exception for assholes like O'Reilly. And please don't bring my mom into this. I'm sure she would understand. And now you can forget about any bathroom antics tonight, pal."

I got up off the chair and turned around to face Mo. I was likewise in my underwear, but no Redwing boots. I walked over in front of her, put my arms around her waist and drew her near. "Fuck Bill O'Reilly!" I said. And forced her back as we both fell back on the king size bed.

We managed to turn off the only light in the room, which was on the wall over the bed, but left the TV on. This cast an eerie light, partially illuminating the darkened room. Bill O'Reilly was still blabbering his stupid-ass sign-off when we finished making love. Maureen flipped off the TV and snuggled closer. This seemed like the proper moment to initiate talk about our past relationships and I just started blurting out about an old flame.

Now I promised Maureen I wouldn't divulge the specifics of our 3 hours of conversation last night. But we both opened up like we hadn't done before concerning all sorts of topics, including past love affairs. I expected we would have done this before we returned to Washington, D.C. But quite honestly I didn't think it would happen this early in the trip. I'm glad it did, though. Here is all I will divulge about those conversations and I will make it brief. I don't think I'm breaking the promise made to Maureen.

I don't think it requires 25 years of analysis or an analyst with 25 years of psychoanalytic experience to figure this one out. Folks like me and Maureen (or more correctly Maureen and I, she hates when I talk or write that way!) - 50 and older who

never married – but otherwise appear perfectly “normal,” stayed single because, consciously or subconsciously, we wanted to. Even though we may have secretly desired to find that special someone and settle down with a family – you know, like “normal” folks. You could trace our problem - if you want to call it that - and others like us, to a singular romantic experience that didn’t work out. In our case and I would guess most of the other single 50-plus-year-olds, the romance took place in our early 20s. That early beautiful experience turned into a painful experience, and who wants to go through a painful experience again? (and again and again...) So we never did.

Now I know some people reading this who are single are saying this guy’s full of shit. “Some people just don’t really want to get married, period.” And I’m sure in some cases that’s perfectly true. But I never honestly felt that way, and I doubt Maureen did either. So that’s it. You can fill in any missing parts of this story easily enough. But in the final analysis, I think Maureen and I would agree with Tennyson. You know: “Better to have loved and lost than...”

It’s now 7:30 of the third morning of this venture. I’ve been up since 5 writing on my PC. Maureen was sound asleep but she’s just now starting to rustle around in bed. She’s up now and headed for the bathroom with her cell phone. She just kissed me on top of my head and told me my breath stinks –“go brush your teeth!” I am carefully turning the TV on for the morning news and weather, making sure the Fox News channel doesn’t appear. Mo’s in the bathroom jabbering away like there’s no tomorrow. And now I hear her turn on the shower.

“Hey Mo, are you taking another shower, you just took one last night?” I hollered over the din of the shower and the TV.

“Yeah, but I always take one in the morning,” She hollered back. “And besides I feel especially dirty since you left that O’Reilly asshole on through our lovemaking last night. Boy that sure was a brilliant move Dave.”

“Well it didn’t seem to inhibit your performance much.” I smiled to myself. “He may have even enhanced it a notch.”

“OK Davy baby, knock that talk off.”

I heard her enter the shower and pull the shower curtain. I undressed and quietly entered the bathroom, quickly turned off the light and got in the shower and embraced the lovely Ms Dowd. (I can go no further with any descriptive narrative based on a promise I made last night. But for all you 20, 30 and 40-year-olds who may have a misconception about the quality of sex after 50, or 60 for that matter – let me assure you being in a shower with that someone special hasn't lost a thing, PERIOD!!)

Well it was fun washing the remnants of that asshole O'Reilly away. I may just “accidentally” turn on Fox every night! I have elected to drive the first leg this morning. We decided to head towards Mount Rushmore today, unless something else tickles our fancy. We paid the motel bill and we're on our way to the nearest grocery store to load up on grapes and fruit. By the way, for those interested, we're splitting the cost of this trip right down the middle. We pay for our motel bill giving the desk clerk both our credit cards. He charges half the bill to each. For dinner we get separate checks. Gasoline is handled a little differently. Back in Cleveland we both contributed 200 bucks apiece to a gas kitty and pay for the fill-ups from the kitty. If and when the kitty runs dry we will put in another couple hundred bucks.

I left the parking lot of the Sheep Shedde and turned left onto U.S. highway 212. Just a few miles down the road I could see the massive Renville sugar beet plant I helped start up back in 1975. It looked just about the same from a mile away, but as we got closer I noticed the tank farm was expanded along with the huge 60-foot sugar storage silos. The outline of the main processing facility and massive boiler plant were exactly as I remembered them. The plant was located right out in the middle of huge corn and sugar beet fields, but a lot of ancillary industries had sprung up on some of the farmland. I spent 6 months on that startup. I wanted to stop in and see if any of the original operators – some of whom I'd trained – were still working there. Maureen wasn't ecstatic about stopping, but she could see I was rather enthused about it, so she didn't put up much of a fuss when I turned right off the two-lane highway onto the feeder road to the plant.

I pulled up and parked in one of the visitor-designated spaces and we walked into the reception area. We both were breaking in our new Redwing boots, so we looked like we

fit in – so to speak. I explained my situation to the receptionist – a tall attractive natural blond, the typical type of Minnesota farm girl that we chased in the evening after a hectic 16-hour day at the startup of the plant. Swedish lineage I was quite sure. She said they had scheduled tours during the operating season, but this being August, they were doing maintenance getting the facility ready for the fall harvest of the sugar beets. Just then a strapping older gentleman who looked vaguely familiar came through the door. He seemed to recognize me too. The receptionist mentioned my name and that I had worked at the plant back in '75. That's when the fellow quizzically inquired. "Dave? Dave Cohen?"

"Yes, that's me," I responded somewhat hesitantly. I hadn't recognized him.

"Ted – Ted Swenson." He stuck out his hand and then withdrew it and put his arms around me. Which completely threw me for a loop. "You trained me on the front end of the plant by the beet flume."

"Oh sure Ted. I remember you now. You're the guy that damn near drowned in the flume when we started up." Ted was maybe four or five years my junior. "What are you doing now Ted?" I asked.

"Well Dave, believe it or not. I'm the plant manager." He smiled at Maureen, whom I still hadn't introduced but was just about to, when he looked at her and said, "Your husband was a big reason why we got this damn plant started up in time." He paused briefly for dramatic effect. "Once he stopped chasing some of Renville's prettiest daughters at the Sheep Shedde."

I still forgot to introduce Maureen and asked about the one girl he was making reference to. "You remember all that Ted? Boy that one operator was sharp as hell, Barbara, Barbara, what was her name?"

"Barbara Olson," Ted said

"Geez, that's right. Is she still around here in Renville, Ted. I often wondered what became of her. We had something going there for a while." I still hadn't introduced Maureen as she was taking all this in.

"I hope she's around here Dave, I married her." Ted smiled at Maureen

There wasn't much I could say after that so I quickly introduced Maureen, whom Ted immediately recognized from the last name.

We got the quick half-hour tour of the facility. Ted poured on that Midwestern charm for Maureen. She had this big wide Cheshire cat grin on her puss the entire tour. I thought I saw her next column forming behind that devious smile and those sparkling green eyes – talking to Ted privately as I was talking to one of the operators who also worked back in 1975 and recognized me.

We came back to the reception area and parted company with Ted Swenson. As soon as we got back in the car and headed west, back on highway U.S. 212, Maureen started up.

“Hey Davy, baby. I don’t remember any talk last night about a fling at the old sugar beet plant with Barbara Olson.”

“Yeah, well I am 60, I must have forgotten that one.”

That morning, studying the map of Minnesota and South Dakota, I decided to take Highway 212 to the South Dakota border. It was about 75 miles, and the two-lane road was in excellent condition. It just didn’t make any sense to go back south to Interstate 90 even though I-90 went straight to Rapid City and Mount Rushmore. Besides, U.S. 212 looked infinitely more interesting. So we headed west towards the border and the town of Watertown, South Dakota, about 100 miles from Renville.

As one drives across the prairie and farmland of the breadbasket of the country, you can’t help but be amazed at the amount of crops that seem to be produced by such a small segment of the population. It doesn’t seem to take a lot of people to feed 300 million Americans and parts of the rest of the world. As you travel west, the farms seem to get bigger. As we approached South Dakota it appeared most of the land was planted with wheat. I thought of that famous saying by Winston Churchill during the Battle of Britain: “Never have so many owed so much to so few,” referring to the pilots in the RAF who basically saved the island country when the British were fighting the Nazis alone. You could easily make the same statement about the farmers in this region of America.

The land is so flat in this part of the country that you can see for miles, almost like being on a large endless body of water. There is literally almost no undulation in the topology. Even when you cross a creek or a good sized river. Unlike back east where you start to go down into a valley whenever you cross a creek or river. Out in the plains

you barely change elevation. It's quite weird, actually. Maybe that's why when they have a flood in the prairie, thousands of acres become flooded. There are no natural hills and valleys to contain the flood waters so they just spread out all over hell and gone. Vast endless fields of corn and wheat and sugar beets – and skies with cloud formations that seem to appear more grandiose than back east. Nothing to obstruct this endless infinite view of fields meeting sky – no hills, no trees, no structures to block any line of sight. It possesses a charm all its own. The summers can be brutal. The winters downright harsh. And the temperamental, finicky weather determines their very existence, their livelihood. But the people on these prairies seem to take it all in stride. They must be a sturdy bunch.

The skies were beginning to cloud up. Maureen noticed in the distance that it was getting ominously dark just west of us. I noticed the temperature had dropped considerably and I turned the air conditioning off and opened the windows. This was mid-August in the plains. This was tornado weather. And the western sky was getting darker and more threatening by the minute. I stopped the car and pulled off to the side of the road near a farmhouse, where the family was outside watching the sky darkening, just like us. I didn't feel it was safe to just continue to drive west, and Maureen was tense. The air was still and the sky overhead was turning gray, but not as black as the sky just off in the distance. Then in a matter of minutes, the sky turned from gray to yellow to orange. It began to rain softly then more forcefully and then it just started to hail. The wind was picking up, and then in the distance – maybe ten miles west, it was difficult to tell – you could see what looked like the formation of a dark black funnel cloud. “My God,” I thought and uttered to Maureen, “That looks like a goddamn tornado forming.” Just then the family on the porch of the white 100-year-old farmhouse hollered out to us and motioned for us to come on up to their house. We quickly got in the car and drove the several hundred yards up to their front porch. The old wooden porch spanned the entire width of the house.

We quickly made the proper introductions and the elderly farmer told us that if that funnel cloud starts to move towards us we'll have to go down in their tornado bunker.

Maureen was holding my hand in a death grip. Who the hell anticipated running into a tornado on this trip? Certainly not us.

We watched the funnel cloud, which was a perfectly formed vortex now, move in a northern direction and to our amazement, just slowly break apart and disintegrate, and then like magic reform as it continued its northern path. The rains came and went. The sky began to lighten. And within another 15 minutes the sun was out and it was warming back up. We thanked the family for their protection and left for South Dakota. It was a strange moment indeed – but a somber one. What if we had left the sugar beet plant a half-hour sooner? We would have been directly in the path of that storm according to the farmer, who indeed seemed to be experienced at reading this type of weather from the vantage of his wooden porch. And sure enough, just about 25 minutes west on U.S. 212 we saw the swath cut by the tornado when it hit the ground. On both sides of the road the cornfield was simply flattened. Totally demolished! Obliterated! It looked like someone was trying to put a north south road through the cornfield and bulldozed a swath through the corn. The path of the twister was several hundred yards wide, but we couldn't tell how far on both sides of the road the destruction went, but it certainly was complete. Luckily there weren't any structures in the tornado's path – like a farmhouse or a 2005, gray, Chevy Malibu LT. It was a sobering reminder of just how lucky we really were. We were both pretty quiet till we hit the border.

The sign welcoming the weary traveler to the state of South Dakota was a welcome sight indeed, wheat fields and all. Maureen and I were still a bit tense from the storm, but as we approached the village of Watertown, Maureen screamed out in absolute joy, like a parched nomad suddenly coming upon an oasis in a desert: “There's a Mickey D's!” Sure enough there were the welcoming golden arches. Diet Coke to the rescue.

We decided to lunch at McDonald's, although we usually tried to avoid eating at a franchised fast food restaurant. Not because they were bad – though we both agreed most were – but rather to sample the local fare whenever we could. It was infinitely better in all sorts of ways, not just usually fresher food and milk shakes made the old fashioned way. It was also easier to start up a conversation in a local eatery, and this was Maureen's specialty – the reporter instinctively took over. And she was so good and natural at this. I was much more reserved and shy – Maureen called it non-sociable

behavior – and she well may have analyzed it correctly. So she would always break the ice. But in Watertown, Iowa, we found it more convenient to chow down at the Mickey D's.

We went back to the car and Mo felt like driving and that was fine with me. We ate some of the grapes we purchased that morning from a small grocery store in Olivia. I looked over the map of South Dakota and thought we should stay on U.S. 212, which paralleled Interstate 90, but about 60 miles to the north. Eventually we would have to get down to I-90 before we visited Mount Rushmore and made our evening stay in Rapid City. But we could easily take 212 about halfway across the state, head south on U.S. 83, then on to Pierre, the state capital. From Pierre, it was another 30 miles south to I-90, then maybe a couple more hours to Mount Rushmore and Rapid City. We should get into Rapid City around 5 or 6 in the evening, depending on how much time we spent wandering the Badlands National Park and Mount Rushmore.

It was just after two in the afternoon when we hit the outskirts of Pierre, South Dakota. Maureen headed straight for the first golden arches she spotted and got her Diet Coke fix. Pierre is quite a lovely town and has a western feel about it. Lots of people strolling about with cowboy hats and boots to match. Pierre sits on the banks of the Missouri River. This is one long-ass river. The river has its headwaters somewhere in Montana. I followed it back through the atlas. It empties into the Mississippi just above Saint Louis. It may be longer than the Mississippi; I'll have to check that out. We didn't stay in Pierre long, as Maureen was charged back up with her caffeine fix and headed south on U.S. 83 towards I-90. The terrain was beginning to get hilly, especially near the Missouri. And once we got on I-90 we noticed a continuing change in elevation as we headed west towards Wyoming and what the cartographers call the Colorado Plateau – an elevated plain that stretches from north to south across the U.S. Most of us are familiar with cities like Denver that sit on the Plateau at an elevation of 5,000 feet. (The mile high city.)

I'm repeating all this to Maureen as she drives west towards the Badlands National Park to demonstrate to her my absolute and comprehensive geographical knowledge of the area, but she doesn't seem to be impressed in the least. We're coming up on an exit

advertising the Badlands National Park, and after a tour through the Badlands we're off to Mount Rushmore.

The Badlands are one unusual geographical formation. I think they acquired that name because – well because you couldn't grow any crops on this land. It's "bad land" – very bad land for growing anything worthwhile. Covered with geological rock formations and outcroppings, it is strange looking indeed, like something you might find in a Spielberg movie created by computer graphics.

It's 10 o'clock at night and I'm diligently getting down the day's events. Mount Rushmore was disappointing. Somehow I got the notion that we would get to see the huge sculpture carved into the side of a 1,000 foot granite cliff, miles from the site, but you drive into the park and get the first view just several hundred yards from the cliff. Then, it's just not that impressive. It's not a natural wonder it's manmade, so maybe that's why I wasn't awestruck by the four presidents carved on the side of a wall of granite. Maureen agreed with me, so we spent maybe 20 minutes at Mount Rushmore and took off for Rapid City.

This part of South Dakota is a very popular spot for tourists, and August is the last month for families to get their travel in before school starts. So every hotel and motel had a "No Vacancy" sign up. We wound up in a \$300 a night suite at the Holiday Inn Rapid City Rushmore Plaza, in downtown Rapid City. It was not a "suite" and sure as hell wasn't worth 300 bucks. But it was the only room available, and we were pretty tired and weary, and we hadn't really purged from our collective memories either the sight of that black funnel cloud or the path of destruction it had sewn through some nondescript cornfield in western Minnesota. I almost suggested we try to camp that night, but I thought better of it and figured our first attempt at camping should be in a more dramatic location like Yellowstone or the Grand Tetons. "Good night Mo."

5. “Our Lives are Swiss...”

I’m up. It’s 10 to 5 in the morning. And I am genuinely excited this morning. I know we’ll be driving into the “real” mountains, the Rocky Mountains, today. I think anyone journeying to the West Coast from the east anticipates most the sight of the great Rocky Mountains. That’s why I think most people who make the trek out west try to hurry through those long-ass prairie states. Zipping through them on one of the main east-west Interstate highways – I-80 or I-90 or I-70 or I-40 – getting up on that 5,000 foot Colorado Plateau as fast as they can. I’m glad we didn’t do that. The great American Prairie definitely has a charm all its own and I would highly recommend getting off those Interstates and mingling with the land and the people that fill those vast supermarket chains back home. (Try and check the weather first though. A black funnel cloud may look interesting on the Weather Channel, but it’s damn scary when it’s a few miles up the road!)

Mo is sound asleep. She seems to find it easier to sleep deeper into the morning on this trip. If I keep pretty still, I’ll bet she makes it to 6 o’clock. Although I think there is a reason Maureen is still sound asleep this morning. We had our first real tiff last night. We ate dinner separately. Actually we ate in completely different restaurants. Actually I have no idea where Mo ate last night. I ate right here in the dining room of the Holiday Inn. And that was the start of the problem. So here goes:

When I came out of the shower last night, before we went down to dinner, Mo had been on the phone locating a restaurant and informed me she found the best restaurant in Rapid City. (It was also the most expensive.) I said I was whacked out and just wanted to eat down in the restaurant in the Holiday Inn. She was insistent about not eating at the hotel, and I finally said that I really didn’t feel like spending 50 or 75 bucks for dinner, especially since I’d be paying 150 bucks plus just for the room. Maureen then said she would take me to dinner and for some reason I found that insulting. We got into a “discussion” of why that was insulting – Mo accused me of male chauvinist tendencies and she may have been partially right. I will concede that this morning, but I certainly

didn't last night. I was raised in the 50s and 60s when male chauvinists were bred by the thousands – millions!

We went down in the elevator together but Mo left the hotel in a huff and ate dinner somewhere in town. I still have no idea where she ate. Now if that were the end of this tale I think I would admit that I was acting childish and should have graciously accepted Maureen's invitation last night. But that's not quite the end of this story, so hear me out. I got back from dinner at about 8. Turned on the TV and waited for Mo and decided to apologize. By 10 I fell asleep with the TV on, got up, looked at the clock, got worried then pissed – “where the hell is she?” I turned off the TV and went to sleep – or tried to. I guess I was just about to nod off when I heard the door open. She flipped the light on and remarked: “Are you asleep, Dave?”

I feigned that I was and didn't answer.

“C'mon Dave, I know you're not asleep.” Her voice sounded funny. Her speech sounded slurred.

I sat up slowly, tried to look like I was awoken from a sound sleep, looked at the digital clocks illuminating red figures – it was 12:30! “Where the hell have you been?”

“Now if you're gonna talk like that I'm just going to sleep and we can discuss it in the morning when you've calmed down.” Her speech was now even more noticeably slurred.

“Mo,” I responded, “have you been drinking or what?”

“Well, yes I have, but you make it sound so illicit. I only had one – no wait make that two – no a nice gentleman bought me a drink so that would make three. I had three drinks, that's all.”

Now I was pissed but I tried not to show it. (Mo's take on this will be interesting reading.)

“Some guy bought you a drink?” I asked somewhat incredulously.

“Yeah, he recognized me from a cable news interview and bought me a drink.”

“You've been in a bar till 12:30 and some stranger bought you a drink?”

“Yeah, the bar downstairs.”

“You know Mo, I really don't think there's anything to discuss.”

“The hell there isn't,” she quickly responded.

“Look Maureen, I don’t think either one of us is in the condition to discuss this – logically. But you think about this tonight. Reverse the situation. You’re in bed waiting for me to return back to the hotel, and I tell you the same story you just told me, except some woman in the bar buys me a drink. You think about that and then let me know how you’d react. Goodnight.”

And Maureen Dowd, the well-known, well-respected, popular *New York Times* columnist, fell back on the king size bed and fell asleep – with her Redwing boots on.

It is now 6:30 in the morning and Mo is rustling about. I have a feeling she’s been feigning sleep like I did last night when she returned to the room partially shit-faced.

“Well,” she sat up in bed, “I suppose you’re putting the finishing touches on last night’s activities.” She stretched and yawned and looked down, in amazement, at her Redwing boots still on. She continued. “I have given your comments last night considerable thought, David Cohen and you’re right. I would not have taken it very well if you came back to the room at 12:30 last night. I apologize. I was pissed at you for not going with me to that steakhouse. Your excuse was pitiful and your actions were downright childish. Why you should feel hurt or insecure or embarrassed to allow me to take you out for dinner is ridiculous. So I expect an apology from you and then we can get the hell out of here and see some real mountains.”

“I’m sorry,” I quickly responded. And that was the end of it. Mo took off for the bathroom and I thought to myself: “We made it through our first ‘crisis’ pretty much unscathed. If this would have occurred back in my college days,” I continued my introspection, “I would have been in a funk for 3 days...no probably a week. Maybe I am acting a little more mature at my advanced age, or maybe I’m with someone who knows how to handle me –or both. Probably a little of both.” I heard the shower begin in the bathroom.

“Mo took off her Redwings, showered and packed. We had a complimentary breakfast included in the room rate, so we indulged in what was a rather extensive breakfast buffet and took off for The Black Hills National Forest. I took the driving responsibilities, but first off to a local grocer for some fruit for the ride into Wyoming

and points west. We were both genuinely excited about finally getting into the Rocky Mountains.

“You ready to see the real mountains?” I started the car after our purchase of grapes and apples.

“Let’s go for it Daniel Boone!” Mo opened the Atlas to the map of Wyoming and we were on our way.

We took off on U.S. 16 south in to the Black Hills – which is a little of a misnomer as these “hills” were more of mountainous proportions. In fact, one mountain in the Black Hills, Harney Peak, at 7,242 feet above sea level, is the highest point east of the Rocky Mountains - higher than any of the peaks in the Smoky Mountains or New England. (You can win some money on that piece of info.) The Black hills aren’t the Rocky Mountains, but they’re pretty impressive. We traveled west on U.S. 16 towards the Wyoming border. We were continuously climbing higher in elevation nearing the Colorado Plateau. The weather was another picture-perfect day. Except for that stretch of weather in Minnesota, the weather was more than cooperating.

We crossed into Wyoming near the town of Newcastle, a nondescript little crossroads of a town with an inviting little local restaurant where we decided to stop and use their facilities. We had some coffee and poured over the maps to see how we would get over to the northwestern corner of the state where both Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks were located. We were on top of the Colorado Plateau and the map listed Newcastle at 4,300 feet above sea level. Maureen started up a conversation with our waitress, a pretty teenage statuesque natural blond with a complexion as ruddy as the Colorado Plateau. The waitress convinced Mo not to go straight north to I-90, but rather to take State Highway 250 west to 59 north to Gillette and then take I-90 west to Cody and the parks.

I continued driving the suggested route, which was at times very stark and empty and flat. Occasionally we’d see these bumps or hills in the terrain which seemed like they popped up from nowhere. The map calls these hills buttes. They don’t look to be very high, but because of the raised elevation of the plateau, the buttes, in some cases, are listed as being 6 to 7,000 feet in elevation, measured from sea level. Which is why they

don't appear very impressive. The scenery in a single word is, desolate. And one look at the map confirms that. There wasn't a single town listed on the map between Newcastle and Gillette. We stopped along the side of the road and took some pictures. (Yes we both brought our own digital cameras. I was reluctant to bring one because I found taking photos on a trip to be a pain in the ass. You almost felt compelled to stop and get a picture of this or that. But Maureen convinced me to take a camera and of course I had already taken almost 75 shots and we had been gone only 4 days.)

It was around noon when we hit Gillette and Maureen had her first Diet Coke of the day. You could almost tell by the size of the dot on the map when you'd have a town big enough to support at least McDonald's. Sometimes we were surprised when some towns that couldn't have had populations larger than a few thousand –but there were the damn golden arches. Gillette was up a little higher in elevation than Newcastle, but I still hadn't seen that profile of the snow capped Rocky Mountains that I had been anticipating now for four days. We were assured by the folks of Gillette, that 20 or 30 miles west on I-90, I would indeed see that skyline I was looking for. And true to their word there were the snow-capped peaks of the Big Horn Mountains. The closer we got to Buffalo, Wyoming, the more grandiose the scenery became. Maureen was driving now and I was navigating.

We got off the Interstate in Buffalo and followed U.S. Route 16 right into the mountains and up to Powder River Pass, listed as 9,687 feet above sea level. It was a 5,000-foot climb from Buffalo, and the first thing I noticed was that my Malibu didn't run as well in the higher altitudes. It was only 30 miles from Buffalo to the high mountain pass, but it took at least an hour to get there. Once you get up into these mountains, you can forget about driving 60 or even 50 miles per hour. Too many bends and turns. Maureen was driving and handled the twists and turns quite admirably. The views were spectacular. I can't describe them in words. I'm sure Maureen, the professional wordsmith, will do a better job than me, but this scenery certainly makes the case for taking pictures. We stopped at the top of Powder River Pass and ate some fruit. It was noticeably cooler at these higher elevations. We probably spent almost an hour just looking out at the spectacular views eating grapes and talking. It was a pleasant moment. Maybe one or two cars passed us during that stop. Most travelers were hell bent on getting to Yellowstone on I-90. We got back in the car and headed back down

the mountain another 5,000 feet to the valley floor. It took just as much time to get back to the valley as it did climbing up to the pass. Once we got back to the valley, the highway was straight and flat and we resumed the legal speed, which in this section of Wyoming was 75 mph. We stopped in Worland then headed north to U.S. Route 14 and followed 14 right into Cody, just 20 miles from the Yellowstone Park's eastern entrance.

The traffic was a madhouse all the way into Cody, a famous town of the old west that was made up to look even more western than it probably did back in the 1800s. There was a sign over the highway entering Cody advertising a rodeo that evening, and every evening, as we were later told. It was already 4 o'clock so we thought we better start looking for a motel for the night, but this would turn out to be more difficult than in Rapid City. And it was. Absolutely nothing available within 50 miles of Yellowstone or Grand Teton National Parks, we were told. I sort of figured this would be the case. Back in Cleveland I called the famous Yellowstone Lodge to see if I could get a reservation and the clerk asked: "What Year?"

It was past 6 when we pulled out of Cody and drove west towards Yellowstone, looking now for a campsite. We were told that there were indeed tent sites in Yellowstone and so we drove until 7:30. We saw lots of campsites just before the main entrance into the park. We arbitrarily picked one and drove up to the office where we were presented with a map of the site and told to choose one of the vacant sites, which we did. We drove over to the designated site and as I pulled into the area another car, a big-ass SUV, simultaneously pulled onto the same site from the opposite direction.

"Where the fuck is he going?" I hollered to no one in particular as we both slammed on our brakes.

"Hey watch your language, Dave. You'll start a fight right here at our campsite!" Maureen admonished me. "And since when did you start talking like that?"

I never used the "F" word in mixed company but I was tired and ornery and aggravated looking for lodging for the night. The driver of the SUV got out of the car as I likewise did, and we compared our campsites and it turned out he had pulled into the wrong site. A nice chap who apologized profusely. Coincidentally, he was from Ohio. Turns out Cleveland, Ohio. Turns out we were almost neighbors in Cleveland Heights. He lived about two blocks from me and taught at Case Western Reserve University.

Good thing we didn't come to blows, Maureen commented later. It was a damn good thing, because he was half my age, about six-foot-four and a slim trim 220 pounds.

We took out the new tent, still packaged in the box from Wal-Mart. It was one of those half-moon nylon jobs with a sewn in floor. It looked simple enough to set up, I would think even an idiot could do it in 10 minutes. These idiots took over an hour. Here is where a video camera with sound would have been the perfect device to capture the scene.

"Dave, I think those aluminum poles go this way."

"No way, they have to go like this. No, wait a minute, maybe like this."

"Dave look at the instructions."

"I don't need the fucking instructions!"

"Would you quit using the 'F' word? That guy's got three young kids. You're embarrassing me. And since when did you start using the 'F' word so much? I never heard you use it before."

"Maureen, I've used the 'F' word most of my professional career. Believe me, it comes in very handy on a construction site. I've just never used it around you. Now just let me get this goddamn tent hooked up and I'll be fine."

"Boy if this isn't the quintessential scene of Mr. Alpha male determined to do it his way."

"Do you want to editorialize, do you want to sleep tonight under the stars, or do you want to sleep in a tent tonight?"

"I'll be happy to help if you stop swearing and using the 'F' word."

I stopped fussing with the tent. I was exhausted and sweating profusely. I came around to where Maureen was watching me make a fool out of myself and tried to begin an intellectual discussion concerning the use of the word "fuck."

"Look Maureen the use of the 'F' word has almost been universally accepted by both sexes. Women use the word as much today as men. It is an excellent word to relieve stress. It is very descriptive. In some situations it cannot be replaced with any other word. As a professional wordsmith you should easily recognize that fact. And its use is cathartic. Very cathartic. In addition, it is one of the only words in the English language that can be used as a verb as easily as a noun. It can also be used quite grammatically

correct as an adverb. Very few words in the English language are so ‘fucking’ versatile. Get my point?”

“Very funny, very clever, and if you use that word again, I’m sleeping in the car tonight.”

“Well can you suggest an alternate word, a synonym for the ‘F’ word that will allow me to get this fu.....” I hesitated for a moment

“Don’t you dare say it.”

“Well then, suggest another word or I’ll never get this tent set up.”

Maureen thought for a few minutes and finally said. “Look just use the appropriate synonym—‘fornicate,’ OK?”

I pondered that concept for a minute then spoke up. “You mean like: ‘Fornicate’ this damn tent? Or these instructions are ‘fornicated’ up?”

“Yeah that’s the spirit.” Maureen replied.

“It doesn’t work as well as a verb like the ‘F’ word,” I answered back.

“Bear with it for a while. You’ll get used to it, Dave.”

I went back to the task of setting up the tent speaking to myself under my breath but loud enough for Maureen to hear. “Let’s see, it looks like these fornicating poles go here. No wait a fornicating minute the fornicating poles must go here. Oh fornicate this shit.”

Maureen was on the ground laughing, just about in tears. We were both punchy as hell by this time. Our Ohio neighbors must have been listening in on our discussion because they were laughing hysterically and came over to tell us how entertaining we were and not to worry their children were off playing and didn’t hear a thing. Mr. Case Western Reserve finally helped me get the tent up and we offered to take them to dinner, children and all, but they politely turned the invitation down. They were cooking out this evening, but invited us to join them. Maureen answered before I could and graciously accepted the invite.

The only thing more humorous than my feeble attempt at erecting the tent, was trying to blow up the air mattress for two. Thank God I was inside the tent doing it, because I had no idea how much fornicating air it took to blow that fornicating thing up. I was so dizzy and sick after that that I literally had to lie down on the mattress for 20 minutes

before I left the tent. I would definitely have one of those battery-operated air pumps the next time we decided to tent.

(I am getting ready to hit the sack, as the expression goes. The lantern I purchased at Wal-Mart is illuminating the inside of the tent so brightly I can actual type on my PC. Maureen is still over at the Brosilows thanking them for a delicious meal and great conversation. They were truly kind and gracious to us and the entire evening has been great fun. Even Maureen would be the first to admit that bringing a tent was a great idea. It certainly provided several hours of amusement.

It's about ten o'clock and the temperature I'm sure is in the 50s. It will probably drop into the low 40s before morning. I plan on sleeping in the nude with Maureen. In the buff as the expression goes, so I wish she'd quit bullshitting with the Brosilows and get over here and help me warm this sleeping bag up!)

Maureen entered the tent. I was already tucked into the sleeping bag. My face was still cold as the temperature was dropping precipitously. Maureen started to unzip the bag and get in fully clothed – she hadn't even taken off her Redwings.

“Mo aren't you gonna take your clothes off before you get in here?” I asked.

“No, absolutely not,” she answered rather emphatically.

“Well at least take off those damn boots. You'll kick the hell out of me if you bring those in here.”

“Don't worry I was going to take the boots off.”

“C'mon Maureen take those clothes off,” I repeated somewhat frustrated.

“Absolutely not. If you're naked under there, you're nuts.”

“Oh c'mon.”

“No!”

“Why not?”

“Why not?” She repeated. Then hesitated before she continued. “Because it's too fornicating cold!”

**IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN CONTINUING WITH MAUREEN AND DAVE
PLEASE CONTACT ME BY MY EMAIL ADDRESS (OR EVEN CALL) b.a.h.**