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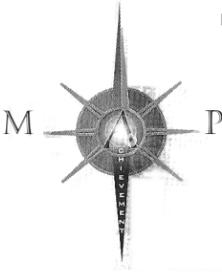


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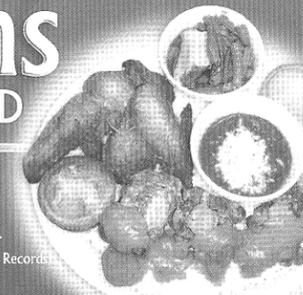
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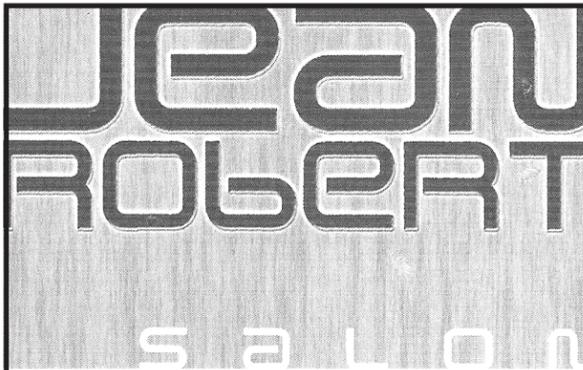
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The Good Life is Not Far Behind

by G. Mynd

Chapter 1

Spinning Out of Control

Michael Jefferson had always been a calm, cool-headed kind of guy. But this particular morning, he looked unsettled and shaky as if he were walking on pins and needles. As he entered the forty-story high rise where he worked, it was totally out of the ordinary for him to pass Jennie (the receptionist) without speaking. He walked quickly as if he were in a trance.

"Hi Mike. How was your weekend," asked the receptionist with a curious smile.

Mike had slowed down his steady pace when he decided it would be more fitting for him to answer her.

"Oh, aah... It was fine. How was yours?"

He could faintly hear Jennie answering him, but he hadn't a clue what she said.

His mind was on so many things and he regretted that he was now bringing those things to work with him. The weekend had been a total disaster and his problems were only just beginning.

As he turned the corner and began walking through rows of cubicles, he could hear others greeting him, some with formality and others with more casual salutations. Still in a little bit of a daze, he said a series of hellos in smaller numbers than those that had come to him.

He finally reached his cubicle at the end of the isle and flopped down in his chair. A deep breath followed as he spun his chair around toward the computer.

"What in the world have I gotten myself into?" he thought.

He shook his head and covered his face with both hands.

"I've got to get through this," he said out loud. "I have got to take care of this."

"Take care of what?" a voice said as footsteps came closer. A stout, well-dressed man entered Mike's cubicle. "What's up, buddy?"

It was John Randolph, a friend and fellow NuStart employee from the fifteenth floor. For about three and a half years, John would come from the accounting department to Mike's floor every Monday morning like clock work to pick up payroll documents. It was their normal routine to stop and have coffee with each other around that time.

Mike raised his head, and John could see signs of fatigue.

"Are you alright?" John asked.

"Yeah. I'm alright. Just going through some things. Had a really bad weekend."

"Gloria still giving you problems?"

"No. Actually, it's not Gloria this time. It's Debra."

"Man! How do you do it? So many women. So little time. So many problems."

"Let me tell you," replied Mike. "It's nothing to brag about. I wish I had never met these women! All of them are giving me headaches."

"All of them? How many more do you have?"

"I don't know! I've just gotta get myself together. All this nonsense is blowing me away."

"Well. I tried to tell you at the party. You are well over your head."

"Yeah. Yeah. I know. You tried to tell me."

The two men drank their coffee and talked for another five minutes. That was usually when one of them would say it was time to get some work done, and the other would be accommodating and say the same. But today was different for Mike. His mind was stuck on his problems. He was in too deep and he knew it. He had to do something about his life because it was spinning out of control.

Chapter 2

Love is in the Air

Night time seemed to be the best time to go to the Old Wagoner Bridge. The moonlight pierced incredibly through the surrounding pine trees making the lighting more astounding there than any other place in the small town.

The bridge was the place where Mike and Gloria always came to talk things over. They had been seeing each other for two years to the day, and, seeing as how Mike knew that Gloria loved sitting on the old bridge, he thought this would be the most romantic place they could be on their anniversary.

"Sweetheart, let's just stay like this forever," said Gloria. "Wouldn't that be wonderful?"

"Yes, baby. But you know I have to make things right."

"I know honey. But can we just hold each other now and embrace our time together tonight?"

"You're right," Mike said as he hugged Gloria affectionately with both arms. "I need to think about you, my flower, and nothing or no one else!"

The night came alive with the sound of kisses and moans. They were both happy to be there with each other. The romance of the night made everything they faced seemingly fade away.

Chapter 3

Some Wrong-Doing Going On

The sound of a small motor boat pierced through the forest as darkness began to subside and the morning light became more pronounced.

The Wagoner bridge was in plain sight as two fishermen sped through the water under the 15 feet high wooden bridge in an old silver motor boat.

"Today could be the best fishing day we've had

this year with the recent rains and all," said Bob Tuffin as he reached behind to turn off the motor.

It was 5:45 in the morning. Bob and his friend of sixty-seven years, Tom Lochner, had gone fishing every second Tuesday of the month for years. The 74 year old men had both retired from the Army in 1975. It was almost a necessity for them to be floating along Chosen Pines Lake in Tom's 10 foot row boat early on those mornings.

People said that Bob knew more about the lake and the surrounding forest than any other resident of Chosen Pines because he had lived there his whole life.

Tom had lived there since he was six years old. He and Bob basically grew up together, almost like brothers. They had both married years ago. Both wives were deceased, and their children, now adults, had moved to different parts of the country.

As with most senior citizens, life had brought Tom and Bob many ups and downs, and they had managed to handle everything and somehow move forward.

"Ya know, I just can't understand why the city council wants to have a road built through the north section of town. Mr. Wagoner would roll over in his grave if he knew this kind of nonsense was going on."

"Well, Bob, the point of the matter is, we need that road," said Tom adamantly. "Otherwise, total strangers are going to be driving through town doing Lord knows what on their way through. Are you ready for that?"

"I guess you're right to some degree," Bob replied shaking his head in agreement. "You have to give a little to get a little."

Thurgood Johnson Wagoner had founded the town of Chosen Pines in 1897. He had been Mayor of the small urban community that was now about 6,000 people until his death at the age of 90.

Tom and Bob knew Mayor Wagoner personally and they never hesitated to discuss with anyone, how profoundly the town had been managed under the old administration.

Many thought Mr. Wagoner's son, Thurgood, Jr., would be his successor, but that assumption was put to rest after Thurgood Jr.'s untimely death. He had lost control of his car coming around a canyon road near the outskirts of the city.

"Hey! I think I got a bite," said Tom. "It's a big one, too!"

"Reel her in!"

"Let's see....Wait! Something's wrong! What on earth...?"

As the boat drifted closer, a white object appeared above the water. The sunlight shone through the clouds giving them just enough light to see that something other than a fish was on Tom's line.

(story continued on next page)

(story continued)

"It's a lady's handbag," said Bob as Tom reeled the object in closer to the boat.

The two used the end of the fishing pole to investigate the object as it remained in the water.

"It looks brand new," said Tom. "Come on. Let's get it in the boat so we can see what's inside."

They pulled the object into the boat and with a pair of pliers and a screw driver, began to open it carefully without touching anything. Having years of experience as military police, they both knew not to contaminate what might be potential evidence.

What they thought was a handbag was actually a waterproof hiking bag. In it they found a couple of large rocks along with a women's wallet, makeup items, a hair brush, other personal hygiene items, a small address book and, a knife with a wooden handle that was stained with what looked like blood.

The wallet contained no driver's license, i.d., or photos, but in the side zipper area, Bob found \$250.00 in cash. There were five new fifty dollar bills all splattered with blood on the back sides.

"I think this is something for the police to see," said Tom. "Let's cut the fishing short so we can make our way back."

"Yeah. There's some wrong-doing going on here."

The two gentlemen put the newly found material back in tact and placed it in a plastic bag. The conversation back to the dock was intriguing. Who did the bag belong to? Whose blood was on the knife and the money? By the time the two had reached the dock, the crime (if any), in their opinions, had been thoroughly investigated and was ready to go to trial. This was the most action these two had encountered in years, and it was all taking place on a routine fishing trip.

Chapter 4

"He Did It!"

"This great city is on its way! We are not going to be pushed around by bureaucrats and state officials in high government! I personally promise to work day and night to finally protect the rights and interest of our seniors! And I will continue to do the same for every other law-abiding citizen in Chosen Pines! That's my guarantee!

The local high school band played vehemently as Mayor Samuel Wagoner finished his speech and began to walk to his seat on the platform. As the band continued to play, Mayor Wagoner shook hands with the other speakers that were present. People stood to their feet and cheered extensively.

The rally was being held to promote the state-funded, state-of-the-art, senior citizens retirement complex that was to be built in Chosen Pines due for completion within the next three years. The town had out grown the present, out-dated retirement homes and legislation had already been passed to get a new complex built. But now, construction had been put on hold because state legislators saw fit to use the money on what they deemed "more crucial projects".

On the front row, as usual in events like these, Margaret Simpson and Betty Leeson, the town's two most prominent, habitual gossipers, spoke their opinions to each other as they stood slowly and continued to applaud with the rest of the crowd.

"You know. He seems to be taking on his dad's demeanor, dressing like him and everything," said Margaret.

"Um, huh. I noticed the same thing. He not only looks the spitting image of his dad, but they say he talks the same politician jiberish as his granddaddy."

"You know, I heard that, too. But I wonder what his dad would be saying if he could see how little Samuel grew up.

"What do you mean, grew up? He acts like an out-of-control child! He's been through so many women in and out of town, that there should be some kind of award for him; not for having so many women, but for not having illegitimate children all over the place."

"Girl, you never know though."

"Yeah, you're right. You never know. But all that aside, he sure seems to be taking a big interest in this doggone senior citizens complex."

"I noticed that too. I guess he wants to leave some kind of legacy."

"Yeah. Probably so."

The two women continued to chit-chat while watching the forty-eight year old mayor wave to the crowd.

For the last three years Samuel Wagoner, the grandson of Chosen Pines' founder, had been the mayor. Though he was extremely flamboyant in his spending habits and everyone knew him to be excessively friendly with the ladies, he ran a top

notch ship when it came to getting things done for the people in Chosen Pines. He and his younger brother Matthew owned two-thirds of the town. Matthew had become a prominent attorney and was working in New York when he wasn't traveling abroad.

Everyone who had lived in Chosen Pines for any length of time knew all the affairs of the Wagoners. No matter if any of the rumors about the Mayor were true or false, people that lived there had pretty much accepted him as Mayor and trusted him past his foibles.

Just as the festivities of the rally began to dissipate and the Mayor and his group were saying their last "thank you's" and "good-byes" to the crowd, an uproar could be heard coming from the parking area. The words were loud and clear.

"I'm gonna tell everybody what you did, you low-life piece of trash!" shouted an irate man as he walked swiftly toward the platform. It was Mike Jefferson, and he seemed to be deranged and out of control. The remaining crowd started to scream when Mike began to run toward the platform while pulling a gun from his suit coat pocket. He continued to shout as he got closer.

"You set me up, you bastard! I'm gonna blow you away!"

A police officer standing near the platform yelled, "Stop! Put down your weapon!"

The panicked crowd scattered. Some people ran. Others went to the ground.

Three other policemen ran toward Mike reaching for their revolvers in the process.

Mike yelled frantically again, "I'm gonna get you for this!"

Mike then aimed his gun at the Mayor and three quick gunshots rang in the air!

A man standing on the platform immediately grabbed the Mayor and rustled him to the platform floor. Screams and cries of terror could be heard as people ran to their cars, hid behind chairs, and continued to panic!

But the Mayor had not been shot. It was Mike who layed on the ground bleeding from three gunshot wounds to the chest. He had been shot by two officers who were standing near the platform.

As on-site paramedics moved in, other officers with their revolvers still drawn slowly approached Mike as he took two deep breathes and said, "He did it...the Mayor did it!" At that moment, he raised his arm, pointed toward the Mayor and died.

Almost everyone still present turned and looked toward the platform at the Mayor who was now standing dusting off his clothes. Chattering could be heard throughout the premises as people began to recuperate from the shocking ordeal.

"What was that guy talking about?" one person said. "What did he mean?" said another.

The Mayor began to talk to people who were standing around him on the platform.

"I have no idea what was in his mind! I grew up with this man! I am completely overwhelmed by thiscompletely overwhelmed!"

As the Mayor spoke to officers and others, an ambulance came and the crowd was dispersed.

Though most of the people at the rally had left before the shooting, many others came from the office buildings nearby when they heard the shots and all the commotion. Two news vans came to the scene and T.V. cameras began to roll.

People stood in the parking lot and watched in amazement as Michael Jefferson's lifeless body was taken away by the paramedics.

The entire catastrophe was unheard of! Nothing like this had ever happened in Chosen Pines.

Chapter 5

"I Would Like To Report A Crime"

At approximately 7:35 the next morning, Gloria walked into the Chosen Pines Police building downtown. She was crying as she walked through the reception area to the front desk.

"May I help you?" asked the lady officer at the front desk.

"Yes. My name is Gloria Bingham. I would like to report a crime. I need to see someone right away."

Gloria's eyes were swollen from crying. She looked as if she hadn't slept all night, and she repeatedly wiped her nose with a glob of tissue.

"Okay, Ms. Gloria Bingham," replied the officer. "What crime would you like to report?"

"A murder dammit! It was murder!" shouted Gloria.

"Now calm down Ms. Bingham. Let me get someone out here to speak with you. Just have a sit over to the left, and I'll get someone for you."

Gloria cried even more as she took a seat. An officer came about a minute later and introduced himself.

"Hello. I'm Officer Clark. How may I help you?"

"Well, Officer, I have to report a murder" she replied after calming herself down.

Gloria began to tell the Officer what she knew. He eventually walked her to a small room down the hall and called in two other people.

"Now, Ms. Bingham," said Officer Clark. "This is Detective Roland and Officer Birdston. Now, please tell them about the incident you started to tell me about earlier. Start from the beginning again please. But first, do you mind if we tape this session?"

"No. I don't care at all."

Gloria asked for some water, and one of the men got up to get her some. One of the officers started a tape recorder, and Gloria began to speak.

"Well, as far as I know, my boyfriend, Mike...you know, Michael Jefferson, who was killed yesterday at the rally...."

One of the officers responded, "Yes. He was your boyfriend?"

"Yes. We were engaged to be married in June of next year. But that obviously won't happen." She began to cry again with her head hung low bobbing up and down with every whimper.

"Try to continue, Ms. Bingham," said Officer Clark softly.

(To Be Continued)

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We will send you the registration form, the Official Rules, and the remainder of the partial short story published in this issue. (For this debut story, you must be 18 years of age or older to participate.)

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ZONE 3 - Hawthorne, El Segundo, Lawndale, Gardena, Torrance, Lomita, Carson, Manhattan Beach, Hermosa Beach, Redondo Beach, and Rancho Palos Verdes

ZONE 4 - Watts, Lynwood, Willowbrook, and Compton

ZONE 5 - San Pedro, Wilmington, Long Beach, and Signal Hill

ZONE 6 - Hawaiian Gardens, Lakewood, Bellflower, Paramount, Downey, Norwalk, La Mirada, Santa Fe Springs, Whittier, and Hacienda Heights

ZONE 7 - Miracle Mile (Wilshire area), Santa Monica, Venice, Marina Del Rey, and Playa Del Rey

ZONE 8 - Hollywood, West Hollywood, Bel Air, and Beverly Hills

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