



MORGAN FRITH

# The Classified Ad

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*Some names have been changed to protect privacy.*

— Ed.

The **Sumner Press**, the weekly paper from my hometown in southeastern Illinois, continues to arrive in my mailbox in Ohio even though I'm not a subscriber. A few years ago, when my wife and I were the grand marshals for the Sumner fall-festival parade, the publisher gave us a complimentary one-year subscription. The subscription has run out, but the paper keeps coming, as if a higher power has decided I need it in my life. "I don't know why you want that rag in our house," my wife says. She resents its conservative opinions. I'm more inclined to tolerate them, though I don't agree with them any more than she does.

I've never been able to explain to her why the *Press* makes me happy. Today I take note of the fact that Christmas decorations will soon be up along the main thoroughfare. I see that the Masonic fish fry is taking place this evening. The Christmas parade will be on Saturday, December 13. The "Community News," which keeps me up on the comings and goings of Sumner's citizens, is full of items like this one, about a certain I.F. and her niece D.A., who took her aunt to get her hair set and then on to Vincennes, where they enjoyed lunch at the Dogwood Barbecue. None of this has anything to do with me, outside the fact that I once lived in the place. And maybe that's what I like about the *Press*: the feeling that I can eavesdrop on my hometown without risk.

Then I turn to the classified ads, which I almost never read, and my eye lands on an advertisement taken out by Judy Beyers of Fort Branch, Indiana. She's looking for her brother, who was born Alvin David Smith to Davis "Smitty" Smith and Velma (Cleeves) Smith in Fort Branch in 1955. Alvin David was, according to the ad, adopted by a couple believed to have lived in Sumner, Illinois. Anyone with information should please contact Judy by e-mail or phone (address and number provided).

Suddenly I'm no longer a voyeur. I'm involved. You see, I have information that Judy Beyers wants.

I hesitate at first, not sure whether I should contact her, for fear that I'll encroach on Alvin David's privacy. To distract myself I read the two columns above the ad, which carry the circuit-court clerk's notice of petition for the acquisition of mineral rights on some land in Lukin Township. The word *Lukin* takes me momentarily away from what I might tell Judy Beyers and back to my childhood, which is only indirectly related to what she needs to know. But bear with me.

When I was a boy, I lived on a farm in Lukin Township, and I went to a two-room school. I rode a yellow bus that was

supposed to pick me up on County Line Road at the end of our lane, but for some reason my father arranged for the bus to come all the way down our lane to get me. I wonder now what grounds he gave for this request. Why was I the only kid on the route to get picked up at his doorstep? My mother was a grade-school teacher, and surely she'd grown weary of parents who lobbied for exceptions for their sons and daughters. I'd never known my stern and stoic father to expect anyone to give him special consideration. When I was barely a year old, he lost his hands in a farming accident, and he had prostheses — a pair of curved steel hooks — at the ends of his arms. He took pride in doing nearly everything he'd been able to do before his accident: He farmed his ground, punished his body with labor, cursed his machinery when it broke down, and repaired it himself when he could. He birthed calves, cut hogs, and hefted hay bales. Whenever I whined that I couldn't do something, he said, "*Can't* never did nothing."

So why in the world would such a man ask the bus driver to come down our lane? Could it be because I was the only child of older parents? My mother was forty-five when she had me; my father, forty-two. I had no older brothers or sisters to accompany me on the walk to County Line Road or to watch over me during the wait for the bus. My mother couldn't provide an escort — she'd be on her way to work — and my father was busy with the farm. But there were other children on the route who had to walk alone to the ends of lanes and stand and wait for the bus. I really don't know why my parents thought I shouldn't do likewise. Maybe I was too timid and uneasy with new situations. Maybe I balked. I can only assume that they saw a need in me and decided to try to meet it for my sake.

Because my wife never wanted children, I've never known that urge to protect a son or daughter, never had a child's needs and wishes to put above my own. Perhaps I was more fragile at that age than I remember. I missed fourteen days of school in first grade because I was "sick." Really I was homesick, afraid to be away from my house. Why? I think my father's accident had shaken my world so much that I clung to habit, stability, and comfort. The accident surely had imprinted on me the unsettling feeling that, if I wasn't watchful, something could happen to change my life forever. My father's hands were mangled by the shucking-box rollers of his corn picker, a piece of machinery he used daily during harvest. (He should have shut down the power and stopped those spinning rollers before trying to loosen an ear of corn that had lodged between them.) My aunt would tell me later that he'd returned from the hospital a

shattered man with frayed nerves and a bad temper. He filled our home with his anger, and I was left forever with the feeling that I could never trust what I thought was mine to control.

None of this would be of any use to Judy Beyers in her search for her brother. I have information that would help, yet here I sit, reading about how the Lawrence County Housing Authority is accepting applications for low-rent housing. I even take time to research the county's demographics, letting an Internet search postpone the decision whether to tell Judy what I know. Close to seventeen thousand people live in the county, which is located across the Wabash River from Vincennes, Indiana. Around 15 percent of those people live below the poverty line. Even in 1961, when I started first grade, most of the farmers there were barely getting by. My parents were fairly flush because of my mother's teaching position, which she would lose during the summer between my first- and second-grade years because the school board thought she had problems disciplining her students. I remember plenty of families, though, who were tapped out and providing for their kids as best they could. When I look now at the school photos from that time, I can see, despite the scrubbed faces and bright smiles, all the signs of stretched budgets: the haircuts done at home; the beat-up shoes; the clothes handed down from older brothers and sisters; the same outfits worn two years in a row, because those were the best clothes they had.

So we were farm kids going to a two-room school. A bus drove us down dirt and gravel roads, past farmhouses and barns and livestock pens, over creeks that rose above their banks in spring, beneath skies lined with contrails from jets or leaden with clouds. In winter we breathed on the glass of the bus windows and wrote our names with our gloved fingers, as if to leave evidence (which, of course, would vanish) that we'd been there: Dale and Cynda Thacker, Larry and Dan Brian, Tony Hair, Alan Correll, Rick Lewis, Becky Hasewinkel, Tammy Marks, Bobbi Riggs, David Sidebottom. When I look at the school photo now, I can name all twenty-seven of us, grades one through eight, at that itty-bitty school in that itty-bitty township where every morning and afternoon we climbed on and off the bus, linked by the fact that we lived along rural roads that ran at right angles to each other. Back then it felt as if our entire lives were meant to take place within the township's boundaries. We'd always be there. We'd know one another forever.

**From the classified-ad rates listed in the *Press*, I see that Judy Beyers's ad, at sixty-three words, cost her a total of \$12.60: a reasonable sum to spend on a shot at finding a brother.**

"I think I know him," I say to my wife. "The man she's looking for. I think I went to school with him."

"Are you sure?"

"Not entirely. But I remember this kid."

I more than remember him. David Sidebottom — we called him David, but his first name was Alvin — lived on Gilead Church Road. Like me he was the son of older parents,

and they had a run-down house on my bus route. In my mind I can see him running out of that house and bounding onto the bus, swiping at his drippy nose with his coat sleeve, bringing with him the smell of hot cooking grease. My father used to say Alvin David's parents didn't have "a pot to piss in." A question I keep mulling over is how in 1955 — if indeed I have the right family — a couple like that, poor and aged, would have managed to adopt a baby. I assume the birth parents, for whatever reason, couldn't care for the child, and there happened to be this kindly old couple willing to take him in.

My wife says, "I wonder if he knows that he was adopted."

I've been wondering that, too.

"So, what are you going to do?" she asks.

"I might be the only one who saw the ad who can help her."

*(end of excerpt)*