

That Bench in Jackson Park

We talked about marriage, on that bench in Jackson Park.
We agreed it made sense ... We were in love ... we didn't want to part ...

But my doubts, self doubts, had begun to grow,
So we sat down one night on the living room floor ...

I needed her to know ... there were no gold watches in my road ahead.
And I needed to be sure she harbored no illusions ...
If we married, our lives likely would be just as it was then.

Hmm .. yeah
Then, I asked her to marry me ...

Without hesitation, she said 'sure'
She wasn't looking for money or some kind of super star ...
She just wanted to live ... exactly the way we were.

So we sealed the deal - both said I do ... Marvin's 5-room apartment soon became **our** home.
The rotted wooden window frames ... made for a year-round breeze ...
But for 85 bucks a month, **including** heat ... hell ... we didn't freeze!
Sure, it wasn't fancy, but we could afford the rent.
And how many other folks had a sculptor's unfinished art stashed in **their** basement?

Hmm ... yeah

She got a loan from her brother, to buy us a car
Which promptly got rammed, parked outside our favorite 2nd hand store.

She put in a garden in that **mess** we called a yard,
Cutting our hands on glass and tin can lids – but we had potatoes - and a whole lot more.

That mad-dash down Skinker ... to the hospital ER? Me, an ex-Army medic – you, blue ... head to toe ...
You could have died ... while those ER folks accused us of being junkies, without ever saying why.

And the food coop? ... eating on 15 bucks a week - and, man, how you could cook ...
to this day, still making all our bread ... I weighed 159 pounds back then – good god! Well, enough said.

The combo of college debt, the hospital bill, owing on the car ... I started teaching high school ...
Man, was that hard ... An hour bus ride, then a mile hike each way, but it made for really cool gifts, ... like
paying off another bill each Christmas day ...

Hmm ... Yeah

That high school, what a trip! Rich folks' kids who couldn't cut it in those ritzier establishments.

I was head of the English Department ... Which made no sense, but those kids needed a whole lot more than grammar or syntax. So I had this idea – take my 9th graders downtown ... so they could see what life was like, for so many living in St. Louis town.

So off we went, 18 packed in a van ... off to places I knew well but which were utterly strange to them. As we're passing a high-rise project on the city's south side, Lonnie – a dyed in the wool ignorant shite – yells, hey look at that nigger guy, that dirty old man ... I like to died!

Hmm ... Yeah

I slammed on the brakes, pulled to the curb, told Lonnie to get out - tell that man to his face what we had just heard. Now Lonnie, scared shitless, yells back 'you're insane' ... And I said - out now, smart ass, you got an opinion, share it with him.

We waited in silence, for Lonnie to get out or eat crow – til finally he says, I'm sorry, man - let's just go. I intentionally drove slowly on our way back to the school, so all had time to add up the cost of rent, heat, and food ... And how much they'd make, **if** they **ever** got a job, and wonder if they could make it without daddy's money helping to lighten the load.

They soon did the math ... and realized there but for fortune, they'd be on that old man's path ... Walking in his shoes ... having to put up with a smart-ass white rich kid's sass.

Hmm ... Yeah

Those years, I taught my 10th graders the poetry of song, playing guitar in lit class and holding sing-alongs. My 11th graders were blown away, when we read old Icelandic tales – about retired Vikings making democracy – how it thrives and how it fails.

And the seniors – Frankl's Man's Search for Meaning - some heady chats on the choices they **hoped** they'd make - If ever confronted with the horrors visited on some in this so-called home of the brave.

One day, out of the blue, I was called to be a college prof ... should have stayed where I was. See I voted **against** a faculty raise 'cause it'd lead to a tuition hike. Later, told the college's President the college's quality didn't live up to the hype ... Hmm ... Another flat tire on the rocky road of life!

Then our 1st child was born – my heart skipped a beat – I held her in my arms – I'd never felt such peace. Or the weight of responsibility – for her being alive. So, I cut my hair, shaved my face, put on a suit and tie ... and climbed aboard that hamster wheel better known as corporate life.

Hmm ... Yeah

We now have four grandkids, all boys – and hope they'll have good hearts ... become honest and caring, treat everyone with dignity ... we can then pass on, knowing we did our part.

And to think, all this started – over 50 years ago - on that bench in Jackson park ...

Yeah ... Hmm ... That bench in Jackson Park