

This is a three-chapter excerpt from “The Road to Renewal” annotated edition. It includes the linked “Behind the Scenes” entries.

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Chapter

j-col47.wpd

When this age is dust, and the historians among our children take it upon themselves to judge us, they shall know we were just downright rude by our computer chips.

It all started in complete innocence. As we headed off for a movie, I paused along the way to buy my wife a soda. The sign on a glowing mechanical monolith declared, “Try me! I’m a new Talking Coke Machine!” So I did. My quarters rolled down its innards as the familiar “Always Coca-Cola” jingle bounded from a hidden speaker. That liquid sugar pusher told me to choose a button. I obeyed.

“Thank you,” said a voice only a bit tarnished by a mechanical ring. As I welcomed the gentle tumbling that signaled my can’s delivery, the monolith added, “You’ve got a spot on your shirt.”

“Really?” I mumbled, not expecting such a response. “Where?”

“On your sleeve. That black grunge shaped like a walrus,

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“Try me! I’m a new talking Coke machine!” — page 230

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dripping slime. You know, I happen to know a good wash box at cleaning spots like that. No trouble.”

I glanced around, but to my annoyance, I couldn't find the stain. So I grabbed my chill can of pop and tried to walk away.

The pusher had other plans.

“Is that your car?” it asked of my just-washed '96 Mustang Cobra. I said yes, picking up speed with every step towards its jet-black door.

“Nice broad,” called the can dispenser.

That made me stop. “She's my wife!”

“I meant the car.”

I slid into my seat, little understanding what I was doing in such a conversation, nor wishing to continue it further. Little did I know my troubles had just begun.

“Honey, how'd you get that spot on your sleeve?” said my wife.

Grumbling something I didn't want her to hear, I handed her the Coke. She popped it open expecting a fizz. Instead, it said, “Hello! I'm the new talking Coke can. Please drink me slowly, especially since he's driving, and don't tear off the tab. You'll just end up dropping it in my can and swallowing it, and believe me, that can hurt. I know this for a fact. And don't spill me on this nice broad, though from the looks of that shirt she probably has more stains than I could count. And just between you and me, your nails could use a coat of paint.”

Then the car butted in: “James, you forgot to buckle your seat belt again. I'm going to huff and puff and blow your face in if you don't do that now.”

Fastening my seat belt, grumbling all the while, I sped off to the theater. On the screen shined an adequate, though somewhat shallow love story. My wife's choice, naturally.

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Talking Coke cans — page 232

Before heading into this darkness, the theater manager told me of a new security system, but I didn't spend much time thinking about it. Halfway through the picture, my seat buzzed.

"Too much weight on the armrest," came a mechanical voice. "Desist nuptial activity."

Now I admit I was leaning over, but I had a good reason.

"She's my wife!" I whispered to the floor.

"Irrelevant. This is a family theater. Desist at once."

My wife laughed, but I wasn't amused. I stared into the dark shadows of that sticky concrete floor and smirked, "Just what are you going to do about it?"

Wiring in my chair soon showed me just what future shock really was. I felt that electrical prodding all the way out the door, across town, and to my desktop computer, making me even more determined to share this outrage with my readers while that spark still wracked my mind. It was truly excruciating.

"That's *excruciating*," this know-it-all terminal reminded me. "And if you asked me, it sounds like you deserved it."

That was the straw that broke my camel's back. I was furious.

"Who cares what you think?" I snapped. "What's it to you?"

"Look," replied my PC. "Do you think I enjoy reading this drivel you type in day after day after day? What good is it, really? Or you, for that matter. Listen – you're afraid of the future, and we both know why. We're superior to you. You're a dinosaur, and what's worse, you don't even try to improve yourself. Your clothes don't match. You have no clue how that greasy slop you eat abuses you. You refuse to exercise, rest, or sleep. You just don't care. You're a disaster."

I must admit, I wasn't expecting that from this talking

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bundle of circuits. From my wife, perhaps, but not my vanilla personal computer. “Oh, yeah?” was about the best retort I could devise. Then came an inspiration. “Well, take this!”

With almost tyrannical joy, I made it my business to type every key that keyboard offered – in random triplicate, no less. I pounded that mass of plastic so hard, it surely needed to have its silicon chips examined.

I’ve felt pretty good since then. Single-handed, I triumphed in humanity’s eternal battle with encroaching mechanization. If only my PC would stop intentionally misspelling my words. Why

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Introductions

“HARRIGAN!”

That primal scream echoed through the near-empty congregation of chipped and scarred World War Two surplus desks, moth-eaten chairs, and rusty, mangled metal file cabinets that together could only be called a newsroom. Though he’d walked these halls for years, James always smiled when pondering this stockpile of nostalgia and necessity. Countless mislaid or abandoned manila folders mixed among stacked newspapers challenging the Tower of Babel. Unbalanced fan blades buzzed within scattered computers long past expiration, their cracked cases so choked by cigar smoke and gathered dust that you couldn’t read their scorched labels warning of combustible rapid heat build-up. And then there were the cherished collections of decades-old phone books, almanacs, dictionaries, histories, travel guides, style rules, press books, catalogues, annual reports, area maps, and just about any other imaginable source of unforeseen, once-in-a-lifetime trivia needs. So much of this seemed out-of-date in the budding internet world, and yet James couldn’t imagine discarding any of it just yet.

“HARRIGAN! Didn’t you hear me?”

Deep within his fortress walls of past editions and staked unopened mail, James Harrigan leaped from his monolithic

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PC with a laugh of vindication. He *knew* Reynolds had been reading his column as he'd saved it!

Like most newspaper editorial departments, Publisher and Managing Editor Dick Reynolds ruled his literary kingdom from a cluttered cube of glass and plaster within shouting range of all five reporters feeding *The Franklin Beaver Beacon*. Through five years serving the 30,000-some residents within its southwest Oklahoma City suburb, this twice-a-week tabloid grew three-fold by improving upon the legacies of several bygone weeklies. Since he'd been at the helm from Day One, Reynolds took great pride in the *Beacon's* success. He nurtured his staff to develop their beats to his exact specifications, and he made a point to edit every word that appeared in print.

Though James felt confident he was Reynolds' heir apparent, with each step towards "The Furnace" – as their editor's office was called – Harrigan girded his ego for the lambasting he knew would follow.

Disillusion reflected from Reynolds's stark face as he sat fuming behind the plain Windows computer anchoring his enormous desk. Most times the old man loved to project a dashing executive image, comfortable in double-breasted suits, silk shirts, and imported ties. His prim and proper mustache fit these well, waxed and curled in the oldest of traditions, although the twice-broken nose flaring from his pudgy face gave him the blunt edge of a heavyweight boxer – an impression the fiery editor seemed to relish when confronting his unruly office staff.

Reynolds erupted from his leather rocker as Harrigan drew near.

"Get in here!" he snapped, loosening his tie from his open collar. "And close the door."

James breathed deep, steadying himself as the oak slab

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latched behind him. Something was wrong here; usually Reynolds liked his staff to hear his rants.

The editor didn't bother retaking his seat. Nor did he give his reporter a chance to sit down.

"You think this is funny?" Dick bellowed.

"Well, yes," James couldn't deny.

Reynolds paced behind his desk, rolling his head from side to side, folding and unfolding his arms across his barrel chest. Just watching him made James nervous, so he sought comfort in one of the two chairs Reynolds left for guests.

"I know you don't want me to write humor all the time," Harrigan continued, wondering what his boss was thinking – and even more important, why he wasn't bashing James over the head with his thoughts. "But everyone I talk to seems to like it."

Reynolds dropped hard into his chair. His wife's photo clattered against the shaken wall. That 8x11 frame held the only image he kept in that office, outside of his wall of marked-up newsprint.

"You're toying with the audience," Reynolds began. "There hasn't been a talking Coke machine here in a decade."

"Well, maybe so," James allowed, "but I always liked them. They make a good foil."

"And they don't talk like that."

"Well, maybe not anymore."

"The cars don't either."

"That's where the humor comes in. You remember... laughter? 'Ha ha' and all that?"

Reynolds wasn't amused, but an interrupting phone call siphoned some of his frustration. He yanked up the receiver and snapped, "*Beaver Beacon* newsroom, Reynolds speaking."

He paused, listening with suppressed irritation that soon wiggled free. "No," he barked, "*news* room. You don't hear any loud music; that's... a basketball tournament on the tube. We have no nude dancers. I didn't say 'nudes room,' I said *newsroom*. Yes, I understand, I guess." Then his rich baritone voice hardened. "Look, we don't sell drinks. This isn't a bar. Newsroom – N-E-W-S. That's right, the thing you read."

Snarling, the publisher slammed the black receiver back

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into its cradle. His whole desk shook.

“Didn’t even say goodbye,” he growled.

James restrained his laughter. “What basketball game is that? We don’t even have a TV!”

“Oh, I just didn’t want to insult him,” Reynolds shrugged, turning his attention back to Harrigan. “Look. This isn’t England. You might like Monty Python, but to many of our readers, that’s heady stuff.”

“Oh, come on! That wasn’t absurd satire! Well, maybe it was, but not out of left field.”

The editor glanced to his graying acoustical tiling as if appealing to God. Harrigan saw his eyes fix on some drifting cobwebs that seemed to spell out bad words for body odor.

“And what’s all this ‘wife’ business?” Reynolds finally asked, sliding back into his chair even as his voice softened. “I thought we’d agreed.”

That told James all he needed to know. Reynolds wasn’t angry; he was concerned – though about what, Harrigan wasn’t exactly sure.

“Well...” James heard himself meandering and took a breath to steady his nerves. “Well, she makes a good foil, too.”

He’d meant that as a joke, but he could tell the boss man didn’t get it. In truth, James didn’t much understand it, either. Part of him wondered why he’d even said it. Another part didn’t care.

“That may be how you see it,” Reynolds said, “but she still lives here, and so do her parents. And they don’t like it. And it confuses the hell out of our readers. They know you’re divorced. Hell – we ran it in our own damn paper!”

No matter who he was talking to, James didn’t like hearing such language, and he always made a point to say so. Even though Reynolds knew how the reporter felt, James reminded him.

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Hot topics in small-town journalism – page 234

"I don't give a damn!" Reynolds roared back. "When you own the damn paper, you can damn well do whatever you please! But right now you're working for me, James Harrigan, and I expect you to write copy the way I want it. The way we've both agreed it'll be written! Comprendo?"

James nodded. That stare chiseled the point in his conscious. He didn't need this roasting any longer.

"We're not here to offend anyone," the editor stressed. "Not in a humor column, anyway. And especially not our ex-wives."

Reynolds swept his thick fingers through his thinning auburn hair. His eyes focused on the ceiling.

"Look, James, it's been, what? A year?"

The reporter stiffened. "Eleven months."

"Yeah. Well, I know it's been hard. I've been there. I've *been there*. It hurts like hell. But it's happened, son. It was her choice, and nothing you do's going to change it."

"That's supposed to cheer me up?"

"No, damn it! I'm trying to make you see sense! It's time to accept it and move on. Others are depending on you, James. You can't go on living in the past. It'd be better for you, for her, your parents... and your kids."

Harrigan clamped his fingers around the armrests. His memories burned hot from the last time Reynolds had brought this up.

"I don't know if this is any of your business," he blurted out.

No one knew how it wrecked him inside, to not be able to hold his young girls, to read to them, hear their prayers. To not even see them for three and a half weeks each month!

No one understood how that betrayal ripped his soul, distancing him from all he'd ever been.

"And for us, too," Reynolds plowed on, ignoring the interruption. "I'm just trying to help, son. You know that. And I know what you do at home's your business. But if you insist on writing about your family – even in satire, James – then it's my business, too. I have to protect the *Beacon*. You know that."

It was all James could do to close his eyes and ask God for

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patience and guidance. It provided no respite, didn't suck away his anger, or drown his ills in chocolate syrup. But that quick prayer provided an anchor for his hopes – even in moments like this, when he'd open his eyes to find the object menacing him was still staring into the depths of his soul.

James reminded himself that Reynolds was trying to do some good, in his own sandpaper-rough way. Still, James wondered how much longer he could cope with it.

"You know," the editor paused, "one more thing, Harrigan. That computer was right; you are getting paranoid about the future."

"I am not!"

"About change, anyway. Maybe that's why you won't let go of Charlotte."

James heard his breath whistling through his lips. A slow, agonizing wail of a sigh.

He didn't care about the future. Or the present, for that matter.

It was too much to contemplate. James had to get out, to think. Or even better, to forget this conversation had ever happened. That would be so much easier.

"Are you finished?" he grumbled.

"I'm trying to help you, damn it! But you don't need my help, do you? You're so smart. You think you can take on the world all by yourself! Listen, Mr. James Harrigan. If you're not careful, you're going to get yourself in so deep, you won't be able to dig your way out – and then no one will shine your boots for all the slow boats to China!"

James's aggravation got the best of him halfway through that speech. Rising with a shrug of indifference, he'd reached the door and opened it before the absurdity of Reynolds's advice made him pause in confusion.

A sly grin cracked his editor's hard face.

"And what are you doing with that cross on?" Reynolds shouted.

James couldn't help smiling at the mocking character his editor now resumed. They seemed to end every such conversation on this subject, suggesting someone had objected to his display of faith at work.

“What else would I wear?” James replied with smooth conviction, his left hand slipping around the two-inch pewter cross dangling about his neck. “It’s what I am.”

It’s the only hope I’ve got, James almost admitted. Then he hardened.

“You can fire me,” the reporter said, “but I won’t take this cross off – for anyone.”

“Augh! A paranoid Christian!” The editor floated his arms before him as if washing his hands of Harrigan. “Get back to work!”

“I’m done. The column’s it.”

“Change it!”

With a smug chuckle, Harrigan headed back for his desk.

“It’s my night with the gals, remember?” James said over his shoulder. “You go ahead. You’ll do it anyway.” Then he whispered, “That’s why you make the big bucks.”

Scanning over the newsroom, Harrigan verified to his satisfaction that most of the staff hadn’t heard that discussion. A few had long since left for home, as was usual for a Wednesday, with most publication deadlines long past. Still, the walk to his desk felt strange, for those present weren’t paying him the usual sarcastic smirks that went to anyone returning from a chat with the boss. Indeed, their eyes seemed determined to avoid his.

James scanned over his striped gray dress shirt and black corduroys, his endangered wolf tie, his silver cross necklace, looking for anything out of the ordinary. He saw nothing embarrassing.

Harrigan pondered that all the way to his desk. Then he forgot it. The scratchy pencil scribbling tacked above his computer reminded him of something far more important: His girls awaited.

3

It Begins

James girded his soul as he pulled his tiny black Geo Metro to the curb of his old home, but as usual, his strength of will proved no defense. Charlotte was her usual cold self, approaching him with indifference as he picked up their girls. Hacking him with a machete wouldn't have made his heart bleed more.

He knew what spark relit the embers of her hate. *I shouldn't have brought up the child support payments*, he scolded himself. It didn't matter that James had taxes to pay or personal needs. He should've known what response seeking a reduction would draw.

With some justification, Charlotte claimed nothing had changed; she needed the amount he'd agreed to pay. He couldn't fight that, for in his heart, his girls were worth far more than she ever requested. Still, that didn't release him from his debts and obligations. His limited funds never seemed enough.

James turned away, but his new view offered no escape. He was trapped.

Eleven-year-old Angela always noticed his despair. "Come on, Daddy!" she said, taking his left hand to uplift him.

If there existed any cure for his heartache, it was the love of his daughters. It beamed from their growing forms,

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dancing black hair, giggling freckled cheeks, and sharp, aware eyes. Having them close nourished his wounded soul.

"Are you ready?" he said.

"That's a stupid question, isn't it?" responded nine-year-old Carla. An impish grin blossomed across her joyous face as she took his right hand.

"That's one way to look at it," Angela agreed. "After all, we're all here. The *Defiant's* here."

"And the zoo's still out there!" Carla shouted.

"Oh, yeah," James recalled. He had promised them a trip to the Oklahoma City Zoo.

His first thought was one of reluctance, but as he looked at his happy girls, he realized this winter day was unseasonably warm. And since it wasn't quite 4 p.m., they might arrive with more than an hour to enjoy the sights before the zoo closed at 6. That would leave plenty of time to get something to eat before his church choir practice started.

"Well, I have to gas the car first," he told them.

"All right!" Carla screamed.

"Just be sure to have them home by 9," cut in Charlotte, who'd watched in restless irritation from her front step.

James took a deep breath. She'd chosen that moment to step closer, folding her petite arms across her chest in a way that emphasized the curves of her jeans and sweater. But now, even with her black curls flowing so lovely about her shoulders, the threatening force of her gaze made James glance away.

Angela didn't notice his unrest. Or perhaps she just overlooked it.

"No problem," she told her mom.

"Nine," Charlotte stressed to James alone. He'd felt chunks of ice that weren't so cold.

"Yes."

"It's a school night, you know."

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The Defiant — page 235

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"I'm not stupid," his defenses kicked in.

Before she could disagree, James shuffled his girls into the compact Metro's back seat and made sure they had their safety belts on. Then he crawled into the *Defiant*, adjusted its mirrors, took the solid plastic wheel in his hands, and gave his surprisingly loud three-cylinder engine full throttle. That brought a smile to his lips. The little car's unexpected power never ceased to amaze him. Sure, some might dismiss his compact as a casket on wheels, or a motorcycle with a cabin, but driving that sprite runabout not only overcome his fears, but always provided him a smile. Even in the gaze of his ex.

"All right!" Angela called.

"To the zoo!" Carla shouted.

"First the gas station," James said, pulling onto the main road out of that subdivision.

"I don't need any gas!" Carla informed him.

"You might not, but the *Defiant* does," James said of the Metro.

"She could use a bath, too!" Angela said.

"I do not!" Carla objected.

"Not you," James assured her. "The *Defiant*."

"No," countered Angela, "I meant Carla."

James clamped his jaws shut. This, he knew, was the wrong time to laugh.

"I don't need a bath!" Carla snapped.

"Oh," Angela replied. "Well then, maybe you do have gas."

"Daddy, tell her I don't have gas!"

"Angela, your sister doesn't have gas. If she did, she'd be splattered all around us."

"What?" cried a horrified Carla.

"You remember Willy Wonka," Angela cut in. "The blueberry girl."

"Messy," said James. "Think how long it'd take to clean up. And the smell."

"Kind of like Tad's fur balls," said Angela, enjoying herself. She didn't see James wince at the drop of his old cat's name – the black Himalayan that was supposed to have been Charlotte's pet, only to give his heart and soul to James. The

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divorce had forced him to leave the aging feline behind, along with almost everything else of that fourteen-year marriage.

"Daddy!" screamed a near-frantic Carla. "I don't want to explode!"

"No one said you're going to," James assured her.

"But you might have a fur ball," Angela kidded.

In the rear-view mirror, James saw an anguished Carla wind her arms around her chest. From the trembling pout gripping her face, he knew the jokes had gone too far.

"You won't have a fur ball," he told his youngest. "After all, you haven't been chowing down on Tad's food, have you?"

Carla issued one of her favorite gagging sounds. Chuckling, James steered the Metro toward a local Easy Come, Easy Go gasoline station with an automated car wash. Angela was right, he decided. The warm weather and crystalline sky provided an excellent opportunity to wash some muddy layers of winter salt off his 1996 Geo's chassis.

"She has been eating ravioli," Angela pointed out.

"Not ravioli!" Carla retorted. "Spaghetti-O's."

"That's good," James said, pulling up to the monolithic Number Seven filling pump. "That ravioli scares me."

That caught even Angela off-guard. "Why?" both girls inquired.

Cutting the engine, James twisted to face his daughters. The speckled black fabric of the Metro's bucket seats looked like something you might see covering pet furniture, but it crunched rather neatly as he moved. Oh, how he loved this miniature car!

"Well," he began, "haven't you noticed how the cans look so much alike?"

"Of course," Angela replied. "A can's a can."

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“Ah, yes,” agreed James. “A miracle of modern times. We can everything from Christmas presents to rocks to air, and all the same way. Yet when you open up some of these cans – like the ravioli – it looks just like Tad’s cat food.”

“Yuck!” Carla cried out.

“Oh, that’s just a coincidence,” Angela giggled.

“You might say that,” James replied, “until you stand with your nose a quarter-inch from freshly opened cans of ravioli and cat food. Then you realize they look an awful lot alike. So, one time I did a test. I took the labels off, placed some ravioli on one plate and cat food on the other. Then I blindfolded Tad to see if he could tell which one was made by an Italian chef.”

“What happened?” Angela pondered aloud.

As James had hoped, Carla leaned forward, her eyes all aglow.

“Two seconds after ripping the blindfold to shreds,” said James, “Tad sharpened his claws on my arms. When I came to, both samples were gone.”

“Came to what?” asked Carla.

“That’s an expression,” said Angela. “It means he got knocked up.”

“Knocked out,” James rushed to correct her.

“That’s a good test,” Carla decided.

“Maybe,” James allowed. Seeing no one waiting behind the *Defiant*, he decided to continue his tale. “Maybe. But it still worried me that these same companies use the same cans, the same ingredients, the same chefs, the same types of food. You might get the impression they think I’m a cat.”

“I’d like to be a cat,” Angela offered. James decided to ignore that.

“It’s not that I don’t like cat food,” he confided, continuing his tale, “but I don’t. I hate cat food. Each morning that rascal Tad would wake me up by sitting on my face, sticking his wet nose in my ear and meowing until I’d serve him breakfast. He’d run on me and jump on me as if all I had to do in life was feed this huge black cat! It’s like I was his butler!

“But I’ll tell you girls something – I didn’t spend four years

at the University of Football in Norman just to be the butler to a cat!"

"What's the Universe of Football?" Carla pondered aloud.

"That's that big round stadium by the duck pond Mommy takes us to," Angela said. "They teach important sports there."

"I mean," interrupted James, hoping to get them back on his point, "it's kind of nauseating to have to get up before the *Today* show is even on and stick a spoon into something that looks like ravioli. Sometimes I have half a mind to shout, 'Get up, you lazy cat! Get your own ravioli!'"

"I bet he could do it," Carla said.

"But then he wouldn't be lazy," Angela told her.

James couldn't help wondering when his girls had stopped laughing at his tale and started accepting it as fact.

"That's not what worries me," he stressed. "I just can't help wondering if all these food magnates –"

"Magnets?" interrupted Carla. James skipped it.

"– are somewhat like General Motors, putting out a bunch of identical products under slightly different labels. They might have one factory that makes the basic putty, to which they add catnip to half and put it in cans as cat food. The other half is dyed red and canned as ravioli. The only thing really different is the label."

"So, what's in the label?" Angela wondered.

"Certainly not what's in the ravioli," said James, "although it might taste like it."

"Grandpa says everything's better with milk," Carla reminded them.

"The point is," James went on, "if they can do it with ravioli, they can do it with cream cheese, and if they can do this with cream cheese, they can do it with motor oil, and if they can do it with motor oil, they can do it with nuclear waste. I don't know about you, but I don't want to open a can of ravioli and find nuclear waste. Even if hiding it in ravioli's the only way to dispose of it."

Hitting his punch line in stride, James waited for his daughters to react with glorious laughter. Instead, they just cast blank stares at his hairless face.

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Just like Charlotte used to.

Through the rear window he saw a green Honda Civic pull behind him. With a sigh, James knew the time to fill his tank had come.

Only then, noticing her father was not only finished, but about to step outside, did Carla say, "I don't understand."

"It's easy," said Angela. "Dad has a nuclear waist."

"Must be why he always wears a belt," Carla noted.

"Oh, Lord," moaned James. He could imagine his girls asking his ex-wife about his nuclear waist.

"The whole problem, as I see it, is taking off the labels," Angela theorized. "You leave the labels on, and you know what's in the cans. Pretty simple, actually."

James settled his feet on the cold concrete, sighing at the ease in which she destroyed his tale.

"Another story shot down by hard-nosed editors," he whispered. "This isn't my day."

"I just know I'm not going to clean up any more fur balls," said Angela. "Not if they have ravioli in them, I'm not. That stuff's disgusting."

"Tad must have a nuclear waist, too," Carla suggested.

"Maybe that's why some of his chest fur's going white," Angela said. "We'd better tell Mom."

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Behind the Scenes

This section provides background information on the history and culture of this novel's 1990s setting, my writing strategies, and theology. Hopefully these will hold you over until you find more authoritative sources. Tackling this turned into an interesting self-examination, one where I often debated what topics needed explanation. Breck Girls made the cut, along with Elton John's *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*, the biblical concepts of joy, and many other subjects. A good number earn brief summaries; others draw essays and comparative analyses. After some debate I decided readers probably knew enough about Spaghetti-Os, Robert Redford's nose, and the Gettysburg Address, among others. And some references, like Queeg and his marbles (from *The Caine Mutiny* novel and film, for those who don't know), I'll probably ponder their inclusion for the rest of my life.

By my personal preference, all biblical quotes draw from the New King James Version, published by Thomas Nelson. Several websites offer easy ways to examine these verses in other translations. I often use biblegateway.com.

j-col47.wpd

That code identifies several things:

- The title of this novel's first chapter.
- The file name of a column (which is that chapter) our lead character – reporter James Harrigan – wrote for his newspaper.

The “j” denotes the author's name, while “col47” refers to this being his 47th column. That “.wpd” reveals the firm's use

of Word Perfect software, a popular word processing program in the 1990s.

I developed this coding as part of a filing system for when my employer switched our newsroom from a Mycro-Tek platform to networked personal computers. I thought my spur-of-the-moment improvisations could serve as a stop-gap solution until we came up with something better. We ended up using my system for well over a decade.

I wrote many a column, review, and social commentary through my 40-year newspaper career. Nearly all of them sampled my broad sense of humor, one honed as I grew up with the Marx Brothers and *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, Bugs Bunny and *Green Acres*, Don Rickles and *All in the Family*. At times I drew criticism for my sometimes reckless absurdity. One high school teacher threw me out of class for including one of his jokes in an article for my school paper (which just happened to run inside our town's weekly newspaper). Another time our school superintendent grilled me for a bit of satire I included on a scholarship application. Perhaps the biggest hit came when I self-published *The Spawn of Fashan*, drawing attacks for mixing elements I found funny into something others took quite seriously. Over time I learned a few lessons on how and when to contain these impulses... you'll encounter some of these in this novel!

"Try me! I'm a new talking Coke machine!"

That line in Chapter 1 introduces readers to a talking Coca-Cola vending machine. These actually existed. Coke distributed 3,100 such devices around the United States in the early 1980s, according to a 1982 *Washington Post* article. A computer system developed by Sanyo allowed these monoliths to synthesize speech in English, Spanish, or Japanese. Those I encountered opened with my novel's introductory line. They mixed in other statements as you made your purchase. Still more dialogue or music emerged while the machine waited for someone to push its buttons or drop in coins. Fun but expensive to install and repair,

technicians I spoke to said Coke and its distributors generally phased out these machines before the decade's end.

“Halfway through the picture, my seat buzzed.”

Moviegoers today are familiar with high-tech seats that recline, shake in time with the action, or allow you to order food. Such was not the case in the 1990s, when this novel takes place. But theaters did experiment with the literal electric shocks discussed in Chapter 1... only it happened in 1959, capping a decade when U.S. film distributors, desperate to compete with surging home television usage, tried everything from wider screens and 3D to smell-o-vision... and seats that shocked people at key moments. Director William Castle hoped such stimulation would enhance the thrill aspects of his film *The Tingler*. While his system did not survive the moment, its legacy did stimulate my imagination enough to impact this novel...

Future Shock

Chapter 1 opens with a humor column written by the protagonist, a newspaper reporter demonstrating some fear of evolving technology. Since *The Road to Renewal* takes place in the 1990s, both those fears and technologies may seem rather quaint today. But the “writer” acknowledges this in his playful use of the term “future shock.” That was the title of a landmark 1970 bestseller by futurist Alvin Toffler. Though I was only 11 years old when that hardcover emerged, I read its paperback four years later. His cautionary words (some still valid) played upon concerns heightened by Watergate, the space race, and the Vietnam War, and yet his cultural theories also drew resistance and disbelief from my faith and love of absurd satire. This echoes throughout the novel...

Talking cars

The talking Coca-Cola vending machine of Chapter 1 was not the only such innovation of the 1980s. While Ford may

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not have delivered the talking Mustang my novel features, other automakers did experiment with voice simulations in their dashboard operating systems. Rather than let a computer speak, Nissan installed small phonographs in some models to play recorded female voice warnings for certain driving and system alerts. Chrysler went a different route, adapting Texas Instruments technologies (remember the Speak & Spell?) to provide up to 24 different synthesized vocal warnings or reminders. Mercury, Buick, and Oldsmobile also tested these waters, but consumers balked at them all. Not one survived into the 1990s.

Talking Coke cans

Besides talking vending machines and cars, Chapter 1 also features a talking Coke can. Like the others, this has some roots in reality!

After its New Coke fiasco, in 1990 the Coca-Cola Co. tried to boost its restored Coke Classic brand with unique packaging: a limited-edition can that held cash prizes within ill-flavored water used to disguise its contents and discourage drinking. Unfortunately, the patented “MagiCan” sometimes failed to work, and a health scare over its safe-yet-foul fluid led to this marketing campaign’s early demise. But other beverage companies soon offered high-tech can contests of their own, encouraged by aluminum manufacturers threatened by increased plastic bottling. Coors Light joined the fray in 1992 with a microchip-enhanced can that told consumers of their prize as they drank its beer.

Perspective

In Chapter 2, readers learn that Chapter 1 was a humor column written by the book’s protagonist, newspaper reporter James Harrigan. *The Road to Renewal* includes many of his columns, which fulfill several purposes.

- In a few cases, these usually absurd excerpts serve the same function in the book as in that small-town newspaper: to amuse and entertain... hopefully. That’s a debated point among some characters, just as my humor columns often

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were during my newspaper career.

- These pieces work as bridges between scenes or gaps in time.
- These transitions provide insights on the characters and culture, with information the reader may need to know later.
- Several columns foreshadow events to come.

These excerpts also inject different voices into the novel's third-person point of view. That structural element sets *The Road to Renewal* apart from my other books – which fits my goal to approach each one with a different style.

All four novels in *The Jonah Cycle* utilize limited first-person narrative, with the viewpoint characters changing from book to book. *The Prophet and the Dove* is told by an old slave. He also narrates book four, though from a far different standpoint. Book three draws from a tortured shepherd who first appeared in book two, while that title, *Lions of Judah*, comes through the eyes of ... you'll find out.

I know some readers prefer multiple viewpoints. The marketplace embraces this, with many books and films sharing diverse protagonist and antagonist positions that reveal vital plot secrets. As Hitchcock often noted, this helps generate audience sympathy and tension. But I prefer writing with a more limited perspective, where only God knows what everyone is thinking. Since I live with but one viewpoint – my own line of sight – I find maintaining this keeps my writing more realistic. *The Road to Renewal* provides a good example. Using a limited third-person perspective best retains the mystery and uncertainty of life, and it helps explain why honesty, trust, and love are crucial to daily survival.

God's Furry Angels is my exception. Since I wrote that for my kids, *GFA* employs a classic storyteller format where a central narrator juggles many different viewpoints to weave his tale. The most-remembered character in *God's Furry Angels* is a youngster excited by discovery and learning, so to her, unraveling the mystery and uncertainty of life is but one aspect of growing up. This differs from *The Road to Renewal*, where faith represents our best – and sometimes only – bulwark when facing the unknown, as Harrigan discovers.

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Franklin, OK, and the University of Football

When I finished *The Jonah Cycle*, my mind crafted a modern sequel to the third book's horror story. I set this tale in rural Oklahoma, a land I knew fairly well. To camouflage some areas I wrote about, I created the fictional Oklahoma City suburb of Franklin. Little did I know there once was such a town, settled south of OKC shortly after the Land Run of 1889. Franklin survived until 1906, when its fourth-class post office was taken over by mail operations in nearby Norman. Franklin residents soon became part of that growing city, home of the University of Oklahoma – my alma mater, which I often referred to then as “the University of Football.” This fondness carried over as I wrote *The Road to Renewal*, with my Franklin as its setting.

Hot topics in small-town journalism

Chapter 2 introduces readers to James Harrigan, a reporter and humor columnist for the *Beaver Beacon* newspaper in Franklin, a “suburb” of Oklahoma City. Harrigan serves as the central figure in this novel's three-day comic tragedy. Readers also meet Harrigan's boss, Managing Editor Dick Reynolds, and view a small newsroom in the days before the web, when no book of information was ever discarded, no matter how old or trivial, and employees spent hours clipping, dating, and filing multiple copies of almost every article and photo to see print, along with some that didn't.

I painted this picture from personal experience, having worked in nine different Oklahoma newspaper offices from the 1970s to '90s. The novel's mid-1990s setting captures newsroom transitions from dedicated word-processing systems to networked personal computers (usually disk operating systems, known as DOS). That move's high cost, factoring in hardware and software, often taxed the financial resources of small papers. This led many publishers to invest in generic PCs, frequently pre-owned, which explains the condition of the *Beacon* terminals.

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This exchange between Harrigan and Reynolds hints at divisive cultural issues the Oklahoma press sometimes tiptoed around in that era.

Reynolds warns that Harrigan's satirical columns often struck the wrong chord with Bible-belt readers. I ran into similar complaints with the slapstick parodies I penned back then, even though Oklahoma public television helped lead the way in bringing *Monty Python's Flying Circus* to mainstream America. Go figure.

Such concerns also underscore why Reynolds criticizes Harrigan's frequent writing about marriage when *Beacon* readers knew of his divorce. Unstated but inferred were editorial concerns about offending conservative audiences that frowned upon divorce, even though more and more marriages ended that way. I encountered such feelings after my divorce, and not just in the newsroom.

This grilling peaked when Reynolds questioned Harrigan's wearing a Christian cross while on the job. Though spoken in jest, our protagonist recognizes the threats behind those barbs.

While I never faced such pressure from my employers – the issue came up only a few times through my career, and then from people I interviewed – I had heard of such challenges in more populated settings. They are far more frequent today, marking just one hot topic where this novel parallels modern times. In later chapters Harrigan will face protests over racial injustice, journalistic integrity, judicial punishments, sexual orientation, religious freedom, and offensive language – which started in Chapter 2 with Reynolds' frequent swearing on the job. These draw from my own experiences in the '80s and '90s, unfortunately illustrating how some things never change.

The Defiant

Chapter 3 introduces readers to James Harrigan's Geo Metro, a two-door hatchback General Motors adapted from Suzuki's Cultus minicar. Suzuki produced this model from 1983 to 2016. GM launched its version in 1989 as one of three

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vehicles bearing the Geo logo. GM hoped that new Chevrolet sub-brand would finally give its North American dealers some popular and efficient fuel-sippers. The low-tech, no-frills Metro mostly delivered on that promise, even when Oklahoma dealers slapped an air conditioner onto its three-cylinder engine.

The Geo nameplate survived until 1997. Its evolving models continued into the next decade as Chevys.

Forced by divorce to find cheap, reliable wheels, I picked up a jet-black Metro in 1996. It averaged 33 to 43 miles per gallon even with that AC. My two daughters had plenty of room in the back seat, and the hatch opened to sizable storage space.

Outside of mountain climbs, that tiny engine provided enough power for most driving situations. Its small size proved easy to maneuver and park, although the light body tended to slide even in the rain. Once I added a cassette deck, that motorcycle with a cabin worked out pretty well.

We named it the *Defiant* – from the newest ship in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, our favorite show at that time. With its dark paint, tinted windows, and slim front end, that Metro actually resembled the nose of Star Fleet's tiny battleship, and its runabout handling strengthened that illusion. My oldest daughter gladly hung her toy Micro Machines *Defiant* from the Metro's rearview mirror, where it swung for two years.

But as 1998 drew to a close, I received a message from God (yes, honestly – I will write a blog on that someday) to trade my Metro for something larger. After a bit of soul-searching, I found a Plymouth Neon at a price I could stomach. Completing the deal in December, I drove that sparkling emerald green compact less than a month before it became the second entry in a nine-car pileup. That black ice nightmare totaled my beautiful Neon but left its passenger crash box intact (I *have* blogged on this – twice). Lacking such protection, no doubt my Geo would have been crushed, taking me with it.

Unfortunately, my daughter's toy didn't survive the ordeal. As you might imagine, with my purchase I transferred that tiny ship to the Neon. When the accident

blew out my windshield, the *Defiant* disappeared. We never saw it again.

Willy Wonka and the blueberry girl

This pop culture reference emerged as James and his young daughters started on their trip to the Oklahoma City Zoo. Somehow they went from discussing gasoline to digestive gases to the blueberry girl who exploded in the 1971 film *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. Like many scenes with James and his daughters, I drew this from lively discussions with my own kids.

Easy Come, Easy Go

The Easy Come, Easy Go convenience store plays a prominent role in *The Road to Renewal*. I dreamt up this thrifty chain from several shops I frequented in my youth, weaving together actual conversations held among their isles to complete those depicted in this novel. One revolved around how much candy each store sold and how scanning each piece impacted the chain's inventory. Another time a cashier scribbled a coded message on the back of my sales slip. And numerous unseasonably warm winter days at neighboring stores confronted me with "the Call of Spring" while I gassed up my cars. More to come...

Kelvin Sampson

Kelvin Sampson became the head basketball coach for the University of Oklahoma men's program in April 1994. His first squad finished its season with a 23-9 record and a 15-0 home court run, spurring three organizations to pick him as the NCAA's coach of the year. Sampson guided the Sooners through nine straight 20-win seasons, three Big 12 tournament titles, and 12 postseason tournament births, all but one in the NCAA's big dance. His era ended in 2006 when Sampson accepted the head coaching post at Indiana University. He guided the Hoosiers to a pair of 20-win seasons and the 2007 NCAA tournament before resigning