

## THE PROBABILITIES OF TIMING

*Gary Fincke*

*Thursday, April 17<sup>th</sup> – Another Underground Nuclear Test in Nevada*

Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, my second period seniors read the city newspaper for credit. Tuesday and Thursday, I read the newspaper for myself during my free first period. This morning, before I finished, the school was evacuated. A bomb threat. My walk home was twelve minutes, more time than it took to empty the school.

When I entered the house, Wendy was lying on the couch with a magazine. She sat up fast and covered her mouth as if suppressing a scream. “You scared me walking in like that when there’s no good reason.” She laid her hands on her slightly swollen stomach, listening, I knew, for the kicking of tiny feet. “It’s viability day plus four,” she said. “Halfway through week twenty-five.”

“Good,” I said, “but better when it’s May, and minimum is behind us.”

She'd had two miscarriages, one and three years before. By now, 1980, we'd become experts on gestation. The doctor had cautioned that twenty-four weeks was the first realistic milestone, that twenty-six was when the odds weren't set at longshot for a baby without defects, but Wendy had read about a couple of twenty-three-week babies surviving. I didn't blame her for fudging. I'd just said "May" when I'd really meant "the end of May," but for now, here we were at the beginning of hope.

§

*Friday, April 18<sup>th</sup> – Bomb Threat Closes School*

"Yesterday was better than a snow day," Larry Wertz said, "because once roll is called, the day counts. We're not making that one up."

Wertz had once passed along the advice never to use a sick day when sick. "What's the point of a day off if you're sick and can't do anything?" he'd said. "Tough it out when you're feeling like shit. The day's wasted anyway. Use sick days for doing something you like."

He worked in a trailer parked behind the elementary school teaching remedial reading in a state-mandated program, a couple of students at a time. No discipline issues was its best feature, he'd said, but the down side was there

wasn't much hope, so I tried to give him a pass. I'll admit that having an absolute free day in mid-April without facing a late spring makeup day was exhilarating.

## §

My second period senior history class was what I called Life Skills and the students—18 girls, 9 boys, like they'd been scheduled according to a recipe--called Dealing with Bullshit.

Mostly, we role-played: bankers, employers, landlords, school officials, and whoever else I thought they had to deal with. They weren't going to college, not one of them. But they needed to keep their heads above water in order to graduate, and the newspaper days got them talking and writing while maybe teaching them something that would help them cope. Once a week, they had to compose a letter to the editor reacting, with evidence, to one of the articles. They all needed to know what might make somebody listen.

They carried their papers home, and they were good about it because none of them wanted to do what the seniors in other history classes did—something called Problems of Democracy. POD—Pieces of Dung, the farm boys called it.

Now we had a dealing with bullshit example right in front of us. The bomb threat caller was probably someone they knew. The headline story ran down

beside a picture of the building where they were sitting. Everybody wanted to role play our principal and the local police.

“We’re famous,” a girl said.

We didn’t discuss any other stories. During the last minute, while they gathered their books, one of the pregnant girls said, “I wish there was a real bomb and my old boyfriend was the one person who didn’t leave when he was told to.”

“But then he’d be famous,” her friend said as the bell rang, “and that would suck.”

## §

### *Monday, April 21<sup>st</sup> – Iran Gives OK to Family Visit*

The principal held a faculty meeting at 7:30 a.m., all the teachers and staff crammed into the school’s double-sized classroom for an early morning unpaid overtime. He sputtered outrage and guaranteed the hoaxer would be caught. He asked us to have “ears on the ground” for “scuttlebutt.”

An hour later, as first period wound down, Wertz said, “Come on, bomber, do your thing.”

I kept reading. Wertz didn't seem to notice. "He'll call soon," he said. "He's a student who can't wait to do it again. Count on it." As the bell rang, he sighed. "Maybe tomorrow then," he said.

## §

Life Skills labored through the hostage crisis. The students unanimously voted for a full-scale invasion. "But it'll never happen because Carter's a pussy," one boy said. "My Dad hates him."

"Watch your mouth," a girl said. She was another of the eight mothers-to-be. Years before, I'd learned that early spring was pregnancy season for these seniors. Most girls would deliver late summer or early fall. It seemed as if they'd spent Christmas break in bed with boys who pledged their love daily in between looking at brochures for whichever branch of the Armed Forces they most wanted to join. Since late February, one by one, each of the pregnancies had been signaled in class by a girl crying "for no reason." None of them mentioned worrying about complications.

## §

*Wednesday, April 23<sup>d</sup> – Boston Marathon Investigates Possible Cheating*

When the class voted like a jury, every boy said Ruiz had cheated. Every girl but two voted innocent.

## §

*Friday, April 25<sup>th</sup> – Hostage Rescue Mission Fails—8 Killed*

Carter had given rescue a shot, but now there was disaster. “We left the bodies there,” the Carter-hater said. “My father was in Korea. He said that’s never supposed to happen. Not ever. He says Carter’s a pussy.”

Nobody told him to watch his mouth. “My father yells at Carter when he’s on the news,” said a girl who, as far as I knew, wasn’t pregnant. “It’s like Carter is my older brother, the way he swears at him.”

The most visibly pregnant girl said, “My mom says yelling is a good thing. It means you care. You should yell more, Mr. Arbus. When you never yell, it sounds like you’ve decided that we’re worthless, that you’ll let us do anything because you’re out of caring.”

## §

For the first time since October, Wendy and I ate dinner on the back porch, but even though she’d wrapped herself in a sweatshirt halfway through, a chill swept in from the west and drove us inside. In the kitchen, the shades pulled as if she needed privacy, she said, “Those pregnant girls of yours, the seniors. I bet some of them don’t even go to a doctor until the last minute.”

“It’s possible,” I said, “but they have mothers of their own, someone who sees to things.”

“What about fathers?”

“At home? Some must.”

“I meant the real fathers. Some might be sitting right there in front of you.”

“Maybe.”

“The selfish young pricks.”

## §

### *Monday, April 28<sup>th</sup> – Is Economic Embargo Enough?*

Wertz posted a calendar for May and June. Eight weekdays near the end of May were already marked by an X and sets of initials. “You in?” he said. “Five bucks, winner-take-all.”

Wertz ran a yearly pool for picking the day when Don Gaskins would use the last of his twelve sick and personal days. Gaskins had never failed to use them all, not once in the twelve years since he’d gotten tenure. With the most likely days x’d out, I chose the first Friday in June, my X, for now, the only one in that month. Wertz took my money. “Good luck with that,” he said.

When the principal walked in to fill his coffee mug, Wertz pointed to the calendar. "You in?" he said, but the principal used the grimace he'd repeated a few times during his get-the-bomber speech.

§

The class wanted Carter to use bombs, not sanctions. Mostly, they wanted to talk about Terry Fox. They loved the story about him running across Canada after he'd lost a leg to cancer, but that headline was two weeks old now. On April 12<sup>th</sup>, he'd dipped his artificial leg into the Atlantic Ocean in Newfoundland to start his Marathon of Hope.

There was a map of North America that scrolled down across the front blackboard. On April 14<sup>th</sup>, a girl, pregnant but not yet showing, had stuck a small gold star on the edge of Newfoundland, and we'd started following Fox across Canada, planning to add a star every week until the end of the school year. Half the girls had written letters of support to the newspaper editor. Most of their evidence was based on experience with grandfathers who struggled with crippling diseases but didn't ever complain. "Next fall he'll be close," the star-placer had declared. "I have a sister who will be in this class. She can finish the stars." Three stars touched each other, some of the points overlapping, but

it was way more hopeful than talking about hostages, inflation, or Carter's boycott of the summer Olympics.

### §

The first time she was pregnant, Wendy bought a book about the Lamaze Method. She signed us up for a session at the community center, and sometimes, in the car, she would tell me to choke her thigh just above her knee. She would startle, then pant until I relaxed, watching the highway with one hand on the wheel before gripping her again, the interval a sign of urgency, contractions close together for imminence. She would close her eyes for the darkness of realism, riding tensed and blind in the passenger seat.

The miscarriage occurred three days before our official instruction meeting.

The second miscarriage happened even sooner. Wendy threw the Lamaze book away. Once, when I laid my hand on her thigh as I drove, she said, "Don't touch me. Don't you dare."

### §

*Wednesday, April 30<sup>th</sup> – Terrorists Seize Iranian Embassy in London*

Before she opened her newspaper, a girl said, "How many terrorists are there?"

“I can’t wait to join up and shoot as many as I can,” a boy who was late said as he sat down in the back.

“This newspaper sucks,” the girl said. “There should be a newspaper just for baby news so all of ours would be in the headlines instead of terrorists.”

“The hospital sends the notices to the newspaper,” I said. “Babies are local stories.”

“Unless there’s like four or five at a time,” the boy said. “Or something happens to it like it’s stolen or something.”

“Yes,” I said, “nobody wants their baby to have a headline.”

## §

Wendy was asleep at 3:45. I ordered pizza to be delivered. When she woke, she began to cry. “Your teenagers have normal babies without even paying attention. This is your eighth year. You must have taught a hundred like that by now.”

“Their problems come after, and they last a lifetime.”

“Miscarriage doesn’t ever end, Jerry.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Yes, you did. Like it’s nothing more than a nuisance like a broken arm.”

“This one isn’t a miscarriage anymore. It’s premature.”

“Fuck you, Jerry Arbus. Seriously, fuck you for saying that.”

“Sorry,” I said, though I thought it would be something worse if it was stillborn, something even worse if it was damaged and lived. I knew the baby’s chances by the week, the probabilities of timing. It was all about the lungs now, survival likely, but disabilities at 20%. Next week would lower that to 10%. A month more to be ordinarily premature.

§

*Thursday, May 1<sup>st</sup> – Juliana, Queen of the Netherlands, Abdicates*

After the second bomb threat came in, Wertz cheered and hurried out, but twenty minutes went by before I slipped out a side door. Some students stood under the small roof outside, deciding whether or not it was a good idea to wait for the drizzle to stop. My walk home was mostly full of wishing it didn’t begin to pour.

I made sure to call out when I opened the door. “Everybody knew it was a hoax, but we had to leave.” I expected silence, a reminder of what I deserved for being an asshole.

Wendy said, “It’s May” and left it to me to deal with guilt. She was nearly to odds-tipping, but still plenty of reason to tiptoe past surprises. The calendar was like Valium.

While she finished breakfast, I settled into a chair with the newspaper I'd been reading while Wertz muttered. "Come on, bomber."

Wendy gathered her dishes. She leaned over the sink and stared outside. "The first time was the happiest I've ever been," she said, "but the second time it was different. It wasn't joy, it was anxiety. And now it's fear."

§

*Friday, May 2<sup>nd</sup> – Tito Dies*

The newspaper used two paragraphs in "Regional" to summarize the bomb threat. "It's not news when it happens again, is it?" a boy said.

Before anyone else spoke, there was a fresh set of tears, this time from the girl who had moved to town just after Thanksgiving. The girls shared their empathy. Even the boys observed silence while the girls who had been consoled in March provided comfort, hugs and tears. The girl wailed that the father, though he knew she was Catholic, had offered abortion as the only solution.

Settled, the crying girl asked how old I was before I got married. When I said twenty-three, she said, "That sounds old. I thought I could finish high school before I had a baby, but I'd never make it all the way to twenty-three. I'd be forty when she was in high school. My mother's thirty-three."

The girl who had just hugged her said, "I bet you got married and she wasn't pregnant."

"That's right."

The crying girl said. "You two must have been really lucky."

"There's pills. And other choices, too, but they're the easiest."

"Aren't you afraid of hell?" she said, as if bringing up birth control had never crossed her mind after she'd already broken one taboo.

There was nowhere to go except into controversy. When a girl who had yet to cry in class waved her hand, I called on her. "I heard there's a McDonald's coming to town," she said. "It would be fun working there. I love how McDonald's smells, don't you?"

"Yes, I do," I said, and everybody laughed.

"Who's Tito?" a boy said just before the bell.

## §

After school, in front of all the teachers and staff, the principal announced, "The authorities believe they have a way to catch whoever it is. If there is another bomb threat, we'll put an end to his fun. And there will be no mitigating circumstances that will affect appropriate punishment."

Wertz poked me as we walked out of the building. “You know what mitigating circumstances are? They’re what puts people in front of me in the trailer.”

I kept walking.

“You know what I’m talking about,” he said. “You have seniors. They never learn to read because they’ve been too busy fucking.”

§

“We have a doctor’s appointment,” Wendy said the moment I got home. “In case you forgot,” she added, her tone still brimming with accusation.

“Another girl confessed today,” I said. “She only moved here at the end of November. She’s knocked up and strict Catholic. I felt like a priest.”

Wendy made a face that reminded me of the principal’s. “You’re no priest. You think you know those girls because they tell personal stories, but they only give bits of themselves away so the rest can stay secret.”

“That sounds like what everybody does,” I said.

“Does it? Then it’s working.”

§

*Monday, May 5<sup>th</sup> – Siege at Iranian Embassy Ends*

I scrolled the map down, and the new girl added a star. Everybody clapped, but the four stars had formed a solid line that was farther across Canada than Terry Fox. The girl who loved McDonald's said, "Canada is so big. This will take him forever."

"We saw you," the girl beside her said. "My mom and me at the doctor's on Friday. Your wife pregnant, too." The class clapped, even the boys. That girl had entered the waiting room as we were leaving. She'd smiled and stared at Wendy, and now everyone in Life Skills knew I was going to be a father, and none of them thought anything could possibly go wrong. "How come you didn't tell us?"

"We haven't told anybody."

"For what? Five months?"

"Six and a half, closer to seven now."

Everyone was doing the math. I could hear them thinking "Thanksgiving."

## §

"What names you pick out? Mine's either Tammy or Tommy. Isn't it weird how one letter makes somebody so different?"

"We have a pretty long list yet, from Anais to Zach."

“One for every letter. For real? No wonder you’re a teacher.”

“My Grand Ma’s in the paper,” another girl blurted. “She died. There’s a thing all about her because she moved to the city when I was little.”

The obituary said the woman had worked at the Jello factory until it had closed. “They made Jello here,” the girl said, looking at the new girl. “We used to be famous. My Grand Ma worked at the Jello her whole life. My mother grew up believing that’s what she would do, too.” The girl became animated, the class quiet. “Imagine that,” she said, “being a little girl and already knowing what you wanted to do. It was like living in a town where Willy Wonka had his candy factory, and then it wasn’t. She quit school when she got pregnant. They wouldn’t let you go to class once you started showing back then, so I’ll be the first girl in my family to finish high school.”

She looked at me. “Another month to sit here, right?” she said. “Hardly any time at all.”

“Yes,” I said, “but we need to talk about something besides babies.” When she didn’t speak, I watched her expression shift to what I thought was contempt.

“Your students ever mention they get the Sunday paper at home?” Wendy said. She kept the Sunday edition on the kitchen table until mid-week, when she finally finished every section. “Those girls would see this then,” she said. “It might make them think. Take a look.”

“*Lactaria* means places of milk,” the article began, “the Roman columns, once, where babies were brought by mothers, sometimes for the milk of a wet nurse, but more often, abandoned. The mothers had to trust pity’s power. Its time may have come again. After a newborn was discovered in a city park, surviving one night’s exposure to a late March freeze, a local church has offered itself as a modern-day ‘place of milk.’”

When I looked up from the paper, Wendy said, “That church should be on the front page.”

## §

*Tuesday, May 6<sup>th</sup> – Kitty Hawk Ready for Flight across the Continent*

We were going to study a lease, what all that legalese might mean when the landlord didn’t fix things or raised the rent or didn’t want to renew you as a tenant. We were five minutes into trying to understand any of it when the new girl walked in crying. “What?” three girls said at once.

The girl didn't look up. She folded her arms on her desk and laid her head on them. "I lost my baby," she murmured. The girls surrounded her. The boys watched, as paralyzed as I was. I wondered if a few of them might envy whoever had escaped being a father. None of the girls seemed anything but sad. When, one by one, the girls returned to their seats, a boy said, "Sometimes that happens because the baby isn't made right."

"That's a terrible thing to say," a girl said, but he didn't let it go.

"It could mean the baby was going to be crippled or retarded."

All of the girls looked so outraged, I thought a few of them would rush at him. "Or worse," I said.

"What's worse?" two girls said.

"Missing something the baby needs to live after it's born."

"Like a fish out of water?" another girl said.

"Yes."

"You're always so calm, even about something like this that's so terrible," she said. "What's wrong with you?"

Doubt swelled up in my throat like phlegm I couldn't swallow or cough loose. I had no faith. It was a secret I needed to keep from them. Wendy already knew.

## §

*Wednesday, May 7<sup>th</sup> – Tito to be Buried*

Five minutes into first period, the Principal stepped into the lounge. Without looking at Wertz, he asked me to fill in for Don Gaskins.

“Don has a family emergency,” he said. “He’s halfway out the door already.”

Wertz gave me a thumbs-up and mouthed, “You lose.” There were nearly four weeks left, and Gaskins’ real emergency had just slimmed my odds to a million to one.

“Get them settled and keep them occupied,” the principal said as he stopped ten feet short of the open door of Gaskins’ room. Noise flooded the hall.

I imagined the principal standing outside the door to listen, comparing me to Gaskins. The class was 8<sup>th</sup> grade social studies. Four years from now, the survivors would be in Life Skills. “Let’s talk about bomb threats,” I began. Ten hands went up. “One at a time,” I said. If the principal was listening, maybe he wouldn’t leave as soon as the class volume lowered. Maybe he’d hope to overhear a clue from a room full of the sort of students he expected to make prank

calls. I chose a boy who looked big enough to threaten me. When he started to speak, everyone shut up.

### §

The Life Skills class wanted to talk about Mt. St. Helens, the volcano that was showing signs of erupting. They liked Harry Truman, the old man who refused to evacuate.

“He sounds like my PopPop,” a boy said.

“That’s so sweet you still call him that,” the Jello girl said. “I know what you mean. It’s cute when he says, ‘If the mountain goes, I’m going with it, but the mountain ain’t gonna hurt me.’”

“Harry Truman should be President,” the boy beside him said.

“Harry Truman is stupid,” the new girl said, and the room filled with groans.

“He thinks he knows more than anyone else. He sounds like a teacher.”

“He wants to die.” A boy who never talked interrupted without raising his hand. “He doesn’t want to move and be like a hostage stuck in some place where nobody thinks like he does.”

The class went quiet. “You’re so smart,” the Jello girl said. “Why are you in this class?”

## §

*Friday, May 9<sup>th</sup> – Smallpox Eradicated*

Even my great-grandmother couldn't get smallpox when she was a kid," a girl said. "It's been gone since forever. What took so long?"

Nobody cared about smallpox. It was one problem they weren't going to have. They found a quote from Harry Truman to write on the side blackboard that nobody ever used. "That mountain's part of Truman and Truman's part of that mountain."

"Current events are interesting now," the girl at the board said. "People like feelings way more than science."

"Write your letter to Truman this week, if you want," I said. She clapped, but the rest of the class was still.

"Writing's writing no matter who you do it for," a boy said.

## §

*Monday, May 12<sup>th</sup> – Slasher Films Concern Experts*

Wertz started to peel the calendar off the wall. "Sheila Kelly already won the Gaskins pool," Wertz said. "He used up his last two days. He was bitching about being docked when he ran over on the third day, so it's official."

“I guess I came in last,” I said.

“She missed by eight days,” Wertz said. “I talked her into playing, and she picked the earliest day left in May to be a good sport.”

§

The drive-in had opened for the summer over the weekend. Half the class had seen *Friday, the 13<sup>th</sup>* there on Saturday. The rest seemed jealous. A girl turned to

*Reviews* and began to read: “*Friday, the 13<sup>th</sup>* is low budget in the worst sense. Another teenager-in-jeopardy entry with six would-be counselors progressively dispatched by knife, hatchet, spear and arrow without building a modicum of tension in between.”

“Modicum,” a boy said. “Is that even a word?”

“That guy’s wrong,” another boy said. “You’ll see. It will be famous.”

“My Dad says movies like this have it right,” the McDonald’s girl said. “It’s a metaphor. You have sex, you get pregnant, your life is over.”

§

Wendy said. “Emergency is behind us.”

I'd agreed to be in the delivery room for both miscarried babies, but this time I'd said, "When it's safe." Twenty-eight weeks didn't sound safe. It sounded like special needs. "Thirty weeks," I said. "I'll be ok with it then."

"What's that mean? There's an expiration date for fear?"

"Something like waiting to see if you're going into remission," I said.

"What kind of thing is that to say?"

"It's an analogy."

"I know what the fuck it is," Wendy said.

Both of us, then, were quiet. "Ok," I said at last. "I'm sorry," but she didn't even look at me.

§

*Tuesday, May 13<sup>th</sup> – Kitty Hawk Balloon Completes Crossing*

By noon, word had spread that two boys had been caught while calling in another bomb threat. They were using the pay phone in the school lobby.

§

*Wednesday, May 14<sup>th</sup> – Love Canal Pollution Sounds Alarm for Nation*

"We need smarter bombers," Wertz said. "There are a couple of pay phones in town. Different pay phones for each call, and we'd be home again."

§

The bomb threat story was two paragraphs in the local section. No names were mentioned, but everyone already knew the callers' identities. One was a smart boy who'd gotten into drugs. Everybody said "drugs" in a way that told me that it wasn't marijuana, something they found amusing and exciting. The other boy, the students said, had been held back a year and lived in a trailer.

"What's going to happen to them?" somebody asked. "Jail, right?"

Which started ten minutes of discussing what they deserved.

### §

Wendy unpacked all the baby stuff we'd gotten the first time. I'd told everybody during her second month the first time. The gifts had begun to arrive. I'd learned to keep my mouth shut. Even starting twenty-nine weeks, neither of us had said a word. Wendy had barely showed until May. She'd stayed in since then. Our parents lived hundreds of miles away. Now, watching her arrange things, I thought she might be jinxing this.

"Bringing all this out means the baby is safe now."

"You're all superstition," I said. "Your doctor doesn't cast spells and make you swallow potions."

"No. She gives me comfort and confidence. Think on that."

"We can start the Lamaze again then."

“No,” she said. “Never.” She rearranged a pile of tiny clothes. “Anyway, I remember all that. I don’t need you grabbing at me.”

## §

*May 16<sup>th</sup> – Miss South Carolina Crowned Miss USA*

Everyone knew that the trailer-boy had been expelled and the drug-addled boy was going to receive homeschooling once his ten-day suspension expired. “How does that work?” somebody asked. “He gets a prize? Ten days of no school and then private lessons?”

“Because he’s fifteen until school ends, they have to teach him.”

“So, if any of us called in a threat, they’d kick us out for good?”

“Yes. And maybe prosecute.”

“What if you hurt somebody? You know. And you were fifteen. What then?”

“That’s different,” I said, though I didn’t know for sure about what the school was required to do. When no one spoke, I added, “It’s complicated.”

“Exactly. Complicated.”

I looked from face to face, waiting for somebody to break in. “Yes,” I said at last.

“Another Brick in the Wall,” a boy said, and three students said “Exactly” in near unison.

“We should role play a trial,” the girl said. “You be the judge who asks all the questions. Half of us could be the jury because anybody can be on a jury. The other half could be witnesses and defendants because anybody can have things happen to them.”

“Life Skills.”

“Dealing with Bullshit.”

## §

“We’re almost there,” I said that night. Wendy hadn’t spoken to me with more than phrases and looks for days, and not now either. “When it will be ok. When it won’t have problems.”

Wendy turned away, but she finally spoke. “Jerry, full-term babies can have problems too. All you are is wishes.”

“There’s no such thing as wishing too hard.”

“You can’t ever be happy always asking for more. It’s like you’re preparing for regret and grief instead of the future.”

“That’s what wishing’s for.”

She turned. "Put your hand on me," she said. "You haven't touched me for weeks."

The baby moved as I laid my hand on her. "Are you wishing?" Wendy said, "or are you feeling?"

"Both."

"Do not look away when the time comes," she said. "Don't you dare."

She kept my hand on her. "Yes," I said. "Yes, to everything." Like a litany. An absolution. Sincere.

## §

### *Monday, May 19<sup>th</sup> – Eruption Blots Out Sun, 7 Killed*

"Harry Truman will be a fossil," a boy said. "Ten thousand years from now somebody will dig him up and put him in a museum."

Everybody talked nearly at once for a few minutes before I quieted them down long enough for that boy to break back in. "Wouldn't that be the best way to die? All at once? He was old, so why not die like that and be preserved instead of rotting away?"

"Like those people who die on Mount Everest," the boy beside him said. "They freeze and stay themselves forever."

"Not exactly," I said.

“But almost, right? Enough to stay looking like somebody instead of a box of bones in a hole.”

## §

*Wednesday, May 21<sup>st</sup> – 710 Families Evacuated from Love Canal*

“I already knew that,” a girl said. “My aunt lives there with her three kids. One of them is really sick and she’s only seven.”

The new girl kept her newspaper closed, but halfway through class she raised her hand. “My father said he was happy my baby died. He said that out loud.”

## §

*Friday, May 23<sup>rd</sup> – First Woman Graduates from US Service Academy*

“I miss the bombers,” Wertz said.

“You could call,” I said. “You have first period free. Nobody knows whether you’re in that trailer or not.”

“You think that’s funny?”

“Not at all.”

“That’s right—not at all.”

“Just don’t waste that call if I’m out sick that day. Check here first thing.”

“Fuck you,” Wertz said. “You and your knocked-up harem, too.”

## §

*Monday, May 26<sup>th</sup> – Pac-Man Fascinates America*

“We made it,” Wendy said. “We’re starting the thirty-first week. I want to go out. I want to be seen. I can walk ten minutes. It’s Memorial Day. People are out. Just a few blocks up and back.” She wore a blouse that displayed her roundness. She’d thrown away her maternity clothes after the second miscarriage. “Never again,” she’d said. “The hell with anticipation.” I hadn’t argued.

Six blocks, we walked. Slowly. Nearly to the school. Then she sat on a wall someone who lived on a corner had built, I thought, because students kept cutting through the front yard. “I’ll wait until you come around with the car.”

## §

*Wednesday, May 28<sup>th</sup> – South Korea ends People's Uprising; 2,000 Killed*

Because of the holiday, the papers were a day old, but nobody seemed to notice.

## §

*Friday, May 30<sup>th</sup> – New Fossils Age Life a Billion Years*

A girl pointed out that the headline couldn’t be correct because the earth was only 6,000 years old. I counted six others nodding. “We should talk about something else,” I said.

“Yeah, Bible talk is stupid,” said a boy who hadn’t nodded.

“It helps us when things go wrong,” the girl said. “How else do you deal with bad stuff? You know, take care of yourself when it happens.”

“You can’t,” the boy said.

“Two more weeks and I’m never going to read another newspaper, not ever.”

“There’s a new tv channel that’s going on the air on Sunday,” I said. “CNN. Twenty-four a day news.”

“Like this class, only it never ends? That’s like hell.”

The secretary knocked on the door. She said, “Mr. Arbus, your wife called. She says to come home at once.”

“Home? She said that? Are you sure?”

The girls began to clap. Then the boys. All of them closed their newspapers as if class was over.

“I’ll watch them until the sub gets here,” the secretary said. “You’ve barely got started here.”

By the time I was outside, the class had crowded the open, upstairs windows. They were cheering. I began to run.

Wendy was ready and calm. “You look so relaxed,” I said.

“We’re close enough to normal.” I hesitated. “Just say yes,” she said.

“Yes.”

Before I could go on, she said, “Now stop. Be quiet.”

I kept my lips together. “That’s it,” she said. “Now say it three times like all those magic spells that work.”

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GARY FINCKE's latest collection is *Nothing Falls from Nowhere* (Stephen F. Austin, 2021). Earlier collections have won the Flannery O'Connor Prize and the Elixir Press Fiction Prize. His stories have appeared in such journals as *The Missouri Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Crazyhorse*, and *The Idaho Review*.