

Gilbert Allen

The Death of John Beegle

The Belladonna Lunch Bunch had just sat down in the back room of Karrie's Kountry Kookhouse when Lois Stone smirked, "Guess who I saw in the Econoclast yesterday."

"I give up," Meredith Cotten yawned. She'd been up watching golf videos until four a.m. "Who?"

"Butler Breedlove and Winnie Poogan. Buying flowers. Together."

Jimmy, Meredith's husband, shook his head. "So what? She still lives with her parents. He was probably helping her pick out something for Mother's Day."

"He paid for them. And then he kissed her."

"On the cheek?" Priscilla Knobloch asked.

"Guess again."

"On the *lips*?"

"Well, on the teeth." Winnie had the biggest overbite anyone in Belladonna had ever seen. She resembled Bucky Beaver from those old Ipana commercials.

"Good lord," Priscilla said. "He must be fifty years older than she is."

"The miracles of modern chemistry," Meredith Cotten laughed.

"Butler's younger than I am," Dan Styles insisted. "He's been in a blue funk ever since his wife died. And that was ten years ago. I say, good for him."

"Bless their hearts," Hilda Willis said. She'd been the soul of Belladonna Methodist since the last century. "I just hope they're happy."

"Holy F. Christ!" Noel Willis looked up from his cellphone, where he'd been scrolling through the local paper. "John Beegle died!" He passed the digital announcement around the chipped Formica table.

John Beegle, the longtime owner of Beegle Supply and Service, passed away at his home on Sunday at the age of 78. He is survived by his loving wife, Mona, and their daughters Tiffany and Alison. An informal celebration of John's life will take place on June 24 from 2:00 to 4:00 PM at the Beegle residence in the Belladonna community. John's friends and former customers are welcome to share their remembrances with the family.

Directions to the home will be provided at the security gate.

And then, all those around the table began thinking of their appliances.

He personally repaired my Speakeasy Microwave Oven, Leah Dickey recalled. Nobody else could fix it. And even though it was a month beyond the factory warranty, he didn't charge Ted and me a thing.

Hilda Willis took a handkerchief from her purse and dabbed her eyes. *When I wanted to buy that top of the line refrigerator for the church kitchen, he told me the cheaper one was more reliable. He saved Belladonna Methodist a thousand dollars!*

Meredith Cotten remembered when she and her husband were setting up the Test Sleep suites in Ecumenical Bedding, just after they'd moved to Belladonna. *He gave me a thirty percent discount on all the fixtures for the power baths. And steered me to Herman Corvey for the installation.*

Dan Styles thought, *He treated me and Verna like we were billionaires. Even though we lived in the cheapest patio home in Belladonna.* "I didn't know the man was sick," he said aloud. "He looked healthy."

Harriet arrived with their menus. "What can I get for you good folks today?" She grinned at Dan. "I already know what Mr. Frito Lay Man wants. One Mister Pig Platter with a big half and half tea."

Dan Styles told her she'd read his mind.

"Won't be reading your mind much longer. Me and Demarcus fixing to retire. End of this summer. Gonna move down to Isle of Palms."

"We'll miss you, Harriet," Hilda said. "What'll you do with your restaurant?" Harriet had inherited it from the original Karrie years ago.

"Got three chains bidding on this spot right now. Prime location. Probably tear it down and start from scratch."

"Progress," Noel Willis said.

Harriet nodded. "No use fighting it. Gotta ride with the tide."

A month later, on June 24, the downstairs family room stood ready for the life celebration of John Beegle. Mona and Tiffany and Alison Beegle, in matching silk mourning dresses, were adjusting the floral arrangements hanging from the ceiling mounts. They usually held house plants when they weren't anchoring stainless steel poles.

"UFlooria did a great job repairing the water damage," Alison said. "You'd never know anything happened down here." She arched her formidable eyebrows. "Or up there."

On the giant TV next to the buffet table, the slide show prepared by Belladonna Hail and Farewell began with John and Mona

Beegle's wedding portrait from 1983. They'd eloped in ALMOST MARRIED t-shirts made by John's best friend from high school.

Mona felt herself tearing up. "Even back then, he didn't have any hair. I thought he looked so—mature."

Next, photos of them with the girls as babies, toddlers, and teenagers. The grand opening of Beegle Supply and Service in Belladonna Commons. The billboard Mona had designed herself—with the dog in the denim cap. The day they moved into their dream house. John sitting in the one-man helicopter that the previous owners had left in the garage and that had made him a local celebrity as he'd piloted it around the neighborhood. Once he'd even landed it on the golf course to present a tournament trophy.

"Whatever happened to the autogyro?" Tiffany asked.

"He gave it to the Greenville County museum," Mona said. "After you girls left for college."

"When you'd started giving pole dancing lessons down here," Alison grinned. "Where'd you put *my* pole, by the way? I left it screwed to the ceiling."

"Behind the TV. In its carrying case." Mona decided she'd better make something abundantly clear to her younger daughter. "Alison, please don't mention the circumstances of your father's passing today."

"Why not?" Alison put her hand on her mother's shoulder. "It's the most romantic thing that's ever happened around here."

Tiffany walked over from the buffet table, passing the pedestal that held her father's polished brass funeral urn. She'd been arranging the hors d'oeuvres she'd procured from esKatomart, where she worked as a Senior Want Creation Specialist. "I hate to agree with Alison, but she's right on this one, Mom. You two are the love story of the twenty-first century. You one-upped *Titanic*. Really."

"And besides," Alison said, "those EMS guys aren't priests. They've probably spread the story all over Belladonna by now."

The doorbell rang.

"Better get used to it." Alison patted her mother's ballerina wedding band. "You're a living legend."

Herman and Nadine Corvey were first to arrive. After he'd grabbed a couple of canapés from the buffet table, they both walked over to the new widow.

"We're so sorry for you, Mona. And for the girls. Where are they?" Nadine had taught both her daughters in kindergarten.

"Getting the guest book," Mona said. "Make sure you sign it."

"Dependable service," Herman Corvey declaimed. He'd been one of John Beegle's subcontractors for years. Together they'd

provided the InSinkErators, Jacuzzis, and Bio Bidets for most of the patio homes and condominiums in Belladonna. “Dependable service. That was our motto.”

When Tiffany and Alison came back downstairs, Nadine hugged them both. “Your father was a good man.”

“You can say that again.” Herman Corvey brushed his crewcut with the hand that wasn’t holding his half-eaten canapé. “Dependable service. He’s an inspiration.”

Nadine elbowed him in the side of his company jacket.

After the Corveys had signed the book and walked over to watch the slide show, Alison whispered, “Get used to it, Mom.”

Priscilla Knobloch and Dan Styles came straight from the golf course. Ever since Dan’s wife had passed away at the Assisted Living Center, where he’d been her primary caregiver, they played nine holes together every Saturday.

“Excuse our attire,” Dan said. His orange knit shirt was still a bit damp. “We tried to change our tee time, but they were rolling the greens today.”

“It’s an informal gathering,” Mona said. “Thanks for coming.”

“You must miss John terribly,” Priscilla’s eyes were brimming with tears. “But you still have the girls.” She’d lost her own husband to an auto accident decades ago, and her celebrity daughter had died doing NGO work in Afghanistan.

The poor thing, Mona thought. “We had forty-six years together, Priscilla. We were lucky.”

Ted and Leah Dickey handed Mona a four-color brochure from the Belladonna ALC. “I know you don’t need this now,” Leah said. “But if the house ever gets to be too much, remember—you can stay in Belladonna. There’s a full continuum of care, from independent living to hospice.”

“We’ve made contingency plans ourselves,” her husband said. They lived in one of the biggest McMansions in their gated community, but they’d been on the board of the ALC for years. “Just in case.”

Mona glanced at the glossy geriatrics playing bridge and doing yoga stretches. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

After her husband excused himself to answer his cell phone, Leah asked Mona to help her find the restroom. When they were alone, Leah said, “Alison told me about John. I don’t know what to say.”

Mona burst into a massive sob. “I killed him, Leah.”

Leah grabbed both her wrists. “Look at me. You did not kill him. He made his own decision.”

“Why?” she whimpered. “Why?”

“Because John was John.” Leah hugged her. “And because you are you. He adored you, Mona. More than life itself.”

Harold and Peg Carmichael came by in a tuxedo and ballroom gown. On their way to a fundraiser, they’d stopped to pay their respects.

“Your husband was a big supporter of Bullpen College athletics,” Harold said. “One of our most loyal alums.”

“We’re going to make a donation in his honor.” When the tall woman leaned toward Mona, she looked like a horse stretching down to the trough. “We’re hoping it starts the ball rolling,” she said. “The John Beegle Memorial Endowment.”

“We’ll be announcing it tonight,” Harold Carmichael said. “To the entire Heritage Society. Feel free to tell your guests.”

Alison’s long-distance boyfriend had been running a skateboarding academy on Hilton Head Island ever since he retired from the Slackers Tour, a senior skateboarding competition featured on the Trashsports Channel. He’d arrived at about three-thirty, and now the two of them were holding forth in front of John Beegle’s funeral urn.

“Dad adored us,” Alison proclaimed. “He said so all the time. I mean, a pole dancer and a guy who can land a 720 corkscrew flip on the halfpipe.” She tugged playfully on the sleeve of Danny’s Bob Marley sweatshirt. “Use your imagination, people.”

Danny folded both hands and bowed toward John Beegle’s mortal remains. “One love, Spirit of John. One love.”

Lois Stone said, “I couldn’t agree more.”

On the other side of the room, beneath a hanging arrangement of red roses, Tiffany groaned. “Everything’s always about *her*.”

Mona just rolled her eyes.

As they’d promised, Jerry and Jean Desseyn arrived at four-fifteen. Alison had already left with her dreadlocked boyfriend, and Tiffany had teamed up with Hilda Willis to haul the leftovers to the Food Kitchen before they spoiled. Mona, perched on a stepstool, was taking down the flower arrangements. She’d get a rebate if she managed to return them to the mortuary by five—so they could get them ready for a funeral at the Baptist church the following afternoon.

“We can help you with those,” Jerry said. The slide show was cycling through John and Mona’s wedding portrait for the umpteenth time. “I’d forgotten about those shirts,” he said. “I silk-screened them myself.”

“John had a sense of humor,” Mona said.

“I know,” Jerry said. “*Do you smile to tempt a lover, Mona Beegle?*”

Mona winced. “I thought John only sang that for me.”

“Hey,” Jerry said. “I was his t-shirt supplier.”

“And Alison’s,” Mona said. “Whenever she came home from your store after school, I felt like strangling you.”

Jean smiled. “Get in line.”

“I know when I’m not wanted.” Jerry blew a kiss in their direction. “I’ll bring the car to the portico so we can load up.”

When she was alone with Jean, Mona said, “Why didn’t he tell me?”

“I don’t know,” Jean said. “But if it’s any comfort, Jerry didn’t tell me, either. I had no idea what the two of them were doing.”

“Men.” Mona shook her head. “We might have had more time together. Years maybe. He never should have been taking that stuff. Not with his heart medication.”

“He probably thought you’d worry. And you wouldn’t—”

“Damn right I wouldn’t,” Mona said. “It’s not that important.”

“To you,” Jean said.

“And now I’m the neighborhood joke. The Belladonna *femme fatale*.”

“No, you’re not. Do you know what Jerry said to me this morning? *If I were John, I would’ve done the same damn thing*. Dying for love isn’t the worst way to go.”

John Beegle’s life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most remarkable.

He was born in Greenville County, South Carolina, when it was still the textile capital of the world. His father and mother both worked in Monaghan Mill, but they’d moved out of the company village into their own trailer when John Beegle was in ninth grade. Neither of them had finished high school, and during his own high school days, John Beegle had become ashamed of their hillbilly accents and their addiction to old-time country—Bill Monroe, The Dixie Clodhoppers, The Fruit Jar Drinkers. “That’s *real* music,” his father and mother would say, and John would just mutter, “Gag me.”

Forty years later, he replaced their tiny brass plaques with a polished black granite headstone, engraved with a banjo and a fiddle between their names.

As a teenager, he worked as a stock boy in the new big box discount store—within walking distance of home—and saved his money to buy a Triumph Spitfire convertible that needed new pistons and a transmission overhaul. He rebuilt the car at the service station

managed by the father of his best friend, Jerry Desseyn. When it was finished, they'd go cruising on Saturday nights in downtown Greenville, AM radio blaring, offering a ride to every pretty girl who looked close to their own age.

"That thing only has two seats!" the girls would shout.

And they'd always shout back, "We know!"

Jerry liked to draw. As editor of the Parker High yearbook, he'd dubbed John "Most Likely to Recede." John was already losing his hair at the temples, and Jerry had sketched him with a pot belly, sitting on a La-Z-Boy—peering over his big paunch at a TV set, his head smooth as a hard-boiled egg.

They'd enrolled at Bullpen College together, because it cost next to nothing back then, and because it was just a half-hour drive up the road. They'd roomed together, and majored in General Studies together—which Jerry joked meant 120 hours of anything you were able to pass. They even marched together at a couple of local Vietnam protests, until their lottery numbers came up 336 and 354 in July 1970.

"Party time," Jerry had pronounced on the Fourth, smuggling a couple of sixpacks into their dorm room, festooned with Steppenwolf posters. Bullpen College was still a dry campus, but as long as you weren't throwing rocks through windows or burning Dean Wheeling in effigy, nobody cared. They were in summer school, making up for the incompletes they'd taken during the Kent State shootings. Now they sat on beanbag chairs at their open window, listening to fireworks coming from the football stadium. "Not our fight anymore." Jerry popped open another beer. "*All we are saying,*" he crooned, "*is give Bud a chance.*"

John had recently stopped marching for a different reason. His uncle, a helicopter pilot, had died evacuating wounded soldiers from Cambodia that June, and he didn't want to hear potheads calling anyone in uniform a baby killer. But he matched Jerry, can for can, until dawn.

The next morning, while his head was still pounding like a construction site full of jackhammers, John Beegle learned he was an orphan.

His parents' trailer had gone up in flames the night before. The fire department blamed it on the aluminum wiring. After his unbelief, after the funeral, and after the insurance settlement, John Beegle changed.

He began drinking so much that even Jerry told him he had to stop. But instead he moved to an apartment in Dark Corner, traded in his Spitfire for a new Corvette, and spent most of his time playing

pinball. After he flunked out of school in February, he'd drive around nearby campuses, always bringing plenty of cash with him. There were trysts in Tigerville, rendezvous in Rock Hill—and even one disastrous evening with a prostitute in Pendleton.

This went on for two years. On the morning of what would have been his graduation day, he woke up asking himself what in the hell he was doing. He was getting low on money. Hung over, he drove to his old college and sobered up in the football stadium while he watched the commencement. Afterwards, he spotted Jerry on the forty-yard line, in his cap and gown. "Hey, buddy." He slapped at Jerry's gold tassel. "What's up from here?"

"Starting my own business. Custom t-shirts. It's a growth industry. Nobody's wearing anything with a collar anymore. And I've already got the name for it. *Desseyens Unlimited*."

"Cute," John Beegle said.

"I'll start out silk screening in this cool apartment I found down in Greenville. John, I was born to be an entrepreneur."

"Need a business partner?"

Jerry shook his head. "I'm a solo operation for now."

"Hey man, have a heart." John Beegle ran his fingers through what little was left of his hair. "I'm good with my hands."

Jerry snapped his own fingers. "That's a thought. Lots of stores need somebody like that. Maybe you wouldn't even have to shave."

But John Beegle changed again. He took his friend's advice and began working as an independent contractor for a local home improvement center. He traded in the Corvette for an F-150 pickup so he could get mileage money for deliveries, to supplement the installation fees. He'd schlep and fiddle with almost anything, but he soon became the go-to guy for dishwashers, water heaters, and those new microwave ovens. He wasn't saving much money, but he made enough to cover his rent and his car insurance. He stopped drinking, except on Saturday nights, when he'd let loose a little bit. For nearly ten years, his life wasn't great, but it was pretty good. Good enough, he thought. Good enough.

By the time he turned thirty, John had begun installing waterbeds. Sure, lots of them went to latter-day hippies. But chiropractors had started recommending them for chronic back pain, so Mom and Dad and even Grandpa and Grandma were buying them too. That was more than okay with John. He got good at explaining hard side and soft side, free-flowing and semi-waveless, safety liners, patch kits, and water conditioners—as well as the intricacies of heating pad placement and thermostatic controls. He'd rescue the geezers from

reading the manual, and they'd usually reward him with a big tip. When he rolled up to Crescent Avenue on Friday, June 24, 1983, he eyeballed the old Greek Revival with its whitewashed four-columned front porch and grinned. His Saturday night was almost paid for already.

The names on the purchase order were Patrick and Nora Madigan. He was surprised when a young woman in a black leotard opened the door. Trophy wife? But she wasn't wearing a wedding ring.

"Delivery," he said. "Your mother home?"

"She's on vacation. You the waterbed guy?"

Well, there goes my tip. "I'm here to set it up." He checked the delivery sheet. "Says here there's no removal involved."

"Goodwill hauled it away last week."

He managed a grin. "Who's sleeping on the floor?"

"Very funny. My parents are cruising the Mediterranean at this very moment."

"Sounds nice," he said. "They'll have their sea legs ready when they get back."

She watched him bring in the bed frame, position the heating pad, and fill up the bladder with the special hose he'd run in from the bathtub. "I'm setting the thermostat for 86 degrees," he said. "It's a good place to start. You can always go hotter."

While she was signing the delivery sheet, she said, "I've been doing nothing but teach ballet since I came home last month. To a bunch of little kids."

"Explains the leotard."

"You did a good job." She handed him a fifty-dollar bill.

"Thanks."

He held it up to the light, and he tried a joke. "Want to have dinner with Ulysses S. Grant?"

"Why not? It'll be a good story to tell my sorority sisters."

But she never went back to campus, and they got married three months later.

He'd fallen in love, and he'd somehow managed to pull her along with him. She cried when she said she was pregnant, she cried again when he promised to marry her, and she cried even more when she miscarried, a week after they'd eloped.

In the tiny bathroom of his apartment, he told her he hoped she didn't feel she'd made a mistake.

She smiled through her tears. "Sing for me, John."

"Mona Beegle, Mona Beegle, men have named you. You're so like the canine with the mystic smile."

"A man with a voice like that should start his own business."

“With what? We’re broke.”

“I’ve spoken with my mom,” Mona said. “She’s willing to help.”

“We’ll pay her back,” John Beegle promised. “Every penny.”

And they did—although it took nearly fifteen years. But by the time Tiffany and Alison were teenagers, Beegle Supply and Service could pay their tuition to Thornblade Academy and buy a dream house in Belladonna—the best gated community in upstate South Carolina. They’d gotten a great deal from the Barkers, who were retiring to live on a yacht in the Caribbean.

They were a happy family, mostly, and when they weren’t, bad times never lasted too long. The girls squabbled, grew up, made up (more or less), and left home. When he turned seventy, he sold the business, but he let the new owners keep his surname for an extra two million dollars. And, although John Beegle never became a grandfather, he thought his life was good enough. Better than good enough. Perfect.

Or nearly perfect. What was a little angina, for a man his age? His doctor started him on nitroglycerin, which pretty much took care of the problem. And when that same doctor told him to stop taking sildenafil and refused to renew his prescription, he’d just borrow some from Jerry Desseyn. Whenever he wanted to surprise Mona.

In retirement, John Beegle decided to work with his hands again. On mePay he managed to find a classic Triumph Spitfire, British Racing Green, in mint condition. He flew to Atlanta, drove it back to his Belladonna garage, and then began removing, inspecting, and replacing a different part every day. Generator. Distributor. Water pump. Exhaust manifold. He was having a blast. Like he was still sixteen.

One day, when he’d finished tweaking and reinstalling the Zenith Stromberg carburetor, he decided to visit Mona during her customary power nap. So he wiped the grease from his hands, took a quick shower in Alison’s old bathroom, and popped two more pills than usual. Fifteen minutes later, he tiptoed into their master bedroom suite.

She was already undressed, filling the whirlpool tub, when he lifted her off her feet from behind.

“John,” she giggled. “What in the world are you up to?”

“You’ll find out, Mona Beegle,” he said. “Soon enough.”

She carried her portable pole into the family room. Ever

since the No Excuses Soccer and Vertical Fitness Academy had been repurposed as the Amy Knobloch Memorial Center, Alison had been working out in her childhood home. During her afternoon break, when Priscilla took over the docent duties, Alison would walk to her parents' house, unlock the downstairs door with the same key she'd used as a teenager, take down a hanging planter from the ceiling mount, and screw her L'il Minx into the grooved flange. She'd stopped performing years ago, but her Aerobic Pole exercise program kept her looking as if she hadn't.

She stripped down to her Spandex bikini and began with some simple stretches. Then, grasping the stainless steel with her arms held high as she could, she slid down until both thighs were kissing the floor.

"Love the pole, Alison," she whispered, closing her eyes.
"Love the pole."

In the middle of her first invert, she felt water plunking the bottoms of her bare feet. When she opened her eyes and looked down—to look up—she saw a dark stain blossoming on the ceiling's sheetrock.

She dismounted, put on her robe, and headed upstairs to see what in the hell was going on.

Alison could hear water running. She knocked on the door of the master suite but no one answered, so she went inside and found the tub overflowing.

They must be getting senile or something. She splashed across the tile floor, turned off the tap, and opened the drain. She used all the bath towels to sop up the mess, then tossed them into the empty tub.

She walked down the hallway. Inside the bedroom, her mother was lightly snoring, her head sideways against his bare chest, nestled in its silvery hair, a half-smile on her face.

Alison started laughing—she couldn't help herself. She got out her cellphone, took a picture, and sent it to Danny.

"Wake up, you lovebirds," she whispered.

A new ceiling and floor would cost a small fortune, but her parents had more money than they knew what to do with. This was family history, right in front of her! They'd be telling the story at Thanksgiving dinners for the rest of their lives.

"It's raining downstairs!" she shouted.

And then, finally, her mother opened her eyes.

