

October 15, 2011

Dear Rick,

A lot has changed since we last spoke together. That would be back in September of 1972. Or maybe it was back around 1989. If it was back in 1989 when we last spoke together, only you would know that. If it was you who spoke with me back around 1989, maybe someday you will tell me it was you.

Our Mom died a month ago. Our brother Larry and our sister Sylvia and I will be heading down to Riverside Cemetery in Riceville, Iowa next weekend to attend her funeral. Mom was cremated. But she wanted her ashes to be buried next to her mother's grave at Riverside Cemetery. At Mom's request, she has had the following words inscribed upon her tombstone:

"This is my last move."

Mom wanted those words on her tombstone because during her 93 years she had lived in more than 60 dwellings, living in almost 50 of those dwellings with her mother and her father.

Mom's father, George Caleb Palmer, who we affectionately called "Babu," a name I gave him when I was about nine-months old and unable to pronounce the word *grandpa*, he would buy a duplex, and then, while living in the duplex, place it up for sale, sell it, and then buy and move into another duplex, and then put that duplex up for sale.

During the 1920's and the 1930's Mom felt like she and her parents were Gypsies.

Mom's father George (Babu) is also buried in the Riverside Cemetery in Riceville, Iowa. And so is her cousin, Margery.

But wait. Hold on now. Newsflash!

During this year Larry and Sylvia and I discovered that Mom was adopted by her mother and father. We learned that because our Cousin Nancy told us. Nancy thought we all knew.

When Larry then told his daughter Hillery, she told Larry she knew Mom was adopted.

Mom had told Hillery when Hillery was age ten back in 1979. Hillery thought we all knew.

During the past year Mom was not communicating with us. She was in the final stage of Alzheimer's disease. She did not even recognize Sylvia as being her daughter and Larry as being her son. The last time I met with Mom back in 2007, I had to hold up a sign in front of me with my name printed upon it so that she would know my name.

Larry and Sylvia and I now have reason to believe Mom's birth mother was Margery. Why? More than several months before Mom was born, Margery dropped out of high school despite the fact that she was earning good grades in her classes.

Margery's high school records still exist. We now speculate that Margery went to Missouri to have her baby. It's conceivable Margery's cousin, George C. Palmer and his wife Bernadine, who were living at the time in Missouri, adopted Margery's baby.

That would mean Margery is our maternal grandmother.

As you may recall, Mom and George and Bernadine moved from Missouri to Texas and then on to Minnesota.

During Mom's junior high school and senior high school years they always lived over in south Minneapolis in the general area of Minnehaha Creek in the Washburn High School district.

After Mom graduated from Washburn in 1936, she enrolled in Miss Wood's School, earned a teaching diploma, and got a job teaching kindergarten and first grade children in Cody, Wyoming, where she said I was conceived upon a mountain top near Cody. Dad had hopped a freight train from Minneapolis to Cody to be with her for that weekend.

Sylvia and Larry and I have many photo albums containing pictures of Mom as a baby, child, and teenager. Margery appears in most of the photos, standing or sitting next to Mom as Mom grew from childhood to adulthood.

Many of the photos feature Margery with her cousin George and his wife Bernadine; all three posing proudly with Mom: Margery and Mom as a baby; Margery and Mom as an infant; Margery and Mom as a child; Margery and Mom as an adolescent.

There are more photos of Mom with Margery than there are of Mom with George and Bernadine.

Larry and Sylvia and our sister Sue and I sometimes wondered (and perhaps you, too) why we would all spend so many weeks with Margery in her ancestral Riceville house during our summer school vacations. And why we spent so many Christmases with Margery in Riceville. And why Margery would come up to Minneapolis to be with us during Easter and Thanksgiving.

It all seems to make sense now. And it makes sense that Margery and George and Bernadine are all buried in Riceville's Riverside Cemetery, where Mom's ashes will be placed in a grave beside Bernadine next week.

It also made sense how our sister Sue wanted her ashes spread above Minnehaha Falls in Minneapolis. After Sue died in the summer of 2003, Larry and I spread her ashes above the waterfall, sending her ashes off toward the Mississippi River where they could move onward into the Gulf of Mexico and the oceans.

Before Sue's husband Maurice died, Sue and Maurice would spend weekends at Minnehaha Falls.

My favorite photos show them arm in arm and smiling with the waterfall behind them.

It also makes sense why your best friend through grade school and high school, Mike, who was also my best man when Tracey and I became married back in September of 1986 (14 years after you had vanished) has not once spoken with me for the past 10 years.

It was 10 years ago Mike discovered I was investigating how our father, Oscar Edward Johnson, was murdered in our little neighborhood grocery store in 1966 by two teenage lads, both described by witnesses as being your and Mike's age at the time.

It was 10 years ago when I had first discovered from the Minneapolis Police Homicide Unit that the murder weapons were Browning Marksman Medalist target pistols, the exact same kind of expensive target pistol you had repeatedly begged Dad to give you on your 15th birthday because your friends owned them.

The Minneapolis police did not know your teenage friends owned Browning Marksman Medalist pistols.

They never bothered to interview our family, and thereby consequently never interviewed your friends.

It makes sense now why you disappeared after you, at age 21, collected your share of Dad's inheritance money back in 1972.

If you knew two of your friends had murdered our father and you could not bring yourself to disclose what you knew, not even to your family, the best you could do to cope with that burden was to vanish into self-exile.

At around the same time you disappeared, so did Nadine Nims. Mom found a letter in your apartment Nadine had written to you shortly before you disappeared. Nadine expressed she wanted to join you but would have to wait until she finished her college semester in Ames, Iowa.

According to her sisters, Nadine vanished for four years before returning to her family. Unfortunately, her sisters told me Nadine had passed away only months before I had contacted them. They attributed her death to drug abuse.

Nadine had told her sisters she had been living with drug dealers; people who had invested in the development and operation of Keystone Ski Resort.

Her sisters seriously suggested that I not snoop into what they were up to in Colorado because, according to them, "bad things happen to people who snoop into what they were doing."

During the last conversation you and I had way back in September of 1972, you told me your favorite fictional character was from the play *Death of a Salesman*. You told me he was Willy Loman's brother.

Willy's brother had disappeared and only returned as a ghostly apparition who haunted and taunted Willy.

One of the characters in that play was Willy's son, Biff.

According to Nadine's sisters, the man Nadine was in love with while she had disappeared to Colorado was a man named Biff.

During the summer of 1989, when I was operating a resume writing service (20 years after you had graduated from high school) a man entered my office without having made an appointment.

The moment I saw him I was struck by how much he looked like you. He was wearing the same style of cowboy boots you used to wear. He was your height. Same sandy hair. Same big blue eyes. Maybe 30 pounds heavier. Same dreamy contemplative disposition.

He told me he was from Colorado and needed a resume. He said he had spent the past 10 years in Colorado owning and operating a business in which he applied chemical coatings to snow skis. He said he had taken chemistry classes at a college in Seattle during the year 1973 and had used that knowledge to coat surf boards and skis. I told him our mother had married a man who was a coatings chemist and had worked at Cargill developing coatings. I told the man perhaps he might find work at Cargill.

When he returned to my office several days later to look at the resume I had written for him, we reviewed it together, line by line, to ensure its accuracy and his satisfaction with what I had written about him. I would do this with every resume client. Usually it took as much as one hour to review their resume and make whatever changes or modifications were required.

After spending about an hour editing his resume with him until it seemed we had polished it to meet his approval, he did something none of the hundreds of my previous clients had ever done before. He simply sat there before me in silence, seemingly looking for some yet undiscovered flaw in the one-page document in his hands. For what seemed to be at least an entire hour.

From one moment to another moment to yet another moment I asked him what more could be done to improve what I had written about him.

But rather than suggest something, he continued to sit there before me in silence, only glancing up from the page in his hands now and then to give me a quick furtive look.

I sensed he was not happy with it. I told him if he was not satisfied with what I had written he would not owe me a penny.

He reached into his jeans, pulled out a money clip, and handed me one-hundred dollars.

As he stood up to leave, I wanted to ask him if he was actually you. I wanted to ask him if he would pull up his shirt and show me his stomach, to show me if he had a vertical scar above his belly button, the scar on your belly from when you had to have my tie pin surgically removed after you accidentally swallowed it while using it to pick your teeth when you were age eight.

But dammit! I was overcome by a sudden intense feeling of anger shouting within me. An anger shouting to me, "If this guy is actually Rick, why the hell can't he just tell me? And if he can't bring himself to tell me, he must have one hell of a good reason."

He had told me his name is Mark Peters. He had given me his address and phone number to place at the top of his resume along with his name.

A week later I phoned the number to see if he was having any success with his job hunt. The person who answered the phone said there was no Mark Peters living at his home and he had never known a Mark Peters.

The week before he had shown up in my office without an appointment, I had written a resume for a woman. She told me she had graduated from Minneapolis Southwest High School in 1969.

I asked her if she had known you while in high school.

She said, "Yes."

I said, "Rick's my youngest brother."

She said, "Rick was my lover. We would spend hours after school up in his bedroom."

During my interview with her she also told me that she was now living with a man who had spent the past 10 years in prison for dealing drugs. Mark Peters claimed he had spent the past 10 years self-employed in Colorado as a person who applied chemical coatings to snow skis. I was never able to confirm that he had.

And I was never able to confirm that he had told me he had graduated from a high school in Iowa in 1969.

If this Mark Peters was actually you, I hope you went on to do whatever you could to give yourself a sense of well-being. And I hope you gained some sense of satisfaction that I seemed to you to be enjoying the work I was doing back then in 1989.

If you felt disappointment that I seemed to not recognize you as being my own brother, it might help you to know that in all honesty I was afraid. I was afraid that if I asked you if Mark Peters was your “new name” that you would feel compelled to lie to me.

Why? Because if you told me you were actually my brother, you would then be pressed by me to explain why in hell you had vanished from our family for more than 15 years. And the reason might have included that you knew who murdered Dad and yet could not disclose who they were.

You do recall, don’t you, that whenever I would bring up the subject of how and why our father was murdered, you refused to talk with me about it. At the time, I chose to simply respect your wish to not talk about it. Just as I respected how your friend Mike never seemed to want to talk about it for more than a minute.

But now I suspect *why* Mike has chosen to not talk with me for the past 10 years, despite the fact that he was my best man when my wife Tracey and I were married 25 years ago.

Mike continues to communicate with Larry. But the last time Mike contacted me was 10 years ago, just moments after Larry had told him that I had discovered how Nadine Nims had a desire to eventually join you on some adventure you had been planning.

And only a few months later she herself went off to Colorado and disappeared for four years.

Within only hours after Mike had been informed by Larry that I was seeking Nadine Nims, Mike called me and asked me in a very stern voice, “What are you up to, Paul?”

I told Mike I was playing a game of chess on my computer.

After he repeatedly asked me, “What are you up to, Paul,” I concluded he wanted me to say I had only hours before told Larry about how Nadine Nims might provide some information about where you had disappeared to, perhaps with her.

As I was about to tell Mike about how I had discovered Nadine’s connection and relationship with you through her letter to you (Tracey had the night before found the letter in one of Mom’s old Riceville photo albums) Mike asked me a question that disturbed me more than his repeating asking what I was up to.

Mike asked me if Larry ever married the woman he had been going out with over the past year: Glenna.

I told Mike that Larry had sent him a formal invitation to their wedding.

Mike said, “Well yes, Larry did invite me. But did they actually get married?”

I told Mike they did.

Our phone conversation ended without me telling Mike about Nadine Nims.

I then called Larry.

Larry told me he had been in a phone conversation with Mike right after I had told Larry about how I felt if we could contact Nadine Nims we might find out from her where you went after you disappeared.

If Mike had wondered if Larry had married Glenna, he would have asked Larry before Mike had called me.

Mike’s last conversation with me 10 years ago was what I now call a phony phone call wherein I to this day believe he wanted me to disclose that I was in pursuit of Nadine Nims.

And then to politely end our phone conversation, he asked me a question to which he must have already known the answer. While I bullshitted him about how I was “up to” playing a game of chess on my computer, he bullshitted me about not knowing if Larry had married Glenna.

Tracey and I then hired a private investigator to write a letter to Mike.

The letter the investigator sent Mike expressed that as a consequence of a previous letter we had sent to Mike and his high school classmates, we had gained new information about what may have happened to you after you disappeared.

And we now had new information about who may have murdered our father.

After the investigator sent the letter to Mike, the investigator told Mike in a phone call he wanted to meet with Mike to discuss your disappearance and Dad’s murder.

Mike refused to meet with him. Moreover, Mike did not ask him what the new information was.

Instead, Mike told the investigator that he was afraid I had become obsessed with finding you and had become obsessed about finding out who murdered our father.

Furthermore, Mike never called me to find out what the new information was that had been provided by his classmates in response to the letter we had sent Mike and his high school classmates. I got the impression Mike either does not care or that he may be afraid what that new information might be.

One of your 12 high school classmates who called me after receiving the letter Tracey and I wrote to your classmates was Gary Vierkant. Gary was a friend of yours in high school. And your room mate in college. And a high school friend of Mike.

Gary said he was the last person to see you. Gary said he was with you the night before you disappeared. How did he know it was exactly the night before? Gary simply said he went over to your apartment the following night and you were not home.

Minneapolis police investigators suspect you may have been murdered by the two lads who murdered our father. That they may have feared you would tell the police who they were. However, they also have told me that if you had been murdered, your body would have eventually shown up. They claim that it is very rare for a body to not eventually show up.

Gary Vierkant's father owned and operated a business. Gary worked for his father at the time you vanished. Gary now manages and operates his father's business. The business is trash disposal.

I could go into much more detail about the mystery that shrouds your disappearance and Dad's unsolved murder case. But that would take another 100 or more pages. I chose, however, to write a screenplay about it all and maybe someday you shall see the movie at a theater near you.

In the meantime, I continue to see and talk with you in my dreams, where we most often seem to meet at a truck stop located somewhere on a mountain top. Maybe a mountain top in Colorado. Or maybe the same mountain top near Cody, Wyoming, where our loving mother told me I was conceived before she married our loving father.

Always forever loving you, and long may you run,

Paul