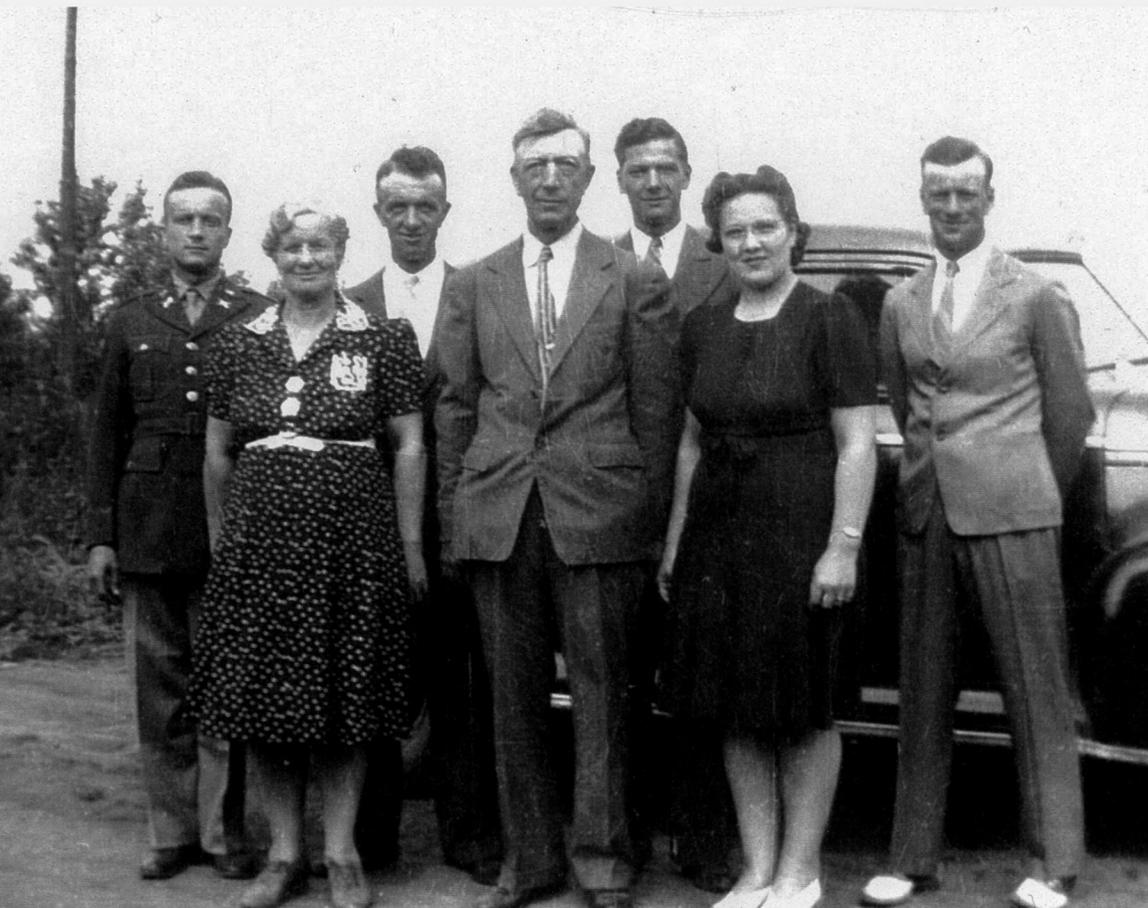


Book one of the Becoming the Greatest Generation Series

NINETY DAY WONDER

A World War II Novel



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Content Notice: This book contains descriptions of war and trauma that may be disturbing to some people. The book also uses racial slurs that were in use at the time that this book is set. We have kept this language to reflect its usage at the time, but the author and the publisher condemn the usage of such language whether it was used in the past or today.

CHAPTER 1

ST CLAIR

I sat down on the step and puffed on the hand-rolled cigarette Brasseux passed around. I sniffed the loose leaves in the bag next to me and recognized the distinctive aroma of marijuana. It grew wild on the ditch banks at home, and Granny used it for headaches and added it to her cough medicine.

The cigarette came around to me again.

"I really shouldn't," I said.

"Aw, come on, Sinclair. Don't be such a fuddy-duddy. Take another drag."

I did and passed it on to Carson, next to me.

My eyes dropped to the letters in my hand, the one from Morris, my best pre-Pearl Harbor buddy, sitting on top. I became mesmerized with the letter as it sat unopened in my hands, thinking of Morris, now attending flight school, until Brasseux nudged me and handed me the cigarette stub.

I started to feel light-headed after drawing in the smoke. The porch lights faded. I found myself sitting with several other men around a campfire in a clearing in the woods.

A cloud of smoke surrounded me. In my hands, I now held a long-necked, hand-carved pipe. I took a short puff on the pipe. Tobacco. I handed it to Brasseux. Or was it Brasseux? He looked like Brasseux, but he smelled like he hadn't taken a bath in a year. His long, unkempt hair and tunic and trousers of animal skins gave off a distinctly sweaty, smoky scent.

"The chief of the Shawnee, Delaware, Mingo, Seneca, Wyandot, Potawatomi, and Ottawa," Brasseux said in French, indicating the men on the other side of the fire. "I'm translating for the Ottawa Chief. He's a nephew of Pontiac."

I understood French. How?

I looked at the men on my right. Closest to me sat Morris. He had gained some weight. No, I realized. This man was Lewis Morris, the New Yorker whose family had governed Colonial politics for the last hundred years. He sat on a worn leather and wood camp stool. The 1775 New York General Assembly had sent him to the Continental Congress, now meeting in Philadelphia, and the Congress had selected him as their chief negotiator of this treaty. Next to him sat Thomas Walker, a physician, explorer, and breeder of superior foxhounds from Virginia. He'd recently negotiated the peace when that scoundrel Dunsmore and his crony Andrew Lewis had attacked the Indians at Point Pleasant. The youngest of the group was James Wilson, a Scotsman like me, in his early thirties. He represented Pennsylvania in the Continental Congress. He was a thoughtful young man, and I felt he would go far.

None of this made sense. I didn't know these men, yet I did. And how had I arrived in the middle of the American Revolution?

"You have come a long way and doubtless suffered many hardships along the way." Lewis Morris spoke, sitting straight and speaking formally. I recorded the words in English on parchment with a quill pen and then translated them to French for Brasseux. Brasseux translated them to Odawa. Morris continued. "It gives me great joy to see you now meeting together at the invitation of your English brothers. We wish to renew and further establish the great friendship that has long existed between our people. With this wampum, we dry up your tears for the loss of your friends who have died since we last assembled. We remove all grief from your hearts so that your minds may be at ease as we deliver the message from the Great Council of Wise Men, now assembled in Philadelphia. Collect the bones of your deceased friends and bury them deep in the ground, then transplant the tree of peace over them so our friendship will not be interrupted or our minds disturbed."

He rose and gave a string of wampum to each of the Chiefs, pretty worthless beads and trinkets from my perspective. And what did he mean by 'our great friendship?'

Morris returned to his camp stool and spoke formally again, welcoming the chiefs to the edge of the forest and thanking them for making the long journey. He gave them more wampum and invited them to begin negotiating a treaty.

The Indians spoke among themselves for a little bit, then their spokesperson said, "We will keep the path open so friendship and cooperation will continue between our people. We will meet with you on the day you call Monday and tell you who will negotiate with you."

The Indian Chiefs and their followers filed out of the council area. I stood with the others, realizing I towered over everyone else. This wasn't my body. I was me, but another awareness occupied this body. What had happened?"

"Gentlemen," a Black man in buckskin approached from behind. "Cook has dinner waiting."

"Thank you, Josiah," Morris said.

Josiah led the way to a rough wooden house a little way from the council circle. He had set the table for the evening meal with China and crystal of good quality, chipped but serviceable. That surprised me here on the western frontier. A large venison roast, surrounded by small roasted potatoes, sat on a platter in the table's center. Walker passed me a pan of coarse cornbread, the only other dish. Josiah filled my glass with a full-bodied red wine.

"We have Arthur St. Clair to thank for this fine wine, straight from his Pennsylvania vineyard," Morris announced. The men all raised their glasses to me. I raised mine in response, realizing that Arthur St. Clair was me. Or I was Arthur St. Clair, although I still felt like Eugene Sinclair.

We dug into the roast and slathered freshly made butter on the cornbread. Then, for a while, we ate in silence.

"I'm afraid we didn't make much progress today," sighed Wilson at last.

"Progress is always slow with treaties," Dr. Walker said. "And very frustrating with all the protocol, speeches, and arguments. It will be at least a month before we've settled the terms. And by that time, it will be almost winter. You know, in my younger years, I had no problem riding out through the worst weather, but I'm

getting old. I long to go home and sit by the fire.”

“You would be bored to death sitting by the fire even now,” teased Wilson.

I rejoined, “You have always been a man of action. Your mind is still going strong even if the body is a bit worn.”

“Yes, and I believe there will be much for me to do what with the trouble these fellows are stirring up.” He indicated Wilson and Morris.

“What is the news on that account?” I asked.

“Washington has taken command of the Continental Army in Boston,” Morris answered. “He sent Schuyler to invade Quebec, but Schuyler became ill, so Richard Montgomery led the expedition. You know Montgomery, don’t you, St. Clair? What do you think of him?”

“I served with him during the Siege of Louisburg,” I responded. “He’s a man of integrity, although he has that Irish temper. He served longer than I did but eventually got frustrated by his inability to gain promotion after North came into power.”

“North has cost the Empire many a good man,” Morris said. “I think the self-declared Lord has done more to set this Revolution in motion than any man in America.”

“It’s a courtesy title, not a self-declared title.” I replied, “I wouldn’t go so far as to say he is responsible for the revolution, but he has cost King George dearly.”

“Always the aristocrat,” Morris shot back.

“No title for me. I’m just a Pennsylvania farmer.” I said.

“Hardly. You own more land than anyone in Western Pennsylvania,” Wilson said. “I don’t know why you didn’t campaign to be a delegate to the Continental Congress.”

“I didn’t want to miss the birth of my new baby daughter.”

“You mean Phoebe wouldn’t let you. Those Bayard girls have always been hard-headed.” Morris said. “How about it, Arthur. Do you intend to get involved in this little rebellion we have going on?”

“I hold that no man has a right to withhold his services when his country needs him. I’ll serve if called.” I replied.

“That is good,” Wilson said, “Because John Hancock has

charged me, as a representative of Pennsylvania, to commission you as a Colonel of the Continental army and compel you to raise a regiment from Pennsylvania to join Montgomery in Quebec.”

“Consider it done,” I replied.

I retired to the room they had provided for me. A rough wooden platform held a lumpy featherbed, covered with three threadbare quilts. A couple of candles stood on the little antique washstand brought over from England. I lit the candles from the fire on the hearth. As I poured water into the bowl on the washstand, I glanced in the cloudy mirror above the basin. I couldn’t believe it. I looked like my Dad. I was my Dad. Or maybe not. They had called me Arthur St. Clair. Wasn’t that the name of the general Dad had spoken about on the porch back home? I had said things I didn’t realize I knew and had expressed some of them in a foreign language. Even my body was not my own. It made no sense at all.

But I was bone tired and hungry as hell despite the cook’s excellent dinner. Too tired to figure anything out. I lay down to sleep.

I woke sprawled out on the barracks’ hard pinewood porch, the early morning sun glaring down at me. I sat up and looked around carefully. Yes, Fort Bliss. I wore my 1942 army uniform. I sat there, trying to figure out what had happened.

My mind kept returning to the statement, “I hold that no man has a right to withhold his services when his country needs him. I’ll serve if called.”

That was a far cry from how I’d reacted to the current war. My mind went back to the week the army drafted me.

CHAPTER 2

THE ARMY CALLS

I swooped into the prime parking spot under the arching elm tree, whose shade provided significant relief from the glaring Kansas sun. I felt a sense of victory as I always did whenever I beat the traveling salesman, who had recently moved into the room next to me, to the spot. I hopped out of my 1936 Buick Sports Coupe. Although five years old, it was still the newest vehicle I had ever owned. Pulling my pasteboard suitcase and scuffed old briefcase out of the back, I headed across the lawn, still wet from the afternoon thunderstorm. Judy Garland's recent hit 'It's a Great Day for the Irish' blasted out of the radio through the kitchen's open window. *Oops. Forgot Mom's cookies. I'll want those for my midnight snack.*

I had a dream and a plan. If Dr. Ingersoll, our hometown doctor, was right, that plan finally unfolded perfectly. I leaped over the flowerbed, landing in the mud. The deep footprint in the wet soil might disturb Mrs. Brennan, but to track mud onto the pristine floors of her immaculate boarding house would undoubtedly lead to retribution. I stomped the mud off my shoe and scraped it on the cement walkway leading to the front steps of the old Victorian house, then tried to kick the clumps of mud off the walk. Still, after years of blowing dust, the rain and its accompanying mud were welcome here. I bounded up the six steps to the broad porch two at a time. Tucking the briefcase under my arm, I threw open the door.

"Is that you, Gene?" my landlady called as the screen door slammed behind me.

I hadn't thought she could hear me over the radio.

Mrs. Brennan appeared at the door to the dining room, flour

covering her arms to the elbows, a white smudge on her cheek, and one on her forehead. "How was your weekend? I trust your mother's well?"

"Just fine, Ma'am. She sends her regards." Mrs. Brennan and Mom went to high school together and had remained devoted friends through the years. Besides my rent, and perhaps more important to Mrs. Brennan, I provided a conduit for gossip between the two old friends. I could be caught up in a long conversation if I didn't get my mail—full of good news, I hoped—and run. I stepped sideways toward the mailboxes.

"Have you made up your mind about next year? I have to tell you I need to advertise the room now if you aren't staying." She tilted her head, frowning, to emphasize the urgency and lifted it again to express hope. If I stayed, she wouldn't have to find another boarder, and I could continue to bring the hometown news.

Having made my way to the mailboxes, I reached into the pigeonhole where she put my mail. "This may tell me."

"Oh, yes. That came for you Friday. I thought it looked important, so I put it up top."

My heart beat faster. I ripped open the envelope and read frantically. "All right!" I shouted.

I leaped into the air, throwing my arms over my head. Just then, the sun came out from behind the clouds and shone through the leaded stained-glass window on the landing. Shimmering patches of color danced on the walls like bright confetti; the old house was celebrating with me, and the sun as well, its light as bright as my heart.

"Good news, Gene?"

I blurted, "I was accepted into medical school! Wow! Since we were boys, Don Ingersoll and I have planned to open a practice together. He's already in his second year 'cause his father could afford to send him. I've saved everything I could from my teaching salary so I could go."

She seemed a bit surprised, like she expected something different. "Well," she said, a bit disgruntled, "might have been sooner if you hadn't bought that fancy car from your brother."

"Albert bought it right before his daughter came along, and

Nancy quit teaching. She was furious with him for buying a sports car without a decent back seat for the kids, and they needed the money, so he sold it to me cheap.”

I started toward the stairs to my room to write to Don.

Stopping me, she said, “Don’t forget the rest of your mail.” She handed me the newspaper. Another letter fell out of the box. She picked up the letter and gave it to me. “It’s from the Selective Service. Did you forget to register for the draft?”

“I registered the first day. I don’t know what they would want now.” I ripped the envelope open, my hands shaking at the thought of what might be in it.

“Damn.” I kicked the wastebasket. It bounced off the wall and rolled into the living room.

“Eugene! Watch your tongue! And your foot!”

“Sorry, Mrs. Brennan. I... It’s just... this is a draft notice. They drafted me. Right when I got into medical school.”

“Don’t they know how bad you want to go to medical school?”

“The draft board doesn’t know anything about it. Why should they? The medical school doesn’t communicate with the draft board when they accept a student.”

“You need to tell them then.”

Just when I had finally made it, everything fell apart again—the lesson of my life.

“I hope to goodness we won’t get into this war. You know the Great War was how I lost Mr. Brennan; God rest his soul.” Her hand fluttered over her heart. Her chin trembled, as it did whenever she mentioned her “dear departed husband,” generally several times a day. “War is a terrible waste. Believe you me, if there is any way we can avoid it, I think we should.”

“What’s the big idea!” Herman Hazelton, the traveling salesman, burst through the door. “I go to the druggist to get something for my piles, and I come back to find that you’ve stolen my parking place.”

“There really aren’t designated parking places,” Mrs. Brennan said.

“Now I have to park out back under the tree where the owl roosts. Do you have any idea how disgusting that owl mess is?”

"You could park in front," I said, absently stuffing the draft notice into my pocket.

"Then people would see my car and know I'm here."

I shrugged my shoulders, and he stomped up the stairs.

"He left his wife," Mrs. Brennan said. "She comes by every once in a while to try to collect money. Always on weekends when you're gone."

I turned to go up the stairs, then turned back. "By the way, I agree with you about the war. You know that William Allen White formed a committee to try to keep us out of the war. They pushed through the lend-lease program to help the allies win without dragging us in. If I know anything about Mr. White, he'll do everything in his power to keep America out of it."

She nodded sagely. "Mr. White practically runs the country from his little newspaper in Emporia." She paused for a moment, squinting as though to remember something. "Didn't you say you worked your way through college as his houseboy? I bet you saw everything that went on in that house."

"I did. Worked for him for three years. I wouldn't say he runs the country, but he has a lot of influence on important people. And some fascinating visitors, from Douglas Fairbanks to Albert Einstein. They all visited that big house in that little Kansas town."

"You don't know what I would have given to have met Douglas Fairbanks," Mrs. Brennan interrupted me. "I saw every movie he ever made!" Her voice trembled with passion. "Some of them several times. Who's Albert Einstein? I don't think I've ever seen any of his movies."

"Einstein is a university professor. He's one of the most brilliant physicists alive. He lectured on his theory of relativity at my college. Fascinating." I replied, confused that she hadn't heard of Albert Einstein. I smiled, recalling the lecture and our meeting.

The scent of burning pie filling drifted from the kitchen. Mrs. Brennan spun around. "I had better rescue those pies if we're going to have any dessert tonight."

I sprinted up the stairs, grateful for my reprieve and thankful for the pies. As I entered my room, the bright pink swans swimming in the wallpaper's deep navy background slapped me in the

face as they always did after a weekend surrounded by the pale rose and cream patterns Mom preferred. I had no idea where Mrs. Brennan had found that design and did not wish to know, anyway. Three and a half years ago, when I replaced science teacher Gerald Carlson, who had suffered a stroke midyear, I planned to spend a few months in the boarding house, then find a decent apartment at a lower rate. That had never happened. Still, the place had become comfortable—nice bed, interesting, if competitive boarders, and reasonable enough price for meals and a room. Mrs. Brennan treated me like the son she never had. My time here has been the best of my life so far.

Dropping the mail and bag of cookies on the bedside table, I tossed the suitcase on the bed. Its age and cheap construction meant it popped open, spilling some of my clothes onto the floor. I had been using it since I began college. I hadn't expected it to last this long. I picked up the clothes and threw them on the bed.

What to do now? Just when life was moving forward as I had dreamed, I had been drafted. The first thing was to tell Don what had happened. I pulled some stationery from the drawer of the flimsy desk Mrs. Brennan had placed in my room and decided to write the letter on the porch. It was a lovely day, and the last time I tried to use the desk, it had tipped over, and Mrs. Brennan admonished me not to destroy her furniture. I dropped my pipe and tobacco into my pocket. As I pulled a book from the shelf for a writing surface, I noticed a stack of clean towels on the overstuffed chair in the corner next to the bookcase. On my way out, I made the mistake of sticking my head into the kitchen.

"Thank you for washing the sheets and towels, Mrs. Brennan."

"My pleasure, Gene. Did you see Mary Jane Howland while you were home?"

"Yes," I said, trying to turn away

"Did she set up her business?" Mrs. Brennan persisted.

"Yes. She bought Letha's beauty shop equipment and set up the business in her house." I took a step toward the dining room.

"Your mother is always telling me how talented Mary Jane is with her hair."

Usually, I would spend an hour or so catching Mrs. Brennan

up on all the gossip from home, but I needed to be alone with my thoughts right now. "Yes, mom's been going there." I tried to take another step toward the dining room.

"Has anyone done anything about the Legion Hall? It really needs to be taken care of." Her questions were like a fishhook.

"Mr. Walters got Cook's to donate some paint and repainted it. Looks better than I ever remember it." I stepped into the dining room on my way out to the porch.

"He's running the Corner Café now, isn't he?"

"Yes, Ma'am," I called back.

"How about Longacre Café? Do they still have dances every Saturday night?"

"Not since Rose Gugleman took over managing it." I moved a bit farther into the dining room.

"How are the new elm trees doing in the park?"

"Growing fast," I said over my shoulder.

"Well, Gene, I would love to talk with you some more, but I have to finish making dinner. Maybe we can continue the conversation when I'm not so busy."

"Yes, Ma'am." I shook my head and finally headed out the door.

I settled into the porch swing. Lighting my pipe, I puffed a few times to gather my thoughts. Don and I had always felt we would be perfect medical partners. He was interested in the complexities of surgery and the intellectual analysis of diseases and syndromes. As for me, I wanted to be the general practitioner who cared for everyone in town. I would treat the mind, body, and soul. Now, thanks to the draft board, it might never happen. We weren't even in the war, and they were pulling me away from my plan.

"Gene, oh, Gene." I jerked my head up. The slim, prim school district superintendent's wife came up the walk waving her handkerchief. "Gene, my niece Gertrude is coming for a visit next weekend. Will you be staying in town? I would love to have you join us for dinner to meet her."

Madeline Glass had been trying to get me to marry one niece or another for the past three years. She never caught on that I

was not interested in marriage right now. I couldn't afford a wife and family while in medical school. After establishing my practice, I planned to marry, a plan crafted and honed over the years in many conversations with Mom, Don, and Granny. As the world changed and I grew, we revised and refined the plan. I would become a doctor, join Don in practice, then start a family.

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Glass. I'll be working on some new lesson plans."

She frowned. "With only five weeks left in the school year? What kind of new lessons are you coming up with at this late date?"

"Um... Einstein. I'm going to teach my senior students about the theory of relativity."

"Oh, Mr. Glass follows all the new advances in science. He didn't think anybody else in this dusty little town knew anything about it. He'll be so excited. Where did you learn about Dr. Einstein's work?"

"I went to a lecture by Einstein in college. Then served him breakfast the next morning and had a personal conversation with him."

"You talked with him? What did he say?"

"I told him I didn't completely understand his theory of relativity. He said, 'neither do I, son.'"

"I must go home and tell Mr. Glass." She waggled her upright hand as she hurried down the sidewalk.

Why had I said that? Now I would have to teach the theory of relativity. In my first year, Mr. Samuels, my principal, warned me when I introduced the theory of evolution that I should teach strictly by the book. Nevertheless, I had kept subtly inserting evolution into my lesson plans. Thankfully, my students knew better than to tell their parents and kept quiet. Their tacit approval kept me employed without having to compromise my principles. I believed they deserved to know current scientific concepts, even if their parents might not have thought so.

I pulled out the draft notice I'd stuffed in my pocket and stared at it. Now, keeping my job didn't matter. By the fall, I would be in the army. I could openly teach evolution. I could even teach

relativity. None of it would matter. I quickly dashed off the letter to Don and went upstairs to plan my new physics lessons.

I usually entered school hallways filled with the cheerful sounds of friends greeting each other with all the exuberance a building full of teenagers could embody. The noise could be deafening, even in this small high school. Today I was early, needing to prepare new material for my physics class. From the echoing halls, I walked through the workroom, filled with the busy clack and hum of the mimeograph machine and the sweet scent of duplicating fluid, into the cigarette smoke dimness of the teacher's lounge.

"I've been drafted," I announced to the small crowd that usually gathered there before school.

"Oh, Gene," cried both Dorothy Bucks and Dianne Hammond. They had both attempted to be wife-worthy, which I had effectively staved off. Dorothy had been incredibly persistent, and I had been sorely tempted, but in the end, Mom convinced me to stick to the plan. A plan that was now ruined.

"Gene, how dare you leave! I've been training you for three years to be senior class sponsor. You're the only one who knows how to organize the senior trip and plan commencement, and now you're leaving as I'm planning to retire," exclaimed Miss Burkhardt. "I've waited so long. If both you and I go now, who will sponsor the senior class?"

"Emma, I hope you won't reconsider your retirement because Gene is leaving," said Henry Martin, the history teacher. Henry would be happy to see both of us leave. When Miss Burkhardt retired, he would be the senior teacher in the school. He and his brother Billy, the Baptist preacher, were behind the uproar when I taught evolution theory to my biology class. I had been furious with their interference. Neither of them knew a thing about science, yet they saw fit to dictate what went on in my class. I told them they were ignorant fools stuck in the last century, and I was glad I was raised in the Methodist church, where we don't have to check our brains at the door. I nearly got myself fired after only

two months of teaching. I knew they would pressure the school board to get a more traditional, somewhat backward science teacher.

“I’m sure someone will be able to take on the seniors,” I told Miss Burkhardt. “If you leave all your notes and lists, everything should be fine.”

She looked doubtful.

I returned to the workroom and prepared a few handouts for my physics lessons. When I introduced natural selection to these same students three years earlier, Mr. Samuels and the Martins shut me down. I couldn’t cover it completely. Now I would introduce them to the theory of relativity point-blank.

Even though I hadn’t been teaching long, some groups of students stood out, and this senior class was one of them. Two of the most brilliant and multitalented students I had ever taught, Betty Sanders and Jimmy Hanson, led the class. She was a boy-crazy cheerleader who deliberately underplayed her intelligence. We had an understanding. I wouldn’t brag about her physics expertise if she kept me posted on what was happening with the students. She was a fantastic source of information on her peers. Jimmy was just as brilliant but naive. His importance to me was that he was the star pitcher on the baseball team. He helped me demonstrate real-world physics applications, like the path of a trajectory, many times.

The warning bell rang. I dashed down the stairs to my classroom in the basement of the three-story schoolhouse. I should have been there ten minutes ago. A loud, rowdy knot of students clustered in the middle of the hallway. The students encircled three boys. I sprinted toward them, realizing it wasn’t a fight only when I noticed that the three senior boys at the center of the group were grinning, arms locked around each other’s shoulders. I unlocked the classroom door.

“Everybody in your seats,” I said as the class filed into the room.

Betty turned to me. “Mr. Sinclair, Junior, Bobby, and Jimmy joined the army. Isn’t it exciting? They are going off to fight the Krauts.”

“Them Krauts don’t stand a chance against us,” Bobby declared.

“We may not even get involved in the war,” I responded. “For now, let’s leave the Germans to the British and French and learn some physics.”

I walked to the board, took a deep breath, and wrote $E=mc^2$.

Herman’s car was already parked under the tree when I got home. He ambushed me on the porch.

“I got it,” he gloated.

“You’re never home this early. Is something wrong?”

“No. I quit early, so I didn’t have to get owl shit all over my car.”

“Do you notice where my car is parked?” I asked. “No owl shit. Just a lot of sunshine. Are you truly willing to sacrifice sales to park under the tree?”

He nodded. “I lose much more than I would have made on those sales if my wife sees me here. She’s constantly after me for money for those two brats of hers, and I’m not even sure one of them is mine.”

“But if she’s your wife, aren’t you obligated to support her?”

“Not if she’s gonna sleep around whenever I’m on a sales trip.”

I nodded and went into the house, wondering how much sleeping around he did on those sales trips. He seemed the type. I sat in my overstuffed chair to consider my options.

Don and I had come up with The Plan in sixth grade. Then, during my junior year in high school, the stock market crashed, the rain stopped, and the Great Depression hit. I worked and scrimped throughout college and three and a half years of teaching to save enough money. Now, just when I had the money and acceptance into med school, the army drafted me. It was as though the Goddess Fortuna had frowned on my plans from the beginning. What could I do to make Fortune smile?

I ducked into the school office to make a quick telephone call to the County Selective Service before classes started the following day. I asked Cici, the school secretary, if I could use the phone on her desk. When she nodded, I picked up the handset and gave the operator the number. A woman answered. I could hear a dog barking in the background. I picked up the base of the phone and turned my back to Cici, trying to keep the conversation private.

"Hello, Eugene Sinclair speaking. I'm calling to request a deferment."

"A deferment? Oh, for the selective service? You're a conscientious objector?"

"No. I got accepted into medical school." How stupid of me. I realized I should have said I was a conscientious objector. After all, I had been President of Students for Peace in College. But they probably would have sent me to one of those new Public Service camps, and I still wouldn't get to medical school anyway. Too late now. I had been so proud of the medical school acceptance that I had to blurt it out.

"I have to find my husband. I think he went out to the garage to work on his car. Please hold on." A muffled shout came through the receiver. "Pete. Pete, get in here. You have some Selective Service business." The first warning bell rang, sending students to class. I was late again for my own class. I continued to hold. Finally, someone came back on the line.

"Hello. Pete Fleming here. You say you want a draft deferment to attend medical school?"

"Yes"

"But you didn't register as a medical student?"

"I won't be a medical student until the fall."

"What do you currently do?"

"I'm a high school science teacher." I paced back and forth at the end of the phone cord. Students would be gathering outside my locked classroom.

"So, are you in good health and physical condition? You can read and write?"

"Of course I can read and write. I'm a high school teacher." The final bell rang.

"I'm sorry we cannot offer you any deferment at this point. Please report as ordered."

"You don't understand. I got accepted into medical school. The army will need doctors if we go to war." Pete Fleming must be denser than lead.

"Report as ordered. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand. Thank you, sir."

What was wrong with these people? They must be as noodled as the Nazis. If we did end up in this war, they would be desperate for doctors.

I slammed the handset back onto the phone.

"Mr. Sinclair!" Cici exclaimed.

"I got drafted," I said. "And they won't give me a deferment."

"If they gave you a deferment, the war would end before you got out of medical school. If we send our boys over there, the war is as good as over."

"Well, I don't want to be one of those boys," I stomped out of the office and slammed the door behind me.

That afternoon Cici knocked on the classroom door as I struggled to quiet the unruly freshman general science class. They were a handful. This class made me glad I was leaving, whether to the army or medical school.

"Pastor Billy Martin is in Mr. Samuels' office. Mr. Samuels wants you there immediately. I'm to watch your class and tell you that you better watch your tongue." As I pushed past her, she whispered, "Why don't you ask for a deferment from the medical school?"

Cici! That was it! I would ask the medical school to defer my acceptance until my one year enlistment was over. I climbed the stairs with a lighter step even though Billy Martin and Bruce Samuels waited for me with loaded guns, so to speak.

I wasn't surprised Pastor Martin was here. Science had made many advances in the early years of the twentieth century, but many people in small town Kansas were not interested in scientific progress. On the other hand, several of the students in my

classes were the first of their families to go to high school, which was progress enough for them.

Through the windows from the outer office, I could see Mr. Samuels tapping his fingers on his massive mahogany desk. I paused, then knocked on the door before I opened it. "You wanted to see me?"

Pastor Martin jumped out of the straight-backed chair in front of the desk. "What are you teaching these children?" he shouted.

"What do you mean? I'm teaching them science."

He paused, then accused me. "You are teaching them blasphemy!"

"I am teaching science. What is blasphemous about that?"

"I heard that you are teaching about the lies and fabrications spouted by Mr. Albert Einstein. That man is German, and he spreads seditious German lies." He took a step toward me.

I took a deep breath to calm myself. "Dr. Einstein is an American citizen, and his new theories might have huge consequences for these students. It could change their lives in ways we don't even understand yet. Just because we live in a small town doesn't mean our children need to have an inferior education."

"You should teach facts, not theories," Mr. Samuels interjected. "I thought we cleared that up with that evolution thing."

"Facts? Science is theory. In science, we prove things wrong, but we can't definitively prove them right. We follow the theory that fits the data best until we discover something that doesn't fit. Then we develop a new theory that does fit the data. That is the scientific process, and it leads to more and more knowledge and discoveries. But I have to teach the theories so that the students have the background to make those discoveries."

Pastor Martin stepped closer and pulled himself up to his full five-foot-four. "In my day, we learned the truth, not some feeble theory we might throw away next year. And we did not espouse the ideas of the enemy. What are you thinking, presenting these ideas to impressionable young students? They need to learn factual information that will be useful if they have to go to war."

I stood a bit straighter myself. "These concepts are essential

to the war effort. The country that best understands these principles might even win the war.”

Mr. Glass walked into the office.

“Oh, excuse me, Bruce. I didn’t realize you were in a meeting.” He turned to me. “Hello, Gene. My wife told me you’re teaching the theory of relativity. I find it fascinating.”

Pastor Martin gasped.

Mr. Glass turned back to Mr. Samuels. “Bruce, aren’t you impressed with this young man? Unfortunately, you know he hasn’t signed his contract for the coming year. We need to get that corrected right away.”

I interposed. “I’m afraid I won’t be signing a contract for next year. I’ve been drafted.”

Mr. Glass frowned, and the frown on Pastor Martin’s face faded away.

“I’m sorry to hear that. Our loss is the army’s gain. I wish you the best of luck. Now Bruce, unless this meeting is crucial, we need to discuss some issues with next year’s basketball schedule.”

“I should go back down and rescue Cici from the freshman science class. James Williams started a fire in the sink last week. I wouldn’t want them to burn down the building on Cici’s watch.”

I slipped out and hurried back to my classroom, silently praising Mr. Glass for his timing and intervention. Cici winked at me when I told her he had arrived.

I acted on Cici’s suggestion. At noon, I got a plate from the lunchroom, some paper from the workroom, and, using my favorite fountain pen, sat in the teacher’s lounge and wrote a letter to the medical school’s dean.

Dear Dr. Graham,

I recently received my acceptance letter from the Washington University School of Medicine. Unfortunately, yesterday I received a draft notice. I’m currently obligated

to serve our country in the United States Army for a year. Therefore, I'm writing to request that my acceptance to the School of Medicine be deferred until after completing my service. I will return to the school immediately on my discharge from the army if you can be so kind as to allow this deferred admission.

*Yours respectfully,
Eugene W. Sinclair*

I took a stamp from the school supply, dropped three pennies into the drawer, and placed the letter in the outgoing mailbox on Cici's desk as I returned to the classroom. She nodded and continued her typing.

I checked the mail every afternoon, but there was no letter from Dr. Graham.

In physics class, Betty and Jimmy asked questions that challenged my limited knowledge of the theory of relativity, so we all made it through those last five weeks with a better understanding of recent advances in physics. Commencement day finally arrived.

The students marched into the auditorium with all the pomp and grandeur possible for a small town graduation with twenty students. Betty, the valedictorian, gave an emotional speech—how wherever they went, they would recall these years as the best time of their lives, thanking their parents for the long hours and teachers for teaching them math and English, responsibility, and work ethic. When she finished, there wasn't a dry eye in the place.

Jimmy's dry humor soon had everyone laughing at his Salutatorian speech. I had let him read my high school graduation speech, an amusing juxtaposition of lines plagiarized from Shakespeare, Thomas Jefferson, Plato, and Anonymous, names

changed to those of students in my school and our teachers. He had borrowed the concept but had been even more clever in his choice of quotes.

Mr. Perry, the music teacher, led the band in several selections from Miss Burkhardt's approved Commencement list—Pomp and Circumstances, of course, but she let me slip in one new one—God Bless America, my new favorite.

The diplomas were all in order and handed to the correct student. Everything went off without a hitch. When the recessional began, Mr. Samuels stood and held up his hand. The music stopped. Sitting beside me, Miss Burkhardt patted my knee, smiling, as I looked around for the problem. Was he going to fire me in front of the whole town for teaching relativity? I had already resigned.

"Will Jimmy Hanson, Bobby Kuhn, William Daniels, Jr., and Eugene Sinclair please come to the front of the stage?" I tried to duck out, but Miss Burkhardt glared at me, grabbed my hand to make me stop, and pointed toward Mr. Samuels. I acquiesced.

"These young men will be joining the army in a few short days. We want to let them know how proud we are that they will be defending our nation and providing for our safety. Please show them how grateful you are."

After the townsfolk's standing ovation, Mr. Samuels asked the faculty and staff to lead the graduates out of the auditorium. At the reception on the lawn, it seemed everyone wanted to shake my hand.

"Mr. Sinclair, if we get into the war, I bet we can beat them in nothing flat," Jimmy Hanson said. "Aren't you excited about going?"

"I'm hoping we don't have to fight. I hope the war will be over before we're forced into it."

"I agree," Jimmy's father said. "But we need to be prepared. We weren't ready for the Great War, which cost us more than it should have. If it does come to war, at least you'll be trained."

"Most of the country agrees with you, Mr. Hanson," I said. "Particularly in the Midwest. The argument is whether we should support the Allies with arms and equipment or stay out of it com-

pletely. There are very few Americans who are pushing for war.”

“Unfortunately, Roosevelt is one of those who are, and he may get us into it yet.”

The war dominated conversations around the lawn. On this day of celebration of our graduates, our thoughts turned to the war they might have to fight.

I slipped away at the first opportunity.