

# The Funniest Story Ever Told<sup>1</sup>

by

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It was a day equipoised between summer and winter, which is just a Goldilocks way to describe the day as not too hot, not too cold in the considerable temperature range of Cincinnati. The group was not numerous that day, just four of us lacing up our running shoes and heading out the door of the University Rec Center, dutifully submitting to having our hands stamped to permit reentry. This ritual was one of the lesser idiocies of university life, since the students at the counter had long known us, and never bothered to check their stamp work on our return. We all worked at the University of Cincinnati, or UC as we called it -- I, in the Physics department as an instructor, Rodd, in the Biz school as a professor of supply-chain management, Chet, nicknamed the Friar, who was finishing a PhD in fiction writing, and Tom, called Coach, who was also a near perennial PhD student in math.

We had run only a half mile or so when we heard a familiar gait behind us and Marty pulled alongside, smiling and adjusting the sweatband that restrained his flowing curls just tinged at the end with gray. He was in his late forties, as thin as a desert monk, and a full professor in the English department where he taught Old English -- the other dead language -- as he called it, and Celtic mythology. He had run with the group for years, from his days as a new assistant professor when all of us had trained hard and traveled as a racing team from local race to local race. We had peaked at the Minster 10K some ten years before, where Marty had run a PR of thirty minutes flat and the rest of us had straggled in respectably after him. We'd won the team trophy that day and for years it had stood perched above the

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<sup>1</sup> in the sanctity of the running group.

first row of lockers in the faculty locker room of old Lawrence Hall. I think it was still there when the building was demolished, going down with the last faculty-only facility as UC became more "student-centered," which in practice meant more "faculty-marginalized."

"Hey, guys," he said brightly, and then looked down at his shoes for a moment as the pack crossed a side street of Taft, five pairs of eyes on the lookout for errant drivers.

"Could I invoke the sanctity of the running group? I've got a story I want to share with you."

Over the years perhaps a score or more runners had come and sometimes gone into and out of the ranks of the group. It's not as if we really recruited, or discouraged anyone, though despite our best efforts we could never keep for very long the occasional woman who joined us. Honestly, it was a pretty masculine society and in our salad days we covered eight to eleven miles most afternoons at a seven minute or faster pace. Everyone remembered days when that pace was taken a good bit faster still. When our Irish racer, Connor, had been a member while a post-doc in the Chemistry department, he occasionally realized that he was going to be late for office hours when we were on the homeward leg of our usual route out to Hyde Park and back. He'd never tell anyone this fact, but all of us realized that the pace accelerated bit by bit, for Connor was easily capable of extended bursts of sub-five minute per mile pace. Conversation would die as we struggled to keep up; we'd suddenly hope for lights to turn red so we could catch our breath and steel ourselves for the next burst of speed. We even gasped out to Connor that his students wouldn't mind if he were a few minutes late, but we certainly would if he kept to this break-us pace. It was to no avail; but we certainly weren't going to let him get away either.

No one remembered when the sanctity of the running group came to be an invocation swearing everyone to secrecy about what was about to be shared by one of our number. We spent long and many hours together on our runs, talking and discussing, debating even, as the miles passed and the years with them. I remember once remarking to someone from Hyde Park who lived along one of our accustomed routes -- the one we called long Grandin -- that I ran by his house frequently, and he had peered at me rather

surprised and said, "You're one of that group always coming by here arguing?" That was us.

But today it wasn't argument but a story that Marty wanted to share with us. And in retrospect, it was no ordinary story that flowed forth that day, when the sun shone and the temperature kept us from sweating through to our socks, which was one of the pleasures of summer in Cincinnati. Coach was a notably heavy sweater, so his summer runs were often sloshy affairs, when large quantities of water collected in his shoes. No, even across the years that separate me from that day, Marty's was the funniest story ever told, but comic in the Shakespearean sense, where absurdity meets irony, conveying something deeply true about the human condition.

"Guys, do you want to guess where I was Saturday afternoon?" Marty began. "Well it certainly wasn't confession..." replied the Friar. Coach had nicknamed him that because he had once been a Salesian brother, a religious order that then sent him to South America where he taught English and acquired radical politics. When the Catholic church expelled its liberation theologians, the Friar had left for an MFA and PhD in creative writing, seeking to turn his anger into prose. There was emotion in his running as well and a near fanatical determination to continue even as his feet fell to ruin. He forever impressed us, when after another of his numerous foot surgeries, he took to the track on his crutches, doing the interval workout he had set himself for that day.

"No, I save confession for you guys.." and so he began.

Marty was my best friend in those years. We probably ran thirty or forty thousand miles together before it was all over and he moved away to another faculty job in Michigan. I valued his judgment, his ready mind and his quick wit. He knew just how to rib a guy, inserting the needle like an acupuncturist, evoking laughter, a blush perhaps, but never hurt or meanness. We were both dedicated readers of the New York Times, so many runs were devoted to discussing the main articles of the day. I liked hearing his stories of research and writing, of long hours spent unraveling the secrets of the lost language that was once our own. Of the shattering blow of the Norman conquest and the dwindling priesthood of Anglo-Saxon speakers and writers who kept the tongue alive until there were no more left

who understood the language of King Alfred the Great. My work in computational Physics seemed bland in comparison and he certainly went to more interesting conferences than I did: Cambridge, Oxford, even Paris from time to time, when I was happy for an annual trip to Urbana, Illinois, where a giant software company wined and dined us amid the cornfields of the downstate.

"I was in the Planned Parenthood clinic on Auburn Avenue, and I wasn't a visitor."

We were stunned. Of course we all knew the place, it was on the home leg of our hill route, the gut wrenching collection of Cincinnati's worst hills that took us from Clifton to Mount Adams and climbing back on Dorchester Avenue with a right turn up Auburn and back to campus. Most times we had to skirt the anti-abortion demonstrators, pacing the sidewalk out front of the semi-fortified gate of the clinic. Sometimes they half-turned to harangue us when we approached, but our outward appearance, showing the cumulative effects of struggling up seven hills, always shut them up. Rodd, the biz prof, was usually in the lead on these runs as the best hill runner of the group. I appreciated the irony of this, because he was the most prolific parent of us all -- the father of four daughters.

"What in the hell were you doing there?" We all blurted out.

"Remember that woman, Mary, I told you about...?" Oh, Oh... I thought.

Marty had been married, a long-time married with a ten-year old son when his wife came home one day and told him it was over and that she wanted a divorce. This had been the previous spring and he was simply paralyzed for a time. I helped him find a cheap condo, organize the move of the few things he took with him and I remember sitting on the floor with him as he assessed his new life as we sipped beers.

"You know, this is the realization of one of my greatest fears: that I would end up abandoned and homeless."

When I protested that here he had a new home, in a pre-war building with hardwood floors. Granted, it wasn't in Clifton anymore and he could no longer walk to his office in McMicken Hall, but it wasn't bad, not bad at all.

"This isn't home.." he replied, "It's exile."

Life assumed a new pattern for Marty: his son on Wednesday evenings and every other weekend; a short drive to campus every day, which brought with it the dilemma of parking. Faculty had the dubious privilege of the covered parking garage at \$40 per month, which the university was more than happy to deduct from your paycheck. With two households to support, such a luxury was out of the question for Marty so he chose to drive into Burnet Woods, a public park adjacent to campus, leave his car there and walk the mile to his office. This had the added advantage of a stroll through the trees, passing the lake, with a steep incline to his office to loosen the legs. It couldn't compare with a hill run, but most sedentary Americans would have called a cab.

"Mary?", answered the Friar slyly, since he was in on the secret, "No, why don't you tell us about her."

Marty picked up the pace a tad, which sent a jostle through the ranks as we climbed the slight hill past the White Castle on our way across I 71.

"I know I mentioned her once or twice. You remember, my new colleague, the assistant professor of Brit Lit? I told you she struck up a conversation observing that we were the only two Apple computer users in the department? Then some weeks ago I was walking to my car and she fell in next to me and walked along to the library. I was about to leave her there, thinking that was her destination, when she continued on and we discovered we were both walking across Burnet Woods. Turns out her apartment is on the other side of Burnet, just past where I park my Subaru."

"Watch out there, SDB on the right!" Coach called out our shorthand for Stupid Driver Behavior -- SDB -- of which we had witnessed quite a range over the years. Fortunately, even miraculously, none of us had been more than bumped by a car. And the one bump came as we were on a sidewalk until forced into the street by a middle-aged woman flying in reverse out of

her driveway. Her Camry just grazed Doc Schaeffer's hip, producing more anger than hurt. After we surrounded her car in order to express our collective displeasure, came her priceless reply "Well, if you didn't want to get hit, what were you doing on the sidewalk?"

"What were we doing on the sidewalk, day after day, mile after mile?" Our snarky answer to anyone that asked was "Training for the Olympics;" but on reflection I think the answer differed from man to man. I had begun running midway in the last boom as an antidote to day-long sitting while I was finishing my PhD work. Physics was a paper and pencil affair in those days, though I sometimes had to feed boxes of IBM data cards into the department's VAX computer. I had been a submediocre athlete to that point in my life, with pickup basketball as my only exercise. Running provided a welcome discipline and control, freed from the necessity of a court and fellow players. I began as an early morning runner, but when I shifted to Stanford for a post-doc I took up midday running with a group of guys who called themselves the Angell Field Ancients after the 1930s era track where we gathered each day. For two years I joined with that group in a regular rotation of runs on the Stanford golf course, into the hills on the "Dish" run and on the stadium track for group speed work. They even gave me a send-off party when I left town for the Cincinnati job. I left Palo Alto a confirmed runner of better than average ability.

"Oh, yeah," the Friar chimed in, "her apartment just happened to be on the same route as your car..."

"No, really... but we did stand at my car for quite a while, chatting that time..." Marty admitted.

"You're not going to tell us that one thing led to another, are you?" Coach chortled.

"What do you take me for, Coach?" "I'm no Doc Schaeffer...." Marty said.

Doc was a legend in the group for the stories of his sexual prowess he told. These all dated from his single days while in graduate school and his first job in Hawaii. Many stories included intimate details that we had no reason to doubt but no way to verify. But there was one story about a visit to a Geisha

house in Tokyo that Doc would never fully tell us about. We all assumed it was debauchery raised to an embarrassingly high art.

"That first walk did lead to others, I admit that..." Marty said, "and we both seemed to like those conversations we had. After awhile, I'd wait until she finished teaching so we could walk together and she waited for me after my Tuesday night class."

"So...?" Rodd said.

"So, I really wanted to ask her out to dinner, but..."

By this time we had reached our obligatory stopping place, Roncker's Running Spot, which was about three miles from campus. This was also the minimum acceptable daily run for us, called simply "Bob's and Back" equal by group lore to ten kilometers or so. We trooped down the stairs in single file, dripping sweat on the carpet, still faintly new from a recent renovation. The goal was a water cooler just around the corner on the lower level. Bob's had been there at least twenty years by this time, evolving from a gritty, no nonsense runners' store to a bi-level with the chic, girly stuff on the top floor, and the "real" running stuff in the basement. All the sales staff were runners; one or two of them had even been part of our group so we could count on a warm welcome and cold water.

"But what?" we asked.

"Don't you guys realize the problems dating Mary could pose for me, and especially for her in our department?" Marty replied.

"She's ten years younger than me, and she doesn't have tenure, and she was very unsure about getting into anything with me."

"She has good sense, I'll give her that.." Coach replied.

"And beyond that..." Marty continued, "I've been asked to become department head after the first of the year."

"Oh, shit..." was the collective response.

By this time we had climbed the stairs and were gathered in front of Roncker's ready to decide on the next stage of our run. Today there was no question of returning from Roncker's as Marty's story had us all ready to follow him as long as the tale lasted. So we compromised on a rich loop with the option of a Long Grandin if there was story enough for it. This meant a right turn down Madison, then a soft right along Grandin Road, then another right up the hill past Summit Country Day, then circling the lavish houses many with views of the Ohio river, which gave this route its name. We eventually ended up back on Grandin.

"Okay, so she didn't go out with you?" I continued "so how did you end up at Planned Parenthood?"

"Well, you don't get there for masturbating" the Friar replied knowingly.

"Since when does a celibate know anything about abortion clinics?" Coach chimed in.

"I'm a recovering celibate..." Friar said.

"Recovering? My ass! You're celibate due to the collective decision of women everywhere. It has nothing to do with leaving the Salesians" I added.

"You're right there... But I have a lot of company."

We all nodded in agreement, since for all of us at some time in our lives running had been a release mechanism for frustrated sexual desire.

By this time we had progressed to the crossing of Grandin and Edwards Road, where we turn left, down and then up the hill in the direction of Hyde Park Square. We then usually take a small side road up to the circle of Far Hills Drive and then down Michigan Avenue to the Square. The origin of this route was lost in the mists of time, but probably had something to do with the Shell Station that stood then at the north end of Hyde Park Square where we could count on a bathroom and drinking fountain. There was also the longer option of a right turn on Erie Avenue, a route that took us out to what we always called the Standard Station even long after it had become BP.

"No, she did kind of go out with me, but it was complicated..." Marty continued.

"You know we often spent a lot of time just talking by my car in Burnet Woods and last Friday we were there talking and it started to rain on us. So Mary invited me up to her apartment, just across from the park on the third floor. We sent out for Thai food and made a bit of a night of it. We even kissed a time or two... It was nice."

"I'll bet..." Coach chimed in, "but last time I checked, kissing doesn't land you at Planned Parenthood..."

"Just hold on, there's more to the story..." Marty said.

By this time we had silently taken the right turn on Erie at Hyde Park Square, one of our longest routes being about fifteen miles according to folk wisdom and custom. But no one was paying much attention to running as Marty continued.

"I left about 11:30 and went back to my condo. I did this and that for a half hour or so and then settled into bed to read for awhile. I must have turned out the light about 1 and had just about fallen asleep when I heard the phone ring out in the living room. I almost let it ring, but I dragged myself out of bed to answer it hoping it wasn't bad news about my parents or something. And it was Mary!"

"Mary?" came the collective response.

"Yeah, seems she locked herself out of her apartment after I left when she took her dog out for a walk. She was calling me from the fire house on the corner there of Ludlow and Clifton, asking if I could pick her up since she wouldn't be able to get into her apartment until she could reach her landlord."

"What in the hell time was that?" Rodd asked.

"Oh, about 1:30 though by the time I got over there it was nearly 2..." "She was really adorable, sitting waiting for me on the bench in front of the

firehouse with her poodle-mix dog, Rosy, and a shamefaced look." Marty smiled at the memory.

"Yeah, I'll bet; did the dog growl at you?" Coach asked.

"Oh, no, Rosy and I are buddies, she gets much longer walks with me than with Mary; that and an occasional treat keeps her on my side."

"What happened then?" the Friar prodded.

"I took her home with me; I have a spare bedroom and it wasn't my weekend with my son."

"I'm beginning to see how this led to Planned Parenthood." Coach said.

"No, listen, it's not that simple." Marty insisted. "On the way home she apologized and apologized and I said it's no big deal, I'll just give you a spare pair of my pajamas you can have my son's room and we can get some sleep. When we got to my place, she snuggled in my arms and wouldn't let go."

"What was the dog doing all this time?" I asked.

"Oh, she had already jumped on my bed." Marty said.

"That dog's no fool.." added Rodd.

"Well, by then we were in my bedroom together, and Mary tells me she's not had sex since she broke up with her last boyfriend two years ago.

"What did you say to that?" I asked.

"I told her the truth: that it had been five years since I last had sex." Marty said.

"Five years? I thought you were married?" the Friar said.

"Boy, you can tell who has never been married by that comment; any married man knows that nothing kills sex like marriage." I said.

"Anyway," Marty continued "we went to bed together and had a wonderful night."

"I'll bet you did. But how did you end up at Planned Parenthood exactly" I asked.

"I forgot the condom" Marty mumbled.

"What was that?" Coach asked, who was running a stride behind Marty and me.

"I said, the second time we made love, I forgot to use a condom."

"Holy Shit, what were you thinking?" Rodd said. "Haven't you heard of safe sex?"

"Come on, give me a break." Marty replied, "There are times when you really aren't thinking, and remember, for years while my wife and I were trying to conceive, birth control was the last thing on my mind." "Oh..." was the collective reply.

"When Mary found this out the next morning.." Marty continued, "She really freaked because she's been off the Pill for a long time. I really had no idea of what to do, but she said it was simple, we just needed to find emergency contraception, a pill they call Plan B."

"You're kidding, Plan B?" I said, "these drug makers have a sense of humor?"

"Yeah, but then we had to get ahold of some and in Ohio that requires a prescription and Mary doesn't have a doctor yet." Marty explained. "So we spent all of Saturday morning calling around to doctors and pharmacies trying to get it. Boy, was that an education."

"What do you mean?" the Friar asked.

"Surely, you know, Friar, that this is a Catholic town, Catholic with a capital C, so birth control is hard to come by. No doctor would prescribe it for Mary, and we talked to several pharmacies that wouldn't fill a prescription for Plan B even if we had one. And meanwhile the clock was ticking because the longer you wait to take it the greater the chance it won't work."

"Oh, shit..." was the reply.

"So our last hope was Planned Parenthood, and I called them and they said to come right away, they had appointments available all afternoon. But then we had to decide how we'd show up there, what to wear and did we have to fear being recognized by anyone." Marty continued.

"I see what you mean; doesn't your department have some notorious gossips?" I asked.

"You're not kidding. We have people who would stand at open windows shouting out the news;" Marty said. "But in the end Mary and I just decided to dress normally, take my car and keep our chins up, we didn't have much choice. And then the fun really began. When we tried to pull into the parking lot of Planned Parenthood, we had a guy throw himself in front of our car. I had to slam on the brakes to avoid hitting him. Then he proceeded to scream at us to turn around. But one look at my gray hair and angry face seemed to confuse him enough that I was able to edge by him."

"Whew," I said. "I never thought about their real purpose being there; they just annoyed me by blocking our way on the sidewalk when we run by."

"Yeah, running by and driving in are two very different things," Marty said.

"Once you make it into the parking lot, you see video cameras everywhere. And there's a formidable looking backdoor where you enter." Marty continued.

"Yeah, that's where the bomb went off, I think." Coach said, he was the only Cincinnati native in the group. "Bomb?" we exclaimed. "Yeah, a guy named

Brockhoeft set off a bomb there in the late eighties, closed the place for months." Coach explained.

"Well," Marty continued, "the place does seem like a bunker now, but it gets lighter when you climb up to the waiting room. As I said, We'd called ahead so they had our names, though the receptionist looked a bit startled when she saw us. I wondered why until we sat down with the others in the waiting room. I've never seen so many scared-looking teenagers in my life. I was old enough to be the father of any of them," Marty said.

"Be careful who you say that to," I said. "Oh, yeah," Marty said, "Anyway, we sat there for about fifteen minutes in complete silence, not even any canned music or anything."

"What, no Sinatra singing "I did it my way?" Coach couldn't help himself.

"No, smart ass, just a bunch of sweating juveniles and Mary and me." "Then a woman called our names and showed us into a small examination room. A minute later the doctor arrived, a forty-something woman, tied back hair, short and compact, pretty stern looking."

"So, we had unprotected sex, did we?" The doctor was looking right at me when she said this. I swallowed and said yes. "When was this?" "last night," I said. "Early this morning," Mary corrected me. "Yeah, that's right" I squeaked.

"Good, that's well within the drug's protocol. "Now, if you, " she looked at Mary "have a healthy blood pressure and can tolerate a high level of levonorgestrel, we're in business, " she concluded.

"Well, I was on the pill for years..." Mary said, "and my blood pressure has always been normal." "That's good, you were probably on a progestin-based contraceptive, so you shouldn't have much trouble tolerating Plan B, but you may feel a bit out-of-sorts the next day or two" the doctor said. Mary obligingly extended her arm for the blood pressure cuff and I digested all this while the "puff, puff, puff" and "sigh..." sounded next to me.

"Right, 110 over 70, that's good, so I'll write the script and be right back," and I saw her back retreat out the door.

"I'm so sorry about this, Mary, I can't tell you..." "Forget it; it was just one of those things," she replied, "I expect this may be just the first of our interesting stories together."

Meanwhile, a nurse had returned with a prescription and a small plastic bag. She gave the script to Mary and gave the bag to me. "Here," she said, "the doctor wanted you to have these..." and then she winked, she actually winked at me." Marty said.

"And what was in the bag?" was the question.

"A dozen condoms, if you must know." came the reply.

The group actually staggered for a step or two as laughter burbled up from each runner, to reach a swelling crescendo that must have struck witnesses as some kind of collective insanity. We weaved from right, left, and center down Jefferson St. on our last quarter mile of a run none of us would ever forget.

And now in hindsight, it's clear to me that we achieved a certain lightness of being that day we would never again quite equal, as if we had crossed from one watershed to another. Rivulets of time still gathered, but they seemingly flowed in a new direction with quickening speed and a different destination. The change was not dramatic, as every workday we strapped on our shoes, gathered the group and took to the road once again. There were even days just as beautiful, and stories and arguments just as engrossing. But there was never again a story to equal Marty's tale of the day Planned Parenthood winked.

