

Headlines

by Karen Eileen Sikola

He brought me flowers once, three wilted carnations I put in water, though the sight of them made me uneasy. He brought me pictures once, too, of three sisters—ten, twelve, fourteen—straddling dirt bikes.

He touched my shoulder once, as I edited pictures he'd taken of those girls after their first race. He brought the photos to me after seeing my name in the paper, above a story I'd written about a youth synchronized swimming team, below a photo I'd taken of young girls on their backs, lifting their legs in printed swimsuits.

"She's my favorite," he said once, as I zoomed in on the face of the eldest. "A fighter. A tough cookie." He called himself "Mr. Bill," and he shook my hand, thanked me before crawling back inside his silver Toyota, rolling up windows with a dark tint I didn't question because the Arizona sun was relentless.

He became a regular in our office, and our receptionist Twyla began to raise her voice when she welcomed him with a "Hi, Bill," so as to warn me, though she never said so. For a while, I would greet him, ask how the girls were doing, and I soon found out they were not his girls, but girls he "took off the hands" of a busy mother, pregnant again with her sixth, as is common in that Mormon spread of Mesa desert.

I warned him once, told him he should be careful, that he shouldn't drive those girls alone, that my mother was a social worker, that I knew these things, that people might be suspicious of a man who invests so much of himself in the lives of three young girls, that he should protect himself from false allegations.

He then asked for Jill, my coworker, complained I'd stopped covering his beat, that he didn't understand why I had begun merely mentioning race times in the Sports Briefs instead of running photographs with his name under them, why I never used the colored pages of dialogue he'd print out and deliver in manila

envelopes, conversations he had with the “Speed Sisters” via a chat room for girls who like racing.

I received an e-mail from Jill once, three years after leaving the paper and Arizona along with it. She included a link. “Former bus driver arrested on molestation charges,” it read. I did not know Mr. Bill had driven a school bus, only knew he drove that silver Toyota with those three girls behind the tinted windows, their dirt bikes parked inside a trailer behind them, useless for speeding away.

Mr. Bill brought Jill a present, too, once, and she said she couldn't accept it, and I remembered the flowers I put in a vase on my desk, the petals as they browned and fell to my keyboard, the smell of the water as I poured it down the drain, the ring that remained on the sides of the glass.

