This Untitled Life-Chapter Three

by Dan Nicely

Dedicated to my lovely wife...
who has heard this story a thousand times.

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Chapter Three

1:42 PM
To: ScottGilbertson@gilby.em
From: im@LJandpartnersforarch.usa
RE: Fast Ivan Redeux

Stevearino,

How-do, G? It is I, your wayward friend, sitting at a truck stop in Medora drinking what is arguably the world's worst coffee. I just passed the old homestead about forty-five minutes ago and am now riddled with guilt. So today, my friend, you get to play the part of electronic priest as I confess my sins.

I should also email Joey, but, as you know, sometimes absence truly does make the heart grow fonder. I don't want to seem like the world's biggest Nancy-Boy… drinking the world's worst coffee and pining away for the world's greatest woman. (With all due respect to Mrs. G.) Even if it is true.

To add to the "sin" list, I have a purchased a pack of Marlboro Red's (yes, in the box-dang Nicely and his American Spirit) and I am sitting out here smoking and drinking bad coffee and feeling guilty every which way from Sunday. All of this, mind you, under the close scrutiny of complete strangers. They look at me like I am the elephant man and yet every single one of them is armed to the teeth with technology. So maybe it isn't the fact that I am sitting out here typing away like a mad-man. Maybe it is the temp. A cool day here on the plains of Dakota… about 45 degrees. Most smoke in their trucks, but I refuse to smoke in the Fairlady Z. Many of these guys are wearing jeans and trucker hats and, I guess, a few know my dad. I just hope that I don't see the man himself. Because…

I absolutely did NOT stop in at the folk's place. Just couldn't do it. Don't ask me why. That's all I will say.

Okay, judge me as you will, Father G. Tell me my penance and if it isn't too much trouble, I will gladly acquiesce. Confirm that I suck and that I am a bad, bad man. Tell me that a good son would have shown the proper respect and stopped at the house –bogged down with gifts and words like, "Thank you for adopting me when I was a little trout." And, "I love you, both." I understand and can even condone your condemnation.

Cue "Modern Guilt" by Beck, brother. I just lit another cigarette and my fingers are cold.

Later, G.

-***I***

2:01 PM
To: jmorozova@plains.net
From: im@LJandpartnersforarch.usa
RE: Much Love

Hi Babe,

It is I, your wayward husband, doing what I just swore to Gundy I would not do…

I love you, babe. It has been five and half hours since I left West Fargo and I am already stopping to tell you that I miss you and the kids. What a gynormous candy-ass I am.

It is a little cold out here –about 45 on the old mercury. I am a little worried that I will hit snow in Montana or Idaho. It is not too late in the past season, or to early in this one, to see that. That would suck. I also imagine that it could be rough if I do hit snow. You know how my twisted mind works… I can imagine the tow-truck dudes:

"Gee, Lyle, do you think this hombre was cold."

"Heck, yeah! I wonder how long he has been here?"

"Well, long enough to see this little foreign car get buried under four feet of snow and long enough for him to stick his hands down the front of his pants for warmth."

"Yeah, look at him. His hands are way South of the border.

"Better call the law; he's frozen stiff."

"Ha, ha. Stiff. Get it? Ha, ha."

That would not be good. Not good at all. Sorry, I don't mean to make you worry. I am *sure* I will be fine.

Anyway, I had better get a move on before my sugar coated rear end ends up in deep ka-ka someplace between Wibaux and Astoria. If I do, I will send out an S.O.S. to you. I guess I like it if you worry a little bit.

Many kisses all over your amusement park-like body (I hope you are blushing –I love that) and…

Much love,

Ivan

Cold fingers to the contrary, time to make some hay on the open freeway. Growing up in North Dakota, one could find cold fingers everywhere. But the third week of school actually saw a reprieve from the brisk September weather that we had been experiencing. On the plains, they call this kind of reprieve an "Indian Summer." My first grade Indian Summer, like the three brisk weeks prior, saw quite a bit of scrapes and fighting during three critical times of the day: before school, at lunch hour/recess, and after school. Threes always come in three, and on the third day of the third week of school I finally found salvation from my playground tormentors in Jesus.

I was knee deep in the final round of a pro Crap Kicking contest and down three to one. Dr. Gladstone was mid kick as I protected the danger areas of head and crotch to the best of my ability. Gladstone was a Norsky-German cross which made him formidable in a lanky-but-stout sort of way. His hair was somewhere between wheat and dirt and flopped around almost uncontrollably in a thin, unrefined way whenever he delivered a kick. Stanley was taking a mini-break –I could see him bent over with his hands on his knees. He was panting from the exertion of a good cardio workout that had been going on for almost twenty minutes. He too was a cross breed, but I could not tell from where. He had an impossibly long torso for somewhat short legs. His hair was similar to what I imagined his soul was like: Deep and Dark. Beluah was somewhere out of sight and I had guessed he was just outside of my vision range –standing somewhere "north" of the old melon. I was in my typical defense Crap Kicking stance –on the ground. Out of the three, Beluah seemed the least sure of what was going on. His one distinguishing feature was piercing grayish blue eyes that seemed to tell you everything that was going on inside him. He was tall and thin and pale and fairly common looking in an upper-Midwest sort of way. He is the only one of the three that I wanted to play poker with –his eyes broadcasted his heart and intentions. He was also the only farm kid in the hate triangle.

Suddenly, as I lay there thinking and praying for salvation, something started to go wrong for the offense. I had lost sight of Stanley momentarily as my body naturally recoiled from a pretty brutal boot coated kick from Gladstone. By this time I was deep into my own thoughts of mercy and almost totally divorced from the pain. It still registered, but I was thinking about how long it would last, or how I could get away. So when there was some commotion on the offense team, I thought, hopefully, that the playground supervisor had finally showed up to rescue me. He was a native Podunkian who was attending Podunk Community College for Education and who moonlighted at noon hour as a playground supervisor. Normally, he could care less and chalked it up to "boys being boys." I looked

upon him with disdain every single day during the mandatory ejection from the lunch room. *You Suck!* was about the best condemnation that I could come up with in my seven year old mind. The guy did absolutely nothing during the lunch hour, but he did it well and with consistency.

Dr. Gladstone had spun around by this time and was now facing off with the new kid. The "new kid" had arrived at the beginning of the week. He had shown up from California. Most of the kids in the class did not know where California was located. I did –the benefits of a dad who is a trucker. None-the-less, my knowing did nothing to win popularity. If anything, it added to the scorn from the class.

"Jesus," is what the teacher called the new kid. Every time she did so, the kids would giggle and titter. And, every single time she said it, the new kid would correct her.

"My name is *Hey-Zeus*."

Her usual reply was, "Not in this state, sweetheart. We read that name as 'Jesus.'" Cue the nervous laughter. Most of the kids didn't understand the prejudice, but they could pick up on it in an intuitive way just like they could understand that I was the whipping boy of a few second graders and therefore they should stay away or suffer the same fate. Jesus was quickly moving into the number two whipping boy position for Mrs. Johnson's first grade class. Mrs. Johnson with her short boy haircut and wrangler dress pants and flowery blouses was twisted and confused. Her hatred for all things Mexican however, was palpable. Jesus didn't stand a chance with her. I didn't care in the least, because, out of whatever self-destruct mode that the kid was in, there he was. He was on the playground , defending a fellow student that he did not know against the second grad Pro-Crap Kicking team. And, to my utter astonishment, he was winning.

"You have to stop now!" He screamed at Gladstone, who seemed to be protecting the cowering dynamic duo of Stanley and Beluah. There was something in his voice that commanded respect, even at his advanced age of seven. He spoke with a slight accent, but his words spoke with a greater authority than any accent or age could define.

"This ain't your fight, Jesus."

Jesus pulled me to my feet and moved me to the side next to him.

"You're big. I think we can take these guys," he said quickly and quietly in my direction.

Semper Fi, brother! He advanced on Gladstone and I followed one step behind. At that point I still had the *lets-not-piss-off-the-bigger-kids* strategy of a smaller kid –even though as a first grader, I was just as big as any second grader at Woodrow. Somehow I had mistaken age for size.

The bell rang. For the first time in three weeks, I was actually disappointed.

"This ain't over," Gladstone declared as he turned for the building.

"I believe you," said Jesus with a half grin.

"Screw you, Jesus!" Wow! Three words I thought I would never hear. Ever.

"Yeah, screw you, you Wet Back." What the heck was a *Wet Back*?

The kids started to run for the building in that overexcited, not yet bored with school way. Jesus started to double-time it and I joined in.

"Hey thanks," I panted.

"De nada."

"Huh?"

"No problem, Ivan."

"Well, thanks, Jesus."
"Call me 'Zeus,' okay?
"Sure. Thanks, Zeus."

Let's talk about miracles for a moment. I have seen my fair share in my little tenure here on the big blue orb. However, this miracle, a guy who not only knew my name in a positive way, but who also put his neck on the line for mine, well, it almost seemed incomprehensible. I had seen this guy in the classroom –his desk was two behind mine and one row over. And I had seen him after school waiting for his ride while I waited for the BMB to pick me up. But I had absolutely no clue what he could or would do for me without asking for anything in return. This seemed like a miracle that made very little sense.

Looking back now, without knowing what was to come, my first reaction would be to chalk it up to a whipping boy helping out a whipping boy. And there may be some truth there, but there was something more. A lot more. Jesus was the first person I have ever met who was completely without guile or bitterness towards others. When I got back to the classroom, I looked back at him more than once. I looked at him enough for Mrs. Johnson to call me on it.

"Turn around and stay turned around, Ivan!" Which was followed by the laughter of the usual brown-nosing suspects. Mrs. Johnson loved playing to these little dorks. She ate up their laughter and absorbed their brown-nosing nutrients as if it were life giving sustenance. I knew immediately that I was dealing with possibly the world's smallest mind.

"Yes, ma'am."

"You would think that you found a new girlfriend the way you keep looking at Jesus." I blushed.

"Um… it's *Hey-Zeus*, ma'am."

"Jesus, when I want your participation, I will ask for it. Do you understand me? Well, do you? Answer me, *Jesus*."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Ivan and Jesus, you two can stay after school tonight and clean the chalkboards."

"But I have to take the bus home, Mrs. Johnson." Fear gripped me.

"Well, we will have to call your mother and tell her how you were disrupting the class and have her come and get you."

"That's a run-on sentence, Mrs. Johnson. Sometimes you can use that to your advantage, but other times it just looks stupid." JUST KIDDING. I didn't say that. I just wanted to see if you were paying attention. No, instead, I nearly pissed myself with the thought of my mother having to drive into town to pick me up. I spent the rest of the afternoon in fear. At rest time, Mrs. Johnson excused herself to call our parents. I squirmed on my little rest mat for five minutes and then looked over at Zeus. He was snoring softly –completely without care. How could he be so calm when the seas were raging and about to crash over our little first grade vessel? I couldn't understand this guy at all. Here I was in full panic mode and he was snoring? What the…

Mrs. Johnson returned with a semi-smug look on her face. I looked into her beady little eyes. She looked back at me. Instead of the usual, "Ivan, close your eyes" command, she looked directly at me and smiled for a three count. Evil has a name and it is Beatrice Johnson.

As school neared an end that day, I could see me mother's ancient and dusty green Chevy pulling up outside. She parked by the playground, just past the bus lane. The room had large glass windows starting at waist height. Below these windows were inserts called *Mapes panels* in a Harvest Brown color. In front of the Mapes panels were rows of bookshelves and activity shelving made out of a glowing honey colored maple veneer. The class room was hip and cool in another era -a 1970's modern architecture -sort of way. Suddenly the windows, which I had enjoyed in small moments of escapism, seemed way too large. For the first time in three weeks, I wanted the Harvest Brown panels to grow in size and cover the windows and willed them to do so. I then transitioned in a deep desire to hide behind the Mapes panels. I desired to be still and quiet, positioned on the floor hidden by desks on one side and the Mapes panels on the other. I could do neither. The windows would not dissolve into opacity and I could not move. I had to sit there and watch my mother walk towards the building, her head down, mumbling quietly to herself. I was convinced that she could see me because I could see her. She disappeared where the window met the brick wall and I breathed for what felt like the very first time.

Zeus instinctively looked at me. His face was a sea of calm. Unbeknownst to either of us, his mother was already in the front office talking with the secretary. When the bell rang the kids lined up at the door to be dismissed. Zeus remained seated. In what I thought was a tricky move, I too lined up. Maybe I could slip out unnoticed and explain to my mother that this had all been a big mistake.

"Mr. Morozova, please take your seat. The rest of the class, except for Jesus and Ivan, can be dismissed." The kids shuffled out under a cloud of whispers.

"Um, Mrs. Johnson?"

"Yes, Jesus?"

"My name is *Hey-Zeus*."

"Well I don't care if it's the Pope, you will be making *hay* now –along with you, Ivan. Come up here and grab an eraser. I want the boards cleaned while I talk to your parents."

"Yes, ma'am." I complied instantly. Sheep. Blind and stupid sheep. Zeus had remained firmly planted.

"Jesus, if you don't get up here right now, young man, I am going to kick you out of school for a week." Zeus slowly got to his feet and started walking towards the blackboard. He picked up a long eraser and smiled at me.

"It's *Hey-Zeus*," he whispered loud enough for the two other occupants in the room to hear. This sent Beatrice over the edge.

"That's it, Jesus! I am going to the office and I am going to talk to your mother right now about your insubordinate attitude!"

"His name is *Hey-Zeus,*" came a voice from the back. It was the heat! The man himself, old "Yardstick Werner," who reportedly had a yardstick in his office for the sole purpose of discipline. Next to him was a petite and stunningly beautiful woman who, in turn, was standing next to my mother. We were all surprised.

"Mr. Werner, I…"

"Yes, Mrs. Johnson. Boys, why don't you come here." It wasn't a question. I put down my eraser and walked as fast as I could towards my mother. I was trying very hard to suppress a smile. To this day, I laugh when I am nervous.

"Hi, Mom," I said somewhat cheerfully. Mom frowned at me.

"You can go now. Thank you, ladies for taking the time to talk with me about this." I looked at Mrs. Johnson who was showing her own little signs of distress. Another poker buddy for me. We split in the hallway. I walking one way with my deeply silent mother and Zeus in the other direction with his drop-dead gorgeous mother. Suddenly I wanted to be adopted all over again.

"See you, Ivan," Zeus called. I looked back and he waved. *Take me with you,* I screamed in my head. I bid a reluctant goodbye to my miracle.

When we got back to the car, Mom gave me the direct gaze look while her hand lingered on her keys in the ignition. Instead of starting the car she suddenly turned to face me.

"Ivan, I'm sorry." Um… come again. Breaker, breaker, one-nine, come again, over. "I haven't been paying attention," she said.

"Mom, I…"

"No. Quiet now. I haven't been paying attention. If I was, I would have known that you were getting bullied by that… Well, I would have known. You don't have to worry. I spoke with Mr. Werner and he's going to talk to Mrs. Johnson. Everything is going to be okay. Will you forgive me for not noticing?"

"Mom… how did… I'm okay. It's Zeus that gets the most of it from her."

"I know, sweetie, but let's not worry about your little friend right now. Let's worry about you, okay?" I nodded. Hey, I was beginning to dig this *martyr Ivan* thing. I could work with this.

"I'm okay, Mom." She looked at me long and hard and something shifted in her eyes. Then, suddenly, she seemed to make up her mind abut something.

"Okay, Ivan. Let's go home. But honey?"

"Yes, mom?"

"Don't ever feel sorry for yourself."

"Yes, mom." I felt admonished and Mom gave me a slight smile and started the car. The radio was picking up KDIX from nearby Dickinson. The song on the radio announced that in heaven there is no beer and that, my friends, is why we drink it here. Life was good. We headed home.

The next day represented a new world in public education. For the very first time in recorded history, the skies opened, the golden rays of sun beamed down on our little patch of heaven. That day –that sun-kissed and most blessed of days, Mrs. Johnson called Zeus by his real name using the correct pronunciation. This singular event was so monumental that I nearly crapped myself –I was way beyond urination. Even the brown-nose contingency was stunned into silence. We may have lost a few battles, but we had won the war. I felt like a Czar. I was the victorious co-champion, sharing in my new found friend's glorious triumph over Beatrice evil. She would not make eye contact with either one of us for the rest of the day. I could sense the hatred frothing beneath her seemingly compliant surface. After all, hell has no fury like a woman and no woman had the hellacious features of Mrs. Johnson. Double trouble, brother. Double trouble.

I caught up with Zeus on the playground. He was his now usual calm, cool and collected self. He pulled out a pair of sunglasses and my esteem bubbled over into a one word pronouncement of all things Zeus:

"Cool!"

"Yeah. They belong to my older brother, Hector, but he said I could have them."

"Hey! What did your mom say? Mine said that Mrs. Johnson wasn't treating us right."

"Yeah, mine said the same thing. My brother Hector told me to put pencil shavings in her coffee, but I won't do that."

"What are shavings?"

"You know, from the pencil sharpener in the back of the room?"

"Oh, yeah! That would be cool."

"No, it would only get us in more trouble." Hmmm? This Zeus kid was making way too much sense.

"Where are you from again?"

"Hermosa Beach, California."

"Is that next to the ocean?"

"Yeah, it's not too far from L.A."

"L.A.?"

"Yeah, Los Angeles?"

"Oh. L.A. Yeah. L.A. My dad's been there. He's been to L.A."

"Yeah, what does your dad do?"

"He's a trucker. What about your dad?"

"He's a doctor."

"A doctor? You mean like a clinic doctor?" Zeus looked at me for a second with a smirk on his face.

"No, like a moon doctor. Yeah, a clinic doctor. What other kind of doctor is there?" Okay, good point.

"Well, if he is a doctor, what are you doing here?"

"He had to repay part of his education by serving in a rural or a poor community. It was either this or some place up by Canada."

"Well we aren't too far from Canada, you know."

"The other place was closer."

"Oh." A lengthy pause and then another question popped into the old melon. "Where do you live now? I mean, do you live here in town?"

"Yeah, we live by the library." I knew that place. Mom had taken me a couple of times to pick out lame books on horses and dogs and crap like that. The ages of four to six were such an embarrassment to me when I finally hit seven and the big leagues of Woodrow. I was willing to bet that cool kids in sunglasses didn't read about quarter horses or puppies.

"Yeah? Ever go in there?"

"Yeah, I was there last night with my brother."

"Did you check anything out?"

"Yeah a book on horses." Zeus lost two cool points, but that was okay, because he had millions in reserve.

"Oh. How many brothers and sisters do you have?"

"Just one. You?"

"None. I'm it. I live on a farmstead out by the rest area."

"The rest area?"

"Yeah. You know, on the highway. You can see it from the hill behind our house."

"Oh, yeah. I know it. I think I took a pee there."

"Cool."

"Cool?"

"Well, you know, it is right by my house."

"Yeah. Still, I wouldn't be telling too many people you live by an outhouse."

"No, it is a rest area. Where you go to rest. You know."

"Yeah, I know. Rest and pee. Pee and poop."

"Well… yeah, but you can rest, too."

"You ever come into town on Saturdays?" Zeus deftly changed the subject.

"Sometimes we do. My mother likes to visit her friend, Erma, at the church. And sometimes we have to go shopping for bread at the day-old store. You know, down on main."

"Yeah. The next time you come in to town you should call me. I can show you the library."

"Oh yeah, I've been there before."

"Yeah, but we could go there and look around and stuff."

"Okay." This was an interesting proposition. Would my mother let me go someplace without her? Once I rode my old Schwinn over to the abandoned Lawrence place, two miles away, and she lost it. More important to me, would she let me call someone? I don't think that I had ever called anyone.

"What church?"

"Huh?"

"What church do you go to?"

"Oh. We go to the Lutheran one over there." I pointed to the brick church across the street. Zeus looked and then turned back to me.

"Yeah? We go to the Catholic one by the high school." This seemed like miles beyond a world away. In reality, it was five blocks away. The whole Catholic thing seemed like a mystery to me as well, and only added to the Catholic church's seemingly remoteness. What did they do in there?

"Cool."

"Everything's 'cool' with you, huh? I'm going to call you *Cool Ivan*." A nickname? Really? So far, the closest I came to a nickname was *Moron-ozova.* Gladstone's little brother, who was in my class, came up with that one. Thanks, Mikey. This nickname was infinitely better. *Cool Ivan.* Alright!

"Cool." I beamed back at Zeus.

And that's how it progressed. We started with Jesus saving my hind end and moved to some fairly deep first grade conversations. These conversations lead to some pretty good games of "WAR," teeter-totter, and marbles. My favorite, the slide, was okay, but Zeus preferred the teeter-totter. He would let go of the pummel sticking out of the wood plank and stretch his arms out like he was flying. His eyes would close and he would smile. It was best not to talk during these moments. Talking always produced a little frown that would be followed by the opening of his eyes –as if he had been disturbed out of a deep and peaceful sleep.

"Someday I'm going to fly," he said. I looked at his complete and utter lack of wings and totally doubted it.

"Someday I'm going to get a college."

"Go to college?"

"Yeah, that's what I meant. Mom told me that I have to get some college when I'm bigger."

"Yeah? What for?"

"What for what?"

"No, Ivan. What are you going to go to college for?"

"I don't know."

"I'm going to go to learn to fly."

"Yeah," I said, "me too."

In the back of these idyllic moments lurked a predator of unfathomable rage and anger. This predator seethed with unrighteous indignation and bided his time, looking for the perfect moment to pounce. His name was Gladstone. And he was a prick.