

## David (Milt) Fisher, MS '51



My time at the Physics Department at Syracuse University was somewhat chaotic. I really didn't realize how much I had learned there until afterwards. I greatly admired William Frederickson. I left in 1948 to take a job as a physicist at Picatinny Arsenal where I worked on rocket propellants. Bothered by the thought I was working on weapons development, I came back to Syracuse and got a masters degree in mathematics and went to work on computers. I worked on the Univac, the first commercially available computer, went to Westinghouse where I worked on the design of turbojet engines, and bounced back to Univac where I worked on the design of the LARC, the Livermore Automatic Research Computer, and spent some time in California to see that it was properly installed. Guilt at working on weapons bothered me. 1962 I left Univac and went to the Johnson foundation at the University of Pennsylvania to work at their computer center mainly advising researchers on design of experiments. One of my clients was chairman of the Department of Medical Computing at Downstate Medical Center in Brooklyn. In 1966, he asked me to *substitute in mathematics* (sic) for a couple of lectures until they could get somebody else. They never did get anybody else so I wound up teaching there for several years. The department was closed down so I gave courses at NYU, Bridgeport Engineering Institute, Staten Island Community College and Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute. By then I had made contacts and worked as a freelance consultant in operations research and computers from 1970 to 1977 with such clients as Bethlehem Portland Cement, Henry I. Siegal and Univac. For Henry I. Siegal I designed a size grading and pattern layout system. Pattern recognition techniques for garment patterns were directly transferable to techniques for recognizing physical structures in the body so I got a job at Philips Medical Systems in Shelton Connecticut. I designed equipment for cat scans, nuclear magnetic resonance and digital vascular imaging. I used to go to Europe for the final test on the equipment designed in Connecticut. At a conference in Cambridge I saw an attractive woman from Norway. We went punting on the Cam and got to like each other. In 1987 I retired from Philips, and we moved to

Australia. When I came to Australia I started to write. I have published both fiction and non-fiction in such areas as philosophy, foreign affairs and the arms trade. I consulted to Senator Woodley and wrote legislation that required an impact statement on the military, economic, social and environment consequences and a debate in parliament before a defence cooperation agreement (training foreign forces) or a weapons export license is approved. I now am working as an editor for [On Line Opinion](http://www.onlineopinion.com.au) located at <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au>.

David Fisher  
<mailto:humanist@aapt.net.au>

## M IS FOR THE MANY THINGS SHE TOLD ME

David Fisher

"This is Karen Pringle from Golden Hill."

"Barnet Lefko here." Lefko knew what the call meant.

"I'm sorry to tell you that your Mother has passed on."

Lefko couldn't say anything.

Pringle went on, "She went peacefully in her sleep."

Lefko thought "peacefully" was unnecessary.

"She is resting in Berman's."

Resting? The pedant thought, "She is D-E-A-D dead." Since Berman was the only Jewish undertaker in Tyre, that's where her body would be. "I'll be there early tomorrow morning. Thank you for calling."

Pringle said, "Have a good night." That was her first experience at that kind of call.

"Mary", Lefko called.

"Yes?"

"Golden Hill called. I'm an orphan."

"I'm sorry. Can I do anything?"

Lefko tried to say something flippant but started to cry. He hadn't talked to his Mother in years. Every two or three months he would go to Golden

Hill and look in at the wasted figure under the sheets. "If you know I'm here, please wink", but there had been no response for at least three years. Occasionally, he would feel anger. Was she really out of it? Was she pretending as she would do when she was caught in a contradiction? Ever the pedant, Lefko corrected "contradiction" to lie. HIS MOTHER WAS A LIAR. HIS MOTHER WAS A LIAR. The liar was really dead.

The bomb dropped on Hiroshima. 100,000 Japanese were wiped out. Infantry private Lefko heard of it and felt a fierce joy. The war would be over. He would be going home. The scared kid could go home. 100,000 people are killed, and you feel good? Your Mother dies, and you think a liar is dead? He had the remembered guilt, and he had a new guilt. They felt the same. All's not gold that's gilty. Lefko, the pedant-punster.

"No. Nothing you can do. I'll drive to Tyre tonight." Lefko looked up at Mary and waved his hand aimlessly from side to side. "The funeral is tomorrow." He knew that Berman would schedule the funeral for the next day unless the survivors disagreed. Lefko was the only survivor, and Orthodox Jews usually bury the body before the next sundown after death.

"How can you drive all night? Let me go with you. I'm your wife."

"I'll pull over to the side of the road and cork off if I get tired. Besides, she was a vegetable since we got married. You never even knew her."

Lefko could be alone with his guilt. He could also feel guilty about shutting Mary out. Why does a man get married? Mary was wife number three. He felt as though he was really getting things together after the first two marriages. When you live alone, you can get up and read in the middle of the night. When you get a call, nobody asks, "Who was that on the phone?" You can play "Rites of Spring" and get no complaints about the dissonance. After a while you start seeing somebody. A nice, warm body. Meaningful conversations. You would feel more guilt if you walked away. Married.

He rode through the night in his bubble of warm air. Lefko against the world. The moon rode alongside with passing telephone poles racing between them. A corsair in his Corsair. He never could talk to his Mother when she could talk. He saw her now as she was the last time he visited Golden Hill, but he remembered her voice as he heard it in childhood. He saw the muddy green, unseeing eyes, "I've got eyes like a cat" but they were bright when she said it. He saw the aristocratic nose with gently flaring nostrils. When he was a child she would call attention to the shapely nose, "Isn't it a beautiful nose?" Sometimes she would say that in front of visitors, and little Barn would cringe. The last time he had seen the nose, it was the same chalky colour as the rest of the face. A year ago his cousin from Tyre had called Lefko. Somehow an attendant had let her fall from the bed. Mother landed on her face and broke her nose. The beautiful nose was broken, and there were dark circles under the eyes. She looked more alive

than in years. Change. What would be the use of moving her to another nursing home? That could happen anyplace. Golden Hill had the best reputation. The nose was set, the bruises disappeared, and Mother stayed at Golden Hill.

She hadn't worn glasses for so long that the little dents on the sides of the bridge had disappeared. She used to rub her nose so the dents would go away when she took off her glasses. He saw the lashes. They were whiter than the chalky skin. The fine hair was neatly brushed. White sheets, white blanket, chalky skin, silky white hair, pale lips around a black hole, black nostril openings. He saw them as he would those of a dentist. He saw the long white hairs on the chin (if she had been aware of them, she would have been horrified), the slight bulge under the blanket and the arthritic hand clutching a roll of cloth. White and black. For years he had thought of his Mother as already dead.

He was in range of the Durbeville radio station. After years of driving up to Tyre he was familiar with the radio menu along the way. Besides the almost omnipresent pollution of the rock Top 40 one could hear nasal country music, semiliterate preachers, Francophones from Canada, "good" music stations with an unimaginative selection of the classics and university stations with "alternate" points of view. There were also sports stations with baseball in summer, football in the fall, hockey in the winter and basketball in the spring. Lefko had almost stopped listening to sports since the player's names became less familiar as veterans retired. The Durbeville station had a different formula with mouldy fig jazz and novelty songs from before World War II. He recognised the melody of "How can you believe me when I told you that I love you when you know I've been a liar all my life?" He roared with the melody, "You know I've been a liar - a good for nothing liar." He couldn't remember what came next and thought someday he should go to a library with a music collection and get the lyrics.

"Tell me you love me even if you're lying." He looked at Teresa lying beside him and managed to croak, "I love you." Then he looked into her eyes and winked. She reached for her purse on the dresser. She hit him with it using all her strength. Their tussle ended as their tussles almost always did. Afterward, he resented the acrid smell of her cigarette. "I'm not good enough for you, huh? You have to smoke, too?" She blew smoke in his face, and he turned his head away. "Barney, do you feel closer to anyone than me?" Lefko grunted.

Teresa looked at him. "You know what kind of sex education we had? One day a nun came out on the stage at morning assembly and said, "A terrible thing happened today. Joannie Damico had her first period." That was our sex education." The story sounded improbable to Lefko, but it also sounded true. He couldn't remember her telling him anything that proved to be untrue. He was in the habit of gauging the truthfulness of the speaker,

evaluating the plausibility of the statement and using those factors to estimate the probable truth. Gauge, evaluate, estimate. He questioned others, but he liked to think of himself as truthful.

He remembered stories his mother told about herself and her family. "Your great grandfather, my mother's father, lived to one hundred and seven years old, but he went blind a year before he died. He was married four times. He was born in 1799 and died in 1906. Lived in three centuries. My mother was the daughter of his last wife who he married at the age of eighty eight, and she was breast fed by her older sister since her mother died having her." The family history was composed of a cascade of improbabilities. What was the probability of all of her statements being true?

Little Barn's mother told him of her life. "I learned French before I learned English. We were surrounded by Canucks, and my parents didn't speak English either. I only learned English when I went to the country schoolhouse. My first teacher originally spoke Gaelic. That's why I speak with a Gaelic accent." Maybe she did talk with a Gaelic accent. Little Barn didn't know what one sounded like. "We were poor. When I was thirteen we moved to Lake Bergerac, and I waited table. I was a well developed girl, and once Victor Herbert, the composer, pinched my bottom."

There was always something new. When Lefko was going to college his mother told him about the Seneca Indian ceremony. "When I taught at the reservation, one of the young Indian women told me of the marriage contest."

"The marriage contest?" Lefko's contributions to conversations with his mother seemed to consist largely of questioning repetitions.

"Yes, the Senecas were matrilinear and matriarchal to the extent of women electing the chiefs", she lectured.

"They even picked their mates. The young women had a foot race, and they had their choice of men according to where they finished. I knew it would happen during the first full moon after the summer solstice, but I didn't know where it would be. The full moon was several days before the term ended, and I was still on the reservation. I hid near a big open space near the lodge houses hoping it would happen there. Sure enough, most of the unmarried young women showed up buck (or should I say squaw) naked." Lefko's mother was a pedant-punster, too. "A statuesque older woman had them line up. Then, she gave the signal to start. Away they went. Tits flapping in the moonlight. At the other end of the course other older women noted the order they finished in. I didn't want to be caught so I stole away as the race was ending."

The morning sun was now rising over the autumn forest. The dark bluish-green of spruce and dark green of pine relieved by an occasional flash of brilliant yellow birch leaves covered the mountains. He loved the

mountains and wondered how often he would see them in the future. The doctor had told him a few years ago, "She has a sound heart. Outside of her senility the rest of her internal organs are sound, too. She can keep going for years." He wouldn't be making the trip many times more.

Lefko's mother sometimes used to talk about various nebulous illnesses and her "delicate" condition. He remembered the day their neighbour, Mrs. Spadaro, said the ominous, "Barney, your mother is a remarkable woman. She looks so healthy."

Lefko stiffened. From his ungainly height he looked down on birdlike Mrs. Spadaro, "Yes?"

"She looks so healthy now, but I managed to pry her secret out of her. She told me how she had a cancer diagnosed as terminal. Faith is wonderful. In spite of different religions we must have the same God. She had a miraculous remission. You should be grateful God decided to keep her with you." Lefko mumbled and shrunk away.

Layers of lies. Lies in strata. Lysistrata tried to save the men of Athens. What had his mother been doing?

WELCOME TO TYRE read the sign. Lefko drove to the synagogue, parked and walked to the door of the rabbi's study. He knocked at the door.

"Come in."

Lefko opened the door and walked in. The rabbi waved him to a large leather chair. The rabbi had the powerful, sloping shoulders and bull neck of an athlete. Lefko sat down and looked at him. The rabbi's face was two intersecting ovals with the bigger one below. His nose tilted up enough so Lefko could see his nostrils. Rabinowitz tapped his large incisors with a gold pencil. The large incisors, fat cheeks and nostrils made Lefko think, "Rabinowitz, Rabbi Rabbitowitz, coulda been a contenduh."

"Mr. Lefko, I am very sorry that I never met your mother, but Berman told me a lot about her. So much that I feel as though I knew her. She was a remarkable woman. He even told me about the gold medal for figure skating."

"The gold medal for figure skating?"

"Oh, yes, don't think I deal with the dear departed as though they are now ciphers. They were human beings, and they still live in our hearts. They will always be with us. I find out all I possibly can about them. Berman told me about the gold medal. He told me about the coast to coast race, too."

"The coast to coast race?" This was reminiscent of conversations with the dear departed.

"Oh, yes."

"The coast to coast race?"

"Yes. It's a pity her fuel line gave out near Wichita so she never made it all the way to the coast. Still it's something to fly in the first all female air race."

There was a long pause. Lefko hunched his shoulders and put his hands over his face as he did when he was little Barn. The same posture of embarrassment at her past antics. The rabbi looked at the "grief stricken" man.

Why, oh, why did she tell that kind of lie? Of course!!! Berman was a sport's buff. You want sporting feats? I'll give you sporting feats. Mrs. Spadaro was a devout Catholic who talked about Lourdes. You want miraculous cures? I'll give you miraculous cures. Lefko was doing a course in anthropology. He got naked Senecas. The family got family stories.

Lefko leaned back in the leather chair and shook in spasms of choking, wheezing laughter. Rabinowitz got up and put a comforting hand on Lefko's right shoulder. "You poor man. You poor, poor man."

THE END