

# **Deliberate Accident**

**The Possession  
of Robert Sturges**

**Barbara Sturges Cassidy**

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This is a memoir and names of principal characters and business establishments have been changed to protect identities. Any mistakes are mine.

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# Table of Contents

Preface.....	1
Chapter 1 May 2000.....	3
Chapter 2 Summer 1992.....	5
Chapter 26 End of May 1995.....	82
Chapter 49 Late Summer 1999.....	200
Chapter 75 January 2001.....	310
Acknowledgements.....	326
About the Author.....	328

*“She’s controlling, with an unusual aura of self-confidence, never shrinks from authority, she feels adequate to deal with anything confronting her, never experiences inferiority, has an extreme need to dominate, imposes desires or convictions on others, does not reciprocate, over-evaluation of self, takes charge of situations.”*

DiCaprio, N.S., (1974) *Personality Theories: Guides to Living*. Saunders, Philadelphia, PA.,  
pgs. 205-206.

# Preface

The scariest stories are real and this is very real. Bob Sturges had the good life as a young man with a well-heeled family and education. He had a patent law practice that supported many inventors and countless novices. He lived well after marriage too. Respected by his many colleagues in Cleveland, Ohio and Washington, D.C., he constructed patents for others and painstakingly rendered drawings of their inner workings. From the 1950's through 1990's, both an engineer and chemist, he acted on the most complex of assignments. He thought of himself as a good and genuinely honest man.

Dad's most unfortunate shortcoming, trusting everyone, merged with his dementia sometime after our Mom's death. As his kids, Carolyn, my sister, and I always credited him with more ability than he actually had to spot fraudulent personalities and live safely in this unsafe world. This is a classic case of losing Dad to a soulless woman who wanted and won everything. How she duped her victims, Dad included, is the stuff of this tale. She was deliberate in every step, and like a cougar, stalked her victims.

In the 1990's, dementia and related diseases were mysteries that health care settings, physicians, and human service agencies were just beginning to understand. Nearly

twenty-five years later, there are significant differences in medical care, as well as special facilities to support patients and families. Today there are national associations providing education, reference, and research. Medical and nursing specialists are on-site in dementia care. Respite and adult day care facilities exist to lift the burden of around-the-clock care for families.

Dad was surely a victim of his own character flaws and unstoppable dementia. Circulatory changes crippled his worn-out frontal lobe executive function. Damaged synapses and dying brain cells killed him as surely as a bullet. He could not change his disastrous course. While he could, he continued to write letters to Carolyn and me. It is a personal testament to his difficulties with his second wife, Diane. He was an accident waiting to happen. It was the most shocking and exhausting period of my life. This is the story of ten weary years of conflict.

# Chapter 1

## May 2000

Maybe it was over for now, this psychotic and out of control stage. Our lives pinioned by other people. Choices abandoned at the courtroom door without hope. A court magistrate deciding our family's private relationships, for God's sake! Neither his wife the plaintiff, nor I had achieved anything, least of all for Dad. The Florida midday sun was steaming hot that May in 2000. The sidewalk sauna outside the Pinellas County Court House in St. Petersburg hit the three of us like a blast from an over-taxed furnace as we left the building. There was only one exit for courtroom combatants. Patrick, my wonderful husband of thirty-one years, our Winter Haven, Florida attorney, Mitchel Johnson, so articulate in family problems, and I stepped into the blinding sunshine and the waves of stupefying heat. He was young, smart, and working out of an understated law firm in a non-descript Winter Haven office building. We hit it off immediately as I relayed the story to date. I was, at last, so tired of this story.

There she was with her attorney at the wrought iron coffee table in the unsheltered sidewalk cafe not fifteen feet in front of us. She was Dad's wife and nearly my age, sixty. Petite, boney, smirking. He was then old enough to be her

father at age eighty! Dad was in a St. Pete nursing home and unaware of all of the chaos surrounding his fate. The two of them, Diane and Jessica Allensby, the Tampa attorney for the beleaguered wife, positioned themselves at just the right angle to catch the three of us leaving the only exit from the building. Gloating. Tears formed in my eyes and Mitchel, my capable young attorney, and Patrick tried to shield me from more Diane damage and to get past the gauntlet of chairs, the pair of hyenas and steam. We had lost Guardianship Hearing but neither had Diane won. Hurrah for that.

I felt her eyes on the back of my neck following me as we crossed the street. We three walked in silence to a small restaurant a few blocks away from the courthouse. We seated ourselves in the cramped bistro favored by judges and attorney types. All at once, the enormity of the testimony in the last three hours blazed through my mind. I finally had seen and heard enough and the tears charged out of my eyes. I choked on the flow. I buried my head in linen napkins. It did not matter as the other “suits” in adjacent chairs looked over; they had probably seen meltdowns like this hundreds of times. This was surreal. Mitchel and Pat leaned over toward me to offer help. It was only the middle acts of the unwinding despicable tragedy with Dad.



## Chapter 2

# Summer 1992

Nick handed the end of the lit joint to his mom, Diane, and leaned back on the sagging wood swing. It creaked as it moved back and forth. God, it was hot and he hated Cleveland humidity in the summer. Night was worse. A mosquito buzzed his ear. He wiped his sweaty face with his T-shirt and batted at his ear, mosquito long gone.

Diane inspected the toke, and took a hit and another. Lacings of coke and marijuana filtered up her boney nose. She felt the effects inhabit her brain. Instantly her rheumatic aches and pains left her. Thinking was replaced by the coke and marijuana mix. Like rain, it filtered her air.

Her overly inbred poodle mix, needing to be let out, howled behind the screen door. Their singlewide rusty trailer, one of many in the “Park,” was a steam bath inside compared to the shaded porch on the concrete pad. At least Diane and Nicky were facing east as the afternoon sun baked the other side of their home. She stood and walked up the five steps to the screen door and tugged it open. Lizzy charged outside, leaped over the side, and peed with a grunt of relief on the stubby lawn.

Back on the swing, they shared the toke in silence for a

while. Freeway noise in the distance with emergency sirens filtered through their littered thoughts. Lizzy trotted proudly around the small patch of grass and flopped to a roll where she had not deposited anything lately.

Nicky lowered his voice enough so next door trailer neighbors could not hear and spoke his mind. “Like you say, if you get an older guy and he has money, maybe we can move out of this dump,” he said as he waved the roach in the air. His wet hair draped his thin dark face. The failing cigarette between his yellowed teeth was nearly gone.

She coughed and leaned back on the swing taking a draw on the second cigarette she lit with the first. She handed the stub back to her son. Nothing to hold onto and he flicked the ashes into the grass. A breeze coated the sweat dripping off his head. He wiped his forehead with the front of his T-shirt again.

“Shit,” she snarled, “I have to do everything!” Smoke rappelled from her lips. “So what will you do?” Cough. She straightened her thick curly blond hair and picked at her incisors with a cracked fingernail. She leaned back and sensed the coke plunge through her veins.

He appraised her smoking style. “C’mon—you’re good at it, Mom, you like it don’t you?” Nicky smiled and looked at her through dilated pupils and whispered “important stuff. I do important stuff.”

“Mom,” he said turning his head away, “just how well do you know this Leonard guy?”

She knew the old guy he was talking about at the home. Leonard had been in the facility for six months of care following a fall at his home. No fractures, but a conk on the head took longer than expected to heal. Concussion mending is unpredictable. While in the nursing home, mild dementia surfaced and he became more of a permanent guest.

“Pretty good,” she said exhaling. With an IQ the size of

a flea, she closed her eyes. Old Leonard, the old fart. She knew just what he liked and where he kept his checkbook. The staffing agency had been kind enough to introduce them five months ago. She as his “nurse aide.” A clerk had uncovered Leonard’s financials and passed them along to Diane’s contact. The potent river of information flowed right to Diane. This would be a good one, she thought.

Diane watched the smoke plume drift in front of her. There was always need for agency staff to care for the elderly inside the nursing home. Agencies paid better. No bennies, but the hourly was better. No sick time and she would need sick time for this. The benefits were where you could find them; Diane had earned a Master of Arts in Finding from the University of Self-Seeking.

He picked up a dog-eared magazine that had been on the ground under the swing and flipped to the back pages. Diane had placed the ad:

Cleveland Weekend, September, 1992 (Classified)

Single lively woman desires relationship with a mature Gentleman. I am ready for fun, travel, and companionship. Are you?

An 800 number completed the ad. Nicky picked up the portable phone that was between them on the swing, dialed his friend, Max, from his stint in the Tampa County Jail. Max had a small store and might be able to help with what Nicky had in mind. Good ‘ole Max had managed to lie, cheat, and steal his way into a small TV repair business in Aurora after he’d finished his three year sentence for cocaine possession. They became best of buds in the same cell. Max picked up on the fifth ring.

“Hey, Max., how’s the biz goin’ these days?”

“Good. You?” Max sounded hoarse. Under the weather. Stoned.

“OK. Say, bro,’ I need some help, guy. Need a way to get

rid of some ‘stuff,’ you know?” The coke was acting like a mood elevator. Nicky’s speech was rapid.

“What stuff? You know we work on fees here, Nick.”

“Right, Dude. How much?”

“A thousand to start, and then it depends on what you have as to how much you’ll get back over time. We can set you up, it just depends, you know?” Max, the planner-confidant. “I’ll give you the contact info after you deliver the money, Nick. You know where I am.”

Diane’s thoughts faded to Lee Sullivan, her first and what she had hoped would be her only husband. On a dare from a cheerleading girlfriend, she had married her high school sweet heart at age eighteen. Lee was a football legend. She actually believed she loved him and he loved her. There was a small measure of solitary contentment in her life and someone reliably secure. What must he be thinking now? God, how she missed him. He and Diane had such a good life together. Lee died of a heart attack in 1980 leaving Diane alone and vulnerable and Nicky without a role model. Lee died without a will, and consequently, the probate courts took half of his estate.

Retrenched in poverty again, Diane moved to a dilapidated trailer next to a golf course and across from a gargantuan nursing home in North Olmsted. Nicky had bailed on his senior year in high school after a spring break in Florida. He never came home. For a while, he was a cook at a country club in Miami. Sometimes, she thought, there was a remarkable resemblance between her son and Lee, but she brushed away dead thoughts. Nicky’s birth mother, Desiree Reiner, Diane’s aunt, had given him up when he was just an infant. Diane and Lee did their best to raise him as their own. Because the transfer was never officially recorded, Diane kept Nicky’s last name “Reiner.” Nicky always felt the distance from his birth mother. Desiree had abdicated from the state of motherhood.

In the 1960's nobody cared about one more infant given away to a family member. Nobody cared whether the infant grew up to be a respectable kid.

Three decades later when Max's Tampa pawnshop business collapsed and Nicky was out of work, and out of money, he found his way back to Diane's trailer in North Olmsted. Nicky was nothing like his proxy father. Timid, dependent, a hanger-on instead of take-charge sort of kid. Lee had tried, but Nicky resisted from the time he learned the word, "no." He never finished high school and barely made it out of 10th grade. Ignored by his stepfather as a youth, he hung around home a lot now. Diane wished he would just go back to Florida. The pawnshop was a perfect place for Nicky. Out of the way. He was people-savvy but only because she taught him all she knew. Theft, he picked that up on his own with a jailbird friend, Max. Max knew a lot about everything.

She was into men, old men now. It was her way to prevent loneliness and have something to do. The money was great. She enjoyed the thrill: befriend, bed, and befuddle. Her friend, Marie, had turned her on to the prospect of easy money. It was so simple. They all wanted sex so bad. Families barely knew what hit them when the bills rolled in. Marie taught her how to do that. She could reroute bills to family members and they never caught on. When the time was right, she would marry Leonard. The need for cash had launched a crusade in her now and Marie wanted her finder's fee.

A widower, Leonard was right across the street in a nursing unit at the local nursing home, or "doggy day care" as she called it. He was eighty-four on his last birthday and perfect. Leonard's sister and daughter were as stupid as he was. Best of all, they lived twelve hundred miles away in the Florida panhandle. Scheduled to be discharged home soon, she waited, and chatted-up the confused old man. He loved the attention. "They love the love," Marie had said.

## Chapter 3

Diane was born Diane Wedowski in 1940 in Bedford, Ohio. She was educated at West Pioneer High School, a mundane place where the only excitement was sports. Diane did not have the comfort of a warm family life. Rather, it was an exercise in her parents' distractions with other things. Her sister, Kay, a skinny blond child, ran away from home at age fourteen, never to be heard from again. The police said she was probably picked up on the Turnpike, a few miles from home. It was never determined why she ran from home, just a neighborly back fence buzz about "abuses in the home." Diane did not seem to miss Kay from the day she disappeared. "We never were that close," she would say to her friends. Just more space not shared in their narrow bedroom.

Her father, Bill, a day laborer with an auto factory, was constantly out of work and drunk. In his haze, he occasionally hit his wife and his daughter. Diane joined a cheerleader group in high school and traveled with the basketball and football teams to all of the away games. Travel was escape. Aunts and uncles filtered in and out of her life as she was passed off like a football. Diane's mother saw these family excursions from normalcy as regular in their small Ohio town. She entertained lonely boozed up

bar men most weekends when the house was empty. Diane copied her style and entertained the team when they stayed overnight somewhere.

One of those youthful barflies became a comrade of sorts, Max. Max Jankowsky, short and muscular from his football days in school, was Nicky's age and had similar interests as she: flirting, partying, and drinking. The occasional Saturday night back seat of the car hook up satisfied their needs for companionship, not to mention wild sex. From Max, Diane learned some artistry to her ballooning trade with other men. They dated on and off when the spirit moved them. Max went on to the Cleveland Police Academy and a respectable career catching bad guys while Diane moved on to the next conquest. They never lost their physical attraction, not even after Diane was married the first time.

By the time Nicky returned to the Ohio trailer, Diane had worked for a time at the nursing home as an "aide" helping the old folks bathe, eat, poop, and sit languidly in chairs for hours at a time. She hated the work, the old farts, and the demeaning wages that were spent as soon as they were claimed every week. By then, Nicky had expensive habits, among them drugs and alcohol.

While working at the nursing home, Diane learned some of the details of caring for the elderly, namely, they liked to leave things lying around: checks, credit cards, cash, and jewelry. She pocketed what she could and found willing buyers for the rest. Her style of life began to improve. She had a "caring" demeanor and sweet genuine smile that elicited trust among her victims. They willingly hired her to care for relatives.

From her boss, Marie Eldonado, Diane had learned more about the "business of love," she called it. Marie had bucket words for everything. She had an insane sense about weakness in the elderly and Diane liked that. The veil of expertise and competence that went with nurse aide uniforms belied the

truth in the relationships. Where there was money, property, and possessions, there was Marie and her cadre of like-minded collectors. Get into their heads and under the sheets as fast as possible. When they are sleeping it off, take everything, and sell it or pawn it. Confusion and dementia made the work easier. Marie could usually find a willing partner in every home she “sent agency staff to.” It was easy. Finance people made nothing especially the lower level clerks. Clerks knew insurance, income, pensions and lots of convenient details. For a price, Marie picked their brains and targeted the “oh, so willing victims.” Marie kept her clerks and nurse aides separated. They never knew each other. The aides and the clerks only knew what Marie told them.

When a request to take care of Mr. Leonard Olsen came to her attention through Marie, Diane leaped at the chance to move-in for around the clock care at an exorbitant rate. Her unreported and under-the-table cash income skyrocketed, and Diane and Nicky considerably improved their lifestyle. Marie profited with her “finder’s fees.” The trailer had some needed improvements and life was bearable with an influx of coke and the ever-present booze.

Leonard found Diane's caring to his liking since it included benefits beyond the usual contract. He generously assigned her to his will. Marie even helped by witnessing the document.

Evidently, Leonard and Diane hit it off fairly well and Nicky was pleased with his mother’s capabilities. The racket was going so well that she placed the ad in Cleveland Weekend Magazine, Diane’s contribution to their inhumane ruse. Nicky continued his old habits that soon included petty theft in the trailer park. Diane even introduced Nicky to Marie and they hit it off immediately. Life was pretty good.



# Chapter 4

Diane punched in and headed for her locker behind several other employees arriving for their night shift at the nursing home side of the retirement community. Six hundred beds and still growing plus a staff of eight hundred regular employees and a dozen agency staffers managed everything from administration to food service to nursing care. She hung up her sweater and shut the locker door. She was always neatly and professionally attired with a pen and a coin purse in her pocket. The other girls were chatting about something trivial up ahead and she ignored them. She thought she had better work on Leonard today. She was focused on her task.

The Charge Nurse passed out the assignments for the night giving Diane her regular work, Leonard, plus seven other patients on the long corridor on the Senile Dementia Unit. The Charge Nurse, Becky, called after Diane, “Say girl, what’s going on with you and old Leonard?”

“Oh, not much, just the usual. I treat him nice and he seems to like me. At least the family is happy.”

“I mean, you two really seem like you have a relationship, know what I mean?” Wink-wink, secret code for the dating deprived. She smiled a thirty-year-old single and overweight female smile. “I hear you may get to go home with him to his house when he leaves next week.”

“Who told you that?” Diane purred.

“Doris, the Supervisor. She said she talked with your boss, Marie at the agency, and wants you to handle the case from there.” Word was getting around.

Diane considered that maybe Marie was working up another aide at the home.

“How do you get so much work, Diane?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I just have to keep busy,” she said.

Marie was becoming an ever-present comrade in the agency business. It seemed as though Marie always had something on her plate particularly finding “customers” at the homes the agency staff frequented. Diane had trouble keeping up with Marie who, like Max, was anywhere and everywhere at the same time. Marie was about Max’s age and said knew of him, but never talked about him, not even when Diane prodded Marie for a clue. Occasionally, the agency would say that Marie was “out of state at another agency branch,” but would never be more specific.

“OK with me, I can handle that,” and with that Diane closed the door behind her to the Dementia unit. Once inside, she expertly took care of the seven easier patients, dressed in their nightclothes, enough blankets, toileting, and snacks. The list of “would you get me...” was endless. Later, she would be helping to get the early bird residents to the dining room for breakfast. Then she headed for Old Leonard. This could be a good night, she thought.

# Chapter 5

She was sensitive to their aches and pains since her own crept into her daily life. In the light of early dawn, Diane gently turned Leonard in bed and bathed his back and buttocks. He thanked her for her soft touch and curiously wanted more attention. “Denise, you know what I like.” Walking around the bed, she bent down and kissed him on his lips without a word. The “private bath” came next and she offered Leonard the warm wet washcloth. He declined to do this for himself, as many did in the home and she obliged. His reaction was characteristic to the warmth and he moaned softly as he climaxed. She sweetly smiled at his pleasure.

“What a joy you are, Denise, my Denise.” His early dementia kicking in, he could not remember her name.

“I love you too, Len.”

“I need to get out of here, my dear,” he said. They all wanted that too.

“Len, I know. It’s what I want more than anything.”

A soft knock and the door swung open. The social worker, Carrie, stopped at the closed privacy drape.

“Diane, I have some Medicare forms to go over with Leonard, are you about done?”

“Hi Carrie, I’ll be done in a few minutes. I’ll meet you at the chart rack in five, OK?”

“Sure, honey, take your time.”

She turned back to Leonard, his eyes closed, napping. Sweet Lenny she thought, looking down at him. She covered his sleeping figure and opened the drapes revealing a morning of bright sunshine through the glass.