

Mud

by Craig Lancaster

I wouldn't say things with Marla were written in the stars. For one thing, that's a really dumb phrase. But beyond that, it's completely inaccurate. Our friendship was written on a first-grade blackboard in 1976, where Mrs. Appelbaum etched our weekly vocabulary words. Marla, who had the desk next to mine, leaned across the aisle and said her first words to me in the five weeks we'd been in school.

"Mud spelled backward is dumb."

I laughed out loud, and Mrs. Appelbaum and her pointy-framed glasses turned around and asked me what was so funny. I guess Marla must have admired my courage in quietly accepting the punishment of writing a hundred times "I will not laugh in the middle of my lesson" because, after that, we were pretty much inseparable.

(Besides, I got Marla back a few years later in Mr. Byrd's class, when we were watching a filmstrip and I leaned over to her and said "Focus spelled backward is suck-off." Marla couldn't stop laughing. She used her feet to propel her desk across the room and buried her face in the wall, and Byrdie about lost it.)

People ask me sometimes what it's like to meet your wife when you're six years old, and I have to admit now that I don't really understand the question. Marla and I, we were just friends for most of that time. She made me laugh. I let her crib off my math homework. Marla couldn't do numbers; it's why the checkbook belonged to me.

What I'm saying is, it's not something we planned. It's something that happened.

To a lot of the people we went to school with, Senior Prom '88 has become this big thing, the Night During Which Gordie Knocked Up Marla, and while it most assuredly was that, the truth of the matter is that we hadn't even intended to go together. That prick Jeff Caslon broke her heart because he decided to go with Carla Edwards

instead, and I hadn't made plans any more ambitious than getting stoned out of my head with Parker White, so I found a tux at the last minute — blue with a ruffled shirt, because I was just that sexy — and I took my friend. You can chalk up what happened next to any number of things, but being as I was there, I put more credence in the bottle of Jack Daniels than I do in the fucking Richard Marx songs that our class of corporate-rock sheep insisted on playing that night.

The point is, we did what we did, and the result was what the result was, and I married her. That was twenty-three years ago, a number that astounds me. I'd like to say I thought I would do more with the years, but truth be told, I've hung in as best I could. Marla eventually became a radiology tech and made some pretty good bread. You know those houses that dot the north end of town, that sprang up there like a rash? I swung the hammer on most of those, and I also spent more than a few winters wondering if I'd ever find another job. On the balance, though, we did fine. Better than many. Not as well as some.

When Keri, our daughter, brought that boy home from college and told us he was the one, it didn't hit me the way I thought it would. She's beautiful, Keri is, and she looks just like her mother. I remember sitting there thinking, "You know, she's found someone she can connect with, and that's all I care about." Keri will be going off to grad school, and I'm just so proud. I can't quite believe I have a twenty-two-year-old daughter—I'm only forty-one, for Christ's sake—but it is what it is, to use another totally useless phrase.

I guess Marla saw things a little differently, though. Maybe I should have picked up on it, the distance that seemed to move into the house after Keri brought her young man by. Marla seemed antsy about things, impatient, unhappy. I figured it was just a phase—hell, I've done the same thing—but I came home a few weeks ago and found the note, and if this is a phase, it's sure as hell going to be unpleasant.

The specifics of what Marla had to say ought to stay between her and me, I suppose. It'll be easier that way if she does come back. But

in general, she said we got together too young and have become different people. I don't feel that way, but I guess I should take her at her word. She said she needed time and space to figure some things out, and I guess whether to stay with me is one of them.

She left Stumpy, our collie mix, and I've been appreciative of that. Dog spelled backward is God. Sometimes I talk to him—God, I mean—but so far, nothing's changed. Maybe he sees things Marla's way. I've always said she's a lot smarter than me.

