Looking

By Art McKenna

Love makes you do foolish things. In the economic recession of 73, I was unemployed, got married, and had a wife with a year of college to go—I was frantic. Graduating from college as a sociology major with a focus on urban planning, I was hoping for opportunities for prosperity and success. Still, I was broke, out of work, and there wasn't a single job on the horizon. No money to pay the bills; no money to go out to eat; no money to feel good about myself—I thought it was the worst of times.

During that hot sticky summer, my lacrosse buddy, Rick—also recently graduated from college, unemployed and flat broke, stopped by my apartment, and said, "Want to make some easy money?" He looked to the side and said, "I have a lead – a job that might last a few months," but he couldn't provide me with any details. I said half-kiddingly, "this job doesn't involve getting rid of dead bodies —does it?" Rick didn't answer. Being in desperate straits—I decided to take his offer. Rick said, "We have to be there now—it takes a half-hour to get there." He made me promise not to tell anyone, not even my new bride, about where we were going. I reassured him I wouldn't say a word, and off we went. Driving to this unknown destination, I thought it was the best of times being in college and being married, but being out of work, I naively thought it was the worst of times.

Rick's restless hands gripped the steering wheel, and with squinting eyes, his head moved back and forth as if he was trying to remember a song he once knew. I stared down the road like a hungry owl perch high in a tree waiting for a solitary mouse, no one said a word. We came to an empty field about fifteen miles outside of Reading, Pennsylvania—a city famous for its lynching activities. We came to a point in the road that we couldn't go any further because a large black ditch blocked our way, and I thought this is a perfect place to get rid of a dead body." Cutting through three feet of smoky fog, we saw a few workers about a few hundred yards from where we parked; we sheepishly looked for someone who might be in charge. Without saying a hello, a man in aging old work, clothes suddenly walked up to us and flung two shovels at us -, saying, "Dig!" He pointed to a half-completed grave-like ditch about six feet wide and eight feet long. On our hands and knees, we backed into a solitary hole filled with mud and filthy rainwater. Standing in a slimy, sticky pit—falling dirt all around us—the ditch smelled like an old forgotten pair of muddy shoes there were stale and sour; we hoisted shovels and started to slop around in the mud. As we dug, without saying a word, we wondered what the hell was going on, but needing money—thinking of it as the worst of times—we resigned ourselves to the moment.

As we dug, we talked about how we grew up. I told Rick that my mother said to me if I didn't go to college, I would become a ditch digger. Mom was prone to make hyperbolic statements to motivate me to be successful. She was a depression baby of the 1930s and dreams of upward social mobility; my older brother and sister and I were at the forefront of her mind. While growing up, my mom gave me the impression that there were two things worse than the destiny of a ditch digger—death and not listening to her. In the middle of that empty field, I thought I didn't have the heart to tell her that my first job out of college was digging ditches. While in a foot of mud, I wished I could ward off my fears of losing the hopes and dreams, it seemed like it was the worst of times.

That morning, we worked in that messy soup for about three hours; before they finally called us to take a break. A short, grumpy man with an old raggedy baseball cap with gray hair popping out from both sides walked s over to us and said, "Who the hell sent you?" "I replied, "I don't know," and Rick answered, "I forgot." This sullen middle-aged man wasn't happy with our answers, and with bend overbent shoulders, he walked away, mumbling, "Assholes." A few minutes later, several workers appeared, and we asked them what we were supposed to be doing. A weary downhearted worker strolled toward us, his sagging head and his slumping shoulders were chilled with discouragement and dejection, "Pick up all that crap, put it in the dump truck; get rid of it," he said, and he walked away. Looking at Rick, I said, "No dead bodies—we must be laborers—aren't we lucky to work with a bunch of affable and outgoing guys." Looking away, Rick muttered, "I said easy money—nothing about having a good time."

Rick and I worked as laborers for about seven months. In the late fall of 1973, I was looking at the morning paper, and I saw an ad in the local newspaper—The Morning Call—announcing that the Allentown Housing Rehabilitation Authority was looking for a person with a college degree and construction experience. I managed to dial the phone without ripping it off the wall. I called for an interview, and, in two weeks, I became a housing inspector. My job was inspecting old, rundown houses, doing cost estimations, finding contractors, remodeling homes, and bringing new life to that neighborhood. At the Housing Authority, we would work on one block at a time, building new sidewalks and curbs throughout the street and planting new trees about every five houses. The areas we worked on had a high number of older adults, so, when we worked in a home, and there was someone in need, we contacted a social worker who would help them. I felt great; I was helping people and had a job that paid $7,000 a year, which would be about $35,000 in today's economy. Realizing my dreams, I believed it was the best of times.

The city of Allentown, Pennsylvania, hired me as a housing inspector and gave me my first chance to feel good about having money in my pocket. The city, located in eastern Pennsylvania, about an hour north of Philadelphia, it had a population of around 150,000 people. Surrounded by rural farmland, dark green rolling hills, and quaint villages, Allentown sat in the middle of the Lehigh Valley. The Moravians settled this area, and many of the towns and cities had biblical names, such as Nazareth, Emmaus, Jerusalem, etc. These names brought up an interesting dilemma. The only fame Allentown had was Billy Joel's song "Living Here in Allentown." The song is not about Allentown proper, but it is about the city east of Allentown famous for its steel manufacturing. A song about the deindustrialization and the loss of the American dream would not have made any sense if it was entitled "Living Here in Bethlehem." As the song described those woes, I hoped I wouldn't fall prey to such as a loss of my new job.

The Rehabilitation Housing Authority would train me to become a housing inspector. The head housing inspector instructed me. His name was Samuel Schoenberger, taught me, but everyone called him Stoney. I found out they called him Stoney because he was known for building foundations and walls out of stone and not because he was into weed. He was six feet tall and slightly overweight. He appeared at ease, wearing a chestnut brown leather waistcoat and the light brown, plaid fedora that men in the 1950s often wore. Every day he would take me out to inspect two or three homes. He strolled, as if in pain, while his stomach preceded him. He often spoke about the other housing inspectors—and said, "They don't know what they're doing." Stoney was a pleasant enough fellow, but not overly approachable. He spoke in a welcoming manner with a Pennsylvania Dutch accent, as in answering questions with, "Yah, well," which meant "for whatever, anything, while maintaining a disinterest in each other. Throughout my training, Stoney would often lament, "I would rather be laying brick and concrete blocks." When he spoke about his past, he was energized, and often would joke around with me. When he confessed about the future looking bleak, he seemed indifferent and discouraged. With his face and shoulders imprisoned with despair, he spoke about how his back gave out months before, saying, "I'm only doing this job because I can't afford to retire." Throughout our brief conversations, while going from an old, dilapidated house to the next rundown building, he said, "You shouldn't get too comfortable with this job or any other job." I believed he was disengaged and estranged from his current work. Dismissing Stoney's concerns, I believed my new job would protect me from the worst of times.

Three weeks into my training, Stoney told me I would have to inspect an abandoned house on my own. During this inspection, I was to determine if the home should be demolished or fixed up. He assured me that this would be an easy assignment. With a smirk on his face, he cautioned me that sometimes these vacant structures had dead bodies in them. As he looked away, he quickly whispered, "So don't be alarmed in what you might find." Believing I had everything under control, and I loved my new job, I felt that nothing could go wrong because it was the best of time.

On the day of my first solo assignment, pad in hand, I walked around the building twice, looking very professional. As with many older homes in Allentown, this structure was of the Queen Anne style of the early 1910s. With their asymmetrical façade, dominant front-facing roof, overhanging eaves, a polygonal tower, Dutch gables in the rear, and a porch covering part of the front façade—this told me it once was a noble house with an auspicious beginning. It was situated on the corner and must have been the jewel of the block—a home everyone dreamed about owning.

Sneaking through the front door, I encountered the living room with its ornate carved oak molding. Thinking about finding a dead body, I realized the odor didn't knock me over, as with rotting fish—but the first floor smelled as if I pulled a sweatshirt out of the hamper, and I later wondered if I was wearing more sweat than "shirt." So, I wasn't worried. I thought, "The living room wasn't half bad—someone could fix this house up." The dining room was large with a big bay window to the east—I thought it only needed some paint, but as I walked to the kitchen, the smell of burnt wood, putrid grease, and musty mold permeated the entire kitchen. The smell was awful, and my optimism changed to pessimism. It didn't look good for an old house I admired a few moments ago, I thought. As I crept to the second floor, Stoney's cautionary declaration haunted me. Because the smell was more potent and recent, I had to squint my eyes and wrinkle my nose to climb the stairs. At first, I thought that it was a dead rat, or that some cat had wandered to the second floor and died. In the first bedroom, off to the left, I quickly opened the small closet—nothing was there except some old hangers and cardboard boxes on the floor. Great! I went to the second bedroom, which was to the right, and the scent of death was even more robust here than in the first bedroom. I was sure the body was in this room. I closed my eyes and opened the closet door as quickly as I could. When I opened my eyes, there I saw a bucket of assorted decaying meats, garbage, and a few fish heads with a note reading, "Aren't you glad it's not a dead body—Stoney." I had never been so delighted with the smell of decomposing garbage. It was the best of times.

When I returned to the office, the other inspectors had a good laugh, and I must admit they set me up. I realized that Stoney had assigned me to inspect this house to inspect as a training exercise, and the city was going to be torn down anyway. I had initially thought I was to determine if whether this house would live or die, but I was only fooling myself. Thinking back, I foolishly believed that controlling the situation and being perfect would allow me the best of times.

I worked as a housing inspector for another two years; Rick went off to law school, and Stoney moved to northern Pennsylvania to live near his grandchildren. My wife, Dorothy, worked at a group home for teenagers, and by the summer of 1976, we saved enough money to put a down payment on a horse farm with Dorothy's sister, Eileen. From my work with

the teenagers, I left the housing authority and started my graduate training in counseling. I thought it was the best of times. In the summer of 1979, a drunk driver smashed into my wife's car—killing her and Eileen—it was the worst of times.

Looking back at the 1970s, I realized how we often go through this life thinking we determine how our life will be. We find ourselves in a world, a world that doesn't care if we actualize our dreams, live, or die. As the Dickensian character, Sydney Carton discovered that we find meaningfulness and redemption through facing the inherent contradictions and paradoxes of life, such as wisdom and foolishness, light and darkness, hope and despair, with love and sacrifice. Feeling overwhelmed by the pushes and pulls of this world, I often encourage myself by looking to my higher values to guide me through those times of triumph and tribulation. I believe "it is better to love than to hate," and "it is better to make than to take." While working through those values, I have discovered accepting and loving life unconditionally in the worst of times helps me appreciate the world in the best of times.