Love Letters

James Calvin Schaap

Some men around Neukirk like to say that a woman is never more beautiful than when she's pregnant. Older men. Younger men might say it too, once. But the ruling councils of most churches in town are still exclusively male and somewhat elderly, so one can safely assume that when Crystal te Lindert came to the council of her church a few months back, at least some of the old guys around that long mahogany table took one look at the young woman who'd given her father so much grief, observed the healthy blush on her full cheeks, noted new softer lines around a chin that had always seemed square-cut and sharp, even snuck a peak at the new maternal heft in her breasts, visible beneath the denim smock she wore, and decided their fathers weren't wrong about women with child, no siree.

Besides, she'd come to them on her knees. Not literally, of course. But she'd come to gain admittance, to profess her faith in Jesus Christ, to join the church, to signal the fact that she'd turned her life around--or that Christ had. She'd come to assure them that she was now fully capable of recognizing sin when it reared its ugly head in her soul and that she was bound and determined to call in flights of angels to keep herself from falling. All of that. She came to affirm the change in her heart publicly and thereby gain admission to sacraments of the church she'd grown up in, sacraments of which the old men keep the keys.

There was a day when that august group struck fear into the heart of a congregation's initiates, but even in Neukirk the church long ago lost its power and such professions are pretty much pro forma these days--no one remembers anyone ever being turned down. The only real criterion is a smile--and you don't really have to show that either. Glen Bruggink sat like a muskrat the whole time the council spoke to him, grunting only when the silence dragged on too long even for him, and he still passed muster. What no one knew was that his brother-in-law put him up to profession of faith with the offer of a loan on a new truck because the family wanted their new son-in-law suitably registered among the faithful.

But the weight Crystal put on when she became pregnant somehow took the edge off her rebel pride in the same way that ample smock wrought righteous modification to a body the men in that room thought she'd too vainly displayed for too many years. Crystal is not a child, and even though this was her first baby, she'd been married to Butch te Lindert for five years. Professions of faith from junior high kids have become quite standard, knowledge of Christian doctrine assumed for the most part incidental to faith nowadays; so at her age--and with the record of her past--she was an unusual visitor that night.

Yet her appearance was no mystery. Admission to the sacraments includes, of course, the opportunity to baptize a newborn. Crystal te Lindert wasn't the first

pregnant woman to enter the council room this year. For years pregnancies have prompted a rush to righteousness. The old men of the council are not dreamers; their feet have walked too long on the rich Iowa earth. So that night, when the preacher told them that Crystal Kamphoff te Lindert was coming to profess her faith, even though all of them understood why, not one of them expected the fervor they heard.

What they heard was real. Her eyes are pale blue--very pale, the color of the sky at the break of morning; that night they seemed guileless. Her hair is the memorable auburn shade of red that seems aflame. If twenty young women had walked in with her, Crystal's hair would have distinguished her immediately. But that night it was more untended, less purposefully arranged than it had been, and they liked that--less style, more grace.

She sat at the head of the table with the pastor, and she answered the opening round of questions in a softer voice than any of them anticipated, but not with her face down, as if she were afraid. What was most affecting was the fact that she addressed each of the men with her eyes, straight on, as if to assure them each that what she was telling them was the God-sent truth. That was disarming because unusual.

"I have come to believe," she told them, "that who I am and what I am is something already determined--and I don't mean to sound as if there's nothing I can do about it," she said, squinting and smiling, as if what she was explaining was something with the sweetness of a riddle. "I'm not proud of who I was--not at all," she said, the only motion a slight toss of the head that one would have translated as arrogance if her words didn't argue otherwise, "but I've come to think that while I'm sorry for what I've been, sorry for my sins--that's the way we say it, isn't it?--I'm *not* sorry, in way, for I wouldn't be here if I weren't what I was." Her eyes skipped around the table. "Does that make sense?" And then a laugh, a giggle the good men recognized as heavenly comic relief. "I'm ready," she said. "It's time for me to be something." She padded her belly. "I mean that in more ways than one."

They all giggled. It was a plainer form of Calvinism than had been heard in that church since at least the Depression. Then she told them her story.

But Crystal's story really begins 24 years ago with her birth into a very plain Neukirk family, the daughter of Marty and Else Kamphoff; if you'd grown up in Neukirk, you'd likely say that right there you got the whole thing. But there's more, and that part begins on a windy night a dozen or so years ago at Watertower Park, where a baseball game was being played before a huge crowd. Crystal te Lindert, then 13 and going on 21, as people say, kept the scorebook for her father, who was coaching a bunch of kids, black kids oddly enough, black kids from Mississippi, among them Cedrick Myles, a gangly 11-year old with a cannon of an arm.

Cedrick remembers those ball games in lily-white rural Iowa well, especially how hard the wind blew the night the Morey Bees, his team, played an all-star line-up of Neukirk little leaguers--how the wind raised dust all over the infield and blew grit

into your eyes and would have made his curve ball untouchable. He remembers looking over at the dugout from first base and yelling, "Coach, let me pitch." And he remembers Mr. Marty Kamphoff trying to keep his cap on his head and pointing down at the score book his red-haired daughter held tightly in her hands.

"Just throw strikes, Tad! Just throw strikes!" Kamphoff yelled, as if death by home runs was preferable to white kids trotting home from third base on a succession of walks. Cedrick Myles remembers the way his friend Tad went go to his cap, chucked the ball into his glove, then stepped to the rubber before delivering another dead bird pitch that bounced a foot in front of the plate.

"Throw strikes," Kamphoff would yelled.

Scoring was no problem, but pitching he remembers best--or *not* pitching. Pitching and losing that one night. Neukirk scored four or five runs to tie the score in the last few innings because Tad couldn't do much more than lob the ball in and miss the strike zone at that. What Cedrick remembers is that the game was tied or at least close when Tad looked over at him on first and flapped his arm like a broken wing. Cedrick held up a fist, then watched the batter step up, some fat white lefty with a torqued swing.

"I can get this guy," he yelled at Kamphoff, reaching up to his eyes to squeeze out the dust. "Let me pitch. I can throw right past him."

But Kamphoff stood in the dugout, his fingers in the fence loops in front of him. "Forget the fancy stuff," he yelled at Tad. "Just throw strikes. We need an out."

The white kids went crazy in their dugout, yelling chucker-this, chucker-that, smelling blood because they were down by only two. Tad reached back for everything he had and unwound a pitch that looked a little low, but this white kid hit a screamer down the line. Cedrick fielded it on two hops, bobbled it once in his bare hand, but still had time to walk to first, where he stood with both feet on the bag to end the inning, then stuck the ball in the kid's face once the fat boy made it all the way from home.

"Cut that out," Kamphoff said when Cedrick got behind the dugout fence. "You don't have to do that crap," he yelled, "and I ain't going to stand for it. Do that again and I'll slam your butt on the bench."

The Bees scored a couple more runs that inning, but soon enough there were three gone, and Cedrick grabbed his trapper and headed back to first base, chucking the ball into the pocket as he watched Tad warming up an arm that was already blown out.

Once he got to first, Cedrick started throwing grounders at the infield, really pissed, so mad he turned around toward Mr. Kamphoff when he tossed the extra ball

back at the dugout. "You *want* us to lose," he said. "You *want* us to lose, don't you?" He couldn't believe it. "You want *them* to win," he yelled, meaning white kids.

Kamphoff sat there next to his precious daughter as if he hadn't heard a word.

Everybody could see Tad was hurting. He was starting to aim the ball, and every pitch came more and more from the side--a sure sign he was shot. Between pitches he didn't even move his arm.

What Cedrick never knew was that he wasn't the only human being at Watertower Field that night who knew Tad shouldn't be chucking. Neukirk people may not understand T. S. Eliot, but they know how to read a kid with a sore arm. What's more, they know what kind of life-long problems some jackass win-at-all-costs coach can do by pitching a kid who should have been rested.

But Marty Kamphoff didn't read the angle of a kid's slumping shoulders. Marty's business with the Morey Bees had little to do with baseball, and despite what Cedrick might have thought that night, there was precious little sympathy in the stands for the Coach Righteousness and the Morey Bees, his own special project. In a town like Neukirk, where people wear good works as freely as they do seed caps, Kamphoff is almost universally disliked. That may seem ironic, but you don't know Kamphoff. Doing good, after all, is a lot like pitching: it's all in the spin.

But Cedrick Myles, just twelve years old, couldn't have understood that the fans were almost entirely on his side. Nothing unites people, after all, like a common enemy, and frankly most of the fans assembled out there that windy night could have cared less who won the game, as long as Kamphoff lost.

So the ball went around-the-horn once Tad had his warm-ups in, and finally it was Cedrick, the clean-up hitter, the biggest kid out there, who delivered Tad the ball. "Let's go home," he said to his friend. "Knock 'em down, man," he said, and then he looked at Tad's arm.

"Hurts some," Tad told him.

"Then let me pitch," Cedrick said.

Tad looked over his shoulder at the dugout.

"Shit on him," Cedrick told him.

Tad slapped the ball into his glove a couple times. "I can't hardly lift my arm."

Cedrick Myles swiped the ball out of his buddy's glove and slapped Tad on the butt with his trapper, sending him to first. The crowd went into a hush once they saw

the kid deliver the ball with the kind of speed only a machine could measure. Neukirk fans knew the score. The white kids moved into terror.

The first three times Kamphoff yelled at him, Cedrick pretended deafness and kept delivering pitches Billy Landers, the catcher, threw back as fast as he could. Strength grew back into the whole operation. Cedrick curled his wrist to signal the big curve, then bent one halfway around the county in that stiff wind.

"Myles, get back to first!"

He didn't even look until he knew Mr. Kamphoff was halfway to the mound.

Kamphoff didn't know much about baseball, but he knew about being on stage. Once he left the dugout, all that mattered to him was politics and power. Unless he nipped this rebellion in the bud, he knew all of Neukirk would spot weakness in him, the great white missionary publicly humiliated by some gangly nigger with a head of steam, a kid who, Lord knows, was probably the illegitimate child of some of welfare queen. To Kamphoff, this whole exercise was about character building--giving these poor kids some exposure to a moral upbringing.

It's likely Cedrick Myles doesn't remember one tiny detail of that night that most who saw it do. As Kamphoff drew a bead, the Lord Almighty meddled and picked his cap off his lovely head of hair with a gust of wind that blew it across the infield. Kamphoff stopped on a dime, almost as if he were suddenly buck naked, his otherwise perfect hair in a mess. Barry Turner, playing second, picked up the cap and trotted it back to him, but those few seconds of abject humiliation were enough to make Marty Kamphoff will blood from the kid on the mound.

"Give me the ball," he growled.

"Tads ain't got a thing left in his arm--"

"I make the rules," Kamphoff told him, "and I ain't going to stand for you telling me what to do. You can't get away with that with me."

Cedrick swallowed the ball in his trapper.

"Gim'me it!"

It would take a freshman English class essay assignment before Cedrick Myles would come to articulate exactly what happened that night at Watertower Field. He brought the whole business back his first year at the Hoover University, where he'd gone on a basketball scholarship and become all-conference. In that class he wrote a sparkling little story about the kind of insidious racism he'd experienced among these fine Christian people up north. Got an A, too. Teacher loved it--white teacher from Iowa. But that night he was only twelve, and what was at stake was nothing more than

losing a game they shouldn't have while he was standing there powerless on first base and a bunch of white kids were hopping and screaming with every last free run strolling on home on walks.

"Give me the ball," Kamphoff said again. "I don't want to take you down right here in front of all these people. Don't make me do it, Myles, 'cause Lord knows I will."

"I can win and you know it," Cedrick told him.

"It's not about winning," Kamphoff said. "I told you that before. It's a matter of helping you people, dammit."

Nobody else heard those words because Kamphoff kept his back to the fans. All they saw was this tall kid stare out at the night over centerfield, the ball behind him in one cocked fist, then spike that ball into the dirt behind the mound, and march off to first base.

Neukirk won. Cedrick remembers that too, but he may well be the only person who can't forget.

Marty Kamphoff's roots are poor, the son of a ne'er-do-well farmer who spent his life leaning more heavily on the promises of God than using his arms to fork out hog pens. His folks were quiet people, devout, less concerned with the things of this world than any child's parents should be, loved for their piety as much as they were pitied for their lack of business acumen. When Marty had a sale of his folks' earthly treasures, he stuck three times as much money in his pocket as his father paid for the old Ford when Grandpa Kamphoff bought it, used, in 1947.

Kamphoff made his fortune almost unwittingly, long before state-run lotteries came into fashion. He caught wind of a product that was scoring well in California: "Victor Cleaners--for a better world." He gambled what he and his wife had, and the rest is history. Today, a couple of decades later, he sits comfortably at the peak of one grand sales pyramid, one of the wealthiest men in Neukirk, and all he does is send off boxed cartons of environmentally-sound cleaning agents to teams of slavish sales reps poised to peddle those squeaky clean products to zealots who believe the CEO of Proctor and Gamble is really Satan the tempter.

His hair is always cut short and perfectly trimmed. Eight years ago it was permed for a year or so, and for a while he wore a mustache and lamb chop sideburns. His wife keeps him up to date. The year the Morey Bees were up, he was into mopeds. When they weren't playing ball, those black kids were buzzing all over town, advertising Kamphoff's newest gimmick. The cops let them be--visitors, after all.

The Morey Bees were a moral project, their Mississippi delta hometown in dire need of a clinic some white doctor was in process of building. All proceeds from that

little league tour of ball games were headed back to the delta, minus Kamphoff's cost, of course.

Neukirk people don't mistrust him simply because he has money, although they're capable of that kind of jealousy. They'd say, you can dry it, stick it in pellets, freeze it, or turn it into bean soup, by golly, but when you get it up to your nose it's still manure: that's what they'd say about Marty Kamphoff.

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Today, Cedrick Myles stands 6'6" tall. If he hadn't been on an almost daily weight program for most of the last five years he'd be lean and willowy, but pumping iron has thickened his shoulders and neck into something almost stump-like. Although three or four Neukirk firemen sport biceps of greater girth than Cedrick's, no Neukirk male is, stem to stern, as precisely defined. He lives in Cedar Rapids, where he works at the Y and plays a lot of ball after leading Hoover University to a second-place finish in the Valley Conference and a bid in the NCAAs. He's a star. In Neukirk, everybody knows his name.

Several months ago, after Hoover lost in the second round of the playoffs, Cedrick Myles got a call from a man who introduced himself as Mr. Marty Kamphoff. Would he and couple of his Hawk buddies like to come up to Neukirk for a benefit basketball game? Kamphoff was sure people would come out because they all remembered the summer when those black kids took over Neukirk streets. "Remember how you guys flew around on my mo-peds?" he said. "Everybody's been watching you for all these years at Hoover. I thought maybe we could arrange a little homecoming."

Cedrick heard only a sentence or two before he remembered the voice, the game and the wind.

"C of C's putting up a flower garden next door to the city offices--right downtown," Kamphoff told him. "It's for next year's centennial. Proceeds go to that."

Cedrick had no idea what "C of C" was, but he looked at the calendar hung from the apartment wall. "I'll have to check with the guys," he said. "It's a long way across the state."

"People here got big hearts--you know that," Kamphoff said. "By the way, no Sundays, right? You remember that?"

"That's right," Cedrick said. "You people are all Christians."

"Tradition up here," Kamphoff said, chuckling away the silliness.

The only people surprised by the size of the crowd that night were the ball players. The place was jammed. Kids sat on the stage and pulled their feet up beneath them. At the baseline on the south side, a line of single guys stood the whole night long, one foot up behind them against the pads on the walls. The stands were packed. From behind the scorer's table, Marty Kamphoff stood several times at the start, microphone in hand, trying to urge the crowd to shove together and make more room for the people still filtering in from the parking lot.

"Welcome back, Cedrick," said a big sign someone hung from the gallery of state championship banners along the ceiling rafters.

Little Neukirk's huge gym holds 1500 people. The school itself is quite new, but teachers often criticize the architect for lack of foresight--no central library, for instance, and no large group facility other than the gym. But the gym is a palace: the retractable bleachers on the balconies on both sides allow three high school teams to practice at once. A four-sided scoreboard hangs from the ceiling like Madison Square Garden's. An abundantly stocked weight room is open all year. The place is outfitted with the best wrestling room in this corner of the state, and a taping room dedicated to care and prevention of injuries.

For decades, rival prairie towns hated Neukirk because of its Amish-like inclusiveness, a place they thought full of religious crazies who swore off TV and dancing, then worked like mules to buy up every inch of available soil and turn it all into profit in corn and soybeans. Never took a drink, believed having fun was sin.

Times have changed. The descendants of Neukirk haters in surrounding towns still despise the place, but now it's for athletic righteousness--Neukirk breeds winners almost contemptuously. The old Puritanism has simply modified its habit: instead of the hair shirt, young Neukirk boys now wear jerseys and invest their time in rebounding and hitting the three-pointer. Over the years faith has changed, but not zeal.

But I'm stalling the inevitable. The night Cedrick Myles and a couple of his friends drove all the way up to Neukirk for a charity game, he took bloody revenge on the place by scoring 40 points, dishing out 10 assists, pulling down more than a dozen boards, but most importantly, bringing the house down a half-dozen times with a series of acrobatic dunks, including a dazzling behind-the-head stunner off an alley-oop on a fast break.

I'm starting to sound like a sports caster.

Actually, the game was not exactly a rout, although people know it could have been, the Hawks turning the contest into an exhibition about eight minutes or so into the second half. But why bore you with details? I'll just paste in the story from the *News*, and you can skip right over it if it doesn't interest you.

Hawks Display Talons, 118-96

Neukirk Welcomes Back Cedrick Myles

Neukirk basketball fanatics packed the house Tuesday night to watch the most impressive display of roundball talent ever seen in town.

Cedrick Myles, an all-Valley guard, led a team of seven former Hawks to a convincing win over local college stars. Eight years ago, Myles played little league baseball in Neukirk and surrounding towns, along with a team from his native Mississippi. Anyone who saw him hit home runs never forgot him.

Before the game, Marty Kamphoff, organizer of the event, presented all the Hoover players with Neukirk Flying Dutchmen T-shirts, but gave Myles a Neukirk wristwatch with a wooden shoe on the face.

The game started out as a battle of styles. The local team, led by Loren Bleeker, a 6'8" power forward who played at Augustana, was determined not to be outrun by the quicker and more athletic Hawks. Jeff Van Eerden, a former SDSU star who prepped here in Neukirk, threw in the first bucket after an offensive rebound, a minute into the game.

But Van Eerden's carom would be the only lead the locals would ever claim, as pure basketball talent laid waste the strategies of the more deliberate Sioux Countians.

Morgan Whitley, the classy point guard who this year led Hoover in assists, dished out a gallery of flashy passes that kids all over town will be working on for months. He gave Jason Willikees, who starred at Northwestern, perfect fits at the top of the key. By half-time he'd already chalked up eight steals.

Bob Foreman, Hoover's 6'5" designated shooter from Muscatine, was unstoppable from the outside. If Myles and Eddie Tyndall, their 6'10" center, found the lane choked, they'd kick the ball back out to Foreman, who finished the night with nine three-pointers, to go with five fast-break bunnies and a free-throw, a total of 38 points, second only to Myles's even 40.

To most observers, the game ended only two minutes after it started, when Myles quick-stepped Westmar's Randy Remius, drove the baseline, then simply went up and over Loren Bleeker for a two-handed jam, bringing the crowd to their feet with the first of six unbelievable dunks.

Willikees, playing the point for the local stars, tried to keep his team in a pattern offense, but time and time again the Hawks, very much up-tempo, blew them off the floor with fast-breaks and a series of middle-distance jumpers in transition.

> But the crowd, estimated at 1700, didn't come to see a game. They came to watch basketball talent, and they got their money's worth. Michael Montrose, Hoover's 6'9" forward, simply blew people out of the lane and owned the boards on both ends.
>
> An unexpected treat was the appearance of two football stars--Jerome Jefferson, the Hawk's all-Valley defensive back, and Hadley Briscoe, a three-year starter at corner linebacker--who came along on the trip at the request of their friends Myles and Whitley, and made local fans wonder how Hoover's basketball fortunes would have risen if those two didn't belong to the football program.
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> The local team was led by Scott Vander Molen, a 6'6" guard who prepped at Orange City and played college ball at UNI. Vander Molen nailed six three-pointers himself, and added four more baskets and three free throws for 29 points. Jeff Blaylock, Westmar's former star center, had 12 caroms in the middle.

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Cedrick Myles was the last of the players to get to the shower that night because everyone who is anyone in Neukirk muscled his way over to him after the game. The mayor himself pumped Cedrick's arm as if it were a slot machine, and Marty, not to be outdone, gave him a bear hug, despite the fact that Cedrick still glistened with sweat.

Crystal te Lindert hugged Cedrick too, even though he had to be reminded she was Kamphoff's daughter, the redhead who kept the book in the dugout during that tour long ago. With her arms around him, she told him that he and his friends were invited to a little party on an acreage four miles west of the baseball field. "We'll leave the lights on," she told him. "Besides, you won't be able to miss it for all the cars." She squeezed him. "You're coming then?" she said.

"It's going to take awhile," he told her, nodding at the line-up still facing him.

Eddie Tindall, the center, is married, and he was tired. Whitley, the quarterback, smelled a rat and stayed behind; his teammates used to kid him a lot about being stuck with his father's Pentecostal Christianity. Jerome Jefferson drove home to Omaha as soon as he had showered. So only four Hoover stars went--Cedrick; Marshall Montrose, the power forward; Briscoe, the linebacker; and Foreman, the Iowan, the only white guy.

Since she was married, Crystal te Lindert has lived in the house her poor Kamphoff grandparents used to own: four small rooms downstairs, a narrow upstairs stairway so steep you have to be part mountain goat to get up and down. It has a modernized kitchen her father put in before the wedding and a huge sound system controlled from the living room, the only room in the house big enough to hold a dozen

dancers. I'm told the kegs stand on the kitchen table during the winter; in summer, they're outside.

Butch, Crystal's sometimes husband, was in the kitchen with his buddies when the Hawks walked in. "Glasses are over there at the sink," he told them. "You can get yourself a beer here," he said, pointing at the keg, "or mix up your own." He nodded toward a table full of bottles and shoved a couple of empty chairs away from the table, as if having these guys around was an everyday thing.

But something changes in men like Butch when superior males appear. No matter how macho they can swagger otherwise, they instantly cow. "That second half stuff--over Bleeker?--that was something," he said once Cedrick was sitting. "That alley-oop, geez!" It's a kind of flirtation really, even though testosterone runs thick as corn syrup. "Whitley," Butch said, "what a magician!"

Montrose stood against the sink, and Foreman hoisted himself on the counter. Briscoe sat beside Cedrick, and the whole lot of them talked basketball--the game against Ohio U., double overtime, the loss to DePaul in the tournament. And everything would have been fine if it hadn't have been for the women, who slowly started wandering into the kitchen and taking places wherever they could find a corner, Crystal doing exactly what her husband had started doing really, tossing up sweet little comments like alley-oop passes for the stars to jam on home.

"Remember how we used to fly around town on those mopeds, Cedrick?" she said. "That was such a great time that summer--did you know I always had a crush on you?"

Cedrick looked up her standing there, drink in hand, and winked.

People who stood there knew Butch hated the way she led him on, something she had a habit of doing once her shoes were tightly laced, as they were that night.

"So Cedrick, you going to get filthy rich in the NBA?" she said.

That question ruined everything. Every male around that table knew Cedrick was unlikely to get drafted, and everybody knew why: he couldn't hit the three-pointer. Every male around that table knew that woman should never have put the star of the ball game into the kind of embarrassing position Crystal stuck him in, having to admit what everyone knew and nobody wanted to believe--especially after the spectacular show he'd just put on.

"We'll have to wait and see," Cedrick said, looking down at his beer.

"I'm so proud," Crystal said. "I used to ride on the back of his moped." She was wearing a vest, gray and silver, over a dark blue turtleneck. "When I see you on TV," she said, I can tell my kids I knew him when he was a boy. He's going to be a

big star, and I once had the hots for him. Hey," she said, "I want to dance. I want to be able to tell my kids someday that I danced with Cedrick Myles." She put her hand over his arm. "We got plenty of Hammer," she said.

"My knees are killing me," Cedrick said.

"I'll make it slow," she told him. "Let's all dance a little," she said, like a cheerleader. "We don't want these guys going back to Hoover saying Neukirk doesn't know how to party. Come on, Cedrick," she said, pulling him to his feet--typical Crystal.

Cedrick wasn't interested, really. "What's your old man going to say?" he said, as if it were a joke. He meant her father, of course, the little league coach. But everyone assumed he meant Butch, who was standing right there as his wife poured herself over the star.

"Well, shit on him," she said, oblivious, and pulled Cedrick into the tiny living room.

It would be nice to think that whatever happened that night wouldn't have if Cedrick had known Crystal was married to the barrel-chested mason in the cut-off Iowa State sweat shirt, the one who looked as if beer was a bit too much of his passion. But my guess is that Cedrick Myles had other reasons to come on to this woman coming on to him, reasons dredged up from the memory of a ball thrown angrily in the dirt at Watertower Field, just two miles east of the farm house where all of this took place. He likely had his own objectives, and they probably had less to do with passion than power. Which is not to say Crystal is fat and ugly. She isn't. Her father's soap and money groomed her well.

And what of Crystal? Cedrick Myles is the only African-American at whom she'd ever taken aim, but he certainly wasn't the only male. Her first may well have been Butch te Lindert. She got him. But he wasn't her last.

Once it was clear that she had drawn her sights on him, Butch left the house rather than suffer more public humiliation. He took the vodka along to inflate his courage, drove out on the country roads with the bottle between his legs. Nobody else seemed to think much of his leaving--he'd done it before and sometimes taken a woman with him. Back at the house, some of the other guests paired off, Montrose stayed on a chair in the kitchen talking basketball with a half dozen guys. A keg emptied, another was tapped, and when Butch finally returned the place was full of people--maybe forty, so many that no one really noticed him until he punched the power on the tape deck and screamed words I'm not about to type in right here.

But even though his bloodstream was pumped with vodka, he hadn't drunk enough to make him forget the size of Cedrick Myles, and once he found the two of them in the bedroom, he took the path of least resistance and went after his wife.

You will probably get fourteen different versions of what happened next, but what everyone will agree on is that Butch caught her in the face with something more than an open hand. And that's when Cedrick intervened, stepping up nicely to the moral high ground. He pushed Butch away and told this man he figured was some long lost boyfriend that, in more memorable words, he should get the hell out of her life.

"The bitch is my wife," Butch screamed, amid other profanities.

"I don't care what she is, you're not touching her again," he said, signaling the battle.

What happened next had the same kind of inevitability as the ball game. "Get away from her," he snarled at Cedrick. "Get away from my wife," he said suicidally, "you nigger."

What began at that moment, ended less than three minutes later.

Not long after, the Neukirk cops arrived. One of the women called them already in the heat of the early exchange, and the cops knew where the place was. They'd been there before.

* * *

Mr. Marty Kamphoff stood in the middle of the Neukirk city offices just after two that night, a warm early May Sunday, his daughter and son-in-law on one side of a table, Butch nursing a fiercely cut lip and a swollen eye. Two town cops stood at the desk, one of them scribbling on a clipboard. Four ball players, three of them black, one of them in handcuffs, sat in a line of hard, flat chairs along the wall, the Sheriff and a half-dozen county cops standing guard at the back of the room.

"There's no reason at all that this has to get out of hand," Marty said. "It only hurts everybody." He walked over to his daughter. "You been brought up better than this," he told her, and took her chin in his hand, "way better than this."

"Myles says Butch beat her," the cop with the clipboard said.

"I never laid a hand on her," Butch said. "I never meant to."

Marty looked around at all three. "I don't care what happened, but it doesn't need to get out of this room, see? Not for anybody's sake. Just looks bad."

"What's he doing here anyway?" Crystal said, pointing to her father. "What business is it of his anyway?"

"Nobody's got to know," Kamphoff said. "We can settle up right here and now."

The Sheriff was leaning up against the counter across the room. "Be the best all around if you could just take care of this whole deal, Marty," he said. "You know what I'm saying? Save us a bundle of money and all these guys here another long trip up to this part of the state--not to mention the taxpayers. Shit," he said, "it'll save me the rest of the night."

"Nobody needs this here--not the Chamber of Commerce for sure," Marty said. "Just a bunch of ungrateful kids--the whole lot of them, the whole lot of them," he told them. "When I think back of what my ma and pa didn't have, and what these kids got here today--and you too Cedrick--what kind of crap I pulled you out of in Corey, there--I could just puke." That's what he said, or something to that effect. "Ungrateful," he repeated. "Papers all over are full of ball players pulling this kind of shit all over the country. Everybody's heroes. You're an embarrassment to the University. You're an embarrassment to your race."

Credit Cedrick with enormous good will for not coming off that steel chair and killing Kamphoff right there. If he had, tons of Neukirk folk likely would have let him walk. And it was prudent for them to leave when offered the opportunity. If the *Des Moines Register* had picked up the story, fans state-wide would have been outraged. Cedrick Myles' otherwise sound reputation would have lost, big-time.

But just a few minutes after their departure, and once Butch and his wife left the station, Marty Kamphoff told the sheriff that from that point on he wanted to know every last time there was a party out at the te Lindert's; he owns the place, after all--it belonged to his parents, he said, who'd be sickened by such behavior. And then he left the city offices himself, stepped out of the door, turned left towards his car, and from that moment remembers absolutely nothing because he was decked with such precision that he flew into that empty space between the buildings and fell into the spot where this year there will be a flower garden celebrating the town's centennial. If you look hard and long enough, there's always miracles.

Exactly how long he was out isn't clear, but when the county cops left a few minutes later, they found him in a crouch, his wrist up to his jaw, catching the blood. He never saw who hit him.

Nobody knows for sure who it was, because it could have been either of the guys involved--Butch or Cedrick, both of them leaving that station seething at the same man. Most people around town like to think it was Butch because there's a certain kind of justice to the wronged husband setting his father-in-law down like that. More than once Butch has let on secretly that he did it. Some like to think it was Crystal.

But folks in town have good reason to mythologize that attack--because of their sympathies for Butch, but also because giving him credit for the uppercut that decked

Kamphoff keeps their shiny image of Cedrick Myles, the basketball star with Neukirk roots, very much alive.

My guess is that the rest of the Hawks were livid when Cedrick told them to stop around the corner once he saw that brand new van with the words "Victor Cleaners" in day-glow across the sides. They must have fumed royally when he told them to pick him up just around the corner, out of the light in front of the city office. And once he was back in the car, they likely screamed at him as they tore out of town, sure there would be a warrant for their arrest out long before they got to Sioux City and that some state cop would flash down the only station wagon on the road so far out in the country this late at night with a cargo of black guys.

Just recently the *News* reported, front page, that Marty Kamphoff was named chair of this year's County Youth Fair. The whole account has no mention of a couple of broken teeth he suffered a few months back, which was, of course, much bigger news in town, even if the story never made the paper. Even though he went to Sioux City to hide the reconstruction, any dentist worth his keep notes when some other hand has been at work in territory he's otherwise long ago marked as his own; and every other bit of Marty's other dental work gets done in town. In Neukirk, his getting smacked was just too good a story to be kept quiet.

I'm sorry if I sound racist, but Cedrick Myles is only a catalyst in Crystal's story. The NBA didn't draft him, he still works at a Y in Cedar Rapids and plays ball on a number of teams around the city; but his future is no longer closely observed by Neukirk residents, since he's *not* with the Celtics or the Houston Rockets.

What should come as no surprise to you is something no one else in Neukirk knows or even suspects--that in the long months Crystal carried that child, she never knew for sure whether she was going to deliver another Cedrick or another Butch. And it was no easy pregnancy anyway. At seven months she was having contractions, sometimes as often as four or five every half hour. In her job as a hairdresser, she was vertical most of the time, and Dr. Howells, noting the fact that she was so prematurely dilated and effaced, ordered her to bed to fight off the effects of gravity, as well as something of the stress she was in, stress he didn't begin to understand fully since no one knew exactly what had happened in the few minutes she and Cedrick were together alone.

Bed rest and medication to halt the contractions worked well until the due date, when Howells induced labor. Butch's story is worth noting in passing too, for he waited on his wife like a servant during those weeks, cooked and washed linens, even scrubbed the floors of the old Kamphoff house, did everything one might expect of a hero and more--became a doting husband few would have ever believed. Such things happen even in Neukirk.

He's a mason in town, gone all day; and he feeds hogs on a couple of acreages, so he's got chores. That left Crystal home alone, and even though they've got cable, a video library you wouldn't believe, she has enough of her father the hustler in her to

get frustrated at the kind of inertia Dr. Howells demanded. In the last two months she did not leave the house often--she was concerned about the baby--but she visited every corner of that little place, cleaning and straightening up regions no one else had entered in twenty years.

Upstairs, three bedrooms are lined up like bunks, one to the left, two to the right once you get up the steps, each room with its own door--no knobs, just a thin, curved piece of steel that undoes a flat dead bolt on the other side of doors made of slats. Perhaps because the little place has no attic, the third bedroom, the one at the front of the house, sometime along the line became an attic; and there, among the artifacts of Kamphoff history, the clutter her father figured couldn't bring a buck at the sale, she found a shoe box full of letters written by her grandmother, most of them dated 1935, and sent to her husband.

When Crystal was in high school, it never dawned on her that what she was up to was getting an education, so she is only vaguely aware of there having been a Depression. When she read those letters, it bothered her that she had no clue why her grandfather would be away from his family just then, because obviously, from what Grandma wrote in the letters, there was no war. They were strange voices to her--people she never knew. Love letters really, without passion, she thought at first. There was no sense of danger in them, only a deep wish for Henry (her grandpa) to be back home with his wife and kids.

(I mention this only in passing, because Crystal's knowing where her grandfather
was is not crucial to the story. But those who are old enough remember that for a time he went off to Minnesota to work with Roosevelt's WPA, a fact his son Marty's right-wing revisionism long ago hacked out of the family tree.)

That shoe box was packed full. By mid-November not much heat reached the front bedroom, the whole upstairs warmed only by a grate near the steps. But for a long time, she told those old men in church, she simply couldn't bring that box of letters downstairs to her room, the room where she'd taken Cedrick Myles (she didn't tell them that). So she said she read them all upstairs in the cold attic/bedroom. This otherwise darlingly pampered dame, her red hair matted and straight, her pregnancy extremely heavy, her feet a blot of veins, her bladder barely functional, her face puffy and blotched, sat upstairs, absorbed by letters penned on paper so thin she had trouble deciphering the lines from the loops and curls cut by the fountain pen on the opposite side of the page.

Not once did she find mention of her father. Uncle Ed was there, going fishing for the first time in Onion River; Aunt Bess dressed the cats in her doll clothes. Uncle Marion was busy with a tree house, and sometime Aunt Margaret's questions drove Grandma crazy. But there was no Martin.

She told the church council she calculated quickly in her mind; for some reason

she'd always remembered that he was born in 1935 and his birthday was December, just a week or so before Christmas. Her father wasn't around yet. Grandma was pregnant. She flipped through the dates on the letters as if they were trading cards--many of them written when she must have been just as pregnant as Crystal was, just as alone--no not as alone, not with four kids all over the house. . .this house, she thought, these walls, sitting right here somewhere. For a moment, she said a chill ran through her as ghosts emerged from every corner, creating the sense that she wasn't alone.

What she didn't tell the old men of the church was that she'd been thinking often about the child having Cedrick's hair and coloring. She had to suppress the thought to avoid crying, but it was there always throughout those nine months, as omnipresent as the whir of the furnace fan, the only other sound in the old house. She's no more a racist than any of us, and she wasn't thinking of how hard life might be for a mixed-race child in a lily-white town. She wasn't even thinking of herself, of what a little black kid would tell the world. Crystal never feigned much Christianity--she'd already seen enough of that in her life. What obsessed her was the thought that this movement in her, this pressing weight against her insides, had resulted from a union that, once accomplished, meant absolutely nothing to her. At some moments in the isolation of her pregnancy, what brought her almost to tears was the vision of this soon-to-be human being forever carrying the legacy of her careful, and careless seduction of Cedrick Myles. She'd come, in her own way, to understand, deeply, what she'd done. Something for generations.

But the letters spoke with a voice she said she'd never heard before, even though it was the voice of her own grandmother. They were written weekly, on Sunday afternoons or evenings, a fact she gleaned from her grandmother's recitation of what passages the preacher had used for sermons that day: "Dominie on I Peter 2--'But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.'" And then, every week, Grandma's little application: "How hard it is sometimes to make our lives shine for Him." Just a single line of comment.

And the afternoon service: "Dominie on the catechism: How great are our sins and miseries." And then, "Yeah, Henry, we don't have to look far either, do we?"

A week later: "Dominie on Psalm 73: 'Truly God is good to Israel, even to such
as are of a clean heart. But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped. For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.'" And then, "How blessed we are, really, with our health. Here, everything is fine this week. We have so much cause to thank the Lord. Tomatoes could use some sun. We have had too much rain. And I miss you."

All Crystal remembered of her grandparents was their miserliness, her grandma's reprimand when she'd watch her grandchildren let too much water from the tap go down the drain as they waited for its temperature to cool.

"Afternoon, Dominie on infant baptism, how our children being heirs of sin stand in need too of God's grace and thus must be baptized." And then, "Even this one, Harry--sometimes he wrestles inside like Jacob." And then the news: "Arnold busy with kites all week--good, stiff winds for him, too. Mary and Agnes played school sitting on bushel baskets."

For three days Crystal went into the cold upstairs and read through those letters, one after another, she said, kept them locked behind two dead bolts as if there were no place for them downstairs, as if taking them from the attic would be like taking a goldfinch from the grove to a cage in the kitchen. She'd wrap herself in a blanket, sitting up as if she hadn't heard the doctor's warning.

Three weeks before the baby would be born, she was lying on the couch in the living room beside the mega-bass speakers, while the house sat in silence around her--no Oprah, no Hammer, no local news. She pulled on her slippers, she said, thinking that she'd go back upstairs and read them again, even though she'd been all through them already, even though she'd realized how little of life her grandmother seemed to know, other than the flower bed and her children's morning play. She'd thought she'd start over again, at the front of the shoe box because the voices in the letters--her grandfather's voice was there too, even though the letters were her grandmother's--had become the only voices in the house through the long hours she was sentenced to inactivity. And they were dear, somehow comforting. They were so simple, so child-like, so pure. Stored within the old woman's few words was more, she told those elders, than she'd ever known, so much more that those few words closed a hole in her heart she didn't know she'd had.

She buttoned her housecoat and stood up from the couch, slowly, the child getting heavier and lower within her, and she told herself that this time she would take those letters downstairs instead of visiting them the way she had been doing, it being cold up there and there being no place to lie down. But she thought again of how inappropriate it seemed to have those letters on the main floor beside the huge TV and the mega-bass sound system. What Grandma wrote should have been in a museum or a church library, a place where they could be protected from the ravages of dust and time, some sacred place they could be reverenced.

It came to her then, she said, that a bigger fight was going on in within her, that the letters were something more than a history. Something fierce and unsettling rose from within her, she said, almost as if from the child itself, something roiling like heartburn, and yet not a sickness either; something that tightened her lungs and constricted her breathing, something like an allergy that pinched every sense in her face. She reached for the Kleenex and sat back down as if it were an attack that would pass. She felt her skin being turned inside out, every vital organ exposed by an alien power suddenly at the keys to every nerve in her system.

She knew what was in her had somehow to do with those letters, so she gathered her strength again and raised herself from the couch and went to the stairs. She pressed her hand up against the wall to steady herself simply to get the light switch, then took hold of the rail on the left side, put her right hand up against the wall, and started slowly upstairs. She opened the door of the middle bedroom, kept herself straight with one hand on the bed and walked through the door to the attic, where she picked up the box and put it beneath her arm, then turned and left again, swinging the door closed and locked behind her.

The stairs in that old house are almost vicious, so steep there's little to distinguish them from a ladder. At the bottom is a sharp twist so jagged the individual steps narrow to no more than a few inches as they sweep the corner. No one would build a house like that today.

Not until that moment had she felt as perilous about her pregnancy, she said. She descended the stairs, the shoe box full of her grandmother's letters between her arm and her side, her knees limp as if she'd continuously caught her weight from a walk down a long, steep hill. At the turn at the bottom, she steadied herself with a hand up on the ceiling, put her shoulder against the wall, and came off the final steps, her right foot reaching for stability, her left following in the unmistakable pattern of an old woman.

When she stood at the foot of the stairs, she breathed deeply, put the shoe box down on the arm of the couch, and shut the upstairs door. It wasn't so much of a rescue, she said, as another kind of birth, this taking of the letters downstairs into her home, into the scene of so many parties. She said she had brought something into her life, something she was simply going to have to make room for, she said.

She sat on the couch and laid her elbow over the armrest, then lay down her head, the box there under her arm. She couldn't say what was happening in her, why her strength seemed gone. If it was the beginning of labor, she thought, she knew there was no way she had the power to carry it through. If the baby were to come now, if this were the time, she thought, the whole business would be accomplished without her.

Tears came--even in the recitation there before the men. She wanted Butch but knew he was at work and besides, how would she explain? She prayed for the first time since she'd been pregnant, for the first time in many years; she lay on that couch where she'd spent so much time, her head down on her arm, and she prayed in groans and sadness, as if there were no way of explaining anything. Her legs shook, she said, her arms quivered, her whole body seemed too long out in the cold.

She felt her heart race, but there was no movement inside her, no sense of a birth beginning. She pulled herself upright on the couch and told herself that it wasn't the child striking terror, for it was something like terror she felt, something deep fear.

With both hands, she grabbed the shoe box and lowered it into her lap, and felt something quell in her, at the moment the sharp points of her shoulder blades receding as if into the sheath of her back. Her breath steadied, her shoulders lowered, her arms fell, and the box on her lap seemed almost like an anvil in her two hands, something that wouldn't shake. It was a gift from Grandma, she told the men around that table. What she'd taken from the attic, she'd brought into her life, something she didn't know how to name, but something that brought her peace. That was the story she told the elders in the church the night she came to profess her faith.

There are old men in Crystal's church, old men with years and years of life's experience, even if all of it comes from a place no greater than this broad patch of Iowa farmland. But none of them had ever heard a story quite like Crystal's.

When the baby came, Sarah Ann, she was Butch's daughter--pale blue eyes, hairless, the same button nose. For Crystal not to have felt some relief would be to make her the kind of saint no one is; but she was sure, the moment she went into labor, that she would have loved that child no matter what its pigmentation.

You may not believe her. In story as in life it is the office of the reader to determine whether Crystal te Lindert's religious experience was simply a physical manifestation of the suppression of her worst fears, her latent racism, and her guilt over what she'd done with Cedrick Myles.

But the elders bought the whole story, every minute of it, even though they didn't know the Cedrick Myles connection. They said, as did many, that the phenomenon she came to label as her conversion was exactly what she claims it to be. Praise God! they said, and then they prayed.

Now you choose.