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The Normal Guy
a novel by Zachary Scribner

about 60,000 words

For Gregory McDonald.

Come on, is the restraining
order really necessary?

Prologue

Out of the Frying Pan

Ford fitted the key into the deadbolt, muttering a silent prayer. The key scraped and protested as he tried to turn it in the lock, but at least it seemed to work. With a sigh of relief, he twisted the doorknob.

"Right this way," Ford said with a hearty smile, stepping aside as the apartment door swung open. "Welcome to my new digs."

First his best friend Peter Donovan, then his younger brother Barry, filed past him into the narrow entry hall.

Peter stopped not six feet into the apartment. "Phew," he said. "'Digs' is right. Smells like an archeologist would be right at home here. Brings back fond memories of that

place we had in college in Salt Lake."

"Ugh," Barry said, right behind Peter. "No wonder you two were always out getting in trouble. You couldn't stand to stay home."

"Getting in trouble?" Peter asked in mock offense. His black beard bristled. "Ford, what kind of stories have you been telling this little brother of yours?"

"Only the truth." Ford was lingering on the threshold, nervous to actually enter, afraid of what he would find. "And Barry's not so little anymore."

"I'll tell you what this place smells like," Barry said, sniffing. "I left some sweaty clothes in my gym bag once, and then forgot about them for a couple of months. When Mom finally opened the bag to wash them, this is the sweet aroma that wafted forth."

Ford made a face. "How would you know? I can't believe you were anywhere near the laundry room when it happened. That would be totally out of character for you."

"I know because she hunted me down and practically rubbed them in my face before she threw them out. My shorts were black from the mildew."

"Good old Mom." Ford closed the door behind him, and the apartment dimmed to an oppressive gray. "You probably would have gone ahead and worn them again otherwise."

Peter was peering to his right, through a doorless chipped doorway into the living room. "Open that up again,

Ford," he said. "We need the air."

"Oh, come on," Ford said, breathing as shallowly as he could. "It's not that bad."

"So said the Nazis to the Jews. 'Zis Zyklon B disinfectant may smell a bit unpleasant, but it will do wonders for your sinuses. Trust us.'"

Barry peeked around a corner to the left. "It gets even better in the kitchen, bro. Looks like someone invented a new party game here. The object is to see how many plates and cups and bowls you can pile up before the stack either falls over or transmutes into a new life form." He looked back at Ford. "The humans don't seem to be winning."

Ford remained in the entry hall while Peter and Barry traded places, like two scouts on point.

"Gross," Peter said, examining the kitchen. "Totally and idiotically gross."

"Nice decor in the living room, though," Barry said. "Not necessarily creative, but definitely tasteful. Oh, my, yes . . ."

Ford finally screwed up enough courage to trail Barry into the living room. Peter followed.

Barry opened the blinds that covered the sliding glass door. Bright daylight from the courtyard outside flooded into the room. A sofa and love seat upholstered in early grunge met in the corner of the room. The cushions were stained and askew. The coffee table was covered with magazines, bills,

receipts, pizza boxes, Coke cans, bread crusts, crushed peanuts, crumpled advertising circulars, remote controls, and a couple of mismatched socks. Crumbs were ground liberally into the rug. A television with crusty food on the screen and a bent hangar for an antenna sat on a pair of orange crates in the opposite corner. Tacked in a two-by-three arrangement on the adjacent wall were six identical black-and-white posters of a disheveled but smiling Claudia Schiffer nearly falling out of her black lace bustier.

Peter folded his arms, stood back from the posters like a museum patron, and nodded his head. "Very nice. Andy Warhol himself couldn't have done any better. Don't you think the repetition makes quite a statement about the current state of pop culture?"

Barry couldn't take his eyes off the posters. He was only nineteen.

"Well, those will have to come down," Ford said. He opened the sliding glass door for air. He thought he might either vomit or pass out. "Can't entertain quality women in an environment like this. And this mess will have to be cleaned up . . ."

Peter carefully poked at the debris on the coffee table. "Yeah. Remind me to lend you my steamshovel."

"Oh, come on, Pete." Ford's smile was forced. "It's just a typical bachelor pad. All it needs is a little cleaning up."

"Yeah, Ford," Peter said, hefting a box of partially eaten pizza. "That's the spirit. You've always been a real the-box-is-half-full kind of guy."

Barry was now examining the Claudia Schiffer posters from up close.

Ignoring Peter, Ford clapped Barry on the shoulder. "Start taking those down, will you? And put your eyes back in your head. You're leaving on a mission next week."

"You don't have to remind me," Barry said. "But doesn't a man get one last drink of water before he starts on his journey across the desert?"

"No. He has to start learning to deal with his thirst right away."

"You were seeing Helen right up until the very moment they set you apart as a missionary."

"And a little while after, too," Ford said, heading for the kitchen. The kitchen couldn't really be any worse than the living room. "And trust me, it was a mistake. That's what big brothers are for, to make all your mistakes for you while you're still dumb enough to believe me when I tell you it was no fun."

Peter shadowed Ford into the kitchen, hovering at his shoulder like a big curious bear. "Stop that," Ford said.

"Stop what?"

"Breathing down my neck. You know I hate that."

"I thought you liked it."

"If you were prettier, then I might like it."

The mess in the kitchen was as bad as Barry had indicated. Worse, actually.

"Don't touch those dishes," Peter said. "Whatever's buried underneath doesn't want its resting place disturbed. That's an ancient Egyptian curse written on the tile there in mold."

Ford touched the stack of dishes anyway, helpless not to. He was rewarded with a resounding crash. He jumped back--right into Peter--as dishes clattered over the counter and onto the floor.

"Told you," Peter said, backing up. "Now the curse of the slime mold will be visited upon you and your posterity unto the fourth generation."

Ford looked for something to wipe his hand on. He settled for a relatively clean patch of wall. "I'm not even going to open the refrigerator."

"You're coming to your senses, finally." Peter pulled a chair out from the kitchen table, examined it, shrugged, then straddled it backwards. "Seriously, Ford, this place is a bigger dump than anything we ever lived in during school. We never let things get that out of hand. Heck, even my wife wouldn't let the dishes go that long."

"She couldn't." Ford turned in a slow circle, surveying his grimy new domain. He was feeling something like despair. "You can't let the dishes go two meals without throwing your

hands up in despair and doing them yourself."

Peter inclined his head and stroked his black beard.

"Granted. But you hate pigpens as much as I do. Which makes it all the harder for me to understand why you ever took a place like this."

Ford eyed the door of the refrigerator.

"I mean, what?" Peter asked. "Did they throw a blanket over this mess while they gave you the grand tour? Sweep all the garbage under the rug?"

Barry wandered into the kitchen with a rolled-up poster in his hand. "Yeah, that's it exactly. And they put a clothespin on his nose, too."

Ford's hand inched toward the refrigerator door. He had to fight not to grab the handle. It was like an itch he could barely keep from scratching.

"Ford?" Peter asked. "You did look at the place before you rented it? Right?"

"Huh?" Ford said.

Peter slapped his forehead. "Oh, good grief, Ford! Don't tell me you didn't look at the place first!"

"Well . . . I looked at the unit around the corner. It was clean."

Barry rolled his eyes. "And Dad says I'm the dumb one." He wandered back into the living room.

Peter was pounding his head on the back of the chair.

"Ford, Ford, where did I go wrong with you?"

"Well, I thought the unit around the corner was the one I'd be moving into. My friend Gordon from work was moving out, and I was going to buy his contract."

"I thought this was Gordon's place."

"No. Around the corner. North side of the building. Best kept apartment in the whole complex. Turns out there was a waiting list for it as long as my leg. I didn't find out until this morning. Gordon had no idea. He thought he could just turn his contract over to me, but the bubblehead in the rental office had other ideas."

"And you'd already given notice at the old place and had your stuff all boxed up and ready to go."

"Yeah! What could I do? I threw a fit, and this girl said she shouldn't really do it, but there was an opening in this other apartment and I could have it today if I wanted. She vouched for the place. 'I'd feel really comfortable putting you in with Leonard and Tyler,' she said. Her exact words. 'Really comfortable.'"

Peter shook his head. "Dissembling wench."

"Pretty, though. Nice body. Still, she had all the charm of a leopard shark."

"Tragedy. You going to ask her out?"

Ford snorted. "Are you kidding? Not after seeing this place." His lip curled. "Boy, I'd like to show her 'really comfortable.'"

"I'll just bet you would."

"Yeah, you're right," Ford said, sighing. "I would."

He opened the refrigerator without thinking. The stench hit him so hard he couldn't catch his breath for half a minute.

"Suckered by a dame," Peter said, rising from his chair to shut the refrigerator while Ford coughed and pawed tears from his eyes. "Oldest story of 'em all."

Ford controlled his coughing long enough to say, "Story of my life."

"But I know you, Ford. You'll cope. You'll put the best face on things. And then you'll give it a nose job, take a tuck in the eyelids, inject some collagen in the lips, and rebuild the chin, just like you always do." Peter shook his head and clapped Ford on the shoulder. "You'll get by."

Barry wandered back into the kitchen. He now had a poster in each hand. "Think your roommates will miss one of these?"

Ford, hands on his knees, looked up at his younger brother. "Is a bear Catholic? Does the Pope--"

"Does that mean yes?"

"Of course it means yes. Of course they'll miss it. They can't keep house, but they no doubt have every last item of their pornography tagged, indexed, and bar-coded."

"So . . ."

"Oh, all right, Barry. Just remember to leave it here again before you go into the MTC. And try not to enjoy it too

much."

Barry grinned. "Yes!"

"Come on, guys," Peter said, helping Ford to stand erect. "Let's check out this poor sucker's bedroom. Then we can bring the van around and start unloading. Unless our stomachs unload first, that is."

Part I: Time and a Word

Chapter 1

Donovan's List

Ford sat down to dinner with the Donovan family in the kitchen of their small house.

"Katie," Peter said, "will you offer the blessing, please?"

Katie, five years old, nodded gravely. She bowed her head and closed her eyes. "Heavenly Father. Thank thee for this food. Thank thee for this day. Thank thee Ford could eat over with us. Name of Jesus Christ, amen."

The three adults repeated the amen.

Ford was just reaching for his water when Stevie, three, said, "Me doot!"

Peter's wife Connie rolled her eyes.

"Okay, go ahead," Peter said.

"Hev Fah," Stevie said. His arms were almost folded, and he grinned widely, mugging. "Fang foo. Nayma Kvice. Men!"

The three adults repeated the amen.

Stevie giggled and clapped his hands. Katie rolled her eyes, mimicking her mother.

While Connie brought a pot of white rice to the table, Peter went into the next room to put on some music.

"I finished reading your novel manuscript this afternoon, Ford," Connie said.

Ford pushed his chair back to help Connie with the food. She was eight months pregnant, but looked like ten. "And?" he said.

"Oh, sit down. I'm not an invalid yet." She set a bowl of steamed vegetables on the table. "And . . . I loved it. I couldn't put it down, despite the language. And despite that sex scene."

"Theck theen," Stevie said.

"I warned you," Ford said.

"I know. Peter did, too." Connie dished up rice and veggies for the two children. Stevie promptly began rubbing the rice into his hair. "I'm leaving the chicken sauce on the stove. You can help yourself. I still can't get over it, though."

"The scene was necessary," Ford said, helping himself.

"I know."

"If you didn't see Rob Spillman's wife rape him after the revivalists brought her back from the dead, if you didn't experience it with him, then you'd never be able to understand why he thought killing himself was the only way he could get away from her."

"I know." Connie dished more rice onto Stevie's plate. Katie was eating quietly.

"Theck theen!" Stevie cried. "Theck theen!" This time he began to eat.

Loud, intricate rock music came from the next room.

"It's just . . . that scene seemed so authentic. All the details. The little details. I don't know how you managed it. You're not married, after all."

Peter came back into the kitchen. "He had me for a technical advisor," he said with a private wink for Ford. "I told him everything we've ever tried."

"You'd better not have."

Peter laughed and kissed Connie affectionately, then sat down at the table. Even hugely pregnant, Connie still looked like a petite little china doll next to her husband. The bear and the fox, Ford had always thought of them.

"When Ford sells <u>Silvertide</u> and it goes to the top of the bestseller lists, he'll owe me ten percent of the royalties." Peter heaped his plate with rice, then slathered the rice with butter. "And then, my dear, our bedroom antics will have made us rich."

"Now I feel like a prostitute," Connie said.

"Hard to get that kind of work when you've let your figure go so far," Peter pointed out.

Ford grinned, his mouth full, as Connie smacked Peter with a spatula.

"Now there's one I forgot to tell you about, Ford," Peter said, rubbing his shoulder.

"Theck theen, Da!" Stevie said, competing with the music in volume.

"You tell 'em, kid. Whatever the hell you're saying."

"What in the world is this music?" Connie asked, wrinkling her nose.

"Yeah, what in the world is this music?" Katie asked, wrinkling her nose.

"Yes," Peter said. He had covered his buttered rice with steamed vegetables, then ladled chicken sauce over the whole mixture. It was a third gone already.

"Yes?"

"Yes," Ford said, agreeing. "Their second album."

"Whatever," Connie said.

"I hope you made a lot of this," Peter said. "Moving our friend Ford into his latest apartment is always hungry work."

"No, dear. It completely slipped my mind, the fact that my husband has the appetite of a buffalo in springtime. So how is the new place, Ford?"

Ford swallowed his mouthful. "Just fine."

"It's an armpit," Peter said, smiling.

"It's not an armpit."

"No, it's worse than an armpit. I'd give it another name, but the children are present."

"It's really not as bad as all that, Connie," Ford said.

"It is as bad as all that, Connie," Peter said. "Even Ford's brother Barry agreed, and that's saying something. It's the armpit of Provo. Nay, the armpit of all of Utah County."

"What's an armpit, Daddy?" Katie asked.

Peter reached across the table and tickled her. "That's your armpit, honey. And it's where Ford lives."

When Katie was through laughing, she said to Ford, "You don't really live in my armpit."

"Not unless he's a louse," Peter said. "Which I doubt."

"Theck theen!" Stevie opined.

"My roommates would appear to be less than accomplished at the art of housekeeping," Ford said to Connie. "I'll get them whipped into shape."

"That was certainly diplomatic. What are they like?"

"Porcine creatures," Peter said. "Dung beetles. Trailer park dwellers."

Connie punched Peter lightly on the arm. "Besides messy, I meant."

"I don't really know," Ford said. "I haven't met them yet."

"We've examined their spoor, though," Peter said. His plate was nearly empty. He dished up more rice.

"<u>Studentus</u> <u>partyanimalus</u>, I'd say."

"How many?" Connie asked. "Can you tell from the spoor?"

"Two," Ford said. "Leonard and Tyler. But there are four bedrooms. One's empty. I assume it won't stay that way for long, though, what with fall semester starting at BYU in a couple of weeks."

"That sounds like a crowd," Connie said.

"It's a big place."

"I liked your last place," Connie said. "It was awfully cute."

"And clean," Peter said. "Spotless. Antiseptic."

"I don't know why you didn't stay there."

"Besides the fact that his roommate was a fairy."

"I still don't know that for certain," Ford said.

"He was a card-carrying fairy. You know it as well as I do."

"I thought fairies were girls," Katie said.

"They'd like to be, honey." Peter turned to Connie.

"And anyway, Ford has a genetic inability to remain in one apartment for more than six months at a time. His feet start to itch uncontrollably. His eyes ache for a change of scenery."

"I'm trying to save money," Ford said.

"You make lots of money," Connie said. "Twice what we

do."

"Three times," Peter said. "Don't badger the man about it. He feels guilty enough about it already."

Ford, a struggling novelist, worked as a technical writer for a software company. Peter, a struggling novelist, worked as the assistant manager of a bookstore.

"I'm just curious about this particular move, that's all," Connie said. "It doesn't seem to fit the pattern."

Ford helped himself to more rice and chicken. He was beginning to feel uncomfortable.

"Look, dear, you're embarrassing him," Peter said. "Let's change the subject, shall we? Ford?"

Ford shrugged. "Fine by me."

"Theck theen!" Stevie suggested. He had cleaned his plate, just like his father.

"I don't think so, Stevie," Connie said.

Katie shook her head. "No, I don't think so, Stevie."

Peter went to the cupboard and brought a box of graham crackers and a jar of applesauce back to the table. "Okay, Ford, so tell us about this Annette that you and Barry were discussing this afternoon."

"I wouldn't really call it a discussion," Ford said.

"No, it was more of a conspiracy. You're trying to get her to come to Barry's mission farewell on Sunday." Peter distributed graham crackers to the two children, then took three for himself. "That's what you said to him before he

left: 'Be sure that Dad calls Annette and invites her to your mission farewell. Don't forget.'

"This sounds intriguing," Connie said. "So who is she?"

"Who is she, Ford?" Katie asked.

"I'm not sure I've mentioned her before," Ford said between bites. He was the only one still eating rice and chicken. "Annette Schoenfeld is a close friend of the family. Her parents were like parents to my father when his parents died. The Schoenfelds never adopted him exactly, but they treated him like another son. Annette is their youngest daughter--sort of a happy surprise--they had twelve children in all--and she's only a year older than me. We grew up playing together pretty much like cousins."

"Kissing cousins?" Peter asked. He had ladled applesauce out into five bowls and was passing them around the table.

"I wish."

"So she's single?" Connie asked.

"Divorced. One young son. You know, I grew up always thinking that Annette and I would get married someday. I took it as a given. We both got back from our missions at about the same time, and I was planning to ask her out and start pursuing things, but she almost immediately announced her engagement to this guy who'd been her zone leader in her mission. I was crushed. Their wedding reception was a real drag. I hated every miserable minute of it."

Peter scooped up a gob of applesauce with a graham

cracker and popped the mess into his mouth. "But there's a happy ending to the story?"

Ford made a face. "Don't say that to Annette. Poor woman. You remember that book signing for Tales from the Corridor last December?"

"The one at Waking Owl Books in Salt Lake?" Connie asked.

"The competition," Peter muttered.

"Sorry," Ford said. "That wasn't my fault. But anyway, Annette showed up, completely out of the blue. It was the first time I'd seen her since her wedding, over four years. She'd spotted an ad for the signing and seen my name on the list of contributing authors. She looked terrific, but when I asked her how she was, she started to cry, right there in the middle of the crowd."

Peter polished off his last graham cracker. "And you were there with ready comfort, right?"

"Damn straight. And when she finally got it together, she told me Dick was divorcing her."

Peter shook his head. "That Dick."

Stevie waved his gummed and disintegrating graham cracker in the air. "Dit!"

"It still makes me angry to think about it," Ford said. "I mean, she's the best woman in the world."

"Ahem," Connie said.

"No retraction. How someone could be dumb enough to have that and then throw it away . . ."

"Why did he do it?" Peter asked.

"I still don't know. Annette didn't volunteer the information, and I didn't pry. I'm sure my parents know all about it from other sources by now, but they're not in the habit of sharing family secrets with the kids. Anyway, Annette told me she wanted me to hear the news from her before I started hearing rumors, and then she just sort of slipped away. Left me standing there stunned. I didn't know what to do or say."

"And that's the last you've seen of her?" Connie asked.

"No. The next day, I hunted up her address and sent her a Christmas card with my phone number, telling her how sorry I was about the whole mess and how I wanted her to call me if there was ever anything I could do for her."

"You should have just asked her out," Connie said. "Not left it in her hands."

"I couldn't. The divorce wasn't final."

"Well, did she ever call?"

"No, but I ran into her a couple of months later at the Brick Oven. I was with some friends, and she was with some friends, and she spotted me and came up and gave me a big hug and thanked me for the sweet, sweet card I'd sent her. She told me her divorce would be final in a couple more weeks, and that she was doing just fine. Then she asked me about me. Specifically, she asked if I was seeing anyone."

Peter closed his eyes and shook his head. "Oh, Ford.

Don't tell me."

Ford raised his hands defensively. "It seemed like an innocent inquiry at the time. It didn't hit me why she was asking that until later."

Peter pounded his forehead on the table.

"That hurts my head, Daddy," Katie said. "Don't do that."

"What?" Connie asked, looking back and forth between Ford and Peter.

"A couple of months after Christmas," Peter said. "Don't you get it? That's when Ford was wasting his life in the pursuit of Heather Kowalski. Six whole months he spent flogging that horse before he realized it was not only dead, cremated, and its ashes scattered to the four winds, but that it had never even been worth its weight in oats while it was still alive."

"You bypassed a childhood dream for Heather Kowalski?" Connie asked. "Oh, Ford."

Ford shrugged, finishing his dinner. "That's always been my biggest character flaw. I can't date more than one woman at a time."

"I'm going to have to beat this habit out of you," Peter said, passing Ford a bowl of applesauce and two graham crackers. "I mean, she all but crawled into your lap and said, 'Take me, I'm yours,' and you told her you were seeing someone else."

"I know, I know."

"No wonder you never said anything about her."

"You like this woman a lot," Connie said.

Ford nodded.

"And that's the last you heard from her?"

Ford nodded.

"Well, why don't you call her up? You still need a date for your high school reunion this weekend, don't you?"

Ford nodded.

"Who better than a girl you grew up with?"

"I haven't seen her for six months," Ford said.

"So? She came to that book signing when she hadn't seen you for four years."

"That's different."

"How?"

"She was getting divorced. She wasn't telling me she was seeing someone else. She could probably care less about me now."

"But you still want her to come to your brother's mission farewell," Peter said.

"I want to meet her on neutral ground. Ease back into things. I don't want to call her up out of the blue and say, 'Hey, my last squeeze didn't work out, so how about it? After all, you're next woman down my list. You're the consolation prize.'"

"I think this Annette woman just moved up to number one

on our list," Connie said. "Don't you think, Peter?"

"I do think," Peter said.

"What list?"

Peter tilted his bowl up and drained it of applesauce.

"Our list of women we want you to go out with."

"You have a list of women you want me to go out with?"

"Of course." Peter licked applesauce out of his beard.

Stevie tilted his own bowl up and ended up with applesauce all over his face.

"Oh, Stevie," Connie said.

"I eat mine with a spoon," Katie said primly.

"Theck theen!" Stevie said proudly.

"Why have I never heard of this list before?" Ford asked.

"Why have I never been fixed up with any these women?"

"Come on, Ford," Peter said. "You know we'd never work that way. The best you can expect from us is that we might engineer a chance encounter for you sometime with one of these women, and then let you take things from there. Friends don't let friends date blind."

"So who was number one on the list before Annette?"

Connie was wiping Stevie's face with a wet washcloth.

"Monica Ballard," she said.

"Why don't you get Ford when you're done with Stevie, dear," Peter said. "He's got some applesauce on his face, too."

Ford touched his face. "Where?"

Peter looked more closely. "Oh, I guess that's supposed to be a beard."

"Very funny," Ford said. "Connie, I think your husband has Spanish moss growing on his face. If this were October, I'd guess he were dressing up as an oak tree for Halloween."

"Touché, turtle."

"So who's Monica Ballard?"

"Remember?" Connie said, moving on to Katie's face. "We ran into her outside Chili's last New Year's Eve."

"Her?" Ford said. "The one with the long black hair?"

"That's the one. Didn't you think she was attractive?"

"Oh, very. But she was only seventeen."

"She's eighteen now," Peter said. "Legal."

"But she was divorced already," Ford said. "And had a kid."

"Just like Annette," Connie said.

"Annette's ten years older."

"Listen, Ford," Peter said, "Monica's the sweetest girl I've ever known. Sharp, too. When she was fourteen, we trusted her enough to leave Katie with her for the whole weekend while we went out of town. All she needs is a good man, as opposed to the gutter slime she normally seems to attract."

"Connie?" Ford said.

"I agree," she said, "but more so."

"Is Monica going to come tend us again?" Katie asked.

"Mocka!" Stevie cried happily.

"I think it's about time she did," Connie said.

"I agree," Peter said. "But more so."

"Theck theen!" Stevie said, throwing his hands in the air.

"Let's hope not, Stevie," Connie said.

"You know, someday that kid's going to learn to speak English," Peter said.

"I'm starting to worry that he won't," Connie said.

"Maybe there's something wrong with him."

"My brother Barry was three before he could talk," Ford said.

"But you were reading by the time you were three. And doing multiplication. I keep wishing my son were smart like that."

"Careful what you wish for," Ford said. "I knew how to read, but I couldn't tie my own shoes until I was seven. My little sister Holly had to come find me after school during the winter to make sure my boots were tied before we walked home together."

"I can tie my shoes," Katie said. "I know my own phone number, too."

"Stevie's fine," Peter said. "He just enjoys being cryptic. He'll grow up to be a T.S. Eliot or a James Joyce. Which still doesn't mean he'll ever learn English."

Ford finished his applesauce. "All right. You can

arrange a chance encounter for me sometime with Monica. I won't complain."

"Always the martyr," Peter said. "It'll hardly be like getting spikes driven through your wrists. And even if it is, you might like it."

"Still doesn't get me a date to my reunion this weekend. That's what I need right now."

"Why don't you take your wife?" Katie asked.

Peter laughed. Connie rolled her eyes.

"Because I don't have a wife," Ford said. "I'm not married."

"You're not? Why not?"

"It's sure not for lack of trying," Peter said.

"Not all grownups are married, honey," Connie said.

Katie looked surprised. "I could marry Ford."

"Is Katie on our list, dear?" Peter asked.

Connie hit him with the spatula.

"I think I'm free twenty years from now," Ford said.

"I'll keep 2014 open."