THE TENDER MERCANTILE COMPANY

Written For the Brautigan Library
By Len Kirschner

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August 20, 2021

Abstract: A local mercantile company becomes the scene for strange happenings etc.

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Signed: Len Kirschner
I had already snapped these photos last Tuesday. He arrived after perhaps picking up his young daughter from school. He was possibly a renter, but probably the owner. "Excuse me, do you know the history of this house?" I asked.

"I do know it was built in 1910," he said. I proceeded to tell him about the former owner, Edna Webster and of course Richard Brautigan. I could tell he will never look at the house the same way again. He took notes on his cellphone. I drove away thinking I had just participated in his "Start Making a Brautigan Reader Today" brain storm.

Last night he must have sensed he was sleeping in a house of history for the first time.
THE TENDER MERCANTILE COMPANY

1. Entering the work force

It was a night like this when I made one of the biggest mistakes of my life. After a heated discussion with my parents concerning ignorance being one of our most precious freedoms, I broke the news that I didn’t want to leave home at eighteen years of age. I suppose telling them that I didn’t realize that doing nothing was as much fun as I had learned that it was didn’t go over too well.

Most of us in Notmuch Missouri after high school gravitated toward the lure of the Mississippi River. For me staying in Wright County seemed like the best way I knew of to do nothing with the idea that the less I did the longer I could do it. Parents, being how they are, disagreed on this being the best use of my time and the best use of their money continuing to support me.

Notmuch had very little to offer for employment, so it is not remarkable that I wound up at our local Feed Store. Even if I wound up in Perryville, Cape Girardeau, even down in Caruthesville or up to the St. Louis area I would need travel expenses. Having not worked a day since graduation I knew all that lay before me.

I made it to the Feed Store before it closed. Even though it was only three miles from our house I experienced a great degree of difficulty getting there. The Tender Mercantile Company was primarily a family operation but a few years back they started hiring outside help. Their last helper thought he could escape Wright County by becoming a screenwriter. Word has it he was unsuccessful and found his niche driving trucks in Arkansas.
Lee, being fourth generation only knew from stories of how the main building was the result of a barn raising party but with so few people left in Notmuch he knew that community support was something he shouldn’t expect ever again.

Most people traveled as far as Highway 44 to get cheaper supplies. Lee had made a poster and placed it in his office “If you can’t beat their price, then you better be nice.” It was his general philosophy.

I saw Lee loading some hay or straw. I didn’t know how to differentiate the two. I asked about employment. At first, he didn’t answer. This was common in Notmuch with conversation being held at a minimum in most cases. I had to ask twice. Things were slow at the Feed Store. After many facial expressions of deep thought, he handed me the bale and said to load it on one of those stacks.

It didn’t feel much different in the work force than it did to be out of the work force, that is until lunch. Making sandwiches from the stocked refrigerator were soon to be a memory instead of a way of life. Notmuch had a Chick-Fil-A so I learned that that would be my lunch all to be accomplished in 30 minutes. Lee wanted me to take all the food wrapping home. He called it my garbage and not his.

2. **Left-Handed Women**

Four years later I was still there. I had learned a lot, mostly about myself and my lack of motivation but quite a bit about Lee Tender as well. He had been very active in high school primarily in seven-man football and was very deeply infatuated with a girl,
Josephine King, back then. She wore his letter sweater but not his ring.

After graduation she went off to Mizzou. She even took summer classes and graduated early. She was very critical of him during their dating saying too many of his sentences ended in please.

The last he had heard she was married, had children, and was living at the ocean, which one he didn’t know. He didn’t want to know either. He already had too much information which haunted him and must have contributed to his belief that he needed to find another left-handed woman. He had watched her in school, her perfect posture, sitting at the desk writing left-handed. Any woman doing anything left-handed sparked his interest. Could she be the one?

During the four-year stretch he had a number of women, two of whom he married and divorced within a few months of each other, but his exploratory obsession never stopped. Even with the notoriety of having been known in his high school days by the girls as “Tender Lee.” It must have been an inside joke among the cheerleaders because I couldn’t imagine this guy doing anything except shuffling around slowly and occasionally mumbling.

3. **Tornados, Floods and Pigeons**

It was in my fourth year that things started changing. Squires, a franchise store, had opened on 44 at the site of the old five and dime. The tornado ripped the roof off the storage barn and Lee Tender began his fascination with a kit of rock pigeons that had taken up roost in that barn. Our truck
deliveries began looking different. Squires had taken over half of the truck’s space and our shipments were squeezed in usually the back left side.

The following flood had left a few items floating but for the most part we were spared. With Lee spending his time on the back porch following the pigeons who shot from the silver maples to the unrepaired barn and back, I was left to run the operation. I had thought to ask about a raise but balancing the books I was aware that the current salary couldn’t be fiscally justified so I remained mute on the subject.

4. **Time Has Come Today**

I don’t quite remember where his idea came from, but Lee found where we could order hourglasses in bulk and sell them as a novelty. “Watch time pass in Notmuch,” he became fond of saying. I was skeptical as anyone would be. With corn feed, hay, straw and our other supplies barely making it off the shelf something as useless as watching time pass seemed very unlikely to catch on as the next Wright County pastime. The next truck had very little for us on it but the one after that carried 100 hourglasses. They came boxed with enough bubble wrap to make beds out of. After the shelves near the checkout were stocked with hour glasses Lee resumed his study of Rock Pigeons.

I remember it being longer, but Lee said it was seven weeks before we sold the first hourglass. It was sold to Josephine King’s mother. She had remained in the area to be close to her younger daughters,
I couldn’t tell what they talked about when she came in, but they seemed to be friendly in a comfortable manner. She said something about her feeling sorry for a Feed Store selling hourglasses. She wanted to watch something other than television and the wheat fields blowing in the wind. Four months or so had passed without an hourglass being sold after that or even to be picked up for inspection. It was good to put the sale in the ledger.

5. The Return

The day was drawing on much like everything else in Notmuch when Lee took a break from watching and taking photographs of the pigeons when he placed his hand on his hip and saw in the long view to the west from the store a figure on what appeared to be a bicycle coming up the gravel road. Eventually Lee with his hands still on his hips asked, “How may I help you”? It was a woman with a pack on the bicycle and out of that pack she pulled an hourglass still in the box stuffed with bubble-wrap. “This isn’t an hourglass,” she said. With only one hourglass sold and this person clearly not who he sold it to, Lee slowly but with some alarm connected the dots. “Why the long face?” she asked. “Jo?” he inquired.

“I’m home visiting my mother. She said she came by and saw you talking to the birds, arguing with the birds she said. She said she felt sorry for you still being here with that boy, (meaning me) so she bought one of these hourglasses. I couldn’t believe it when she told Lee but the three of us sat
and watched the sand in this so-called hourglass empty out in thirty minutes. It’s a half-hourglass that you sold her believing it was an hourglass.” “This is the first I’ve heard of it,” Lee replied. “I wonder if they are all like that?”

Lee took a random sample of about ten and turned them over and looked at his watch. “Coffee?” They both sat at the back table looking at sand falling. I went back to the cash register and pulled out a Richard Brautigan paperback.

I could eavesdrop that she came from the west coast, Oregon specifically, and her two sisters were here for the visit as well. Both sisters were working in Independence and were down for a few days.

After the sand fell to the bottom on the first hour-glass Lee looked at Josephine King and said “30.” She said “30,” both sipped their coffee trying to assess the value of their agreement.

“You look good.” Lee said with great effort. Josephine looked at him in silence. As the small television droned in the corner she asked, “What ever happened to the evening news?” Like everyone else in the country he had no answer. “I guess people in general have no workable solution,” she concluded. Where words could have been was a tilting coffee cup at Lee’s lips.

6. **The Customer Funnel**

Bicycling was not a popular activity in Notmuch. In fact, they were very rarely seen so two more women on bicycles creating
little dust clouds coming up the street were an odd sight for the town. They both arrived slowing their bicycles to a stop.

Josephine stopped sharing the silence with Lee and walked out to greet the girls. “Did you figure it out?” the younger girl said. “Candy, do you remember Lee? and Sugar do you remember Lee?” Candy nodded and Sugar smiled and said, “Tender Lee,” which brought a concerning look to Josephine’s face. Lee Tender could think of nothing to say. In fact, he was so taken back he could think of no expression to carry on his face.

Candy broke the uncomfortable silence. “You need a Digital Marketing Plan.” The younger sister nodded in agreement. “This could open to door for you to promote and own digital media.” Candy waited for Lee to respond. He didn’t. Josephine clarified “my sister just finished an on-line course with one of them Ivy League schools. Took her two weeks and cost $950. I was wondering what she would do with it.”

Candy pulled up a barstool. “Everything is here waiting to be implemented. He has something no one else has-half-hour glasses.” By this time, I closed the Brautigan novel and was sitting down in a splinterly wooden chair in the corner observing the largest amount of optimism I had ever seen in Notmuch. “You need to access your customer’s needs and identify your primary marketing objectives.” Candy went on dropping acronyms like they were raindrops in a downpour and Sugar just smiled.

Sugar was making Lee very uncomfortable because he had no recollection of ever seeing the stunningly delightful looking girl. He
was told his younger days were wild but something like this he would have remembered.

Lee was jolted from his revere by Candy asking, “What time to you open up?” “The store opens at Nine and we’re usually here by Eight.” “Good,” she said. “I’ll be her at Five. I want a key. I’ll have a working website by tomorrow night.” Candice proved to be a woman of her word. The following night she showed him the website with the Half-Hourglass Marriage Therapy link. Lee asked, “What do I do with that?” “I’ll show you tomorrow,” Candy said.

7. **Singing Falls Marriage Counseling**

And so, the summer came and went. As soon as the website went up can Candy proclaimed it was now time to “throw paint,” and we did. At first sales didn’t go up but with Josephine’s connection at Mizzou the payroll was soon staffed with two counselors and Sugar took the job of receptionist saying she just wanted to be “on the team.”

By the fall married couples came from all over Missouri to talk with the two counselors and then experience the session of holding hands in silence while watching the sand fall in the half-hour glasses which they could buy for three times the cost of the counseling session. The sessions proved to be reason for damaged relationships being repaired by touch and silence.

With the sudden success a new wing of the Feed Store was built with a two pigeon Singing Falls logo centered on the front. Lee started to spend most all his time on photography of Rock Pigeons and Candy quickly capitalized on selling clothing apparel and hiring
a Kabuki Theater from Seattle to celebrate the Grand Opening, once again a connection through Josephine. The local papers started reporting on the level of counseling success and the number of divorced couples signing up for sessions and then remarrying shortly thereafter.

The two Mizzou counselors remarked that they were doing very little other than listen to people complain about each other before the therapy which they termed “Silent Touch.” It was only when some of their clients reported that they were not able to get the same results at home, that the demand for counseling skyrocketed.

8. **The Tender Tradition**

Within the following year Singing Falls acquired highway directional signs and Candy and Sugar, who had bought a small home nearby, started to attempt to convince Lee to change the feed store name to Singing Falls to unify the branding of the operation. Candy even used a Mark Twain quote “the less there is to justify a traditional custom, the harder it is to get rid of it.” With Lee that proved to be true because he refused to even consider thinking about any change within the store let alone its name.

From my perspective, trying to keep to myself and just do the job, I noticed the people coming for counseling becoming more and more volatile with each session but only during the communication interchange and then being as quiet as trout hiding in a pool just below the riffles.

I heard a Mizzou counselor say that he wasn’t doing anything but keeping people from physically harming each other. Coincidentally
the very next day a woman picked up her chair and smashed it over her husband’s head. The counselor talked them into the Silent Touch segment and afterwards they went back to the car hugging and kissing each other while avoiding his facial cuts which the staff was very successful at performing Hemostasis on. In fact, Sugar revealed she always thought that being a nurse would have been a good vocational choice. She had passed the NCLEX and told me not to be concerned about what it is. “Just know that it wasn’t easy,” she said.

9. **A Break for “That Boy”**

It was about this time, although this time was a long time ago, that Candy thought I was burning my candle at both ends running the Feed Store. She was right. I was getting as delusional as Lee was. He was now holding court with the pigeons, raising his voice and yelling “This will always be a non-union shop,” “I will never negotiate with birds,” and similar nonsense such as that. I had no idea what he was doing, saying, or thinking. He certainly wasn’t performing any tangible work.

Sugar seemed to not really volunteer to move to the Feed Store, but Candy convinced her saying that she could handle the reception as well as the management of the counseling service while I was gone.

10. **Vacation to New Madrid**

I contacted a few old friends and most of them were tied up with work except Happytocu, my sole Native-American friend from as far
back as elementary school. He had received a back payment from the Bureau of Indian Affairs distributed to the Shawnee tribe. It had something to do with Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa in the early eighteen hundreds that he never fully explained. He used his money to purchase an apartment complex in New Madrid, Missouri and renamed it *Hill Blocks View Terrace*.

I arrived not knowing what to expect for I hadn’t seen him in so long, but he wasn’t interested in staying at the Terrace. I learned he had a sincere hatred of computers, cellphones and even televisions.

I left my cellphone at the Terrace at his request. He took me on a trip exploring the tectonic plate of the 1812 earthquake all the way from New Madrid to the Reelfoot Fault in Tennessee.

After spending two weeks camping on the Ohio River and watching Happytocu empty a case of whiskey, I knew it was time to get back. I had only asked for a week, and I had been gone for two.

11. **The Slight Return**

As soon as I walked in the Feed Store, I got the vibe from Sugar, and it was anything but sweet. She looked up at me and then looked back down at the ledger she was working on without saying a word. “Where’s Lee?” I asked to break the silence. “Let’s just say he’s now a committed full-time student at Fulton State.” She waited for me to speak knowing full well that I knew that Fulton State was no College or University where you could earn a degree.

Pulling her hair out of her eyes she said “Some tall guy wearing a tall hat came into the counseling service and caught Lee in the
therapy room holding a pigeon by the feet watching sand fall. The therapy wasn’t working on the bird.

This tall guy had scheduled appointments with eight different women at the same time. He gave being incapable of upholding an enduring relationship as the reason. That was the subject matter in the reception log. Candy booked it.

He caught Lee and the bird in the therapy room when he went looking for the women. None of them showed up. He left the list. There’s a Michaela, a Marcia, a Valerie, a Beverly, a Patricia, a Victoria, a Sherry, and a Takako. He said he was well known in Japan. Left the name Richard Brautigan but he didn’t leave a phone number. Are you going to tell me?”

She had a way of using her fingers to brush her hair off her face that made you want to do it for her. “Where the hell were you for two weeks while I was stuck here doing your job?” she exhaled radiating a charming hostility. I beheld her for a few moments captivated by her appealing presence. “A lot of people think they are Richard Brautigan,” I said leaving her question unanswered.

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and others who know who you are.