

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

2003

MEETING MARTY

Some moments in your life happen, and you never forget them. They stick with you. Through ups and downs, good times and bad, some memories are permanent. Occasionally, they're silly things. Sometimes, they're small, mostly insignificant memories with no value, but they stick with you anyway.

My memory is odd. I tend to remember primarily unimportant things. Directions to a friend's house I haven't been to in 30 years. A phone number someone once told me to remember so we could call it back later. What shirt someone was wearing at my 16th birthday party. The lyrics to Snow's "Informer" that I painstakingly learned in eighth grade to impress my friends (while I simultaneously got an F in Science class). The memories seem to make no sense, but they're in there. Locked away for all time. For some reason or another.

So many people have come and gone in my life over the years. They've been so important to me, and then, for whatever reason, they're gone. Sometimes, there are reasons why a friendship stops. Sometimes, it's organic, and you grow apart as people. Especially when you're younger. As you grow up and become an adult, sometimes the adult version of you doesn't like the adult version of who your best friends became. That's fine. That's not the point here, really.

One of my most vivid memories of my entire life was the day I met Marty.

It was October of 2003. It seems like forever ago. So many important things happened to me that year. I met my wife in March of that year. I met the girl I'd marry, my first wife, if you'd like to be specific. And while I remember the gist of those events, they're not quite as vivid as the moment I met Marty.

It was unusually warm in New England at the beginning of October. Warm enough that, on my drive home from Boston, I had the windows in the car open. Music blasting, as usual. Enjoying having just left the dorm room of the girl who'd become my first wife in a handful of years. I was high on happiness.

Like every other night, I pulled into the driveway of my childhood home, parked the car, and sat listening to the remainder of the song I'd been listening to on the local rock radio station, WAAF. Though I've outgrown the habit, I used not to be able to get out of the car before the currently playing track finished. Perhaps it's because, nowadays, you can pause what you were listening to on Spotify or Apple Music or whatever, get out of the car, and pick it right back up when you get inside. Technology has changed a lot of how someone my age lives their life.

I got out of the car when the song was over, closing the door quietly not to disturb my mom's sleep. I knew she'd be asleep already because it was late. I always did my best to be quiet when coming home, no matter what time, not for fear of getting in trouble but just out of courtesy.

We lived on a quiet street. The adjacent streets to ours formed a U-shaped neighborhood, with our house sitting at the exact middle of the bottom of the U. Therefore, not many cars drove by our house, even in the middle of the day. So, when someone came walking down the street in the middle of the night, it caught me by surprise.

It's more common now, with the people who live in my mom's neighborhood, to see people walking their dogs at all hours of the day. So, today, I wouldn't be surprised by this. But twenty-plus years ago, it was a bit of a shock.

I froze, not knowing who this person was, barely able to see them on the mostly dark street. The streetlight on the corner about a hundred or more feet away didn't help illuminate the person.

He must have been startled at seeing me as much as I was shocked at the sight of him. He froze as well.

Neither of us moved for a beat, trying to size each other up.

In hindsight, he probably figured, based on where I was standing—right up against the car door—that I was breaking into the car. Standing there in the middle of the night, in a pitch-dark driveway, only illuminated by the half-moon in the cloudless sky above, I probably looked like a criminal.

And I, in my state of panic, initially thought the same. He was in our neighborhood for something nefarious.

Why'd my brain go immediately to something negative? I'm not sure. Maybe it was the twenty-something mentality of knowing what I'd probably be doing if I walked around in someone's neighborhood in the middle of the night.

"Oh," he said after a moment. "Hello there."

Still frozen, it took me a moment to respond. Likely furthering his thought that I was doing something illegal to the car in front of me.

I turned to my right to face him. "Hi," I said. "What are you doing here?"

He stepped closer to our driveway from the far side of the street he'd been walking along. "I'm new here," he said. "I'm just getting the lay of the land."

"At night?" I asked quickly.

"There are fewer automobiles after dark," he replied equally quickly.

"Huh," I thought out loud. "I guess you're not wrong."

There was another moment of awkward pause between us. Both of us were partially still frozen.

"I'm Matt," I said.

He nodded. "Hello Matt, it's nice to meet you."

He didn't give me his name, which I found odd. I still find it odd to this day. I never questioned him about it, which was odd of me.

I stepped toward him. "Are you lost? Do you know how to get home?"

"I am not lost," he replied. "Home is just there," he said, pointing down toward the end of the street, in the general direction of where my childhood friends Josh and Sarah lived.

"Oh," I said. "Okay."

The lights by our garage came on, which I knew meant my mother had either woken up and heard me outside or heard me outside and woken up from it. In either case, she'd turned the lights on for me, allowing me to see him a little more brightly. With him now standing at the end of our driveway, I was able to make out his facial features and clothing.

He wore jeans, normal-looking sneakers, a plain white t-shirt, and a non-descript baseball hat covering his short brown hair.

His blue eyes reflected the light from the garage vividly. Even from twenty feet away, I could see their clarity and color.

When he realized I could now see him, he smiled.

"I better get going," he said, stepping back and turning to his right to face the road ahead of him.

"Good night," I said, watching him walk toward the streetlight.

I don't know why I stood by the car for so long that night. Like some sort of creep, I watched him walk to the end of my street and make the right on the adjoining road. I watched him until he disappeared behind the fence at the house on the corner.

When I went inside, my mom stood in the kitchen, the fridge open, rummaging through its contents.

"Who were you talking to?" she asked.

"There was a guy out in the road, walking."

"At this hour?"

I looked at the clock on the microwave. It was just after 12:30 a.m. It was not an uncommon time for me to get home from wherever I was, but it was very unusual for my mom to be awake at that hour. Wrapped in the same bathrobe, I'm convinced she'd had since before I was born, I figured she must have gone to bed and gotten back up to get a snack or a drink.

"Yeah," I said. "It was weird. He said he was 'new here,' so maybe he just moved to the neighborhood."

My mom, ever the gossip, immediately responded. "There haven't been any houses sold in the neighborhood lately."

As was typical of me when not knowing what to say, I gave a big shrug and slithered past her toward the stairs up to my bedroom.

"Night," I heard her call from the kitchen as I was halfway up the stairs.

"Night," I called back down.

INTRODUCTIONS

It wasn't long before I started seeing him more often. Usually at night, generally walking along the same side of my street that he'd been on that first night.

I'd get home from wherever I was, and there he'd be.

The fourth time I'd seen him, we talked closer, physically, to one another.

That was the first time I had heard the slight accent in his voice. I couldn't place where it was, though. It wasn't American, not a southern accent or mid-west. Not anything obvious, like England, Australia, or France. Just this every so slight, tiny little accent to his voice.

"What's your name?" I finally asked.

"Oh," he said, fumbling. "Did I not introduce myself before?"

"No," I said. "I don't know your name or where you're from."

"Oh," he said again. "I'm from all over. Papa travels a lot for work, so we've lived in lots of places. We are originally from Belgium."

It was the first time he'd referenced any other people. I suppose I had assumed he had a family up to that point, but the reference to "Papa" seemed to solidify he was living with at least one other person.

"Ok. So what's your name?"

"I am Michel," he said.

"Michel?"

"Yes, that is correct."

"Do you have a nickname?" I asked.

"Yes, I do."

I waited a solid ten seconds. "Well? What is it?"

"Oh, yes. You'd like me to tell you. When we first came to America, I chose an American version of my name. I chose Marty."

"Marty? Why not Mike? That's closer to Michel, isn't it? Well, anyway, nice to officially meet you, Marty." I walked to the end of the driveway, hoping he'd meet me there to shake my hand. He didn't budge from his spot and seemed a little frightened that I'd gotten so close to him.

"I must be going," he said.

"All right then, Marty. Have a good night. Get home safe."

Like the other nights we'd talked, I, again, watched him walk to the end of my road and make the right, eventually disappearing behind the fence at the house on the corner.

Part of me wanted to follow him, to see where he lived or where he was going. My mom's voice echoed in my head, reminding me there had been no house sales in the neighborhood recently. It made me wonder if he lived in our neighborhood or not.

A Gift

The next morning, I ran into Marty on my way to work. Somehow, as I'd left the house door and made my way to the car, I'd heard his footsteps coming down the street.

He was coming from the same direction he'd always come from previously, though I'd never seen him during the day before. Our encounters had always been at night.

"Hey, Marty," I said, waving as I unlocked my car.

"Hello, Matt," he said, waving back. "It is a beautiful morning, isn't it?"

It was a beautiful morning. Something I hadn't, and didn't normally, notice. I was usually so focused on jumping in my car, finding a good song on the radio, and getting off work to stop and see what the world was doing.

"It is," I said. "Great morning. I'm off to work."

"Before you go," he said. "I've brought you something."

"Oh, huh?" I fumbled for words, half jogging to the end of the driveway to meet him.

"It's a gift," he started. "From the last place I have lived."

From his pocket, he pulled out what looked to be a small rag or towel. Dirty and tattered, it looked like junk someone had picked up from the street.

I stared down at it, confused.

"My apologies, this seems odd," he said. "This is not the gift."

He opened the rag slowly, one corner at a time, as if intentionally trying to be dramatic.

As the corners were removed, I saw a small stone, shiny on all sides that I could see, with a hollowed-out center. A completely round hole, all the way through the stone. The stone looked like a six-inch-long oval with a perfectly circular hole in the center around an inch.

"I've kept it with me for a while. When I found it, I felt something special about it. Something that felt unusual but gave me comfort."

"And you want to give it to me?" I asked.

"You've shown me kindness," he replied. "And I've been taught that kindness deserves reward and appreciation."

"This is..." I fumbled for the right words. "This is so incredibly kind of you. To give me, a virtual stranger, something that's meant so much to you and been important to you is really nice."

"I thank you for chatting with me these handfuls of nights and now this morning, Matt. You have been a very nice man."

I was still unsure of what to say. No one had ever given me something like that before. Certainly, no one that I'd just met. Definitely, no one that'd been walking down my street in the middle of the night.

"You must go," he said. "You don't want to be late."

And then, like always, he sauntered off down the road, making the right and passing the fence into non-existence.

I got in the car, found a song I wanted to listen to, and off I went to work. My new stone was sitting next to me on the passenger seat, still partially covered by the tattered cloth it was wrapped up with in his pocket.

The stone is still with me to this day. It's become one of my most sentimentally valued items, which I will never get rid of.

MY BIG SECRET

By the time I got home from work that day, I'd half expected Marty to be walking by as if some magic would get the timing right so that I'd pull into the driveway just as he happened to be walking by the house.

It didn't work out that way. So, I did what any completely sane and normal person would do. I got two lawn chairs from the backyard, set them up at the end of the driveway, and plopped down in one of them, waiting.

From my vantage point, I could see where Marty was coming from for the first time. Rather than just being surprised when he passed the small side street next to our house and appeared in front of our driveway, I saw him at the far end of my road, making the right from the adjacent street.

I'm not sure if he saw me right away, but as he got closer, he definitely saw me sitting there.

"Matt!" he said, "What are you doing?"

"Waiting for you," I said with a smile. "Grab a seat."

"Thank you," he said, always so polite.

The sun had begun setting, casting a shadow from behind my house, inching its way down the driveway, eventually covering us from behind.

"Tell me about yourself," he asked.

"What do you want to know?"

"Tell me something no one else knows," he said.

"No one? Oh man, let me think."

As I pondered what fact to come up with about my life, we both sat, staring across the street. The house across from us was off to the right, so their side yard separated us from the house's backyard on the next street over. Paul and Pete lived there. Paul was my age, and Pete was two years older. Nothing extraordinary ever happened in those two yards, though years later, Paul and Pete's parents put in a pool, so we'd see them swimming from time to time.

"When I was seven, I was at a friend's house. Not someone I was really close with. I think, if my memory is right, my mom had to go somewhere for an appointment and couldn't bring me with her, so she dropped me at this kid's house in the neighborhood we used to live in, around the corner from us. I forget the kid's name now. Anyway, I'm over there for a while and suddenly have to poop. For whatever reason, I'm embarrassed by this. The fact that I, like every other person, needed to poop should have been no big deal, right?"

"Right," he confirmed.

"But there I am, seven years old, fully potty trained for years by this point. And I'm scared to poop in this kid's house for some reason. I just don't want to. So, I do what any kid would do, right? I hold it in. I squeeze my tiny ass cheeks together as hard as possible for as long as possible."

"I know where this is going," he said.

"Oh, that's right," I laughed. "Eventually, I can't hold it anymore, so I poop my pants. It's November or December, so it's cold enough I'm wearing pants. I was thankful I didn't have shorts on and had it fall out of my underwear."

Marty started laughing, not at me, but with me. I had a hard time getting the rest of the story out.

"But that's not the worst part," I said. "It was another hour before my mom came to pick me up. So, there I was, in this kid's house that I'd never been to before—and never went to again—with poop in my pants, playing games, and running around outside, doing my absolute best not to let on that I had a load in my underwear."

Tears were flowing from my eyes. The memory of myself at such a young age trying to be nonchalant about the whole thing was so funny, in retrospect.

"So what happened when your mom came?" Marty asked.

"I flee the house. As soon as I hear the horn, I go running from the house to the car. I jump in the passenger seat as fast as I can. But I'm not dumb, right? I don't want to sit *on* the poop. I don't want to squish it into myself."

Marty was having a hard time hearing me over the sound of his laughter by this point.

"I... I can't..." he said, huffing and puffing for air.

"So I stand up on the seat," I said. "I squatted on the seat and buckled myself in. My mom looks over at me and says, 'What are you doing?' I burst out into this big confession about how I was too scared and embarrassed to go to the bathroom in a stranger's house. How I felt so uncomfortable with the whole thing and that I'd pooped my pants."

"Did she burst out laughing?"

"No," I said. "But I imagine they laughed when she ran through the story with my dad later that night."

The two of us sat in total darkness, now laughing hysterically at this story from decades ago. This embarrassing story that I'd never told anyone before. Come to think of it, I've never told anyone else that story. So now, in addition to my mom and Marty, you know as well, dear reader.

"That is a wonderful story," he said.

"I haven't laughed that hard in a long time," I said. "And I've never told anyone that story, either."

I chuckled to myself as the hysterics died down.

"I value our time together, Matt," Marty said, suddenly getting very serious.

"Me too, man," I said. "I really like hanging out with you."

He paused momentarily as if he wanted to tell me something or say something he had on his mind, but he didn't.

It was the first of many nights we'd sit in those lawn chairs at the end of my driveway, laughing.

As time passed, we'd plan what time to meet, order dinner, get drinks, whatever. We'd hang out at the end of the driveway like it was the hottest club in the city.