

Chapter I

Falling in Love

December 7, 1898 – June 9, 1917

So it was that Geannie and Curly came into this world together. One night soon after they were born, the Brasons got together with the Austins next door for an evening of socializing. Geannine fell asleep and Marie put her down in her crib. Next it was Sheffield also fell asleep. Marie told Ellen to just put him in with Geannie. A little while later, Marie went to check on the babies.

She came back and said to Charles and Emmett and Ellen, "You have got to see this."

They followed her into the nursery to have a look. Both Geannie and Curly had somehow rolled over so they were cuddled up to each other, each with an arm reaching across the other. That should have been an indication that these two had a special bond between them. Their earliest memories included each other. As small children they were playmates. As they got older they were best buddies.

As small children, they thrived in the loving security of their respective families, who were close friends. Their children grew up together and the younger ones, Curly and Geanie and Walt and Stirling particularly, had become best friends.

There was the night in August when Geannie and Curly were eight years old that Curly, and Walt, along with Geannie, Stirling, and their cousins Billy and Sarah slept out under the stars in their backyard to watch a meteor shower. Between the meteors, fireflies, and ghost stories there wasn't a whole lot of sleep that went on that night.

Geannie's Aunt Martha died when Sarah was ten. From then on Geannie's mother looked after her as a surrogate mother. Not only were Geannie's mother and Sarah's mothers sisters, but Sarah's father, William and Geannie's father were brothers.

By the time they were twelve years old Geannie was actually a little taller than Curly. They went everywhere and did everything together. If there were ever bosom buddies, it was these two. Fortunately she had Sarah to do girl things with. Sarah was only six weeks older than Geannie and kept her balanced. She was the sister that Geannie didn't have. Her only sister had died as an infant six years before she was born. She and Sarah also had a friend by the name of Lorraine Reeves.

Curly often tagged along with Walt and Stirling and considered them as his friends. Occasionally he palled around with other boys his age. But when it came right down to it, Geannie and Curly were the best of friends. The circles of their lives revolved around each other, everyone else was secondary.

Curly was a very descriptive name that his father always called him and it stuck with him. He had thick, black, curly hair in his younger years. He never cared much for the name. His father had raised his family to be God fearing people. Like his name, his up bringing stuck with him. Going to services on Sunday is just what he did. While at sea or otherwise on duty, Curly always made a point of attending

services held by one of the Navy's fine chaplains. Geannie was of the same upbringing. Neither one of them ever took up smoking or drinking and using foul language was out of the question.

Although Geannie's father was wealthy, he taught his children to be frugal, conservative, and hard working. Geannie who took after her father in so many ways, particularly learned those lessons. She was not spoiled, but being his baby girl she was somewhat indulged. When they were younger, Geannie babysat for neighbors and Curly worked for Senator Austin doing chores and cleaning the stables that housed his prize thoroughbred horses.

In his mind's eye, Curly reverted to a pivotal day in his relationship with Geannie. It was the summer they were fifteen. Both of their families were spending a couple of days at the Austin's summer home near Abbot in the Brush Mountains west of Roanoke. It was roomy and as nice as most people's homes but they called it a cabin.

Typically they would go fishing at the small lake which was a forty five minute hike from the cabin. This day as they hiked in, they didn't bring their fishing gear with them. It was a very warm afternoon when the two of them got to lake. They sat on a log on the lake shore skipping rocks and talking. "The water sure looks inviting," Curly commented. Then lamented, "It's too bad we didn't bring our bathing suits."

"So," Geannie quipped. "Why should that stop us."

"What are you talking about?" Curly quizzed.

She flashed back, "We can always swim in our underwear."

"Huh?"

"I know that you and our brothers do it here all the time. Us girls do it a too."

"I don't know." Curly responded shyly. "Thats different."

"After all, aren't I just one of the guys?" Geannie tempted.

"Yeah I suppose you're right, But what if someone comes along?"

"They won't. Everyone is doing their own thing back at the cabin. Besides there is no one else up here during the week. Come on it will be fun. You're the one who said you wanted to go swimming."

Then he rationalized to himself, "Oh what the heck, after all its only Geannie."

"Alright then." he agreed shyly.

As Geannie began unlacing her high top shoes, Curly pulled off his boots. With their clothes neatly laid out over the log they stood there in their undergarments, she in her long legged bloomers and camisole and he in his drawers and undershirt. "See," Geannie said, "this isn't much different from our bathing suits."

Together they rushed into the cool water of the lake. At first it nearly took their breath away. But a moment after plunging in, it felt so good on a hot afternoon. Geannie challenged, "Let's race out to the

rock.”

Curly boasted, “I bet I beat you!” as they both launched out into deeper water. With the nervousness out of his system, he sped for the rock, but she had had got there first. The water around the rock was deeper and they decided to go diving. Holding their breath, they dove down as deep as they could go. By now, he was having fun and forgot his shyness. “Why wasn’t Geannie shy?” He was amazed at her boldness.

After about an hour of swimming and diving, they swam back toward the shore. Geannie announced that she was going to get out and began wading ashore. When she was only knee deep in water he was staring at her from behind. Her wet clothes clung to the form of her body. At that point, she stopped and looked back at him looking at her. She turned completely around to face him and asked, “Well, aren’t you coming?”

She didn’t realize that her semi transparent clothes gave him distorted view of her blossoming body. He could see her well enough to get his first look at what a girl looks like. It was at that moment that he realized that his buddy, his pal, and his best friend was indeed a young woman. In that instant something changed and he would never see her the same again. The image of that brief moment was forever etched in his mind. It was not a sensual moment but one of innocence and awakening.

After what seemed an eternity, but was actually a few seconds, Curly stood up and followed her out of the water. Sitting on log, the hot afternoon sun and a gentle breeze soon dried them enough to put the rest of their clothes back on.

On the hike back to the cabin, they simply talked and joked as usual. As they walked along, he reached out and took her hand. There was an electrical surge that seemed to emanate from the palm of her hand that traveled up his arm and jolted his heart. At that instant, he realized something else. He loved her. He always had. And knew that he always would. From that day on, their relationship was that of sweethearts rather than buddies or playmates. But always best friends.

It’s difficult to say when their first date was because they had always gone everywhere and did everything together. About the only way to distinguish the difference was that now they held hands everywhere they went, whether just the two of them or with others. Walt and Sarah began going together about this time, as did Stirling and Loraine Reeves.

During late August, just before beginning their sophomore year in high school, The three couples went to the Roanoke County Fair together. They enjoyed wandering around looking at all of the animals and booths. Toward evening they took in the carnival. About sunset, they were riding the ferris wheel. Stirling and Lorraine were ahead and Walt and Sarah were behind. After several revolutions, the ferris

wheel came to a stop with Curly and Geannie at the very top. While Curly was imagining that he was flying, Geannie brought him back down to earth by giving him a kiss on the cheek.

During their sophomore year in high school, when it came time for the junior prom, it was just understood between them that they would go together as a date. That night after the dance as they were standing on her doorstep, she kissed him. It wasn't just another peck on the cheek either. She held his face in her hands and planted a warm, tender kiss right on his lips. Again he felt a jolt of electricity. He practically floated home as he walked next door. She always seemed to be the one to make the first move. She was assertive yet never bossy nor domineering. In fact, she was even born a couple of hours before him. From then on, they went steady. One Sunday afternoon at a church picnic she boldly proclaimed that one day she would be his wife. All he could say was, "I know."

A couple of days after the picnic, Geannie and her mother were home alone. "Baby girl." she began. "Did I ever tell you the story of how your father and I got together?"

"Yes, Mother." Geannie replied, trying not to sound sarcastic. "I know the story. Father tells it all time."

"Good." Marie said with a little sarcasm of her own, "Then you can correct me if I get it wrong. But that isn't the version I'm about to tell you. Not even your father knows some of what I am about to tell you."

That got Geannie's attention as they sat down in the porch swing.

"When you began going through puberty, I told you the facts of life, now I am going to tell you the realities of life.

"When I was your age, there was a neighbor boy that I really liked. He liked me too, or so I thought. One day he invited me to come over and see a newborn foal. I loved horses, so I wanted to see it.

"After he showed me the foal, he invited me up to the loft where he told me there was great view of the river as it rounded the mountain. It was an incredible view at that. Then he kissed me. It was heavenly. You see, I'd never been kissed before. I wanted more. I felt something stir inside of me that I had never felt before. Before I knew it, he was touching me, which only flamed the excitement. I'm ashamed to say that I willingly let him take advantage of me. I was young and naive and mistook the physical ecstasy for love.

"After that one time, he never spoke to me again. He wouldn't even look at me. Come to find out, I was just another conquest. For the next few weeks I was horrified of the thought of being pregnant. Thank God, I wasn't. That made it easy for me to hide what I had done. I felt so ashamed, I had behaved like some shameless floozy. I never told anyone about it, until just now."

Geannie sat next to her mother completely engrossed in her story. "Oh mother how awful you must have felt." Then she added, "Curly would never do anything like that."

"I know he would never take advantage of you. He's a fine boy and I think the world of him. He will

go far in life. But my warning to you is that it is so easy to get trapped in the passion of youth. Please save yourselves for each other in marriage. You might not know it yet, but everyone else does; the two of you are destined to get married one day.”

“I know.” Geannie admitted. “That is exactly what I told him at the picnic the other day.”

“Promise yourself that you will save yourselves for each other. I know how a totally innocent relationship can get caught up in passion as well. You see, not long after that we moved here to Roanoke where my father went to work in the bank. Being from up north, we Winslows were nothing more than damned Yankees. My father had fought on the side of the North and the Austins and Rogers were Confederates. Nevertheless, your father took a fancy to me and his brother, Bill took a liking to Sarah's mother. So, that is how I met your father. He was attending Princeton University at the time.

“He was home for the summer, working for his father at the bank. It wasn't long before he asked me out. Something clicked with us and we began seeing a lot of each other. At the end of the summer he went back to Princeton for his senior year. We wrote to each other and when he did come home, we spent as much time together as possible.

“He graduated the following June and went to work full time in the bank. Soon after that, he invited me to one of those famous Austin outings at the cabin. We took picnic lunch to the lake, just the two of us. We had a lovely time. As the afternoon sun beat down on us, the water in the lake looked so inviting.

“I suggested a dip in the lake. I stood up and stripped down to my under most garments and plunged into the cool, refreshing water of the lake. Charles did the same. We were swimming and splashing around with no intentions of doing anything else. Our clothes were soaked and clung to our bodies. I felt like they were bogging me down so I took them off, like my sister and I used to do at the old swimming hole back home, and tossed them into the bushes to dry.

I felt so free to be rid of them, so I suggested he do the same. He was reluctant at first but he followed my lead. You see, it was more common in those days than folks let on. We swam out to the rock and back and had a gay old time. When we decided to get out, our clothes were still damp, so we laid out on our blanket to dry in the sun. I think it was me who led him on, but the next thing I knew, we were pitchin woo and it went much farther than either one of us intended.

“Once again, I felt ashamed of myself and I was afraid I would lose Charles. I had fallen for him and was so in love. About a week later he asked me to marry him. It wasn't long before I found out that I was in a motherly way. We were both too embarrassed to tell anyone what we had done. We decided to move up our wedding and we were married a month later. Fortunately I didn't show for some time. When Charlie was born, he was quite a small baby so we told everyone he was premature.

“There, now you know more than anyone else on earth. I tell you this so you don't have the same

regrets and guilt that I went through. So I ask you again, promise yourself and each other that you will save yourselves for marriage, whoever you marry.”

“Boy, that is quite a story! I would have never known.” Geannie responded with wide eyes.

“Promise me that you keep this to yourself and take it to your grave.”

“I promise, Mother. Your secret is safe with me. And I promise that I will wait until I get married.

After all, that is Christian thing to do.”

“Geannie, I am always open to discuss matters of intimacy with you. Please don’t ever hesitate to come to me. Okay”

“I have a confession to make.” Geannie said reluctantly.

“Go on, baby girl, I’m listening.”

“One day last summer, we were at the lake and didn't have our bathin suits with us so I enticed him to go for a swim in our underwear. After swimming for a while, when I got out I didn't realize it then but I'm sure that he could practically see through my wet clothes. I think that is how he finally noticed that I was a woman and not just his best friend. He didn't say anything but on the way back he held my hand.”

“I wondered why all of sudden the two of you went from best friends to sweethearts. Oh, and your secret is safe with me, too.”

“I have another secret.” Geannie admitted. “One time Sarah and I were swimming and heard the boys coming so we hurried and got out and hid in the bushes. Ever since you told me about boys, I was curious and wondered what they looked like. So there was me and Sarah, spieing on them while they took off their clothes.”

“Shame on you, Gean Marie Austin! Did you get an eye full?” Marie asked.

“No, the bushes were in the way. After they got in the water, we got dressed and left.”

“Just as well, that will make your first time all the more intersting.” Marie counseled.

At sixteen Geannie and Curly both got part time jobs. He worked as an attendant at a service station while Geannie worked as a telephone operator. They learned to manage their time, balancing work, school, athletics, Geannie's piano lessons, and having fun. Their parents taught them to save what they earned and how to manage their what had to spend. Some of what they kept for themselves was spent on a matinée at the show house or at City Drug on the corner of Campbell and Jefferson. City Drug had the best soda fountain in the whole valley and was a popular place for teenagers to gather. It was there that both Gennie and Curly acquired a liking for Coca-Cola.

Curly did take some of the money he earned that summer and bought an old 1906 REO Model B Runabout that he picked up for not very much. For a nine year old car, it needed a little work to get it in



running order. His boss not only let him use his shop and tools, but helped him fix it up. With a car, he gained considerable independence and was able to get around on his own much better than on his bicycle. It sure made going out with Geannie much easier.

By the time they began their senior year, Geannie had truly become beautiful a young woman. She had charm and sophistication not to mention grace and poise. Many young men would like to have vied for her attention, but for her, there was only Curly.

Curly was handsome and dashing, with wit and a quirky sort of sense of humor. He was a perfect gentleman, having learned from his father and the Senator. Likewise, the young ladies would love to have been asked out by him; but for him, there was only Geannie.

As the romance between them deepened, a new element was added to their relationship as they matured; they were also physically attracted to one another. Being the gentleman that he was and the refined young lady that she was, they were able to keep their attraction for each other within the proper bounds, for the most part.

There was however the one time during their senior year when they sloughed Sunday School. The assistant pastor was surprised to find them in the bell tower involved in some pretty serious kissing. They were brought before Pastor Brason and confessed their indiscretion. For her punishment, Geannie was relieved of her responsibility as the chairman of the Pastor's Young Ladies Committee, after all that is no way to set an example for the girls who looked to her as a leader. As for Curly, he was assigned to some of the dirty jobs that no one wanted, like cleaning the clickers out of the coal furnace in the basement of the church.

Word got around and naturally, embellishments were added to the story as it was passed around. One day not long after that, Curly was at wrestling practice when his sparring partner called Geannie a tramp. The comment enraged Curly, who felt it necessary to defend her honor. He employed some rather unorthodox and down right illegal moves to defeat his opponent. Given the nature of the other wrestler, the coach didn't interfere, hoping that he was learning his lesson.

As graduation approached, they both knew what they wanted to do. Ever since he was twelve years old, Curly wanted more than anything to fly. When he and all of Roanoke saw their first airplane fly over, he knew he was born to fly. When he was fourteen, Senator Austin pulled some strings with some connections that he had and arranged for Geannie and Curly to take an airplane ride. He was still flying high long after the plane landed. In fact, his head was in the clouds ever since.

Whenever he heard the sound of an airplane engine, he scanned the sky until he spotted it and

watched it until it disappeared from view. One time he and Geannie and a bunch of other kids were playing baseball. He was playing third base but was preoccupied watching an airplane when Geannie, the pitcher, threw the ball to him as a kid on the other team was trying to steal third base. The ball hit him right in the head. That girl could throw!

To accomplish his desire of flying, he thought the best way would be to join the military. Inspired by Eugene Ely who had flown from the deck of a ship in 1910, Sheffield decided to apply to Naval Academy, in keeping with the Brason naval tradition following the wake of his grandfather and Uncle Rick Brason who was a Lieutenant at the time. Senator Austin agreed to be Curly's sponsor and got United States Senator Claude A. Swanson to endorse him. As for Geannie, she wanted to be a teacher and applied to Hollins University, a private all female institution right there in Roanoke.

Their senior year was a busy and an eventful time. They both worked hard on their studies to keep their grades up. Geannie's friend, Lorraine had dropped out of high school during their junior year to marry Stirling, who had gone to work with his brother, Winslow, at the Austin Sawmill, which belonged their Uncle Bill. Their first baby was came in December 1916 but tragically Lorraine died in childbirth at the tender age of eighteen. Stirling and the baby moved back into the mansion so Marie and Geannie could help him take care of his infant son.

Just before that, Stirling and another man named Richard Johnson were unloading a load of logs. There was an accident and Richard was killed leaving his wife a widow with an infant son. His widow, MaryAnn, was employed by the Austins as a wet nurse for Stirling's baby. A couple years later, they were married.

Right on the heels of Lorraine's untimely death, Geannie's beloved Grandpa Austin died three days later.

During the first week in February, Curly was scheduled to take the entrance examine for the Naval Academy and had to make arrangements for being absent from school for three days. He was fortunate that one of the ten locations in Virginia that offered the test for the southwestern portion of the state was right there in Roanoke. He was one of six hopeful candidates who showed up at the Roanoke Public Library.

It was a grueling, comprehensive series of tests that challenged his intellect. On the first day he had a three hour geometry test followed by three hours of algebra, with a two hour break in between. At the end of the day he went home mentally exhausted. When he got home he had to do some home work to stay caught up in his regular classes. After spending a little time with Geannie, he went to bed early to be rested for day two.

The second day was just as tough. During the morning, he had a three hour arithmetic test, followed by a two hour brake. During the afternoon there was a twenty minute spelling test and two hours of grammar. The final day of the tests consisted of geography in the morning and U.S. history in the afternoon.

Once his scores were tallied up, he had a 3.7 out of maximum of 4.0. The last thing he needed was a physical examination that he got from their family doctor. Once all of the results had been sent on to the Academy it was a waiting game. Geannie had her acceptance letter from Hollins in hand before Curly got his. About six weeks before graduating from high school in 1917, the United States finally joined the war effort in Europe.

After graduation, Curly and Geannie didn't have much time before their paths were to diverge for a while. Curly was expected to report at the Academy on June 11th. For Curly there was a lot of last minute items that needed to be taken care of. For one, what to do with his old car. It was now eleven years old and pretty rusted out, but it still ran. It wasn't worth much, that was for sure. His father told him not to worry about it. After he was gone, he would unload it somehow and would put whatever he got for it into Curly's bank account.

Each looked forward with anticipation to what lay ahead. It was known to everyone that Geannie and Curly were destined to marry each other. They knew it too. Curly didn't want to leave without a proposal of marriage to his life long love. Everyone else was expecting it too. That made it challenging for Curly to come up with a proposal that would stand out. He was running out of time and had to come up with something quick.

He began with the obvious first step. He made an appointment with the Senator at his office at the bank. Looking like a dapper gentleman for a lad of eighteen, wearing a three button pinstripe suit, white shirt with a rounded starched collar, and red silk necktie, he waited outside of the office holding his hat on his lap.

Important business kept Senator Austin way beyond the appointed time. Curly waited patiently for his turn. He was not nervous for he had an excellent relationship with Gennine's family. He had always felt right at home around them.

Finally the door opened and several distinguished gentlemen emerged from the office. Many of the them Curly recognized as respected businessmen from the community. Senator Austin approached Curly and with a politician's handshake apologized, "Sorry for keeping you waiting, son. Let me make it up to you and take you to lunch."

"That would be swell, sir."

Together they walked out of the bank and around the corner to the Hotel Roanoke and were

promptly seated near a window with a clear view of Roanoke's downtown business district.

After placing their orders, the Senator asked, "Are you all set to go to Annapolis next week?"

"Yes, sir. I am. I'm really jazzed. I know it will be tough, but I am up to it. I'll make you proud of me, sir."

"I already am, Curly. You're like one of my own sons, you know."

That was the segue Curly used to get to the point of his business. "That is why I wanted to meet with you. There is something that I need to ask you."

"Sure Curly. I'd do just about anything in my power for you."

"Well then." Without hesitation, Curly was ready to lay it all out on the table when he was interrupted by the waiter who brought their order. With their meal set before them, he continued. "I have come to ask for your daughter's hand in matrimony."

Senator Austin paused before taking his first bite. "I know. I have known that for years, even before you did. Let me ask you one question. Will you love and cherish her with all of your heart? This is my baby girl you are asking for."

"Absolutely." Curly promised. "I know that I am only eighteen years old now. We won't be able to get married until I graduate from the academy in four years. I don't want to go away without making commitment to her of my intentions. I know we're too young right now, but by then we'll both will be ready to get married."

After listening to Curly as he savored his first taste, he responded, "Of course you have my blessing, Curly. And that goes for Marie as well. We have often discussed this. I know that Geannie expecting something before you leave."

"Thank you sir. I won't let you down."

"Just see to it that you never let her down." the Senator stressed. "So, how are you going to ask her?"

"That is the hard part." Curly admitted. "Since she is expecting it, I need to come up with something to really wow her."

"As clever as you are, I'm sure you will come up with something."

"Actually, I would like to do something with both of our families together, but I haven't quite figured it out."

"Leave the get together to me, You know how I love a shindig. You figure out the rest."

During the course of lunch, their conversation turned to the Academy and what he had in store during the next four years. His plans were to eventually go to flight school, his potential career as a naval officer, and how Geannie and a family fit into it all.

After lunch, Curly took leave of his future father-in-law as he returned to the bank. When Curly got home, Marie was sitting on their porch swing waiting for him. She called him over as he walked up to his house next door. She waited as he came over and up onto the porch. Patting the swing next to her she invited him to sit down.

"I understand you had lunch with the Senator, Curly." she beamed. "He called me and told me all about it. I think it's wonderful."

"Thanks, Mrs. Austin."

"Have you bought a ring yet?" she asked.

"No, not yet. But I have the money I have been saving."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. A couple of weeks ago, Geannine, Sarah, and I were doing a little shopping downtown. As we passed Muldoun's Jewelers, we stopped to look in the display window. Geannie saw a beautiful diamond engagement set that caught her eye. She commented that she would like very much to have an engagement ring before you left for the Academy. She went on to say that she would love to have one like the one we were looking at." She went on to describe it. "It is white gold in a spiral with the diamond mounted between the offset tips of the spiral. The wedding band is interlocking. I have never seen anything like it."

"How much is?"

"It was marked forty nine ninety five."

"Fifty bucks!" Curly gasped. "I really had no idea jewelry cost so much, but you know what? Geannie is definitely worth it. Thanks for the tip"

"There is something else I need to talk to you about. I understand that you want to propose with both families present."

"That's right."

"We are going to throw a graduation/going off to college party for you and Geannie next Saturday. At least that is what we are going to say it is. It will be one of our famous Austin/Brason picnics right here in our front yards. Will that work for you?"

"That will be perfect!" Curly exclaimed. "Now if I can just figure out how to go about it."

"Oh, you'll think of something. You're a smart young man." Marie assured him.

Seeing Geannie coming down the street, she quickly changed the subject. "So tell me about what you expect to find at the Academy?"

Curly was telling her what he knew about it as Geannie came up the steps. "Curly what are you doing here?"

"I was just telling your mother about the Academy while I was waiting for you to come home from

work." He got up to greet her with a hug. "So, how were things at the telephone company today?"

Setting down on the swing with Curly and Marie she explained, "I was surprised to pick up a call to find that it was Daddy on the other end. He had me patch him through to the Governor's office in Richmond. Other than that it was just routine calls. Oh, someone complimented me on what a nice telephone voice I had.

"Say, why are yall gussied up in your suit?"

Curly stammered to come up with an excuse without lying to girl he was about to propose to. "Uhh. I had some business in town."

"Oh really? What sort of business?" Geannie pressed.

"Uhh. I was looking into the best way to invest the money I have saved up for while I am away at the Academy."

"Really? You should talk to Daddy about that."

"Actually I did. He recommended that I invest it in precious metals." Quickly changing the subject, Curly said, "While I'm all dressed up, why don't you go get dolled and we'll go out on the town?"

"That's a terrific idea, Curly." She said as she got up. "Give me about fifteen minutes."

"Swell. I'll just sit here and tell you mother more about the Academy."

After Geannie went into the house, Marie elbowed Curly in the ribs. "That was some pretty fast thinking. You didn't even have to fib."

Since they were sitting right under Geannie's upstairs bedroom window, the rest of their conversation was all about the Naval Academy. Soon Geannie returned wearing the formal gown that she wore to their senior prom. Her hair was piled up with ringlets on either side and with long slim earrings dangling from her earlobes and a matching necklace around her neck. The heels on her pump-boots made her nearly as tall as Curly

"You look fabulous." Curly gasped.

"Where are you going to take me?"

"Lets start with dinner and go from there." Curly responded with no idea of where he was going to take the elegant young woman hanging on tightly to his arm.

Over the next couple of days he thought long and hard about how to formally propose to Geannie. He went to Muldoun's Jewelers to take a gander at the ring Marie had told him about. He too was impressed with it and went to the bank to withdraw the money for his investment in precious metal.

Now that he had the ring, he was still at a loss for ideas as how to present it to her. Then he got a brilliant idea when someone stopped by the service station to have a large canister filled with butane. After

talking to the man and making the deal, Curly was sure his plan would literally have Geannie floating on air.

The day of the graduation/going off to college picnic arrived and it was a beautiful 9th of June at that. Both families gathered in the adjoining front yards. The tables were spread and everyone was there, except for Curly that is. Geannie was wondering where he was. All his father said was “He should be dropping by any minute now.”

No one really knew what he was up to and everyone was surprised to see a brilliant multi colored hot air balloon approaching from the southwest. As it drew nearer, it descended until it was hovering just above the trees. As everyone looked up in wonder, a rope was lowered from the basket. Attached to the end of the rope was an envelope.

“It is addressed 'Airmail Special Delivery for Miss Gean Marie Austin'.” Geannie’s brother, Charlie exclaimed as he removed it from the rope and handed to her.

She opened it and read:

*My dearest Geannie, Will you marry me?
If this is your hope, Give a tug on the rope.*

As she read it out loud, everyone cheered as she she burst into laughter; not expecting anything like this. She went over to the rope and gave it a tug. Curly appeared as he leaned over the basket and waved as he began hauling in the rope. Once he had the end in hand he tied something else to it and lowered it again.

With trembling hands, Geannie untied a small box. Opening it, she saw the ring. Bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet, she slipped the ring on her finger and looked up and shouted, “Yes! Yes, I’ll marry you.”

Curly called down, “Meet me in the church parking lot.”

As the balloon slowly drifted toward the parking lot around the corner behind the Brason home, Curly pulled in the rope. Geannie followed with everyone coming along behind her.

The balloon descended until the basket rested on the ground. Another person was with Curly and he opened the gate on the side of the basket. Curly extended his hand to help her into the basket. Once she was in and the gate shut, he took her in his arms and gave her a very long kiss. Again, everyone cheered. In fact they were still cheering as the balloon ascended back into the sky and drifted off to the northeast.

For the next forty five minutes they drifted low over the city and the surrounding countryside. Geannie clung to Curly for dear life. He wasn't sure if it was out of fear from dangling in thin air from a hot

air balloon or from the excitement of his proposal. She said that it was a little of the first and a lot of the second.

At the end of the ride, the balloon touched down in a pasture some distance from town. As they got out of the basket, Curly thanked the man for the ride and handed him a ten dollar bill. The man in turn congratulated them on their engagement. Curly's car was waiting there to take them back home.

As they rejoined the celebration there was plenty of fried chicken, potato salad, homemade root beer, and everything else left. Senator Austin, the great orator, made a speech in which he wished them well as they went their separate ways to school and on their engagement.

Of course, everyone wanted to know when the big day was going to be. All they could say was, "Sometime after we're finished with school." Not everyone was aware that Curly couldn't be married while attending the Naval Academy.

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The entrance exam that Curly took to get accepted in the US Naval Academy is described in *Life at the U.S. Naval Academy: the making of the American naval officer*, by Ralph Earle published in 1916.