

# Derailed

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# DERAILED

**By Jeri Ellen**

My dad worked for the railroad. He was gone a lot. When he was home he was busy doing things around the house. He was good at fixing things and we seldom had to call a repairman for anything. He liked the outdoors and when he did have some free time he enjoyed being in the woods or canoeing the abundant lakes and streams that Minnesota had to offer.

When I was twelve years old my dad took me to the rail yard on his day off. We walked from the parking area to the large maintenance facility. Once inside my ears were assaulted by the loud banging and clanging of men pounding and cutting metal. The air was filled with blueish smoke that smelled like burnt metal. Sparks flew from the welders and the men with cutting torches.

We stood there a few minutes watching the men work and then walked out another door to the main rail yard. I was glad to get out of there and be back under the basking glow of the bright sunshine of midday where the air smelled so clean.

After looking in both directions my dad led me across a dozen sets of rails to where a single locomotive was parked on a siding. We turned to the right and began walking towards it.

The front of the locomotive was painted with yellow and green diagonal stripes. It looked like the war paint on an Indian warrior's face. The two yellow headlights, one on top of the other, glared menacingly at us as we approached the engine. At the bottom the massive coupler was open, almost like the jaws of a mechanical monster waiting to devour the both of us.

My dad grabbed the handrail and walked up the front steps. I followed him as we walked along the catwalk to the cab. The huge diesel engine was murmuring softly as we made our way to where a man sat inside. He stepped outside the cab and my dad let me in ahead of him.

He had me sit at the controls and stood behind me.. He released the brakes and then pushed the throttle forward. We lurched ahead as black smoke poured from the diesel engine. After a hundred yards or so he applied the brakes and then shifted the engine into reverse. We went back to where the engine had been parked originally. My dad locked the brakes and we left the cab.

Dad thanked the man who had been at the controls and we walked across the tracks to where his

pick up truck was parked. Later at MacDonald's over a burger and fries he looked over at me.

"What do you think Louis?" he asked me. "Would you like to have a job like this someday?"

I took a sip of my drink and looked back at him. I was sure he was expecting an affirmative answer.

"I don't know dad," I answered. "To be honest I really don't know what I want to do just yet."

His face showed no emotion as he replied: "Well, you have lots of time yet."

We finished our lunch and he drove us home. I had given him an evasive but truthful answer. I wanted no part of that noisy, stinking maintenance facility. I thought it might be cool to be able to drive that big diesel engine but I really didn't like being around machinery or anything mechanical for that matter.

I had always felt more comfortable at the library or in front of my computer. I was good at math, science and things that required some thinking ability. I really didn't want to work with my hands or do physical labor.

That night I woke up and found myself standing in the dark between two railroad tracks. Suddenly I was illuminated by a bright yellowish light. I turned around to see that massive diesel start rolling towards me. I turned around again and started to run.

The ground started to vibrate under my shoes and I knew the diesel was gaining on me. I turned my head to see how close it was. As it got even closer I saw the front coupling closing and opening as if this beast was getting ready to grab me, then drag me inside to be chewed up and eaten.



It suddenly dawned on me that if I jumped aside the locomotive could not jump the rails to follow me. I leaped to my left and the locomotive rushed past me. My heart was pounding as I watched it travel down the tracks and disappear into the blackness.

I stood there in the dark for awhile to catch me breath. Suddenly I was bathed in light again. As I stood between two adjacent rails to the one I had originally been standing between another locomotive began coming at me. Black smoke was pouring from the stack as it picked up speed and the coupling in the front snapped closed and opened again as it shortened the distance between us.

Once again I jumped aside and watched the engine fly by me. I turned and ran across more rails trying to find a way out of the rail yard. I was running out of breath when suddenly the whole yard was bathed in light. It was if night had been turned into day.

There were diesel locomotives coming at me from every direction. I panicked. There seemed to be no where to run to. As they closed in I suddenly woke up.

Sitting up in bed it was several minutes before my pulse returned to normal. I got out of bed. My tee shirt was soaked with sweat. I took it off and draped it over a chair. I went into the bathroom and urinated. I filled the sink with warm water. After washing and drying myself off I put on a clean tee shirt and went back to bed but it was sometime before I finally fell asleep.

The next morning at breakfast my mother asked me if anything was wrong. I guess she had seen something in my face that I wasn't aware of. I shook my head no and said that I hadn't slept well but that I as okay.

Shortly before school started Dad took me out to a construction site. We watched as earthmovers, end loaders, and dump trucks moved large amounts

of dirt and rock. After an hour or so we left the highway project and drove to where a housing development was being built.

Dad's brother drove a concrete truck. He was pouring concrete into the forms for a driveway when we got there. I watched as the huge drum revolved around and the concrete came pouring down the chute. It didn't take long before the workman on either side of the driveway had the concrete all smoothed out. Dad's brother got in the truck and drove away.

We drove to a pizza place and once again my dad posed the question about all the jobs I had seen the construction workers doing that day. I shrugged and to give him an answer I simply said that I would rather be driving the end loader that loaded the trucks than any of the other jobs.

He seemed satisfied with my answer and we dug into our pizza and soft drinks. I was hoping my dad hadn't been disappointed in my answers. I knew that he only had my best interests at heart.

The truth of course was that I didn't want anything to do with those construction jobs. I wanted to stay as far away as possible from the noise, diesel smoke, and mayhem that the construction jobs were about.

Just what I was going to do was still up in the air, but like dad said I had time.

I went to bed without thinking any more about what I had seen that day. Waking up I found myself standing at the back of the concrete truck. I was stark naked. No one was around but I had this strange sense of foreboding.

From out of nowhere came a very large man with a maniacal grin on his face. He grabbed me and carried me up a ladder to the top of the concrete trucks' drum. He opened the hatch and tossed me inside.

I landed with a splash at the bottom of the drum in a mess of pink concrete. The hatch closed and I was in darkness. The drum started to revolve and I began to panic. I closed my eyes tight and the pink slop enveloped me. As I tumbled inside I gasped for air when the pink stuff slid off of my face long enough for me to catch a breath.

Finally the drum stopped. The hatch opened up. The man was holding a water hose in one hand and motioned me to stand up with the other. When I did he squirted me with the hose. The pink slop washed away. I began to climb out. He helped me out of the drum. When I was back standing behind the truck the man drove away.

I looked down at my body. What little body hair I had was now gone. My eyebrows and the hair on my head were the only places that hadn't been touched. When I ran my hands over my body I found that my skin was silky smooth to the touch. It was just like a girls' skin. My pulse accelerated as I thought about the possibility of someone trying to turn me into a female.

A horn honked. I looked over at two women standing next to the open sliding door of a mini van. One was holding a pink dress on a hanger in one hand and a pair of pink high heel shoes in the other. The second woman held a pink bra in one hand and a pair of pink panties in the other. They were both grinning and waving at me to come over to where they were standing.

Waking up I found myself soaked in sweat again. After removing the wet tee shirt I walked into the bathroom. In the mirror over the sink I saw my face hadn't changed any. I still had some peach fuzz. My arms and legs still had some light hair. I was still a male too. I washed and dried myself off. After putting on a clean tee shirt I went back to bed.

I laid awake for quite awhile thinking about that dream. The fact that I had shown no interest in what might be called very "manly" occupations doesn't mean that I should have been a girl or be changed into one. In this day in age there were very few jobs that might still be described as "a man's job" or a "woman's job."

My physicality was similar to that of a girl my age. I was shorter than the average boy in my class at school. I had a small frame with correspondingly small features, that is my hands and feet were closer to being like a girl's than a boy's. I never thought of myself as being feminine, or what some of the older boys called a "sissy".

When I finally fell asleep it was a restless one. I had never had many dreams but these two seemed to hit me in a peculiar way.

I entered middle school and began playing soccer. I enjoyed the physical activity as much as challenging my brain with the studies. I dropped some weight and felt better for having taken it off. My dreams hadn't returned. The little time dad was able to spend with us we usually went hiking in the park or canoeing.

Entering my freshman year of high school in the fall of 2008 I was feeling pretty good about my life. Then the bottom fell out. It seemed as if the whole

financial world was coming apart at the seams. I wondered if there was ever going to be an end to this mess.

It was in January that my world came to a screeching halt. Dad was working nights. They were switching some cars around and dad apparently slipped on the icy cold rails and fell under the wheels of a moving box car. We got the call around 5am.

As a kid I never thought much about death. Death was for old people. I remember going to the funeral home to see my grandpa when he died. We walked down the aisle to where he was lying in the casket. He appeared waxy, not at all like the man I remembered. Now it wasn't anybody old it was my dad.

After the funeral the house seemed to be bigger and empty. I picked up his tools and put them away after sweeping out his shop. It was a couple of weeks before mom packed up his clothes and took what his brother didn't want to the thrift store.

The death benefits and insurance would take care of things for awhile but mom wanted to sell the house and get a smaller place. Before moving to one side of a duplex we had an estate sale and then auctioned off what was left.

I went back to school after the holiday break and concentrated on my studies. Mom continued working at the hospital laundry. There seemed to be less and less conversation between us. Even the smaller duplex seemed empty at times.

One of my courses was in journalism. I wrote a piece on the upcoming soccer season. The local paper reprinted it and I received a check for one hun-

dred dollars. I began to think more seriously about being a writer or reporter.

Before school was out my interviews with two coaches and my write up on the baseball team were also reprinted earning me some more spending money. I felt more confident and began studying the art of interviewing as well as becoming acquainted with all the resources I would need to do research.

The comments from friends and neighbors as well as the letters I received from people who had read and liked my stuff gave me more confidence to continue. Mom was pleased too though she never said much.

I know my dad's death had been hard on her so I didn't push conversation too much.

By summer I had my driver's license. I got a job offer from a small community news paper to report on the little league baseball games as well as some of the adult summer baseball leagues. I met some other reporters from the major twin city newspapers who were always complimentary and suggested I stay in touch.

This along with comments in my e-mail inbox as well as letters boosted my confidence. I continued to be meticulous in my research as well as in my writing. It was something I not only liked doing but looked forward to doing. Journalism was my favorite class by far though I still maintained a healthy B+ average in my other classes as well. My teachers and my mom were very pleased.

Mom helped me with a down payment for a used hatchback. I would no longer have to borrow hers to go to the games I was covering. I also began dating a

girl in my journalism class. She was more into the political scene and was covering the city council and county board meetings. She was also very good at it. In fact her reports were the first thing I read in the school newspaper.

Since dad's death our lives were no longer centered around my dad's railroad schedule. We were no longer in the "main line", in railroad parlance. We were sort of on a siding. Mom would occasionally hear from the wives of the men dad worked with and of course his brother Ray would always stop by for an occasional visit.

In April of my junior year Candice and I were walking thru the mall after watching a movie at the multi-plex. We stopped in front of the window of a formal apparel store to look at the display of prom dresses in the window. The prom was a month off but I had already asked her and she had accepted. We went inside and walked over to the rack of dresses.

"What do you think?" she asked me.

"I don't know, I think you would look great in any of them," I replied.

She continued to look some more and then I drove her home.

For some unknown reason those racks of beautiful dresses stuck in my head. That night in my dreams I found myself wearing a floor length pink chiffon dress and four inch heel pink sandals. I walked down a narrow space between two rows of women and girls. They all looked up admiringly at me as I passed.

I turned and walked to the back room where a woman helped me out of the dress and into another

one with different colored high heels. In the full length mirror I saw I was wearing a shoulder length blonde wig, pink blusher, pink lipstick. My finger and toenails were pink too.



When I woke up I felt more tired than when I went to bed. In the bathroom I splashed some water on my face and looked at myself in the mirror. I wasn't wearing any lipstick or blusher and my nails didn't have any pink nail polish on them like they did in my dream.

The funny thing was the dream had been so real. It was almost as if I had been somehow transported into the body of a teenage girl model and then brought back to being a teenage boy again. I went back to bed and slept soundly until the alarm went off.

The prom was an enjoyable one. We hadn't been seeing each other for very long so sex afterwards was out of the question though we were able to steam up the windshield a little in her dad's driveway. I finished out the school year. Our soccer team wasn't very good and we didn't make the finals. I continued to do my reporting over the summer which made it go by all the more quickly.

My recurring dreams of being en femme continued to gnaw at the back of my mind. One summer day I googled "cross-dresser" and "transsexual" and found a massive amount of websites from stores that sold women's shoes and apparel to men to websites offering counseling for men and women who felt they were trans-gendered. These websites were interspaced with many pornographic websites which I avoided entirely.

I knew I wasn't crazy and neither were all the people, male and female alike who were seeking help from these websites or the professional therapists who advertised themselves in them. I was beginning to wonder why a young male like me, who enjoyed

the company of women, could possibly be one of those pictured on the websites I had viewed.

My senior year was busier than ever. I was sleeping soundly and there were no more dreams. My days were full with school as well as my reporting duties. I had become well known locally and felt confident that upon graduation from college I would have no trouble getting a career started.

I was also pretty certain that my dad would be proud even though I had chosen something far removed from the labor jobs he had taken the time to show me. I was happy doing what I was doing and had rapidly become good at it. There wasn't much money there but I knew that would come later.

After the holidays my journalism teacher asked me to stay after class for a minute. When the other students had left the room she handed me a slip of paper with a name and phone number on it.

"Call this woman and ask for an interview. It's about a summer internship overseas in England. Use my name and good luck."

I left the room with an accelerated heartbeat. When I got home I talked to my mom about it. She was more than supportive.

"Not many kids would get a chance like that you know. Be sure you ask a lot of questions though, especially about accommodations, expenses and some walking around money," she admonished.

"I will," I replied.

I called the number and left a message on voicemail indicating I was interested in the summer internship. I couldn't wait to hear from them.

Later that evening a woman named Leona Hanson returned my call. She wouldn't give me any details until she was able to meet me in person at an interview. She gave me an appointment on a Saturday two weeks away at one of the airport hotels in Minneapolis. I was ecstatic.

At school I told Candice about my good fortune. She just nodded.

"Is something wrong," I asked.

She shook her head.

"No. I am happy for you. It is just that I might have stumbled on to something.

"Like what?"

"It has to do with the debate over the construction project to build another mall just northeast of here. I have been to the county board meetings and the project is moving along quite rapidly as opposed to the usual amount of time it takes to get something like that approved."

"You mean like money under the table or bid rigging," I asked.

Candice shrugged.

"I don't know anything for sure. I have a source. Last time we talked the source just held their nose briefly as if to say to me that "something stinks".

"Be careful then. Things might get rough," I cautioned her.

"I will," she answered.

We finished our lunch and departed for our classes.

The two weeks to the interview dragged by slower than you can imagine. Finally the Saturday arrived

and I drove to the hotel near the Minneapolis airport. I arrived at twelve thirty and parked in the visitor lot. I sat there for another ten minutes and looked over the list of questions I had drawn up. I wanted to be sure I knew exactly what I was getting into.

I went inside and stopped at the desk.

“I am Louis Carley. I have a one pm appointment with Leona Hanson.”

The man picked up the phone and buzzed her room. Shortly he put the phone down.

“Go right up to 417,” he said.

I walked to the elevators. The silent ride up was quick. As I walked down the hall to the room my heartbeat accelerated again. I knocked on 417. Shortly a tall brunette in a black pantsuit opened the door.

“Please come Louis, you are right on time.”

I followed her inside.

“Have a seat,” she said pointing at a stuffed chair opposite the sofa.

“Now then let’s get started. Your instructor told me about you and has recommended you for this internship. How ever it is unlike many others. Some of the work you will be doing will not be for your instructors over the three months you will be in England.”

“The work you will be doing is for us.”

She held up a copy of America’s Voice. It was a well known supermarket tabloid. There was a similar one in the UK called England’s Voice. I began to feel a bit apprehensive as working for what most

people call a gossip rag was hardly what a serious journalism student would call a job opportunity.

“Just what would this involve?” I asked.

“Recently one of our investigative reporters went missing while he was researching an article on Laura Wentworth and her financial empire. Laura was born here but educated in the US. She went to work making money for other people and then struck out on her own. Her excellent financial management has made her quite wealthy.”

“She is a very private person, not a recluse like Howard Hughes but definitely avoids the lime light whenever possible. She is rarely seen in public. She hires on a number of trainees every two years but over the last sixteen years eight of them have disappeared. I mean completely gone, like they had fallen off the planet.”

“When an investigator shows up her office shows them a letter of resignation and a final paycheck that had been cashed. There was nothing more the authorities could do. We need someone outside England to try to work into her organization and find out what happened to those eight young men.”

“It sounds to me like you need a private investigator more than a journalism student,” I replied

“Not in this case. She and her staff would be on the lookout for that. You are a student, not from England and in a perfect position to gain the confidence of those around her.”

“I see. Can you tell me any more about what I am looking for? Are there similarities among the missing men? I feel like I might me working in the dark here.”

“I understand. The only thing I can tell you is that all of the young men were of slight build, with small features and a clear complexion with little facial hair. They were all very bright and eager to learn. I find that you have all those very same qualities. If something is amiss here you would have a better than average chance to find out what it is and report it back to us.”

“If I agree to do this how do we go about it?”

“First you need to get a passport and a visa. Our contact in England will have you set up in a dorm with other journalism students. Your monthly stipend can be picked up at our main offices in London.”

“You will attend some college level classes there but most of the time will be spent with the financial editor of a local newspaper. This will give you an “in” so to speak with Laura’s organization. For the first month don’t press for an interview. You probably aren’t going to get one anyway but you may get close to several of her people.”

“If and when you do remember to keep your questions about finances not about her personally or she may cut you off entirely. The same can be said of any member of her staff that you might have the chance to talk to. Please be very careful in all things you say and do, especially when it comes to Laura or any member of her staff.”

“I understand. I will be a sort of James Bond but with a laptop and a pen not a gun.”

She grinned at me.

“Not the best of analogies but the work requires a total absence of any firearms.”

“I’d like some time to think it over. Also I may have some additional questions.”

“Perfectly understandable Louis, here is my card. Please call me by noon Friday.”

I took the card from her and stood up. We shook hands and I left the room.

Back home I laid down on my bed and began thinking about the things we had discussed. I had no doubt that even three months in an overseas internship would be a great thing to put on my resume when I finished college.

On the other hand I was a bit intimidated too. After all eight men had disappeared. Had they been killed? Kidnapped and forced to work under some unfortunate circumstances? I didn’t want to risk my life for a three month job.

I continued to think about things over the next week. Sometimes it was hard to keep my mind on my reporting. There were so many “ifs” and “unknowns” here. I almost felt that this assignment was better for someone older with more experience in the field than me. Yet at the same time the benefits I could derive from this experience would certainly outweigh what I perceived to be “some risk”.

Thursday night after supper I decided I would take the bull by the horns. I called Leona and told her I wanted to accept the job. She said to watch my mail for an information packet. I was to apply for my passport and visa too.

When I went to bed that night I laid awake for awhile wondering if I had done the right thing. I had crossed the Rubicon in a sense so I didn’t feel I should call Leona back and tell her that I had

changed my mind. I closed my eyes and drifted off to a restless sleep.

Tuesday a box was delivered by UPS. When I opened it that night I found a city map of London and the surrounding area. There was a tourist's guide to London as well as a separate guide to the customs, currency, and local expressions used by the people. I recalled from school someone once saying that America and England were two great nations separated by a common language.

In March I received my passport and visa. I had studied the materials Leona had sent to me and felt confident I would be able to find my way around as well as manage the stipend I would be given.

The day before St. Patrick's Day Candice died in a car accident. I was stunned to say the least. She was coming home from covering the county board meeting when her car went off a curve and flipped over into a water filled ditch. There had been a rain/snow mix that night which authorities had said contributed to the accident.

I went to the funeral home to express my condolences. Her mother mentioned that her laptop hadn't been found in the wreck. I thought that was rather odd. I remembered her saying that she might be on to something.

The Saturday night news had a story about the new shopping center project clearing the environmental hurdle. Construction would be starting soon. The next day the Sunday edition of the paper had an article giving more details of the construction and the proposed stores in the mall.

For the first time I felt a pang of fear. Had Candice been killed to keep whatever information

she had acquired quiet? Then I began thinking about my own upcoming assignment.

Suppose I come across something that would make headline news not just locally but around the world. I would be in a foreign country and up against a well know financial executive. It wouldn't take much to get me out of the way, especially when you consider that large sums of money would probably be at stake. That night I had trouble getting to sleep.

The first week in April brought a real warm spell. I was glad to see the snow disappear. Somehow it made everybody feel a little better. I hadn't dated anyone else since Candice's death so I did not attend the Senior Prom. Construction had started on the new mall project and it made me think of her remark about her source holding their nose as if to say "something stinks."

I continued to go over the materials Leona had sent me. I wanted to be prepared to do my best. Her most recent letter contained a schedule for me and a plane ticket. I would be met at Heathrow airport by a representative of the magazine and taken to my dormitory room. As excited as I was about getting this opportunity I still had a few concerns.

That night in my dreams I found myself naked with my hands, feet and mouth duct taped. It was late at night and I was on the edge of a barge moving on the Thames. Two very serious looking men were standing with me. I saw Laura Wentworth walking towards me. She had no expression on her face but she did have a pistol in her hand.

She stopped in front of me and grinned broadly.

“So you thought you were going to get rid of me did you?”

She brought the pistol up and squeezed the trigger. I felt the pain in my chest as the bullets hit me. She took one step closer and then shot me in the face. I fell backwards in the water. As I sank into the Thames River I could feel no pain. I kept my eyes open and when I hit the mud at the bottom there was Candice. She was in her prom dress. She opened her mouth to talk but nothing came out and I woke up.

I sat still for a few minutes. The dream had been very real. When my pulse returned to normal I took off my sweat soaked tee shirt and went into the bathroom. I washed up again and put on a clean shirt. It was several hours before I finally went back to sleep.

The dream left me shaken for a couple of days. I concentrated on my studies and my reporting duties but it didn't seem to do much good. If I was heading into something dangerous I would think Leona could have provided me with more information.

I received my passport and visa. I passed my final exams but skipped the graduation ceremony. I wanted the next few days before my flight to pass quickly but they didn't. Each day seemed to be like a year and a day. It was almost as if time was standing still. I wondered if maybe it was an omen. Like something or someone was giving me time to back out of this deal.

My flight was an early morning one. Mom drove me to the airport and wished me well. I went thru security and boarded my flight. It too seemed to take forever. I wasn't claustrophobic by any means but

half a day in a small aluminum tube was a little too much for me. I was very glad when the pilot announced that we should fasten our seatbelts for the descent to Heathrow.

I was relieved to get off the plane which to me had been an aluminum prison. A short, stocky man with a white beard in a chauffeurs' uniform was holding up a sign with my name on it. I walked over to him and introduced myself.

"I'm Ian Smythe," he said with a grin. "Come with me and we'll get your bags and take you thru customs."

A short time later I was enjoying my ride in the back of the limo as we headed to London. We stopped at the downtown offices and I picked up my stipend in British money. There was a sandwich shop nearby so we had supper there.

The drive to my living quarters only took about a half an hour. I had only one bag but Ian accompanied me inside to my upstairs room. It was about the size of a small motel room. He gave me a set of keys and a schedule for the upcoming month. I thanked him and he left.

I was tired so after calling mom to let her know I had arrived ok I watched some British television. I took a hot shower and went to bed. I slept soundly and the next morning took a walk around the area to familiarize myself with it. I ate breakfast at a small shop and went back to the dorm. When I got back I introduced myself to some of the other residents.

It would be two days before we would begin with classes so I made the most of my time by doing a lot of walking and of course continuing to sample the

British cuisine. I browsed a few stores mentally calculating the change I would receive if I were to pay for any of the items.

I was feeling much better now that I was acclimated to the new time zone. I went over the guide Leona had given me to brush up on a few things. All in all I felt ready to face the challenges ahead.

The classrooms were on the first floor. After breakfast I took my notebook to the room on the schedule and took a seat. Several others had already arrived when I walked into the room. The instructor came in and shortly the rest of the class arrived.

There were students from several other countries as well as the UK. By the end of the first week the only problem I encountered was that one of the instructors had a much more pronounced accent than the others requiring me to listen much more closely to what he was saying.

I spent evenings in my room studying notes from the day's lecture. Financial stuff seemed pretty boring to me. Lots of statistics and math oriented material. It was pretty dull and I could see I was going to have to really apply myself to stay focused for the next three months. I also made good use of the exercise equipment in the basement though not all of the others did.

After my last class on Friday the instructor invited all of us to a local hangout not far from the dorm. This get acquainted session was sponsored by the instructors and they paid for the pizza but naturally the alcohol was on us. I decide to have a soft drink since warm beer or ale didn't appeal to me.

We were seated at a large table near the back of the restaurant. Each of us in turn stood up and introduced ourselves and stated where we were from. After a second round of drinks the pizza arrived and we all dug in.

It was an enjoyable evening. By all accounts I don't think any of us thought of ourselves as strangers. Despite the fact we were all from different places we were much alike in terms of our age and our interests in our field of study.

Someone once said that if you wanted to know what people in India, Indianapolis, Indonesia or anywhere else was like you should look in the mirror. He was right of course. People are people regardless of language or culture. Work, family and recreation bind us all.

Most of my fellow students were interested in finance except for one girl from Ireland who, like me, was interested in journalism. Of course none of them knew I was there under what you might call false pretenses.

It would be several weeks before I would have my first meeting with my contact at the offices of England's Voice where I would also be picking up my second month's stipend. It was too early for me to have anything to report so I assumed it would be a short meeting.

Classes continued. I was learning more than I thought I would. At the end of the week we spent some time at the London equivalent of our stock exchange. I knew little about our own but this seemed to mirror ours in one respect. By all outward appearances it was best described as controlled chaos.

Later that evening over pizza and drinks some of us shared the same impression that it seemed a small miracle that anything was getting accomplished amid all that confusion and mayhem. One of the instructors put it as well as any American could. He said simply: "That's the way it is!"

On Wednesday of the next week I saw Heather Kilgan walking to the sandwich shop where I usually ate my lunch. I asked her if she wanted some company and she agreed to join me. I bought her a sandwich and some tea.

During our short lunch break I found we shared a lot of ideas about journalism and reporting in general. It was a very enjoyable lunch break and we were nearly late getting back to our class.

I mentioned her when I talked with my mom that Sunday night. I kept our calls short due to the expense but e-mailed her several times during the week. She was happy that I was happy and doing so well. "Your dad would be so proud," she added.

The first month was drawing to a close. It was easy to forget that I was not there to study world finance or journalism. I began thinking about what the next two months or so was going to lead to. There were still a few unknowns but my concerns about working "in the dark" so to speak were being somewhat allayed.

There was a bus stop not far from my dorm. I took a pocket schedule with me and had a pleasant ride. I needed only one transfer and then a five block walk to the offices of England's Voice. At the reception desk I identified myself and was directed to an upstairs office.

The man behind the desk stuck out his hand and introduced himself as Harold Withers. He asked me how I was getting adjusted and I told him there hadn't been any difficulties so far. He counted out my next month's stipend and I left.

Heather and I saw each other periodically. Both of us had received praise for our write ups of what we had done so far. One evening she let me read a piece that she was sending home to her journalism instructor back in Ireland. I was very impressed with her talent to say the least.

At the end of the next week we were all taken to one of London's largest investment companies in the morning. In their board room their Vice President lectured us for about an hour. The Q&A session lasted almost another hour. After lunch we went to one of the larger banks in London. One of their executives spoke to us for over an hour followed by another hour of Q&A.

Heather and I asked questions that skirted financial terms. They centered around the way things were done, the regulatory process, as well as education and training required for these positions. The other students asked questions that had more to do with speculation, risk versus return, etc. that were a more inherent part of the business.

It was quite a day. I think both men were impressed at the questions they had to field. All of us agreed that the two lectures were concise and to the point. Neither man had tried to fill in the time with any, shall we say, "BS". We were just as impressed with them as we hoped they were with us.

The instructors were pleased with all of our work. At the end of the week I asked about the possibility

of seeing Laura Wentworth's financial center and maybe having her speak to the group. The instructor sort of stiffened and then said he would look into it but not to get our hopes up. She didn't spend a lot of time talking about what she did or the way she did it with anyone let alone a group of students.

That evening I invited Heather to a movie. Afterwards we went down the street for pizza and soft drinks. It was a cozy, dimly lit, little place that was just the perfect place for couples. After our drinks came I looked over at her.

"Do you think I crossed a line asking about Laura Wentworth?" I asked. The instructor didn't seem to like it very much."

Heather shrugged.

"I don't know. It is hard to say. I know she is a very private person both personally and professionally.

She is one of the richest women in the world. She didn't marry it or inherit it. She is 100% self made, that's a rarity in women and even more so in the financial business especially here in Europe."

"People like that aren't readily accessible to anyone let alone some students but I thought it would give us some insight into how she became successful especially to you and the two other girls in the class."

"I agree. I guess we can only wait and see."

We finished eating and I walked her back to her room. I leaned in to kiss her good night and she responded with a warm and willing kiss.