

From Miss Route 66
By Michael Lund
fourth in the Route 66 Novel Series

Prologue: Belly Dance

"If I wet it, Susan," Mr. Pierce said, dipping his cigarette-browned index finger into the water of the Coke glass before him, "and then put my finger on the lip of the glass. . . ."

We were sitting in a booth at Fanny's Dairy Delite one Saturday more than twenty years ago, me a naive twelfth grader and he the worldly high school assistant principal. Me a declared contestant for the coveted crown of Miss Route 66, he a long-time promoter of that Fairfield beauty pageant.

"Yes?" I asked, wondering then what it was he was going to show me, wondering now at how innocent I must have been not to pick up on his intent from the first.

"If I circle the glass," he continued, his finger moving slowly around the rim. "If I circle the glass with just the right pressure, at just the right speed--like this--it will make a note."

And, indeed, a sound did rise up out of the glass, a ringing hollow tone I associated with the wind's moaning on a winter night in some romantic castle: "Oooooo," sang the glass.

"That's neat!" I agreed brightly, taking the straw out of my glass so I could try the same thing on my side of the booth.

As I was putting the straw on a paper napkin, Mr. Pierce reached across the booth and stopped my hand. With his fingers wrapped gently around my wrist, he leaned forward and looked intently at me. I noticed an oddly excited look in his eyes and extra saliva gathering at one corner of his mouth.

"I can put my finger on another place," he said in a husky whisper. "And you'll make the same sound: 'Oooooo.'"

He leaned closer. "You'll do a belly dance. 'Oooooo.'"

His voice dropped to a whisper. "And love it. Oooooo."

At this point I jumped up from the booth and ran out of the store, essentially terrified. I didn't understand exactly what he was talking about, but all my instincts screamed together: "Get out of here now!"

It was not the last time I had to confront Mr. Pierce and his notion of our making music together. In fact, the next time he looked into my eyes scarred my young psyche so deeply I'm only now able to talk about it. And to seal it into the past forever.

That's why I'm driving down to Fairfield several decades after the 23rd annual Miss Route 66 Pageant, determined to rectify a wrong done to me and some other girls I knew in those days. It's an anniversary celebration for the town, the sesquicentennial. But no one knows the surprise I'm planning for the mayor, the chamber of commerce, the powers that be.

I've always been a believer in consummation, you see, in things moving inevitably toward a final appropriate relationship. So if a process was initiated, then broken off, odds are, I believe, it will pick up later and continue to an end. Matters that were tilted out of kilter at one time long ago will come back level at a later date. Today is my time to set things straight in the small town of my birth.

This belief in an underlying order toward which we move is so old with me I've concluded it must have

grown out of my childhood. Even the onomatopoeic sound of my name--my maiden name, that is, "Bell"--asserts, to me at least, the resonance of a perfect note, intention and fulfillment in one sound.

My family too was a harmonious whole throughout my growing up, as father, mother, older sister, and I shared a sense of destiny, the wholeness of clan. Not that we thought of ourselves as upper class, above others, but we were the Bells of Fairfield, Missouri, nuclear family in a small town at the heart of the country.

Tricia and I grew up in a close neighborhood too, several dozen parents raising a generation of young people in an area so unified we kids called it the "Circle." It was a new section on the edge of town then, frame and brick two-bedroom homes (later expanded) built to keep pace with growth during World War II and in the boom years afterward. The loop made by its three principal streets--Oak, Hill, and Limestone--gave us the sense that we were living within some benevolent realm, a circle of magic.

Even into our teenage years, my world remained connected, contained within supportive boundaries. Our high school cruising route even completed a circle: Main Street out to Business Route 66 (also called Kingshighway) past Fanny's Dairy Delite around to Sixth Street, back up to Main. We'd make that circuit ten times in the course of a Friday or Saturday night in those days, seeing the same sights but refreshing ourselves with every trip.

Life was a lovely song for me until twelfth grade, until I got caught up in the Route 66 Pageant. And something, or someone, broke the spell, ended the age of innocence. Mr. Pierce, yes. But there were also others.

That's why I'm headed back down the path of fabled Route 66 (today I-44) to Fairfield, ready to complete a set of actions begun over twenty years ago, desires abandoned in the middle of their pursuit, aspirations left to be fulfilled now.

All of this brings us back to Mr. Pierce, a man whose interest in me was, thankfully, never consummated. I didn't understand his intentions then, of course, for at least two reasons: I didn't know my own power; and I didn't understand his lack of it.

Let me explain. I hope my chief source of strength is immaterial, my heart and my character. My family and friends say it's so. But I also know a significant portion of what force I can exert in a man's world comes from my body, more specifically my belly.

You see, I have had since I entered puberty an unusually flat, attractive stomach. My breasts are modest, my rear end appealing enough, I suppose. But the way my hips are hung, my flat tummy--even after three children--moves, rocks, swivels, and bumps in ways that, it turns out, men can't seem to resist.

This was something I was just beginning to learn at about the time Mr. Pierce made his indecent proposal. It came as my generation learned first the Twist and then other pelvis-oriented dances, all this at the time fashion was lowering the line where we wore our jeans and tightening the tops of our skirts. I could do, you see, a belly dance.

And Susan Bell with her alluring middle was an unconsciously seductive object of desire for someone like Mr. Pierce.

I also I suspect I know now why the same man made so much of his finger and the note it could sound on a glass of water. Even my sweet husband of twenty-five years has acknowledged that a middle-aged man cannot always, shall we say, rise to the occasion. And that later encounter I had with the Route 66 Pageant official also hinted that leverage was, for him, a recurring problem.

A virgin sitting across the booth from the assistant principal at Fanny's Dairy Delite, I did not then have sufficient petting experience to know the length or duration of manhood. I remember, in fact, how startled I was when I felt Jack Greer, dancing close at a school function, press himself against my tummy. Could

that be his . . . um . . . ?

I also had no idea about substitutions in the game of love. There were, so far as I knew, one male organ, one female organ, and one position for those involved. What a range of options, equipment, partners, goals my own daughters know about already in their teenage years!

Old Mr. Pierce's proposal, on the other hand (so to speak), was not for what he truly wanted. But more than digital manipulation was out of his reach (I can't seem to avoid these puns!). I could have done a belly dance for him, that is, but he wouldn't have been able to join in.

And now I'll be back in town to make a more complete response to Mr. Pierce's offer, as well as to the offers of other men I've encountered in later life. It's a story that will have a happy ending, I think, even if there are some perils and heartaches to endure before then. There are also some laughs to be had along the way, moments where I'll make some happy sounds (though not at Mr. Pierce's direction) and you can, too. So I hope you'll take the journey with me and be pleased with the results. Ooooo!

Susan Bell Thornton

St. Louis, Missouri