

Unbelievable: Tom & Kathleen's Story

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Introduction

Kathleen and I look back on our love story with warm fondness. There are many little incidents we recall that cause us to smile. Some we remember and laugh out loud. We remember some moments very differently. We have a collection of memories that enrich our experience of each other. Our memories are very precious to us. I will recount my memories and share some of them with you.

My Answering Machine

I always look upon Christmas Eve with a tender heart and warm glow in my spirit, more than any day in my year. There are some days I look forward to, but not nearly as much as Christmas Eve.

We moved to Gramercy, Louisiana in April 1968. We discovered the Christmas Eve bonfire tradition and absorbed it into our lives as a family. In time, our family gatherings on Christmas Eves became legendary. It is an important set of chapters in our family lore.

Written into the chapter of Christmas 1987 was a special message I have held dear since. I don't recall the exact date. I don't remember if it was Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, the days before or the days after. I have always simplified my memory of this stretch of time and identified Christmas Eve 1987 as the date for remembrance.

In the Fall of 1987, I was living in Washington, DC. I worked for a financial services company that was experiencing a tremendous shift in its business and its future viability. You may recall the stock market crash of October that year. It impacted my company to the point that we needed reductions in force or layoffs, revisions of our budgets, and restructurings of our management. My boss was dismissed by Thanksgiving Day and I was asked to handle many of his duties, without the authority or compensation, in the interim until the restructuring could be completed in the Spring of 1988. I became indispensable in that I was doing the work of folks who had been much better paid than I and, I don't hesitate to say, who didn't do the work nearly as well. I had become an important cog in the wheel within

weeks. It was a heady time for me. It was an opportunity to prove my worth to the existing powers.

As much opportunity as there was in my opinion, there were great risks. The uncertainty of our circumstances and our foreseeable future caused great trepidation. There were no guarantees that we would survive the coming months. Even this fearful time held much adventure for me, a 33-year old strategic planner. I was approached by a few consulting firms that knew our situation with offers of employment should I need alternatives to my position.

During this period I was thoroughly consumed with my work and the possibilities I had to consider. There was much to do and little time to do it. The first of the year was barreling down on us and many decisions were required before the tax year ended.

It was clear I could not be away from the office for any length of time. I could not afford to comfortably take vacation at Thanksgiving and Christmas. That was a hard decision. It would be the first time I had ever missed those family gatherings, those special family holidays. I especially loved Christmas Eve because the whole family reunited and gathered new family members and friends that had joined the tribe through the year. I was going to miss this.

I participated in the Christmas Washington, DC had to offer in 1987. The brilliant lights and beautiful decorations of public and private properties was startling to me. The churches were glorious with Nativity scenes, ornamented evergreens, caroling bells, and angelic choirs. I had many friends who were not government workers or associated with Congress and who did not leave town for the holidays. Even so, Capitol Hill, my neighborhood, was nearly deserted. I had made very good friends in the area and had numerous Christmas gatherings with which to entertain myself. I went to every party I could. I didn't miss a one. The week before Christmas was a blur of parties. Each held many attractions and entertainments. In addition, some of my hosts used their events in a most singular way. As an eligible bachelor, I was much pushed this way and that towards equally eligible maidens.

The doings of work and the social affairs were interesting, but so different than my past experiences. It was a strange time. It was an unsettling time. It was completely unfamiliar. It was like being a visitor from another planet.

Very late one night, I came home to my basement apartment at 601 A Street, NE, Washington, DC. I noticed my answering machine was flashing. It declared that I had one message. I immediately assumed Mom and Dad

left me a Merry Christmas message. I pressed the playback button and the tape rewound. The tape played and this is what I heard:

“Hello! This is a long, lost friend from Baton Rouge. Kathleen Breaux. I just called to wish you a Merry Christmas. I guess I’ll talk to you later. Goodbye.”

Kathleen Breaux?

I played the message again.

Kathleen Breaux?

I thought, “Hmmm? I hadn’t seen or talked to her since...when was it?”

I played the message again.

“Well,” I thought, “this is interesting. How in the world did she get this phone number?”

The last time I had spent anytime at all with Kathleen Breaux was in December 1981. It was the evening she told me she had decided to renew her girlfriend status with the boyfriend she had broken up with a few months before. I had seen her once after that December but just in passing. So six years had passed by my reckoning.

Six years!

Six years?

She certainly wanted to be in touch with me. But what was the reason. Why six years later? How did she get the phone number? And, what was her phone number? She didn’t leave one.

This is where the story, our story, began thirty years ago. Memories flood forth from this moment; the moment I pushed the playback on the answering machine. How Kathleen and I met each other; how we went out a few times; how we renewed our friendship; and, how we come to this very day, Christmas Eve 2017.

I’ll tell you more of this love story soon. You’ll like it.

Mister Ray

It will serve the story well if I provide some of the circumstances and happenings that preceded this mysterious phone message at Christmas of 1987.

In 1979, I was the District Manager of First Financial of Ascension, a savings and loan branch in Gramercy, Louisiana. The work was anything, but stressful or challenging. I pretty much pushed loan papers around. I certainly learned a lot about finance, mortgages, appraisals, regulatory compliance, insurance, and construction lending. However, at this time, the

financial services industry was going through a major upheaval. Savings and loans were beginning to look like banks. Banks were trying to act like stock brokers. Insurance companies were trying to offer roader financial products. Interest rates during this time were sky high, as much as 18 per cent for a thirty-year home loan.

The father of my college roommate, Ray Robert, Sr., came to my office, closed the door and sat across from me. Mr. Ray was a very kind and successful man. But, he didn't suffer fools in my opinion. I had a great respect for him. I had no idea what he wanted with me. We had had numerous real estate business dealings in the recent past. Perhaps he wanted to clue me into another opportunity to purchase a rental property.

"What are you going to do behind that desk the rest of your life?" Mr. Ray asked. "You need to get your butt back in school." He struck the desk with his hand. "You could die behind this desk and nobody will come looking for you."

I had dropped out of LSU in the Spring of 1976. I completely ignored that semester and flunked in the worst way. I threw away the whole four months. Shortly after, with no clue of what to do, I stumbled into banking and set myself on a new career path.

I had considered going back to school, but I was an officer of Fidelity National Bank at the ripe age of 23. I became an officer of a savings and loan. I was further compensated with a company car. I had also purchased my own car, a 1979 Malibu Classic. I was doing pretty well by the time I reached 25 years old. By most measures, I was very successful with great prospects.

When Mr. Ray came to my office, I didn't expect his declarations. We talked for about an hour. He laid out all of the happenings in the world as he saw them and suggested I needed much more education to face the craziness of this future world. He said he realized my dad and mom would probably wish that for me, but he knew them well. He knew that they would let me chart my own course. They wouldn't push me one way or another. With that realization, he said that he felt it was his responsibility to get me pointed in the right direction. He was very emphatic. It wasn't a suggestion he was making.

And then he said the words that have motivated many before me, "Don't disappoint me son."

Our interview ended and I was left with a swirl of thoughts. I was disturbed by what he had said. He was encouraging. He said he had a great faith in me, my character, my talents, and my potential. He laid it all out to me in such a way I could not ignore the issue.

This encounter with Mr. Ray set me on a course that led me back to LSU. Had Mr. Ray not stopped in that day, had I not followed his advice, I would not have been in a position to meet Kathleen Breaux. I mark that day in the Fall of 1979 as the day this story really begins.

Back to School

I returned to LSU in the Spring of 1980. I had a lot of catching up to do and faced the chore of restoring my grade point average. I didn't have time to mess around very much. I had to hit the books and hit them very hard to get back into the swing of school. With renewed purpose, I found discipline, organization and persistence I didn't know I had in me. My course work was challenging and I threw my heart and soul into my studies. I didn't have much time for extra circular activities.

Beyond school, I needed part-time employment to support myself. I no longer had the luxury of an income. My savings were meager and were available for only emergencies. I had three jobs by the Spring of '81. I was a bartender at George's, a bar and eatery, under the Perkins Road overpass in South Baton Rouge. I was also an early morning bar-back at the Hilton hotel's bar, TD's. And my most joyous source of income was working as a free-lance commercial artist under the direction of a great artist, Robert Ramsey. I generated enough dollars to handle my expenses with a little left for entertainment.

Between school and work, I was thoroughly occupied. Even so, I got out now and then with my buddies to shoot a little pool and drink a lot of beer. I never let my down time interfere with my goals. I was an older student at the old age of 27 years and my previous experience had taught me how easy it was to get distracted and go astray. Frankly, I didn't have time to get distracted. I was too busy.

Amongst this busy-ness, I saw this girl.

I Saw This Girl

I was at The Bengal, a college bar on Highland Road, north of the LSU campus. I reckon it was a Thursday. That was pretty much the only night of the week I would go out anywhere. I do remember I was with my good friend and colleague of the time, Steve Robichaux. It was the Spring of 1981.

I surveyed the crowd to see who was out and about. Surely, I knew someone in this mass.

That's when I saw this beauty.

She had raven hair framing a cream-colored face with bright light blueish-gray eyes. She was striking. I caught her eye and just stared for a

moment. I couldn't help myself. The usual uncomfortable feeling descended on me. The kind of feeling one gets after someone looks a little too long at someone else. Then she suddenly began boldly staring back. I took up the challenge and stared more intensively. It became amusing. I decided I needed to break the stare competition and wiggled my eyebrows without breaking a smile. She didn't flinch. No flicker of a grin.

I don't recall much after this. I turned to Steve to get his attention. In time I got him to turn and look towards the spot where this girl had been sitting. She was gone. I frantically looked around the crowd and couldn't find her or the friend with whom she was sitting.

This is the way I remember the incident. I may not have it all just right. Memories are squishy things. Without question though, this captures the feeling of the moment. I didn't know who this girl was. She was very pretty. I had no thought of meeting her that night. I had no expectation of seeing her again. It was just a fleeting few seconds. But it was enough to recall later, once I did get to know her.

The Group, The Girl

I had become a regular at The Bengal. The owner, Steve Bonfanti, had become an acquaintance and good friend during my first time at LSU in the early 70s. It was a comfortable watering hole for me. Many friends from my banking days in Baton Rouge stopped by there after work in the afternoons. I enthusiastically renewed those friendships. It was good to be around folks my age now and then.

I also made new friends. Many of my new friends I met around the pool tables at The Bengal. I was pretty good at pool, perhaps with a little more than average skill. I certainly wasn't a shark, but, with luck, I could hold my own against college guys and gals.

One particular collection of guys and I became good friends around the pool tables of The Bengal. To this day, some 36 years later, I am in touch with the three that made up the core of this group. They are Larry Kayda, Rob Anderson and George Lathem. I never felt as if I was so much a member of the group as I was an accepted outsider they liked. They were younger than me. They were LSU students. They spent much more time at The Bengal than I. Even with our numerous differences I had an affinity for these guys. They were a great diversion from my serious activities of school and work.

Unbeknownst to me, the pretty girl I had seen one Thursday night at The Bengal was the girlfriend of one of the members of the group, George. I

don't know how I came to know this. I surely didn't expect this revelation. I certainly would have remembered the circumstances very clearly had that been on the top of my mind. I truly just stumbled into this. I had not expected to see this girl again, much less discover she was associated with my new set of friends.

Through this group, I met Kathleen Jewel Breaux.

Sadly, though, she was George's girlfriend. I am an honorable guy. I had no designs trying to pry Kathleen away from George. I liked George. I liked Kathleen. If she were available, I surely would have pursued her. But I was satisfied just knowing her, and knowing her as George's girlfriend.

Given my good intentions, I never missed an opportunity to be charming or witty or intelligent or whatever might make me seem attractive. As I recall, she didn't mind flirting with me a little as well. Neither of us had any deeper motives. Everything was very superficial.

I wasn't looking for a girlfriend anyway. I had much too much on my platter. I had tons of course work to get through. Rebuilding my decimated GPA was paramount in my life. My odd jobs kept me busy and entertained. Thankfully, I had no time to spend the money I made. I could not afford the distraction of a relationship even had I wanted to hang out with a pretty girl.

I didn't see Kathleen a lot. I saw her out with George at The Bengal once in a great while. When I did see her, I just had to talk to her. She was fun to be around. I visited with her when George was playing pool and I was waiting for my turn on the tables. I found her to be very sweet. She had a wonderful sense of humor and was clearly very smart. I was very impressed with my new acquaintance.

A Little Flirting

In time, I playfully suggested that she dump George and go out with me. I told George that Kathleen was much too good for him and he should let her go out with me. I went so far as to give Kathleen my phone number in case she needed a break from George. I was joking around. These guys were much too nice to me. I didn't want to stir up any serious problems between them. I truly liked them both. They were a great looking couple and they seemed to have a fun relationship.

When the Fall of 1981 rolled around, George and Kathleen's love boat hit some rough waters. I wasn't aware of this. That's their story, not mine. I had gone to Summer School and rolled right into the Fall Semester without a hitch. I had enrolled in Dr. Edwin O. Timmons' Psychology of Adjustment

class. That class, and Dr. T, had an immeasurable impact in my life (and that's another story). I was completely absorbed with the class. So I was not paying very much attention to anything other than school. I even dropped my bar-back job because the benefits of the job did not exceed the benefits of getting good grades. I was on a path to sacrificing all for good grades and the real possibility of Graduate School. My life was consumed with scholastic efforts. I was not watching the lives of others.

A Few Dates

Out of the blue, Kathleen called me. I was shocked. Pleasantly so, but shocked. She said she broke up with George and wondered if I wanted to go out sometime. Of course, I said, "Sure!"

"Lucky me," I thought. "That pretty girl called me. How cool."

I don't remember the order of our few dates. We have a box in our attic that contains mementos from our dates. I kept many of them and she did, too. It was interesting that we both saved stuff like that without the other one knowing. I could reconstruct the calendar of that time, but it wouldn't further the story. Suffice it to say we went out three or four times that Fall Semester.

I couldn't go out a lot. My schedule didn't allow it. She was busy, too. She went to school and also worked. Finding compatible times to get together was difficult. We eventually found some time and since it wasn't that serious, we felt no urgency.

We saw the movie "Fiddler on the Roof" at the Varsity Theater. We listened to Perry and Sanders, a folk duet, at The Cateria. We went out to eat somewhere, but I don't really recall where. Kathleen also came to visit me when I was at work behind the bar at George's a few times. She said she liked my legs.

Early on in this spate of dating a funny incident happened. She worked at a department store in Baton Rouge, D. H. Holmes. I called for Kathleen at her work to arrange some aspect of an upcoming date.

A woman answered the phone and eventually inquired what I was calling about.

"Hello," I said. "May I speak to Kathleen Breaux?"

There was a squeal on the other end of the phone. I could hear her say excitedly, "It's Tom! He's calling for Kathleen!"

It was one of the Farrow girls, Lisa or Kimberly. I believe it was Kim Farrow. (I still see Kim today. She married an old banking buddy of mine, Luis Crespo)

There were three girls I knew from George's, Kimberly, Lisa, and a bartender friend, Tracy Smoak. They were friends with Clay, one of the other George's bartenders. I got to know them pretty well in time. Eventually, they turned me into their project. They became interested in finding me a nice girl. I had told them I didn't need a girlfriend, but I wouldn't mind going out on a date or two. In time, they told me they had someone in mind, with whom they worked. They thought she would be just right for me. I never got around to finding out who this person was.

Lo and behold, it was Kathleen. She was the girl they had in mind for me.

Our dates weren't earth-shattering. They were your common, run-of-the-mill dates. They weren't romantic. They were just fun. They were getting-to-know-you dates. I remember we laughed a lot. I remember we found many things we had in common. I had liked her before. I liked her even more after these dates. I got the sense that she liked me, too. It was nothing more than that.

On one of our dates, we drove down to Gramercy where my family lived. I wanted to show her where I had grown up. I wanted her to meet my parents. It wasn't uncommon for me to introduce friends to my family. My family is one of my best aspects. Why not use this to my advantage?

I had met Kathleen's parents. Once she had met mine, we compared notes and were very amused at how much our parents were alike. For instance, when I had visited Kathleen's house, her parents had The Weather Channel on. We knowingly looked at each and smiled when we came into my parents' den and Tom and Eloise had The Weather Channel on. We told stories on our families and got into how we got to be the people we had become at that point in our lives. I recall that drive. It was about two hours worth. We have always enjoyed drives together. We still do today.

Kathleen was growing on me. I really liked her. I was starting feel like I had found someone I would like to spend some time with. A lot of time.

Christmas 1981

The Christmas season approached. Kathleen's birthday is December 5th, but she spent her birthday with others that year. I still thought we were too fresh and new for me to think I should be involved. But I did want to get her a couple of fun gifts for Christmas.

I found one gift that was odd, but special in my mind. It was a little plastic piggy bank with a music box that played "Rainbow". The little figurine inside the box flipped around and around while the music played. I love that song. I used to belt it out while I worked behind the bar or whistle it unconsciously at a drop of the hat. It was a signature song of mine and

Kathleen knew this. So I thought that if I gave her this gift, it would be a good remembrance of me. But to make it a little more personal, I hid a sterling silver charm bracelet in amongst the pennies I loaded into the bank. I figured if we spent more time together, I could add little charms to the bracelet. We have that little bank today. It was saved from our flooded home.

Another musically oriented gift is the “White Christmas” ornament. That song is also one of my “go to” songs. I’ll sing it anytime of the year or whistle it whenever I am in the mood. I found an ornament that played “White Christmas” at a Hallmark store. There was a problem though. It was an “Our First Christmas Together” ornament. It was an ornament meant for a little more of a relationship than Kathleen and I had at that point. It was an ornament that suggested there would be a second, and a third, and a so on, and so on Christmas together. It was clearly meant for newly weds. I was certain we hadn’t gotten to that point. As much as I would have liked it, we were months away from that much seriousness. But, this was the only ornament I could find that played my song. I went for it. This ornament we display prominently on our Christmas year every year since we have been married. The ornament also has a tail of its own I’ll share with you later.

I was pleased with my Christmas shopping. It was simple. It wasn’t over the top. I wrapped them up and delivered them to Kathleen’s house in Sherwood Forest. Kathleen wasn’t there so I left the gifts with her parents.

And Then She Was Gone

A few days later Kathleen called me at George’s and told me that she needed to cancel our upcoming date. She asked when I would be off of work. I told her and she asked if she could meet me at my apartment.

“Sure,” I said. I knew something was amiss. I didn’t know what, but I didn’t have a good feeling about this.

We got together at my place and we sat on the sofa. She said she had something to tell me. I told her I knew what it was. I told her that George was getting lonely around Christmas and wanted to make up and get back together with her.

Kathleen started crying and said she didn’t want to hurt me. I told her she could obviously do what she wanted. I wouldn’t get bent out of shape, but I would be hurt and sad, because I really liked her. I told her I thought we had a lot more in common than she and George had, but I understood she had history with George.

She pulled herself together and left me behind.

Like that. It was over.

I don't know what I thought. I was a little angry. I was not a little surprised. I was a little sad. I was a little,...whatever. I didn't have any claims on Kathleen. I truly liked her, but I began to rationalize that I was in no position to have a girlfriend with whom to build a future. I wasn't near finished with my studies. I had a bigger agenda to fulfill.

Yep! That made perfect sense. That was a great rationalization I could buy into. I just didn't feel it.

I thought, "Man, who would I find to be as good as her?"

I never spoke with Kathleen after she left me that evening. I thought of her from time to time, but the memory began to fade. Thoughts of her were soon replaced with the rest of my concerns of the time.

I bumped into her once right before I graduated from Graduate School in 1984. It had been two and half years since we had talked that last time. I just brushed her aside with a quick wave and moved on. I don't think I was very nice to her. I didn't even wait to feel any pain. I didn't feel any pain. She was well and truly gone.

And then, that answering machine message at Christmas of 1987.

There's so much more to tell.

Immediate Aftermath Of The Message

I played the answering machine message over and over again. How many times? Who knows?

I listened intently to each replay. I tried to discern background noises to extract clues about the phone call. From where had she called? Who was she with when she called? What time of day was it? Was she drinking wine?

I thought that with each hearing I could determine her purpose for calling me. Maybe the twentieth time I played the message there would be more information. Maybe she would say more on the thirtieth replay. Maybe I played it repeatedly to enjoy her voice. I was surely wearing out the tape. It wasn't designed for this type of use.

The repetition forced me to consider my feelings about her. I had set her aside six years ago. I had not thought much about her. She was a thousand miles away. She was truly out of mind. We hadn't spent enough time together to even say we had had a history. I had no feelings for Kathleen when the message was left on the machine.

I became friends with Lynne Breaux, owner of Tunnicliff's on Capitol Hill. She was a dark-haired beauty with Louisiana ties. The name Breaux and her looks certainly would seem to have made some sort of connection,

at least tenuously to Kathleen. But no. Kathleen never emerged in our encounters, not even in the back of my mind.

I had heard the message and listened to it many times. I was forced to think of Kathleen. How do you go about dredging up thoughts and feelings from six years prior? Where do you start?

First, I struggled to remember my last time with Kathleen. It was in passing and I don't believe I was very nice to her. Then I tried to remember what I knew of Kathleen. What did she look like? I knew she was pretty, but her face faded in my mind as the years passed. I recalled some of her features, but couldn't build a face in my head. What did I feel for Kathleen? I do remember how disappointed I was when I didn't see each other anymore. I supposed that meant I liked her. I remembered I felt hurt by her. Reconstructing Kathleen and our relationship was a chore. A very pleasant chore, but still hard work.

A free floating notion that I could not ignore the phone call took root. And it grew. I didn't know what I felt about Kathleen, but I needed to decide that before I took any action on the message.

What was the action that I could take? She hadn't left a phone number for me to call. In 1987, there was no caller identification. Perhaps she didn't want me to call her back. It was entirely possible the phone call was one of those lonely Christmastime phone calls one makes to people from their pasts. I hoped it wasn't that, but it seemed likely.

I created one scenario that grabbed hold. I recalled Kathleen's boyfriend, George, had wanted to get back together with Kathleen at Christmas 1981. She put me aside and went back to George. Maybe she broke up with George and got lonely for me. But six years later? That was stretching it.

Then I came up with reasons why she didn't leave her number. Maybe while she was leaving the message a wave of regret overcame her. Maybe she was sorry she had called in the first place, but it was too late to hang up. Maybe she figured she would just finish the message and let it go at that. No harm, no foul. I just know she didn't leave a number. I also know I didn't know what that meant.

Another mysterious aspect of this answering machine message was how did Kathleen get my DC phone number. Not many people had my number. I was not much of a phone person. Most of the phone calls I received were at my office. Most of the phone calls I made were from my office. That was a satisfactory state of affairs for the majority of my time in DC. I even hadn't purchased the phone and answering machine at my apartment that received the message. A colleague of mine purchased them and prompted me to get connected. He wanted to be able to discuss our work after hours. I

remember him saying, “Who doesn’t have a phone nowadays?” He got me a really spiffy phone and answering machine after I had done without for two years. So my number was relatively new. And it wasn’t listed. That was a luxury I had always wanted, but couldn’t afford before. For a few dollars more a month, I could keep my number in limited hands.

I racked my brains trying to imagine how Kathleen came to have my number. I could only guess that she had gotten it from someone in my family. Of course, that prompted a whole series of thoughts. Who did she know well enough to ask for my number? Who would give her my number? Who did she talk to and about what? What did they think about some girl calling for my phone number? The questions seemed boundless.

Please do not get the impression that I sat on the sofa, replayed the message, and then began thinking of the thoughts I have recounted in some orderly fashion. It wasn’t nearly that organized. My mind was ricocheting with images, memories, and questions. I could not concentrate on one thought long enough before another would intrude and take its place. My brain swirled with possibilities and impossibilities; probabilities and improbabilities.

This did not happen one evening or the morning of the next day. Christmas fell on a Friday in 1987. I had no one around with whom to hang out. My friends who had stayed in DC had family weekends planned. Many businesses were closed. So I consumed the days before I had to go back to work with these assorted disturbances of the brain. I didn’t want to rush to judgement. I didn’t want to act hastily. I was anxious to shut down this crazy circular conversation with myself, but not before I had considered every angle. I spent days of replaying the message and thinking a little more. My brain ached.

I remember going to my neighborhood bar, The Tune Inn on Pennsylvania Avenue, and seeing some of the denizens of the watering hole stranded on barstools over the weekend. It was after Christmas Day. There were many in bar hungover from their family festivities. “Too much of Uncle Billy” and “my gifts sucked” floated in the air with Patsy Cline wailing in the background. It was the perfect place to stop my crazy thinking.

With beer in hand and a shot of rye on the side, I bored anyone who would listen to my answering machine incident and all of the surrounding thoughts and stories. If I didn’t know you, you weren’t exempt from my ravings. I didn’t care if you had a wonderful Christmas. I didn’t want to be invited to your New Year’s Eve party. I could care less what ski trip you had planned. I didn’t know what teams were playing, in what bowl game, on what day. I just had to be certain that you understood the full, complete,

and “interesting” story of that girl I knew in Louisiana calling me after six years.

I vaguely recall that as I would relate the story, other facets of the story would pop up. They had to be explored conversationally as well. I tried to explain to people so that they understood thoroughly how odd this situation appeared to me. Some patiently listened until they tired of me.

“Well, good luck Tom,” they’d say. “I’ve had enough and I need to go.” Did they have enough of me, or did they have enough to drink?

On my next visit to the bar, those I had seen the day before completely avoided me. I was becoming even more annoying than my usual self. Alcohol didn’t help, I assure you. It simply fueled the hyperbole and embellishments. It magnified the insignificant and discounted the negatives. It expanded and placed great import on the slightest notions. The inhibitions it fostered, however, did help me remember things I had not recalled while sober. John Barleycorn was a great help in that respect. Others around me suffered.

Thankfully, Monday, December 28, 1987, rolled around. The city wasn’t going to fill up again until after New Year’s. This is a city of government workers after all. Congress wasn’t to return for a few weeks. To me, it hardly mattered if they did or didn’t. Not many folk were about town.

I had to shake off the holiday reverie and buckle down to work. I had lots of work to do. I refocused my thinking to deal with the tumult of the office. We had until the Spring to set the company on a productive course. My duties were interesting and important and I was thankful to turn to my work. Underlying it all was Kathleen. My goodness, what a heavenly distraction to have.

Up Next: Getting Kathleen’s Phone Number...

Getting Kathleen’s Number and Calling Her

I decided I needed to call Kathleen. I wasn’t going to wait around. I intended to take a positive action. This opportunity was not going to pass by me. I had nothing to lose. I would be crazy to wait for her to “guess to talk to me later”. That “later” might be another six years.

I had met her parents a couple of times. They were very nice folks. I thought we got along okay. I could find their phone number through directory assistance. It would be cinch to call them and ask for Kathleen’s number.

I needed a reason to request her phone number. I know how parents can be. I expected they would be similar to me. They would want to know why this guy from six years ago wanted to talk to their daughter. They'd have to fill in the blanks if I didn't give them a reason. I thought the best course was to be straightforward. I would tell them that their daughter had left a message on my answering machine and "forgot" to leave a number. I don't know if that was true or not, but why not propose that as a reason for needing Kathleen's number. I had no plans to overthink this action. I had done all the overthinking already.

I called one early evening in January. The phone call was simple. It was unmemorable. I asked for Kathleen's phone, stated my reason, and, with a perfunctory conversation, got her number. It was too easy. I didn't know whether to be mildly triumphant or moderately concerned. Again, I decided not to overthink this. Why not just call Kathleen, solve the mysteries, and move from there.

Seemed simple enough.

It certainly wasn't simple. I didn't want to appear too eager. I didn't want to come across as cold or as "a matter of fact." What approach did I want to take? In time I said to myself, "Just call her and let her do the talking. Respond to everything positively. And by all means be witty and charming." I really thought that way.

So I called her. I don't know the day. It was probably in the early evening in case I needed to get a drink or two afterwards. I know how I am. I probably could have used a drink before I called her.

I don't know how we opened our conversation. I don't remember any specifics. I do remember her voice sounded familiar. It was more than familiar. It sounded as sweet as I could remember it. Memories rushed back into me.

It was a normal conversation between two friends that wanted to exchange the happenings of their lives. We got caught up on family, our school time, our jobs, our friends, and all manner of life events.

Obviously, I asked her how she came to get my phone number. She told me she had called my home in Gramercy and my baby sister, Teresa, answered the phone. Teresa found my DC phone number from someone in the house and gave it to Kathleen. That mystery was solved.

I explored why she had called me. I am less clear about my memory as to her explanation for why she decided to call me. Whatever her reason, it obviously seemed plausible. I made a point of emphasizing how glad I was she called me. I truly was. I was delighted.

She said that when she got my answering machine, she really didn't remember my outgoing message. She said she had gotten the impression that perhaps I was married. It sort of explained why she didn't leave a phone number. Once I had gotten her phone number, I really didn't care why she didn't leave it before. I did make it very clear that I wasn't married and wasn't seeing anyone.

I told her I would have thought she was married to George by then. She said they had broken up some time ago and never got back together again.

And so the conversation went. I don't remember how long it lasted. I don't know who attempted to end it first. I don't remember all the details of it. I remember I told her I would like to talk to her again. I remember she didn't discourage me.

After I hung up, I was very intrigued. Kathleen was as I had remembered her, now that the memory was refreshed. She was smart, and clever, and witty, and kind. That short conversation was wonderful. I wanted to call her right back so we could talk some more.

The fact she called me all these years later made me feel pretty special. She was a special girl in all respects to me. I was so happy she tracked me down.

But where would this go?

Renewing Our Relationship By Phone

Throughout the month of January in 1988 I was occupied with my work. The work was difficult. People were going to lose their jobs because of my work. Our budgets needed to be slashed and slashed deeply. My boss was Dave Johnson, the previous, and now, reinstated Chief Operations Officer. He had been part of the previous managerial regime and lost his position a few years before when the powers that hired me began running the company. The previous regime used the October '87 stock market crash to maneuver back into power. Dave Johnson was rehired and came back to clean up the home office. He and I worked really well together in the past. We didn't have any issues between us. He gave me tremendous flexibility in creating various budget scenarios to present to the Board of Directors and Executive Team. He gave me his full support for some of the toughest decisions I had ever made in my career. Containing costs was paramount. Most of my waking hours were devoted to this task.

Ironically, I was doing anything but containing costs. I was burning up the long distance phone budget in my department talking to Kathleen every chance I could get.

Kathleen was working in the Adult Intensive Care Unit at Earl K. Long Hospital in Baton Rouge in January 1987. She worked twelve hour shifts three days in a row. She was then off for two days. Then the schedule seemed to flip where she'd work two days and was off three. In time, we worked out exactly when would be the best time for me to call.

It was not unusual for me to work late at the office in those days. I had wonderful surroundings to do the depressing work I was charged to do. The address of our offices was the corner of New Jersey and Louisiana Avenues. It was only seven blocks from my apartment which made my commute shorter than anyone else's. My office was a prime corner office, on the top floor. Out of one window was Union Station. Out of the other was the North side of the U. S. Capitol. I don't know how I rated and I never asked. It was like living in a post card. I frequently stared out those windows mesmerized by the view. I was very lucky.

In the evening, Union Station and The Capitol were lit. The lighting reflected off the white marble of the buildings and set them glowing against the night sky. In this setting I worked very hard. On the evenings I had arranged to call Kathleen, I would set aside my work a little early and jot down the notes of what I would do the next day and who I would talk to. I would then kick back, watch the clock for a few minutes, and stare out the window at my glorious view.

I always enjoyed those few minutes of anticipation. I mulled over our most recent conversation. I tossed it around in my mind and would discover a bit here or there I wanted to know more about. I couldn't wait to talk to Kathleen. Each phone call to Kathleen, every conversation, was a new revelation about Kathleen. I was so ready to learn more about her. But it was also sufficient just to hear her laugh or listen to a moment of silence. Within a few short weeks I had talked to her more than all the previous conversations we had ever had six years ago.

We talked about three times a week. Some times more. Some times less. We could talk for a couple hours or more at a time. Once in a while, though we had planned to talk, we couldn't for whatever reason. I was always disappointed and suffered the exquisite pain of having to wait until we could talk again. I recall these feelings vividly. My feelings were so adolescent that it was embarrassing.

I can't recall the specific topics we explored. It really didn't matter what we talked about. The phone calls were dates. Had we been in each others'

presence I am not so sure we would have connected anymore than we did in those phone calls. I will never know, but I feel that the intimacy we developed in those phone calls may not have flourished on regular dates with all the physicality dates entailed. Opening doors, ordering food or drinks, meeting friends, and all kinds of incidental activities get in the way of listening. Through the information we exchanged and the hopes and dreams we shared, we were consumed with attending to each other. You may think I have magnified the significance of those phone calls. I'm pretty sure I didn't and I haven't.

It became clear that phone calls were not going to advance our relationship. We needed to see each other. I felt it was incumbent on me to make the move. We discussed when would be a good time for me to slip down to Baton Rouge.

The vacation policy of my company allowed employees to accumulate unused vacation time. There was no "use it or lose it" policy. As a matter of fact, one could gather months and months of unused vacation time and cash it in for monetary compensation. One could even sell vacation time to other employees. It was a crazy system I had never encountered. It also came under my budgetary analysis as a possible extravagance that the company could no longer afford. But until I reaped some of the benefits, the policy was safe.

By the time Kathleen and I were renewing our relationship, I had about two months of vacation time I had not used. I had primarily used my vacation days during football season. I used my friend's LSU season tickets and would pop into town for home games. People in that section of the stadium used to call me the "Thousand Mile Fan." Jim Andrepont, my buddy with the tickets, and Kathleen and I to this day sit near each other in Tiger Stadium. My football weekends didn't consume very much vacation time. I only used a few Thursdays because we worked on four, ten-hour day schedules. I could catch red-eye flights back to Washington, DC out of New Orleans on Monday mornings and be at my desk by ten. I didn't use that much vacation time in those three plus years.

I had not taken any vacation since about early October of 1987. I was due. I needed to coordinate my vacation plans with my duties at the office. I had accomplished a lot in a few weeks and was in a holding pattern waiting for others to review the scenarios I had constructed. I sat down with Dave Johnson and discussed my proposed vacation plans. He gave me a lot of leeway and said they could afford to let me take a couple of weeks as long as they could reach me by phone. I was very grateful to Dave. He was very helpful to me. In the near future, he was to become even more so.

I looked at my calendar. On the near horizon was Mardi Gras. That seemed as good a time to come down to Louisiana as any. I called Kathleen with my proposal and it matched up well with her schedule. She could take a couple of weeks off and so could I. We arranged our vacations accordingly and eagerly awaited our first time back together.

February 11 could not come fast enough.

Double Dates

By the end of January 1988, I had completed the budget overhauls for the home office departments. In the past, budgets were adjusted using anticipated or proposed revenue projections. This time the budgets were zero-based. Every penny had to be justified and any questionable, proposed expenses were placed under the microscope. All of us budget hounds had worked fast and furious in the first weeks of the New Year. Suddenly I emerged from my office and found myself with nothing to do. My job was to wait until the Executive Committee and Budget Committee received the budget reports, reviewed them and compiled their comments and questions. These groups gave themselves a March 1 deadline to do this tedious work. Originally, I was prepared to stay in Washington, DC and keep myself available for any issues that emerged in these reviews. Things had changed though. I wanted to get the heck out of town and see Kathleen.

I set aside two weeks for vacation in Louisiana. Two weeks was the longest vacation I had ever taken in my life. I never considered filling two weeks of vacation with fun and frolic. The most downtime I had had in my life was the weeks after I dropped out of LSU in 1976. Those weeks were hardly a vacation. They were perhaps as depressing a set of weeks as I had ever had.

Now I had two weeks on my hands. Of course, I intended to spend time with friends and family. However, Kathleen was my primary focus. Thinking about her put me on the vacation track before I had even left town. I was already gone by the 1 of February.

I had no expectations, but given our conversations on the phone and my clearing memories of her, I knew Kathleen and I could keep ourselves well entertained.

On Wednesday, February 10, 1988, I boarded a plane at National Airport in Washington, DC for New Orleans. My adventure was underway. I do not recall who in my family picked me up at the airport, but I was very happy to feel their warm welcome and the humidity on my face. It had been since the Kentucky vs LSU game, October 17, 1987, since I had been home, the weekend before Black Monday. Oh, it was so good to be home.

I spent the evening in Gramercy. We visited and exchanged stories, got caught up on family happenings and discussed my plans for the days I had at home. The next day, Dad gave me the use of his Nissan truck so I could avoid a rental car for my days at home. By Thursday afternoon, I was on my way to Baton Rouge to meet Kathleen at her apartment.

I had made arrangements to stay with my good friends, Gerry and Cindy Moll. They lived in the Sherwood Forest subdivision, coincidentally a couple of blocks from Kathleen's parents home. Kathleen's apartment was on Newcastle Avenue off of Sherwood Forest Blvd. This situation was so different from living in Washington, DC where everything was never near anything else.

I drove to Kathleen's apartment complex and readily found her apartment. It was early afternoon. Kathleen wasn't working; she had taken extended vacation time as had I. We hadn't made any specific plans and I was fairly prepared for anything. Kathleen knew more about what was happening in Baton Rouge than I did. I knocked on her door and turned to notice I had left the truck's lights on. She opened the door, I said, "Hi! Just a second. I left the lights on in the truck. I'll be right back."

Now, you can imagine the impression that may have left. Did Kathleen think that was my ruse to get a look at her and then have a plausible excuse to high tail it for the hills? I surely hoped not. I was just a scatter brain. No more explanation was needed. We laughed about that and my goofiness actually broke the ice.

She said she had an errand to run before we could go out and about and have our date. I told her I could occupy myself until then. I suggested I could even go with her on her errand. She explained that she had agreed to take her friend's father to cancer treatments at Oschner Hospital. Her friend's mother couldn't drive and needed some help. To me, that was a little more than a run-of-the-mill errand. She told me her friend was Karen Profita, formerly Karen Jensen. I remembered Karen well from years gone by. We had become friends in our own right during that time and had

classes LSU together. I told Kathleen it wouldn't bother me in the least going with her to help Karen's parents.

We drove over to Woodland Ridge subdivision, not very far from Kathleen's apartment. Kathleen introduced me to Karen's parents, Larrie and Joanie Jensen. They were delightful. If I twisted my mind around it and looked through the kaleidoscope of experience, I could say that my first date with Kathleen after all those years was a double date to the cancer clinic. In many ways, this circumstance allowed us to become reacquainted without those vague feelings about what should I do or what should I say. Larrie and Joanie asked us questions about our relationship and we just answered them. The conversation was as normal as it could be. I do recall that even in the seriousness of our purpose we laughed a lot. Larrie and Joanie kept us entertained with their banter.

We arrived at Oschner and Larrie and Joanie went off to attend to the treatment. Kathleen and I were relegated to continue our "double date" in the waiting room. We worked through a lot of preliminary "getting caught up with each other since our last conversation" and moved right into the humorous exchanges that have marked our relationship since. It didn't matter what the topic was. Some aspect of something always strikes us as funny. I remember we paged through some magazine filled with pictures on the coffee table in the waiting room and could not find a single solitary serious thing on any page in that periodical. We were bad. We're in the waiting room in a section of the hospital where folks were in distress for their well-being and we were cracking ourselves up.

It is often said, "Misery loves company." I have expanded the notion to suggest, "Not only does misery love company, misery loves miserable company. If they had a choice between a miserable person and a joyous one, miserable people will always opt for the miserable person. People who whistle do not make friends easily in a dentist's waiting room. As a matter of fact, they are hated."

I thought about that as Kathleen and I tried to suppress our giggles and guffaws. It was like sitting in church and not able to contain a laugh until your ribs burned in pain. I felt a little guilty, but I also felt that Kathleen and I were of the same ilk.

While we pleurably tortured ourselves, I heard the intercom announce, "Dr. Gaupp. Dr. Gaupp. Paging Dr. Gaupp."

I sat up and listened. They repeated the announcement. I turned to Kathleen, "There's only one Dr. Gaupp I know. That's Myles Gaupp. He married my friend from LSU, Lynne Nowakowski. I knew his sister. She married a good friend of mine. We have a lot of mutual friend's in LaPlace

and Destrehan. I think his dad was a doctor, but that was in New Orleans. It's got to be the same guy."

I went up to the desk and asked about Dr. Gaupp. I told them I was a good friend of his, had come into town and stumbled upon this announcement. I asked if they would mind sending my name to him and, if he had a moment, to step out and say hello.

A short time passed and Myles came walking out of the treatment area. We visited a bit, I explained what we were doing at Oschner's, and I introduced him to Kathleen.

He said, "Lynne made a huge gumbo for the Mardi Gras weekend. How about you plan on joining us tonight for gumbo and a movie? I know Lynne would love to see you. Whaddya say?"

I looked at Kathleen questioningly and she sort of shrugged and said, "Sure."

He gave us his phone and address and we told him we'd see him around 7PM. It was a date. Another "double date".

Mr. Jensen's treatment finished up a little later in that afternoon. We got him and Joanie situated in the car. Joanie explained that she had some prescriptions the doctors had given her for Larrie and she wanted to get them filled. Since she couldn't drive, we went to their drug store and helped her get what she needed.

Joanie was a very dear person, a little naive and unworldly, but humorous and self-deprecating. You had to love her and want to protect her. In time she learned to drive. We didn't live far from her and we made ourselves available in case Joanie needed us for some reason. We were often in suspense as to whether or not she would get home after she left some venue. We were completely relieved when we received the phone call from her son-in-law, Bill Profita, and he announced, "The Eagle has landed." This meant Joanie had arrived home safely.

I became very fond of her and we poked at each from that time on until she passed away a few years later. I told her frequently I always appreciated our "double date". She giggled at that.

The afternoon wore on to evening. We got Larrie and Joanie home safe and sound. Kathleen was very good at helping Joanie understand the medicines and how they were to be administered. It was a task that caused Joanie much trepidation. Kathleen was very gentle and professional. It was interesting to watch her work. I could see this girl was an excellent nurse. Once all was squared away, we ended our first date, our first double date.

It wasn't long until our next double date so we headed over to White Oak Landing and Dr. and Mrs. Myles Gaupp's house. We had the best time

visiting and then settled into the serious business of eating some homemade gumbo. We settled on the floor with pillows and watched Patrick Swayze shake his hips in Dirty Dancing.

During the movie, there was little room for talking, much less intimate talking. However, almost mindlessly, I rubbed her feet during the movie. I rubbed them perhaps more than was appropriate. Perhaps I was too forward. But she never withdrew her feet. Later, much later, she informed me I had pretty much set the hook by that one action alone. She loved having her feet massaged. I didn't know. I wasn't to know for a very long time how much she liked foot massages. She withheld that information for months, if not years. I was completely unaware that I had hit a home run.

The movie ended and we said our goodbyes to the Gaupp's. On the way back to Kathleen's apartment, we talked about our interesting day, smiled at the craziness and made plans for Friday. We got back to Kathleen's apartment and we said goodnight for the evening. I drove the few miles to Gerry and Cindy's with the swirl of thoughts and feelings bouncing about my head. When I got to the Molls', I don't remember much. I know I unloaded on them and gave them the whole story up to that evening. Cindy Moll and Lynne Gaupp were sorority sisters at LSU, so there was even more to talk about. I must have seemed like a mad man to them. They had to work the next day so a bid them goodnight. We drifted off to bed down for the night.

For me, February 11 was pretty memorable. I had not been on that many double dates before.

What did the days ahead have in store?

Mardi Gras Weekend 1988

Uneventful perhaps describes the next four days, Friday through Monday. In 1988, Valentine's Day fell on the Sunday before Mardi Gras and Presidents' Day was on Lundi Gras. It really doesn't mean much, but I recall that vividly.

Kathleen and I spent as much time together as was possible, but nothing of great moment occurred between us. I would characterize that group of days as a marathon. I had never had so many dates back to back with anyone in my life. I had only just become reacquainted with Kathleen on Thursday and we became instant constant companions it appeared. We did take a breather on that Saturday before Mardi Gras. I don't recall why, but I remember needing rest. I was in the middle of a whirlwind.

Every second away from Kathleen I spent thinking about her or talking about her. She was eating up all of my attention, and rightly so. She was as beautiful as I had remembered her. She was smart, funny, quick-witted, affectionate, and every other quality to which I was attracted. My inventory of superlatives didn't match the way I was feeling about Kathleen.

Overwhelmed is as good a word as any to describe me.

We got together with her friend, Karen Jensen Profita, and Karen's husband, Bill Profita. We had already had a "double date" with Karen's parents, Larrie and Joanie. It was time to give Karen her opportunity.

Karen and Bill were newlyweds. They got married on September 5 the previous year. As I mentioned earlier, I had known Karen; I didn't know Bill at all. I could tell Kathleen had a special bond with them. Kathleen and Karen were life long friends, had been roommates, and Kathleen had been Karen's Maid of Honor. Bill, a local advertising agency owner, was interesting and fun to be around. We spent Friday evening with them at Zee Zee Gardens, a popular restaurant and cocktail bar in Baton Rouge. We spent most of our time getting to know each other. I seemed to get along with them. We got along well enough that we got together again to soak up Mardi Gras Sunday.

We also got together with another of Kathleen's friends, Donna Monceret James, and her husband, David James. David is Kathleen's first cousin. Donna and Kathleen grew up together in North Baton Rouge. Kathleen was also Donna's Maid of Honor years before. These folks were friends and family all rolled into one. I could sense a very tight bond between Kathleen and this couple. The time with them that Lundi Gras was fun and quiet, just family time.

These get togethers with Kathleen's friends were special. These "double dates" became more than a meet and greet. I knew I was learning more about Kathleen in these encounters than I could have learned any other way. I saw her sense of humor on display. She was playful. She was caring. She was quick to laugh and slow to anger from what I could tell. She was attentive to needs of others. My list of her qualities continued to grow. To see how she and the closest of her friends interacted told me so much. They respected and valued her. They clearly loved her very much.

I also judged my interactions with these important people in her life. I was new to all but Karen, but even Karen hadn't seen me in six or so years. They all made wonderful first impressions in my book. We exchanged personal information easily, explored each others' interests gently, and shared opinions and ideas unreservedly. I never felt placed under a social microscope. They were all very pleasant to me.

One small notion troubled me though. I wondered what Kathleen had told them about me before they met me. I'm sure they were mighty curious as to why this character from Washington, DC all of a sudden pops into town to see Kathleen. And then, over a few days time, Kathleen is everywhere with him. I didn't ask Kathleen about this funny feeling. I just let it ride along under my other thoughts.

An incident has always stood out in my memory even these thirty years later. The Profitas and Kathleen and I went a TGI Fridays for food and drinks on that Sunday evening. At some point I went to the bathroom. Bill came into the restroom soon after. We spoke briefly, but he made a declaration that I always remembered.

He said, "Kathleen really likes you. Y'all get along great together." That's all he said.

I don't know what I said. Perhaps I said something like, "I like her, too."

I believe the significance of Bill's comment had to do with someone other than myself deciding that Kathleen liked me. I felt like a tenth grader. You may recall the feeling. When your friends told you that the object of your adolescent affections liked you in return, it became more real. That's how I felt at that moment. And in a restroom of all places. Just like tenth grade.

I slowly and deliberately became confident that Kathleen and I did like each other. My confidence accelerated with Bill voicing his observation. It's funny the things people remember.

During this weekend, I learned that Kathleen and her family had scheduled a Colorado ski vacation following Mardi Gras. They planned to leave Ash Wednesday morning. I don't recall her having told me this before I had planned my vacation. I had a full ten business days of vacation. With weekends, I had fourteen days to spend with Kathleen. At least that was my plan. The best laid plans and all that rot.

I realized my time with Kathleen was whittling down to one more day. By that Monday night, February 15 before Mardi Gras, I was bewildered and sad. Mardi Gras loomed as my last day with Kathleen before she was off to Colorado. I surely wanted to see Kathleen again, but when would that be? Given my circumstances in Washington, DC, I could not begin to imagine my future.

It was even harder to imagine when I would see Kathleen again.

Mardi Gras & Pat O's

Kathleen and I went to New Orleans for Mardi Gras evening. We continued our marathon date with the cloud of impending separation hovering over us. We didn't want it to end. I was determined to stay in touch with Kathleen. I didn't like the idea of a long-distance relationship, but that appeared to be our trajectory.

We were having a wonderful time together. I don't recall having so much fun and being so relaxed with someone to that point in my life. I felt as if I had known her forever. At every turn in our conversations we found commonalities we had not expected. We shared similar values, experiences, and likes and dislikes.

I wanted to hold on to Kathleen. Minutes ticked by. The next morning a plane would take her to Colorado. I couldn't picture what was next.

We found a parking space in the Quarter surprisingly easy considering it was a late Mardi Gras afternoon. We strolled through the streets on our way to Pat O'Brien's. Kathleen and I were building another experience, a potential memory. We were having fun. The sights and sounds of Mardi Gras, the crazy crowds of Carnival, rushed by me in a blur. In desperation I tried to soak up every last drop of Kathleen. Everything around me paled in significance and importance. Kathleen filled my head.

We got to Pat O'Brien's and entered the portal to the courtyard. An apparent lull in the festivities had settled upon the bar because it wasn't very crowded. We situated ourselves under the Japanese yew tree growing just to the left of the outdoor bar.

I turned to Kathleen and said something like, "I'm gonna get a beer. Do you want a Jack and Coke or something else?"

I don't remember how she replied.

And then, I don't recall the exact words, but I said, "Before I get our drinks, I don't know what's gonna happen. I don't know how. But before the end of the year, I'd like to be back in Louisiana and married to you."

I hadn't planned this. I didn't think about it until that moment. I wasn't in a panic, feeling I needed to hurry up and say this. I didn't blurt it out. I didn't consider the implications. I didn't think about what she might say. I just calmly told her what I wanted. Kind of like ordering drinks.

I don't recall how Kathleen responded exactly. It wasn't dramatic. Her reaction seemed rather as a matter-of-fact. In my memory I see her looking me in the eye, smiling, and saying something as pedestrian as, "Okay."

I then ordered our drinks.

That one moment took less than a minute. The words that passed between us in that moment were few. The feelings that passed through me were white hot and burned my mind. Kathleen's response was precious. The memory is still vivid and vague at the same time.

In that moment, everything was new. Everything was changed. Everything was scary. Everything was wonder-filled. Everything was everything.

It never occurred to me to second guess myself. Whatever spark of inspiration that ignited my need to declare myself felt correct. This shift in my life had to happen the way it did with no questions asked.

Kathleen and I have frequently smiled at each other when this memory passes through our thoughts. Neither of us have exact recollections of all aspects and features of that fleeting moment. We both agree it would be impossible to reconstruct the moment perfectly. We have arrived at an agreement though. We know how to characterize how we felt. We have termed that moment, and many before and since, with the one word, "unbelievable". I know we both felt a sense of "unbelievable" that Mardi Gras evening at Pat O'Brien's under the Japanese yew tree. (I planted a Japanese yew tree in our patio area of our home in Baton Rouge when we moved in. It's our "unbelievable" tree.)

From that unbelievable moment on, I walked around in a cloud of relief that evening into the night. I no longer worried about the minutes ticking by until Kathleen was on her way to Colorado. All of the trials and tribulations in my workplace in Washington, DC seemed to have vanished from my concerns. A new, joyous set of challenges had emerged for me to work through. Kathleen had suddenly morphed into my helpmate, someone I could call upon to assist me in my new, unfamiliar circumstance. She was no longer someone for whom I had to compete or convince. We were now a team.

It's hard to express how sudden and life-changing this moment was. I will not try to expand or embellish beyond my meager efforts here. I will leave it to your imaginations.

It was "unbelievable."

And the "unbelievable" continued.

The Old Absinthe House and The Airport

We basked in the glow of our new status, "engaged couple." Folks around us didn't realize the momentous event that had happened there in

the midst. Their attention firmly focused on sucking up the remaining hours of Mardi Gras 1988.

We hung around Pat O'Brien's for a while. Having never been affianced before we weren't certain of next steps. It took us a few minutes and a couple of drinks to clumsily settle into this new phase of our relationship.

Kathleen and I left Pat O'Brien's and strolled to Bourbon Street. Revelers of every stripe pushed and shove through the night. We reached The Old Absinthe House, one of my favorite Bourbon Street watering holes back then. It has since turned into a daiquiri shop and I have no use for it anymore. Damn shame.

I don't recall ever seeing The Old Absinthe House as crowded as it was that night. A band filled the place with blaring Mardi Gras music. We negotiated our way to the bar to order drinks. I turned to Kathleen and we stepped away from the bar to let others order. Once situated, I realized I would soon need to go to the restroom. Simultaneously I realized I didn't handle this whole engagement thing by the prescriptions of tradition.

I looked I at Kathleen with a grimace.

She asked, "What's wrong? You look like you lost your wallet."

"No. I have my wallet," I told her. "I really screwed up. I just told you I planned to marry you. I should have ask you."

She said, "That's okay."

I went to my knees and took her hand. "Would you marry me?" I asked her. I was trying to be a little silly.

She burst into tears and said, "Yes!"

Well. I was just goofing around. I certainly hadn't expected this reaction. I got up and said, "Oh, Baby. Please don't cry."

She said something like, "I can't help it," through her sobs.

I was astonished and a bit bewildered. And then, my bladder filled to its bursting point. I had to go and I had to go right then. What a time to need to go to the restroom. I didn't plan this thing very well at all.

Standing next to us was a small middle-aged woman with blonde hair. I can still see her in my mind. I got her attention and asked, "Hi. What's your name?"

She said, "Dee."

"Where are you from Dee?" I asked.

"Chicago!"

"Oh. Are you having a good time?"

She said, "Yeah! It's the first time I've been to Mardi Gras. This is great."

"Wonderful Dee." Then I asked her, "Could you do me a great favor."

"If I can."

“I just asked this girl here to marry me pointing to Kathleen.

She saw Kathleen and asked, “Is she okay?”

“Yeah, she’s fine, but I have to go to the bathroom. She shouldn’t be left alone right now. I was wondering if you could stay with her until I get back. It’ll be just a moment.”

She looked at me incredulously and said, “Okay. I guess so.”

I introduced her to Kathleen and, kissed Kathleen on the cheek, and left them to do my business.

As I pushed through the crowd to make my round trip, I couldn’t help but review Kathleen’s response to my attempt at humor. I felt kind of bad that I had made fun of the ask her to marry me tradition. She obviously took it all to heart. Her response was just one more of those little special things that told me I had done the absolutely right thing. My girl was definitely a tender-heart. I didn’t abuse that wonderful quality.

I returned to Kathleen and Dee. Dee turned on me and punched me in the left jaw. I can still feel it.

Then she admonished me, “I thought you were pulling my leg. You really did ask her to marry you. Are you a fool? You don’t ask a woman to marry you and then go to the bathroom. You go to the bathroom first. Then you ask her. Are you an idiot?”

Kathleen tried to intervene and said, “It’s okay. It’s okay. Don’t hit him.”

I don’t remember much after that. It was just too funny. I surely didn’t expect to get slugged by a pint-sized Midwesterner on the night I got engaged.

We still get a chuckle from this moment that Mardi Gras evening.

We closed our night soon after this and were back in Baton Rouge well before midnight. Kathleen still had some packing to do for her trip in the morning.

We talked on the road and back at her apartment about next steps. We had decided we wouldn’t announce to the world that we were engaged. We didn’t have time to make the announce to others together. She was off to Colorado and I had to be back in Washington in a few days. We felt it was best to plan when we could be together to talk to her parents and spring the news on my parents. We agreed we would check our schedules and figure out how to make our announcement.

The next morning came. I drove Kathleen to the Baton Rouge Airport to meet up with her family. We weren’t too demonstrative in our affectionate goodbye. I suppose we both didn’t want to give our witnesses too much fodder for their imaginations. I stood there with her friend, Donna James, and said goodbye to them all as they boarded the plane.

Donna and I walked back to the parking lot. She got to her car and I had a few more rows to go to get to the truck. She bid me farewell and said, “Well, it was nice meeting you Tom. You go back to DC soon?”

“Yeah! I leave next Monday. It was nice meeting you and David too,” I replied.

“ I hope we you again,” Donna said.

“Oh! You will. You’ll see a lot more of me,” I declared, with the emphasis on more.

Donna looked at me strangely and I walked away.

Queen Margie Joke

Many of you have been following my installments of Unbelievable: Tom & Kathleen’s Story. This year, 2018, marks the thirtieth year of Kathleen and I becoming engaged and married. The story is a memoir of sorts reviewing the early days in our relationship. There were many moments we have recalled over the years that family members and friends have heard a little bit about, but have never had the whole picture. I wanted to give them the whole story in one package.

I decided to mark the anniversary of each memorable moment that has made us smile all these years by writing a little story or chapter about it. I decided to post these installments as close in time to the actual anniversaries as is possible. However, over time, some readers have begged for more and more and sooner and sooner installments, regardless of the timing. Others would prefer to read it all at once when it is finished. There’s really no great way to do this. I’m very busy restoring our home and catching an hour or two when I have time to write can be difficult.

Something that has happened is that I receive very interesting feedback and critiques of my writing. I am most gratified by the support and encouragement I have received from many of you. It’s very appreciated on my end.

I also get some cute comments about Kathleen and my relationship. Here’s a little humorous anecdote that recently happened.

Kathleen and I attended the Spanish Town Mardi Gras Royalty Brunch and the Grand Marshals’ Party following the brunch. We had a great time visiting with friends all day long. At one point, Queen Margie Moore came up to me and told me how much she had been enjoying our story on Facebook and she looked forward to more. I told her that Kathleen read the

first installment but hadn't read anymore and intended to wait until I was finished. I explained that the story was totally from my point of view.

Margie said something to the effect, "Oh. So she hasn't read most of this?"

I said, "No."

"And she doesn't know everything you wrote?"

I said, "No. I told her a couple of things I wrote about, but not everything."

"Oh! This will be fun." I could see Margie's wheels turning. She said, "I'll go visit her outside and tell her how much I am enjoying the story you're writing. I'll also tell her how I especially liked the part where you described y'all's first sexual encounter."

I cracked up. I said, "Yeah! Do that. I'd love to see her face."

After a few minutes passed I stepped outside where Kathleen was visiting with Queen Johanna Smith and a few other women from the brunch. Margie had just joined the group and entered their conversation.

Then Margie interjected, "Oh. By the way, Kathleen, I really am enjoying the story about your engagement. The part about your first sexual encounter..."

Well, Kathleen's lower jaw hit the floor, her eyes nearly popped out of her head, and her face was evolving into a crimson hue.

"...The way Tom described it was so detailed and descriptive,. I really like it." Margie continued in a vain similar to this.

Kathleen looked at me with a vicious glare.

"Tom! Oh My God! You son of a bitch."

Margie cut in and said, "I'm just kidding. I'm just kidding."

Kathleen didn't become amused right away. Margie and I, as her compatriot, were definitely on Kathleen's list of Worthless Pieces of Excrement.

It took awhile for Kathleen to recover.

No doubt, this was one of the funniest episodes surrounding this storytelling of mine. Margie's joke will live in infamy.

Reality Sets In

Kathleen was gone. Just like that, she was gone. We had spent so much time together that I got used to being with someone what seemed like all the time. Now I was alone. I felt a little like I was in the Twilight Zone.

I drove from the Baton Rouge Airport back to Gerry and Cindy Moll's. On the way to their house, I tried to recount all of the moments of the previous few days. I struggled answering the question, "What just happened?" The time we spent together seemed so short. And yet, it felt as if we had never been apart before this time.

This when the feeling of "unbelievable" really took root. I didn't use that word to describe how I felt, to summarize my experience, or to examine my new reality. Kathleen came up with the word a few months later. So I didn't know it, but I was living through this new sensation, "unbelievable."

From Ash Wednesday through the following Monday, Kathleen called me everyday.

Back to Washington, DC

I returned to my desk in Washington, DC on Monday, February 22. I had been engaged less than a week. Diving back into my work seemed odd. Those first few days back on Capitol Hill felt unreal. By the end of the week spreadsheets, business plans and executive directives occupied me thoroughly. My emersion in work made the previous precious week seem distant and unreal. The phone became our tool of romance.

Kathleen and I talked frequently on the phone. Those calls pulled me back from my work and allowed me to bask in the glories of engagement. We eventually became well acquainted with our schedules and timed our phone calls accordingly. We found no difficulty with staying in touch. We found no difficulty in running up substantial long distance charges. Our conversations ranged over topics and subjects that taught us much about each other. I remember how anxiously I waited for each next time when we could talk.

The over-riding issue that weighed on me was getting out of DC and back to Louisiana. I had fashioned a pretty good life in Washington. I liked the friends I had made. I liked living on Capitol Hill. I enjoyed the work I had been doing. Even with the turmoil at the office and the looming restructuring, my position was safe. Even if I were to go onto the chopping block, my prospects for other employment were excellent.

Overall, it had been a wonderful experience. In some ways I was giving up quite a bit to move home. Without question, giving it up to face an uncertain future with a girl I adored presented an unbelievable adventure.

Having worked with Dr. E. O. Timmons over the years, I had become familiar with the events that represented major stressors in a human

being's life. Among the top stressors were the devastating events, death of a child or death of a spouse. These events were very remote from me. Also on the list of stressors were major residential moves, getting married, and changing jobs. I had stressors in spades. I was confident I could cope. Kathleen was a perfect sounding board for my worries and concerns.

At The Office

First and foremost, I had my responsibilities at the office to which I had to attend. I also had to give my notice.

My new boss following the management shake-up was Dave Johnson. He had worked for the company before and had been moved out by the recently fired management a year or two before their own firings. I knew Dave and worked well with him. The first action I took when I got back to my office was scheduling an appointment with Dave.

I told Dave about my little vacation to Louisiana and my big news regarding the change in my engagement status. We had a great visit. I told him all of the stories I have related to you thus far. We had quite a few laughs. He asked tons of questions. We eventually moved to the more serious topics of my notice. We reviewed the timing of my notice, the schedule for my leaving, and the essential work I needed to complete before my departure.

I was committed to my obligation to help sift through the budgets of our division, Corporate Operations. We had about 10-12 departments in this division. These included human resources, the cafeteria, office supplies, facilities management, the printing and copy shop, advertising and public relations, video production, sales training, strategic planning, and project management systems. The total budget amounts were enormous. The need to cut those budgets and find any savings was under my direction with the assistance of the department heads and the other company-wide divisions.

The initial work on the budgets had been completed. I knew how much we needed to cut relative to the other divisions, Marketing, Legal, Financial, and Insurance Services. The next phase of the budget process required identifying the essential work that had to be done given the restructuring and the personnel needs given this work. Obviously to make the deepest cuts we were looking to an "RIF," reduction in force. This is never a pleasant exercise.

However, there was one employee that was prepared to be severed from the company work force, me. My next action was to write up a severance

package for myself that would benefit both the company and me. Dave and I came to terms that satisfied us both. The terms were very generous for me. It was almost as if he gave me a wedding gift.

I did not identify a specific leaving date. I wanted to give the company my services during the difficult time it was having. I had loyalty to the company for the wonderful opportunity it had given to me.

My focus shifted to the work at hand and planning my exit from Washington, DC.

Kathleen's First Visit to See Me in Washington, DC

Kathleen worked at Earl K. Long Hospital in Baton Rouge in the Adult Intensive Care Unit. Her schedule was night and day shift work at 12 hours per day on three days on two days off and vice versa. She also could accumulated "comp time", compensation in the form of days off. She had a number of days of comp time available and used them to come to Washington, DC for long weekends a few times.

Kathleen made her first trip to Washington the weekend of March 4-6, 1988. We hadn't seen each other since Ash Wednesday morning, February 17. I could say it seemed like ages, but it didn't. We talked almost everyday on the phone. Even so, it was wonderful to be together again.

Kathleen met me in the Capitol Hill neighborhood at "our" bar, The Tune Inn. With Pasty Cline and Randy Travis crooning in the air, Kathleen began meeting my Washington, DC friends. She was bombarded with the typical, "So you're the one who will straighten him out" and "Be sure to bring him back for a visit." We had a great weekend. Kathleen and my friends raked me over the coals. I knew she and they would be good friends a very long time.

We had numerous items on our agenda. I had kept Kathleen up to date on my employment status and the possible dates for me to be able to move home. We didn't need to discuss this at all.

Our biggest agenda item was figuring out how we would announce our engagement to friends and family in Louisiana. I had plenty of vacation time coming to me. It was only a matter of synchronizing our schedules and organizing the manner in which we would inform our families. We decided I would come home the weekend of March 17-20 to tell our folks.

My March Visit to Louisiana

I have only one specific, monumental memory from announcing our engagement to our families. For the most part, we were in a whirlpool of family and friends, first at her house in Baton Rouge and then at my family home in Gramercy.

Her family and mine were familiar with our past history. They were somewhat surprised that we had renewed our friendship even to the point of engagement. They wondered how it all came about and we shared our story. In time, for most of them, they thought the two of us tying the knot was the most natural thing in the world.

The one memory of note was when Kathleen and I sat down with her parents to tell them our plans. Kathleen and I sat on the sofa in the den of her parents' house. Her mother, Gloria, sat at a right angle closest to me. Her father, Vernon, sat in his chair on the other side of his wife. One could tell they were mildly curious about our serious demeanor. I could see in their faces anxiety wondering why this guy from years ago was there to talk with them with their precious daughter by his side. I don't know if they even had an inkling of what we were about to announce.

I said something like, "Miss Gloria, Mr. Vernon, Kathleen and I have decided to get married."

Miss Gloria's eyes got big and she blurted out, "You're supposed to ask him," pointing to Kathleen's dad. Mr. Vernon immediately replied, "No, he doesn't. I didn't ask your father." And the argument was on. The two of them sat there going back and forth recalling their engagement and whether or not Mr. Vernon had asked Miss Gloria's father before they had gotten engaged.

This went on for a while. It seemed like an eternity. I sat on that sofa afraid to look at Kathleen. I had not been prepared for this reaction.

Eventually the storm subsided. I don't know how it came to be okay. We left the house with everyone relatively satisfied.

Kathleen and I frequently recall that interview. It is so amusing in retrospect. It wasn't amusing at the time to me.

Easter, April 3, 1988

Kathleen came back to Washington Easter weekend 1988. Again, Kathleen came to the Tune Inn straight from National Airport. After we stowed her baggage we situated ourselves at the bar.

Kathleen put her hand on my arm and her serious voice said, “Before you get us drinks, we have some business to discuss.” She reached into her purse and pulled out an LSU schedule saying, “Your future mother-in-law told me to give you this so we could set the wedding date. The wedding can’t be on an LSU football game day.”

I hadn’t really thought about wedding dates. I was too busy trying to get a date to leave Washington. But Miss Gloria was indeed correct. Our wedding date had to be before football season, on an open date, or some time after Thanksgiving and the football season. Neither of us wanted a Friday night wedding, but kept that as a last ditch option.

The dates before football season meant we had to hustle. We had to comply with the Catholic Church prescriptions for pre-marriage instruction and counseling, we needed to identify and schedule a church, not to mention all of the other preparations for a wedding to consider. I couldn’t see setting a date before the football season.

We weren’t to keen on waiting until after football season. So we eyed the football schedule and considered away game weekends and the one open date. We decided to try for the open date on September 10, 1988.

Kathleen really wanted to get married at St. Joseph’s Cathedral in downtown Baton Rouge. It is a beautiful cathedral and the seat of the Diocese of Baton Rouge. It is as Baton Rouge as it gets. Since neither of us we’re parishioners of St. Joseph’s, we needed special permission and of course, the church had to be available. I got on the phone as soon as I could to inquire into the possibilities. Father Frank Uter was the pastor for the parish. He had at one time been pastor at St. Mary’s in New Roads, the parish of Miss Gloria’s parents and grandparents. That little bit of connection and a favorable calendar of events allowed us to nail down September 10, 1988 at St. Joseph’s Cathedral, Baton Rouge.

Just another unbelievable we added to the string.

My Parents Meet Her Parents

Kathleen returned to Louisiana with a date in hand. I was fast approaching the day when I could leave Washington, DC. Amongst the commotion of moving home and preparing for our marriage, Kathleen was presented with an opportunity for our parents to meet.

She called me one day and said that she and her parents were planning to attend a funeral in LaPlace for a family member or friend. Gramercy, the town where my parents live, is about fifteen minutes from LaPlace.

Kathleen wondered if I would have a problem with her arranging to bring her parents to Gramercy to meet my parents on the way back from the funeral. I didn't see any problem, although I had kind of wanted to be there when the parents eyeballed each other. That would have been interesting.

I told her it was fine with me, but she had to promise to call me as soon as she could to give me a report on the encounter. I didn't have any real trepidations. Our parents were about the same age and had very similar experiences, so I could imagine they would have much in common.

Kathleen called me that evening. Her first words were, "Oh Tom! We have got to get married. Our dads know each other."

I said, "What? Tell me."

She proceeded to describe the meeting.

Kathleen had talked to my parents about whether or not she could stop by with her parents. They arranged an approximate time. When that time approached, my mom and dad were seated at the kitchen table. When the Breaux party arrived at the back door, Dad could just see through the window. He opened the door and looked straight at Mr. Vernon.

Dad said, "You're Vernon Breaux. You were Leon Spires' best friend. Leon was my roommate in the Dairy Barn at LSU in September 1941. You came up there and stayed with us for two weeks and then you left. That was forty-seven years ago and I haven't seen you since. How are you doing?"

After the ensuing introductions my dad and her dad did almost all of the talking. Our mothers didn't really get too many words in edgewise according to Kathleen.

That incident has always been a wonderment to me. It truly was unbelievable.

Bobby Dalton's Alternator

When I moved to Washington, DC I brought my 1979 Malibu Classic. I wasn't a very good car owner nor was I a very rich one, so the Malibu suffered my neglect. I had become very good friends with Bobby Dalton, one of the characters of the Capitol Hill area and an excellent mechanic at a local gas station. Senators, Congressmen, and sorts of government officials found their way into the repair bay over which Bobby ruled.

My Malibu had seen that repair bay a couple of times in my tenure in DC. I fully intended driving the car back to Louisiana, but my plans in doubt as the Malibu began to act up a couple of weeks out from leaving for home. Bobby came to my rescue and tuned up the engine. In particular, he

installed a new alternator. He didn't charge me a penny. He said it was his wedding gift to Kathleen so she could get me home.

Bobby and Kathleen had hit off front the start. To this day they have a relationship that is remarkable.

Leaving Washington, DC

The weekend of April 22-24, 1988 was my weekend for leaving Washington. The weeks prior to this weekend were filled with activities. I finished up all of my work at the office and enjoyed the farewell party. I made my goodbyes to neighbors and shopkeepers I had gotten to know. I worked out the disposal of my furniture with my landlord. He even gave me my security deposit back and didn't charge me for the month of April as a wedding gift. He was an excellent landlord.

Kathleen returned to Washington, DC before the weekend got underway. We were going to drive back together to Louisiana. My mom and dad drove up to Washington in their Volkswagen van to carry my clothes, books and one table back home.

I was afraid to leave town without being able to say goodbye to everyone. My fears were unfounded. I had some wonderful friends who weren't going to let me leave town without a proper send off. Lynne Breaux, the owner of Tunnicliff's, a Capitol Hill bar and restaurant, had become a very good friend of mine. She isn't a Breaux that is related to Kathleen's family. She put together a going away party for me at her restaurant for Saturday night, April 23. Mom and Dad sat in the chairs of honor and held court, greeting my friends and hearing horrific stories and lies of my time in DC.

Sunday the owner of the Tune Inn, Tony Nardelli, decided to throw me a going away barbecue at his house in Virginia. That gathering was filled with laughter and stories also.

I was surely going to miss the friends I had made. The whole weekend was bittersweet.

Trip Back to Louisiana: Mom and Dad at Rest Stop

Monday, April 25, 1988 we headed home. Mom and Dad led the way and Kathleen and I followed. The thousand-plus-mile trip had few incidents. A couple of them became legend in our memories.

The first incident was in Virginia. Mom and Dad had pulled into a rest stop along I-80. We needed a bathroom break and took the opportunity to snack on some crackers and peanut butter. Kathleen and I noticed the

countenance of my parents. Their interaction seemed stiff, abrupt, and much too polite.

Mom would say, “Ard, could you please pass me the crackers?”

“Certainly Eloise, I’d be happy to pass you the crackers. I would be delighted to pass you the peanut butter, too,” Dad would reply.

“No, Ard. Thank you very much. I do not want any peanut butter. Thank you for asking, “ was Mom’s response.

I have never been one to avoid the obvious and asked them if something was wrong.

“Oh, we’re fine,” said Mom. “We just get very polite when we have little disagreements or arguments.”

“Eloise, I’m always polite,” said Dad.

I let it drop right there.

Kathleen and I got back in the car thinking about that interaction, wondering what we had in store for ourselves. We smiled for miles.

Trip Back to Louisiana: Sleeping Arrangements in Gadsen, Alabama

We arrived in Gadsen, Alabama Monday night. We were a little more than half way home. We pulled into a motel parking lot.

Kathleen asked me what the sleeping arrangements would be given my very Catholic parents. I told her I hadn’t considered that and it we were probably going to find out real soon.

I got out of the car and met Dad at the check-in desk. He had gotten a room for him and Mom and walked off wishing me goodnight. I got Kathleen and me a room. Apparently my parents were more progressive than I had thought.

Father Matt Lorraine and The Couples’ Questionnaire

In the next few months, Kathleen and I settled into preparing for our wedding and establishing our life together. I began consulting again with Dr. Edwin O. Timmons and Kathleen carried on at Earl K. Long Hospital. Our work and our plans moved at a normal pace. We enjoyed our time together. I enjoyed diving back into Louisiana life.

One our most important chores was attending to the Catholic preparatory procedures for engaged couples. We attended a three-day retreat, Engaged Encounter, during the Summer. Having participated in many retreats in the 1970s, I was well familiar with the basic program of the retreat. We were a little older than most of the couples there. It was odd, but not bothersome.

The next phase of our preparation involved working with our parish priest through a couple of counseling sessions to ask questions and receive advice. Kathleen's lived in the St. Patrick's Catholic Church parish in Baton Rouge. It just so happened the Father Matt Lorraine was the pastor of St. Pat's. Matt and I were well acquainted from our time at LSU in the early 1980s. He was an active in Christ the King Catholic Church community on the LSU campus and I was the Editor of the LSU Catholic, the weekly newspaper for the parish. It was a pleasure to have him as our counselor.

One of the tools used to help couples communicate is a questionnaire of 156 questions. This instrument is thought of as a compatibility test of sorts. It is more of a conversation starter to help couples discuss issues that they may not have explored or about which they may differ. Kathleen and I took this questionnaire and made an appointment with Matt to get back with him a week later to discuss the results.

We returned for our appointment. Matt said, "Well, we don't have too much to talk about. You guys are kind of special."

"In what way?" we asked.

Matt said that we had answered all 156 questions exactly the same. He said we both had left one question unanswered and even that was the same question: "Have you considered adoption?" He said he had given this questionnaire hundreds of times to couples and never had a couple return results like that.

Kathleen and I had discussed everything from joint and separate checking accounts, vacation likes and dislikes, children, where we'd like to live, retirement possibilities, hobbies, and every imaginable issue. But we had not even considered adoption as an issue. It was no wonder we answered everything the same.

It was just one more of those unbelievables.

Beans and Rice

During the weeks before our wedding we went too many family gatherings. At one of them, Kathleen related a saying I frequently told her from the movie Pretty Baby, "I love you once, I love you twice, I love you more than beans and rice." My brother, Paul, knowing just how much I love beans and rice told Kathleen, "Man, that's heavy."

Engagement Party and The First Wife

Kathleen's uncle, Roy Chustz, and his wife, Carmen, held an engagement party for us at their gorgeous home in Baton Rouge. A couple of giggles

came from this gathering. I remember at one point in the evening I was visiting with my friend, Larry Kayda. Miss Gloria approached us and introduced me to one of her friends.

Her friend said, "Nice to meet you, Tom. Must be nice to be back home." Then she asked, "Where are you living?"

Miss Gloria knew full well that I was living in sin with her daughter and, by the look on her face, she dreaded how I was going to answer her friend.

Larry noticed the awkwardness and jumped to the rescue, "Oh, Tom is staying with me." We avoided a bit of embarrassment for my future mother-in-law with Larry's quick thinking.

At another point in the evening, a friend of the family was greeting folks in the foyer of the house and ushering to the patio. Among the folk I met on the patio was Melanie Leach, a very good friend of mine. We visited for a bit and she said she had noticed people staring at her. I told her I couldn't imagine why. Within a few minutes the family friend who had been in the foyer said, "Oh! You found your first wife!" She laughed and laughed. The mystery was solved and I had to apologize to Melanie for the joke that had been played on us. Melanie is a good sport. We still laugh about it today.

Hurricane Florence

Our wedding day arrived. And so did Hurricane Florence. Hurricane Florence formed in the Gulf of Mexico during the week prior to our wedding. We all watched her with wary eyes. She was clearly tracking towards the Louisiana Coast and was projected to pass through Baton Rouge on Saturday, September 10, 1988.

I received a phone call from my friend, Father Etienne LeBlanc. He was to be the priest to officiate at our wedding. His church parish, Holy Cross in Morgan City, and his high school's facilities were being prepared for emergency services for the hurricane. He told me he could not get to Baton Rouge. Fortunately, Matt Lorraine was available.

I had made a comment to Miss Gloria, my soon-to-be mother-in-law, about the wonderful food that had been catered and arranged at the LSU Faculty Club for our reception. I told her it could come in handy for hurricane refugees should we have to cancel the wedding. She turned on me and said I wasn't funny.

By Saturday morning, it was clear that Florence was not going to be much of a problem. I believe by the time it hit Baton Rouge it was actually a Tropical Storm or Depression.

By the time the wedding service was over and we were walking out the front doors to the peel of the cathedral's bells, the skies had cleared and the Sun shone brightly on our unbelievable story.

The Beginning.

Love,

Tom

