

From *Growing Up on Route 66*
By Michael Lund
First in the Route 66 Novel Series

Prologue: The Open Book

At the next-to-the-last rehearsal for my high school's junior class play, Linda Roper struck Martin Pruitt in the groin. She did not do it on purpose, of course; and Martin was not seriously hurt. But for over thirty years I have carried a picture of that event around with me; and now, suddenly I understand what was involved.

Here is some more of the picture as it has reappeared recently in my memory: the play's cast, about a dozen eleventh graders from Fairfield (Missouri) Senior High School, is making a semi-circle around the comely young teacher/director, Miss White. We have been practicing for a performance of "Escape from Time," a 1930's comedy about a hobo/hero who poses as a visiting therapist at an old folks home. Miss White is not impressed with her Thespians at this moment, and she has stopped the rehearsal to give us a pep talk.

As Linda Roper takes a step back to create a space around Miss White, her arm swings at her side in a casual arc like the pendulum in a grandfather clock. At the same moment that she retreats and her arm comes down, Martin Pruitt steps forward. He is making room for students beside him to move toward the center of the semi-circle.

Linda's hand is half-closed, almost making a fist; and it collides directly with the flap of blue jeans material covering Martin's zipper. The blow is solid enough to make a sound--thump! The boys who see it wince.

"Boys and Girls," Miss White is saying in her sweet, first-year-teacher's voice. In the general shuffle she is ignoring or did not notice the collision between Linda and Martin. Evidence of a silent gasp, however, is visible on some of the girls' faces. "Listen to me, listen to me, puh-lease."

Miss White stands erect with her arms folded around a large, annotated version of the script pressed to her breast. In "Escape from Time," the handsome Mr. Entwilder is saddened by what he sees in the nursing home; and he decides to wake up the numbed residents to the joy of life. He also falls in love with a beautiful young nurse, the only one on the staff who already knows how much everyone needs revitalization.

As Miss White speaks, Martin, who cannot stop the instinctive recoil of his pelvis away from Linda's fist, but who is somehow able to keep from crying out, silently doubles over. To anyone in the dramatic frame of mind, like Miss White, he might seem to be taking a bow.

"We must get more feeling into our lines," Miss White pleads, looking around at each of us. "Some of you are just going through the motions."

Martin's head is down, though the pain, it will turn out, is not so severe as those who see it at first assume.. Or perhaps we witnesses, surprised, have exaggerated the sound of contact.

Some in the circle of students gathered around the director had first tittered, then as quickly fallen silent, when Linda hit Martin. In those days, attention was never directed toward genitals, male or female. So we saw, we responded in a kind of shock, and then we denied according to convention.

I was standing, by the way, down the line from Martin in the semi-circle that faced Miss White. For reasons I will explain, I had been watching Linda Roper as she backed into Martin Pruitt; so I saw clearly the reactions of both parties.

Miss White pulls Mike Davidson, the male lead, out beside her into the center of the circle. "When Mr. Entwilder kisses Nurse Primer," she goes on, "He has to move as if he means it." Squaring off in front of him, she takes his two hands and places them firmly on her own shoulders.

Miss White's instructions do not matter much to me. I have only a minor part in the play, as a friend of Mr. Entwilder, a fellow tramp who urges him to leave the nursing home and his, at first cavalier, then more serious romance with Nurse Primer. In three acts I never set foot on stage but speak to characters from the other side of a high garden wall, part of the scene's backdrop.

"You are not kissing your sister in this act," Miss White chides Mike Davidson. "You are stricken with love."

Mike is ordinarily comfortable standing out in a crowd, but right now he cannot control a blush rising from his shirt collar. Mike feels awkward, as any of us boys would, because Miss White is very pretty and very young, and because his girlfriend, Marcia Hall, also in the play, is watching from a position just a few steps away from me.

Just as Marcia and Mike made up a couple, Linda Roper and Martin Pruitt were, in the language of the time, "going steady." In fact, this pair provided a model for me of what was possible in the world of teenage romance. Linda and Martin embodied not just the public image of dating--he carried her books, she wore his letter jacket, they came to all the parties together--but around them had grown the reputation of love's private beauty as well.

"Kiss me," Miss White commands. Mike Davidson stands frozen in front of her, his hands locked on her shoulders, his face pale in confusion. He is tall, much taller than the diminutive blonde woman who just last spring was a senior drama major at Southwest Missouri State College. So holding her requires his bending over, as if beginning the kiss he has been ordered to bring to her lips. But she must pull herself up to him and slip her small hands behind his neck to draw him close.

Did Linda and Martin, the perfect couple, go, as we put it in those supposedly innocent days, "all the way"? It was the question we asked about any relationship that lasted several months. Close friends claimed, betraying sworn secrecy, that Linda and Martin had separately admitted to intimacy. But, as we all know, what we say we do may not be--especially in sexual matters--what we really do.

Such questions were difficult for me to resolve, given my rather limited experience. Even though I had, with neighborhood pal Marcia Terrell, advanced to amazingly intricate stages of petting, I could not really imagine taking the final logical steps.

I now know, however, the answer to the ultimate romantic question about Linda and Martin. I figured it out only recently, as I've said, when the picture of her hand bouncing off his crotch rose magically once more in my memory. It's not new information about those two that provides the answer; it's my own expanded frame of reference from thirty years of experience in life.

In fact, now that I think about it, I realize that I also understand Mike Davidson's embarrassment far more fully than I did at the time: he was having an affair with Miss White, the young teacher/director. (I must have learned this at one of our class reunions, the fifteenth?) It was not kissing her that was a problem for Mike: it was kissing her as if this were not a regular thing for him!

The same principle applies to Linda Roper, whose action, after she hit Martin, I haven't yet spoken of. The picture of her face, not Martin's, is, in fact, what has most haunted me ever since the event. When her hand rebounds off her boyfriend's privates, she looks over her shoulder (she does not spin around) and says, almost (but not quite) nonchalantly and with a little smile, "Whoops."

The look on her face--not of alarm or shame or surprise--and the way the little "Whoops" slips out of her mouth now tell me something I could never have known at the tender age of sixteen: Linda knew from

experience what she had struck; she understood from past contact precisely how hard she had bumped her lover; and she could predict fairly accurately how much discomfort a blow of that magnitude would cause Martin. Nothing else but the knowledge gained from experience can account for the easy way in which she turns back to Miss White, listening to her instructions, as Martin straightens up and finds himself not so badly hurt as he had thought.

I suppose I ought to feel pretty stupid that Linda Roper at sixteen knew more things about sexual exchange than I would learn in another decade and that it would take twenty more years before chance (the sudden appearance of this image one more time in memory) encouraged my expanded knowledge to reinterpret this event from the past. But I have decided to take a positive approach to this discovery, to be grateful that, if for many years bewildered, I understand at last. I'm glad that some things which happened long ago now make sense to me, that the road I've traveled has clearer landmarks when I look behind me than when I was moving forward.

Perhaps this is why I think the life of my generation is so neatly embodied in the current fad of retracing the old path of Route 66, that famous highway in American history. Steinbeck's "Mother Road," in fact, passed just a few blocks from Fairfield Senior High School; and the story of this town's youth would be reflected in changes to that highway.

Ah, children of America's heartland in the second half of the twentieth century, where are we today? Although our journey from innocence to experience is in many senses completed, there are important stages in that process we are only now ready to understand. I would love, for instance, to linger over the story of Linda Roper and Martin Pruitt, and not just their parts in the junior play. The mythic pattern of their romance, I have only recently begun to suspect, shaped their classmates' future far more than anyone could have predicted at the time.

Our lives are, really, open books, stories which, though written, can be read and reread with profit. To determine the future we must visit, and revisit, the past. In some cases--like middle America's 1950s--the past at least seems a pleasant and fortifying place. I propose, then, keeping a seat at that table for a time before looking down the road which we will soon have to travel.

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