

Closer to Heaven

by Rich Stim

Winner of the
John Steinbeck
Award
for Fiction

Closer to Heaven

HOT LINE: Many rooms in the White House, including the oval room is overrun by four legged rats, plus the two legged ones the taxpayers are saddled with in taxes to furnish them hookers, mistresses, prostitutes, and sluts for sexual enjoyment. Whenever a meeting is to be held everyone is given a slingshot with a handful of small steel balls so they can have target practice on the four legged ones. Interested to know the truth, as many are. W.L., Butterworth.

HOT LINE: I need you to verify this. I have heard that the country and western singer Dolly Parton had a silicone job. And that her husband tried to sue the doctor. Is this true? L.K., Ellettsville.

In the 1970s I worked as the HOT LINE editor at the Butterworth Daily Telephone (circulation 22,000). HOT LINE provided answers to readers' questions. Typical queries might be: What kind of guns were used in the Gary Gilmore execution? Where is the statue of Christ in the Ozarks? How can I get cat pee off my carpet? Think of HOT LINE like a pre-Internet version of Google ... that is if Google took weeks to answer a question, or sometimes didn't bother answering at all.

In my early weeks as HOT LINE editor, I encouraged readers and sympathized with their problems, but that proved to be too time-consuming. The southern Indiana callers

liked to chat and often repeated themselves. So, to save time, I dropped the hand-holding approach and perfected a dispassionate tone, absent any hint of sympathy or encouragement. By April, 1977, when Joan Lee Henderson called, my voice was flat as a pancake.

"HOT LINE," I said.

"*This is HOT LINE?*" she asked. "You don't sound too excited about it. You seem like you couldn't care less."

"What's your question?"

"This is Joan Lee Henderson. I live here in town and my question is this. Can a tenant stop paying rent just because the landlord died? We have a tenant who stopped paying rent four months ago when my husband died. This tenant says his rental contract is with my husband not me, and that under the law, he's ..." She took a moment to find the word. "He's ... exonerated."

"Have you tried evicting him?" I asked.

"He told me not to bring the law on the property and that if I started any trouble, he would finish it." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "I think he's on drugs."

Joan's plight — a widow frightened by her tenant — had more urgency than the typical HOT LINE, so I spoke to a sympathetic deputy sheriff who paid a visit to the tenant. The next day, the deputy called to say that the tenant was gone. Also, the

deputy had a HOT LINE question of his own. Could a man fit inside the Statue of Liberty's nose? I worked it into that day's HOT LINE column.

HOT LINE

Rats in White House

QUESTION - I have heard that the White House has a rodent problem and that some animals have even been spotted in the Oval Office. Could HOT LINE please check?

W.L., Butterworth.

ANSWER - Yes, according to Associated Press reports, rodents were spotted in the Oval Office during the meeting between President Carter and Crown Prince Fahid. The outbreak is due to the destruction of a subway near Pennsylvania Avenue. Precautions have been taken to keep the animals away.

Dolly Operation?

QUESTION - Can HOT LINE find out if the singer Dolly Parton has recently had any medical operations? If so, were the operations successful? L.K., Ellettsville.

ANSWER - According to the public relations department at Dolly's record company, the "Jolene" singer has not had any recent operations. Dolly's new album, "Here You Come Again," will be out soon, and she'll be performing in Indianapolis on July 14.

Liberty's Nose

QUESTION - Is the nose on the Statue of Liberty big enough for a man to fit inside?

R.D., Butterworth.

ANSWER - According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, the nose on the Statue of Liberty is not hollow so a man cannot fit inside. The nose is four feet in height, and two and a half feet at its widest point.

No Free Rent

QUESTION - My tenant hasn't paid rent ever since my husband died four months ago. He says that under the contract he's only obligated to pay my husband. What can I do? J.H. Butterworth.

ANSWER - Attorney Ron Feldon said that the tenant is incorrect. The agreement makes you a "successor" to your husband and the rent should be paid to you. This may be a moot point, because the Sheriff's Department told HOT LINE that the property is now vacant. For more information on evicting tenants, the county clerk has a guide, "This Place Ain't Free: Indiana Eviction Procedure."

Joan Lee Henderson would have faded into the sea of HOT LINE callers but for an unexpected development. She called to thank me for getting rid of her tenant and she confided that she was wary of renting again unless she could rent to someone reliable ... like me.

"Why do you think I'm reliable?" I said.

“You write HOT LINE six days a week,” she said. “That’s reliable. You’re the one who writes it, right?”

“Right.”

“And from what I can tell, you’re smart, and fair.”

Like an actor might be confused with his part, Joan was confusing me with my job. She offered to rent me her property— a two-bedroom/one-bath house — for \$125 a month. I turned her down, politely. It wasn’t much of a savings from my then-current rent.

That’s when Joan offered to *sell* me her house for \$12,500. Again, I was wary and thought something was odd about her misplaced gratitude. And again, I turned down the offer.

But for reasons known only to herself, Joan persisted. She had a real estate agent call me and offer to sweeten the deal: I could buy the house for \$12,000 on a ten-year loan-to-own contract, no downpayment, no bank or mortgage company, and an interest rate of 4.5% (the fixed rate mortgage at the time was twice as much). “Just take a look at the place,” said the agent.

I toured the house with the agent, and except for a hole punched in the wall, the place was in good shape. In fact, it was in much better shape than my current digs, it was in a nicer neighborhood, and my monthly payments would be less than my rent.

“You’ll need to get that gutter fixed,” said the agent. About six feet of gutter hung

down from the roof, almost touching the patio. "That's where it happened."

"Where what happened?"

"The accident. He was fixing the roof when the ladder went over."

"Joan's husband?"

"Yeah, Buck," said the agent, pointing to a faded brown stain on the patio. "Poor guy went over head first."

We walked to the sidewalk in front of the house.

"It's a damn good deal ... you know that, right?" said the agent.

"Why does she want *me*?" I asked.

"She's sentimental about the house. She and Buck lived here for years, and it's where he died."

"But why *me*?"

"She trusts you and she thinks you're honest."

When the real estate agent dropped off the contract, it had two additional conditions: (1) Buyer will personally deliver the monthly payments to Seller; and (2) Buyer agrees to answer all of Seller's HOT LINE questions.

I was okay with the first condition — I assumed Joan was lonely and wanted visitors — but the second condition, the unlimited HOT LINES, wasn't going to work for me. There had to be a cap on the questions, so we settled on four HOT LINES a month.

"This is a material condition of the contract," said the agent. "If you don't answer

her HOT LINES, you lose the house.”

“I don’t think that’s legal,” I said.

The agent shrugged. “I’m not a lawyer but it seems fair to me.”

I signed the contract.

Joan lived with her daughter and son-in-law on the west side of town. When I showed up with my first house payment, Joan’s daughter, a middle-aged woman with a funnel of gray and brown hair, took me aside in the kitchen. Glass and porcelain jars, all labeled by hand, were packed on shelves, and behind them was patterned wallpaper a fading combo of pink, brown, and orange.

“Just so you know, HOT LINE, mom’s been having a hard time since dad’s gone,” the daughter told me. “Her mind’s not right. She shouldn’t have sold the rental to you. It was supposed to be income property. She got it in her head that *you* should be living there,” said the daughter. “You jewed her down on the sale price, didn’t you? Got her down to twelve hundred?” She rummaged through her bag for keys. “You’re not Jewish, are you?”

“I am,” I told her, “and I’m pretty sure “Jew” is not a verb.”

“She didn’t mean anything,” said her husband, a slaughterhouse worker on disability, who had joined us in the kitchen. He had a HOT LINE question (“Why doesn’t my SSI cover dung lung?”) and he offered me some advice, man-to-man, on my

new arrangement.

“Don’t make us chase you for the money,” he said.

“In fact,” said the daughter, pretending she just had thought up the idea, “You could just make the checks out to me.”

I hadn’t even made my first payment to Joan and already her family was plotting to take it.

“I’m required to pay the person named in the contract,” I told them, “I can’t change that.” My explanation contradicted HOT LINE’s previous advice, but they didn’t object.

Joan was waiting for me in the family room. The windows were closed and the room smelled of Pinesol. The high wattage bulbs in the chandelier cast shadows on the carpeting. Framed still-lives — generic sea-faring images — hung on the plywood paneling, along with several needlepoints. One read, “Hearts are broken by words left unspoken.”

Joan, a petite woman in her mid-seventies, wore a pinkish floral house coat, and a wig that looked like lemon cotton candy. She sat at a card table, a large black percolator bubbling across from her, the “Price is Right” on a portable TV.

“Mom,” said the daughter. “This is HOT LINE. He’s making a house call.”

Joan tugged at her wig, straightening it.

“He’s got your check,” said the daughter, closing the door.

Joan, staying seated, put out an outstretched hand. “God bless HOT LINE, I am so

grateful." I clasped her bird-like fingers in a fingertip handshake. I felt large knobby bumps on the bones of her right hand and Joan saw me looking at them and pulled her hand back. "At school, the nuns hit me with a rod."

She moved her cup under the percolator spout and pulled the switch. Thick, inky coffee poured out. "Seven cups," she said. "Now *that's* my limit."

Then, Joan got down to business. She reached for her glasses and read from a piece of paper. "First of all, HOT LINE, what's the best thing to do for edema?" She swiveled in her chair and exposed a swollen ankle. "I have heard that four teaspoons of apple cider vinegar daily can get rid of it. Is this true?"

"Next," she said, "HOT LINE, I have talked to several women who claim that if a woman cans food during her menstrual cycle, the food will spoil. They can all cite specific instances of this actually happening. Could this be due to a chemical reaction occurring between the woman's body and the food during this time? If so, just what chemical reaction takes place?"

She watched me writing in my notepad, then continued. "HOT LINE, I would like to know whether the actress Ann B. Davis who plays Alice on Brady Bunch is related to Joan Davis who was in My Favorite Blond."

She cleared her throat for her final question. "HOT LINE, how is it that the Midway House VD Clinic can open on East 2nd Street? Do we really want our children to pass such a place on their way to school? If that's the way its gonna be, I'll stay home on the

farm.”

I wrote down her questions and then the daughter and son-in-law joined us for apple fritters. I later saw that Joan had endorsed my check to her daughter.

During the next few months my routine with Joan rarely varied. I was greeted by the distrustful daughter, hassled by the disabled son-in-law (“HOT LINE, why does it take so long to get my SSI checks?”), and offered coffee and a confection.

Once, Joan told me about her late husband. “Now that Buck is gone, I’ve got nobody to look after me.” She pointed at a photo on the table.

“He was a milk man?” I said, looking at the man standing by the dairy truck.

“We were married for forty-seven years,” Joan said. “He wasn’t very talkative. I’d be lucky to get a couple of words at dinner.”

“The strong, silent type?” I asked.

“He hated questions and he hated raw vegetables,” said Joan.

Then, she reached for her sheet of paper and delivered a month’s worth of HOT LINE questions (“HOT LINE, whatever happened to the swine flu shots? Did they stop giving them?” “HOT LINE, how can I contact Gil Gerard, star of The Doctors?” “HOT LINE, Is it true that Pat Robertson of the 700 Club uses the Living Bible?” and “HOT LINE, when I pay for dinner at Peking Dragon on Bypass 46, I expect that the cashier can speak English. Is there a law about this?”).

Eight months after she sold me the property, and on the anniversary of Buck’s death,

Joan suffered a stroke. Actually, she suffered a transient ischemic attack (TIA) which, according to HOT LINE, causes stroke-like symptoms that disappear after a day.

When I showed up to make the monthly payment, I learned that Joan had been committed to Rosedale Manor, a nursing home on Second Street, next to the boarded up Planned Parenthood Building. Joan's commitment was justified, according to her daughter by her TIA, edema, and her "mild dementia."

Rosedale was a park-and-ride facility, typical of nursing homes back in the 1970s. I walked the first-floor hallway looking for Joan. When I turned the corner, I came upon two women: a patient in a wheelchair, crying and upset, the other woman, in a blue uniform holding a mop. The woman with the mop, whose name tag read "Velma Goins - Supervisor," stared at the puddle under the wheelchair and asked me, "Did you ever see pee so green? Or so thick?"

I knew from HOT LINE that green urine could be a sign of new medication or a urinary tract infection but I said nothing as Velma Goins led me to Joan's room.

Joan, dressed in her floral housecoat, was propped on her bed, legs elevated. She clasped my hand and held it up with both her hands like a referee announcing the winner of a fight. "HOT LINE is *here!*"

"Visiting hours end in ten minutes," said Velma Goins.

"I told them HOT LINE was coming," Joan said, once we were alone, "and none of them believed me. Now, they'll be singing a different tune. God bless you HOT LINE."

She rubbed the silver cross on her necklace. "Do you believe in God?"

"Not really."

"Do you believe Jesus has sent you as my angel?"

"I'm not a Christian," I told her.

"I know. You're a Jew ... like Kirk Douglas." She leaned her head closer and said in a stage whisper. "None of that matters as long as the Lord's purpose prevails."

I was uncomfortable and changed the subject. How did Joan feel about Rosedale? She liked the privacy — back at the house, she felt as if her daughter was spying on her. Plus, she liked the deserts (especially the rhubarb pie on Fridays), and the TV reception was much better at the nursing home (and there was a 21-inch color TV).

But most of all, she loved the dogwood tree, with its dark spindly branches, outside her window. "I once had a dogwood but Buck cut it down," she told me.

She checked the wall clock, realized it was time to move on to the main event, and pulled a piece of paper from under her pillow.

"HOT LINE," she read, "If a mother has a child out of wedlock, can the child's last name be changed if the mother married the father?"

She continued. "HOT LINE, How can I write to Anita Bryant about the work she is doing concerning homosexuality."

"HOT LINE, I have heard that Fanne Fox went back to Argentina to have Congressman Wilbur Mills's baby out of wedlock. If the baby was born in Argentina,

can it still be a U.S. Citizen?"

"HOT LINE, What right does the local schools have to test students for V.D? I am a local taxpayer and I don't want my dollars used like this."

I bought Joan a subscription to the newspaper after she moved to Rosedale. She saved the HOT LINE columns to discuss during my visits, sometimes even calling me at the newspaper to ask about a question or compliment me on a response.

Joan's monthly HOT LINES also made her the defacto champion of rights at Rosedale ("Why are there no Tuesday visiting hours at Rosedale Manor?" "Why can't Rosedale Manor residents have potted plants?").

These HOT LINES didn't win any fans with the Rosedale owners who complained to the newspaper's advertising department. I was told I could answer questions about the nursing home as long as I didn't use the name, "Rosedale."

During Joan's second year at the nursing home, things took a turn for the worse. Her edema returned along with a serious attack of gout.

When I visited her, she was rattled and depressed. "I just keep getting older," she told me as she looked at her swollen red-splotched feet. At the same time, Joan's world of HOT LINE questions kept shrinking to fit her personal experience. She asked questions about what she saw out her window ("HOT LINE, how do you identify a female red-winged blackbird?") or what she saw on TV ("HOT LINE, is Dennis Weaver

really part-Cherokee?"), or what she saw on her plate ("HOT LINE, which has more calories, mashed potatoes or white bread?").

One month, her four questions were about the dogwood tree out her window.

Dagwood?

QUESTION: How did the dogwood tree get its name?

ANSWER: The branches of the dogwood, because they were hard and dense, were used for the making of daggers (or *dags*), skewers, and arrows, hence the old English pronunciation, *dagwood*.

Dogwood RX

QUESTION: I have heard that chewing the bark of the dogwood trees gets rid of headaches and diarrhea? Is this true?

ANSWER: The dogwood is known as a source of tannin, a quinine substitute. The bark has been used to treat malaria. However, other medical uses have not been verified, according to Dr. Vince Williams at I.U. Medical School in Indianapolis.

Dogwood: tree or shrub?

QUESTION: Is a Dogwood a tree or a shrub or a flower?

ANSWER: The dogwood is a tree in the *Cornaceae* family. It is the state tree of Missouri, the state flower of North Carolina and both the state tree and state flower of Virginia. P.S. The dramatic blooming petals of the dogwood are not technically flowers; they are *bracts*, modified leaves.

Legend of the Dogwood

QUESTION: What is the legend of the dogwood and Christ's crucifixion? Is it in the Bible?"

ANSWER: Hewitt Huntington, professor of religious studies at Carmichael community college, told HOT LINE that the legend of the dogwood is not part of scripture. According to the myth, the dogwood tree was ashamed and sad about its part in the crucifixion — the cross was made from dogwood. Seeing the unhappy tree, God promised that the dogwood would never again be used to crucify anyone. He changed the once-mighty dogwood into the small, spindly and crooked tree it is now, and He made the dogwood's flowering blooms look like small crosses.

In April, 1978, I arrived at Joan's room to find that a white-haired gentleman had displaced her.

"Where's Joan?" I asked him.

He pointed upwards, as if she'd gone to the hereafter.

"Did she die?" I asked.

"No, they moved her upstairs," he said, spittle forming on the edge of his lips.

"Why?" I asked.

"It's closer to heaven," he said. At the nurse's station, I learned that the second floor was populated with terminally ill patients.

Velma Goins asked when I would be answering her HOT LINE question. She wanted an address to write to the Captain from the Captain and Tennille but she wanted an address where Tennille wouldn't see the mail. I had given Velma the address of the singing duo's press agent and record label but that wasn't good enough. "I'm working on it." I told her.

The only good news about Joan's second-floor unit was that it was directly above her previous room so the top branches of the dogwood tree were visible out her window.

Joan's speech was slurred, the result of a sedative she'd been given earlier. Velma Goins had told me that Joan became hysterical when she looked out the window and was face-to-face with a man on a ladder, a worker repairing the siding. The shock must have been severe because restraints were used.

Joan told me that shortly after our last meeting, she'd been diagnosed with superficial thrombophlebitis, which increased concern over blood clots. More tests were needed. "If Nixon can live with phlebitis," Joan said, "then so can I." (What Joan didn't tell me — and I learned later from her daughter — was that she'd also been diagnosed with thyroid cancer.)

Joan's HOT LINE questions that day had to do with (1) a bra she bought from Becky's that was "all tore up," (2) an address to write to Coach Bobby Knight, (3)

where to get the rules for air hockey, and (4) why “a black family with no minor children is allowed to stay in a five-bedroom apartment in public housing.”

The questions were out of character and Joan confessed that they were not hers. “My daughter wrote those. I wasn’t up to it.” I wondered whether I was contractually bound to respond to Joan’s daughter’s questions.

The sedative finally caught up with Joan and she nodded out. Or I thought she nodded out until her boney hand pulled me towards her and she whispered in my ear, “He’s coming.”

“Christ?” I asked.

“*Buck,*” she said.

I waited a few days to call Joan’s daughter. She thanked me for sorting out her problem with the bra at Becky’s and for making the monthly payments on time. Then she talked about Joan’s condition.

“Mom’s in a bad way ... she imagines things.”

“Like hallucinations?” I asked.

“She makes up stories in her mind.” I heard her light a cigarette and take a drag. “Like God sent HOT LINE to beat the druggie devil tenant. And she believed you would take her back to her old house, to live out her final days. We told her, no, that would never happen, but she wouldn’t listen and sold you the house. She’s been that

way ever since she found Buck on the patio. She imagines things, prays for things, wishes for things. You'd think that she'd know better. Buck used to tell her, 'Wish in one hand and shit in the other and see which gets filled up first.' Excuse my French."

The next time I visited Joan — May 1, 1978 — the dogwood had bloomed and she seemed to have forgotten the previous month's odd encounter. We sat side by side, looking down on the blossoms from her second floor window. "See those four petals shaped like a cross, and in the middle there's the crown of thorns," she said. "And at the edge of each petal is a mark from the nails, and that red is Jesus' blood." She smiled, reflecting on the floral beauty.

"If only we could open the window," she said.

I tried opening it, but a locking device had been installed on the latch and I couldn't budge it.

I wheeled Joan back to her bed and helped her get in.

"God bless you HOT LINE." She sipped from a paper cup. "Has the Lord been talking to you?" she asked.

Before Joan could spread the gospel, Velma Goins appeared in the doorway, a candy striper behind her.

"Are we ready for our bath?" Velma asked Joan .

"We? Are you taking one, too?" asked Joan .

"Now Jo Ann . . ." said Velma, pronouncing Joan 's first name as if it were two syllables.

"It's *Joan*," I corrected her .

"Okie dokie," said Velma, pushing the candy striper into the room. "Lisa's gonna clean you up. What do you say?"

"Not now, HOT LINE's here," said Joan.

The candy striper hesitated, unsure.

"Go away," snapped Joan. The striper backed into the hallway.

"If we don't do it now," said Velma, speaking in a sing-song, "you'll be smelling till tomorrow."

"Please, in the name of heaven, go away," said Joan.

Velma was no stranger to inmate resistance. "This is not negotiable, Jo Ann."

"*Her name's Joan*," I said, unable to take it anymore. "She's been here a year, can you please get it right?"

Velma crossed her arms and planted herself in the doorway. "I don't appreciate being spoken to like that."

"Close the door on her," Joan called from her bed.

I shut the door in Velma's face. When Velma pushed against it, I pushed back, holding the knob.

"*We'll see about this*," I heard her say before walking off, presumably for

reinforcements. During this standoff Joan began to hurriedly read her HOT LINEs to me, afraid perhaps that she might be cut off.

“HOT LINE, I cannot eat sugar for health reasons. Last week, they took away my saccharin. I know saccharin may cause some problems, but, if this country allows cigarettes and alcohol to be on the market with all of the medical problems they can cause why can't they do the same for saccharin?”

I heard people talking in the hallway. Velma Goins was back.

Joan sped it up, “HOT LINE, whatever happened to the “low cholesterol” egg? A few years ago, there was a lot of talk and attention on the subject.”

She glanced up at Velma who entered the room with a security guard. He told me, “Sir, you'll have to leave now.”

I stood up but Joan signaled me back and whispered, barely audible, “HOT LINE, What's going on with the TV Guide? All week it says *Price is Right* is on at three and instead *Tattletales* comes on. Who prints these things ... that's my favorite show.”

“*Tattletales*?” I asked.

“No! *Price is Right, of course*” she whispered.

“*SIR!*” barked the security guard, taking my arm and pulling me into the hallway.

Back at the newspaper, I answered Joan's three questions. I left Rosedale before she could read me her fourth HOT LINE, so I made up my own question to fill the column.

OPEN WINDOWS

QUESTION - Recently, I visited someone at a local retirement home and I learned the windows do not open. I thought residential retirement homes had to provide open windows or air conditioning. M.R., Butterworth

ANSWER - You are correct. Unless a retirement home has central air cooling, state fire law requires that windows in the home must open at least 18 inches.

A few days later, Joan called me at HOT LINE to report that the windows were now open at Rosedale. "Another victory for the Lord and HOT LINE," she proclaimed in what was to be our final conversation. "Thanks for showing me the way."

That night, Joan took her own life. She squeezed herself through the eighteen-inch opening in her window, and fell into the arms of the dogwood tree, one of whose dagger-like branches impaled her. By the time she was discovered, her blood had dried leaving reddish-brown streaks on the dogwood flowers and the sidewalk.

Velma Goins had found an envelope addressed to HOT LINE under Joan's pillow and when I went to Rosedale to pick it up, she pointed me out to a nurse, saying, "He's the one who made us open the windows." Then to me, she said, "I hope you're happy."

Joan's envelope contained four HOT LINE questions.

HOT LINE: How do you remove bloodstains from cement?

HOT LINE: Where should a woman go to report her husband beating on her. (Don't

say to call the local police cause they don't do anything)

HOT LINE: If a person leaves a confession to murder after they die, will that affect that person's last will and testament? Can the state take their property?

HOT LINE: If a person doesn't believe in God, does that mean God doesn't believe in that person?

I answered her questions in that day's column. A few months later I sold the house back to Joan's daughter for what I had paid. A few decades later, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration declared saccharin safe for human consumption.