



# Catch Up by Nick Holle

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Well, if it isn't Little Davey Wendlestad. Wow. Twenty-five years, Wendlestad. Can you believe this shit? How you been?

Great. No. That's fricking great! I don't know how many times in the last twenty-five years I've wondered how Davey Wendlestad was doing. Three or four times at least. And now I find out you're great. That's great.

What line of work you in, Wendlestad?

Teaching? What the f—I never—I never pegged you for a teacher. A child molester maybe. But a teacher? Nah, Wendlestad, I myself am in the business of yanking chains, if you know what I'm saying. But teaching, that's great. Just great.

So let me ask you, you ever marry that skinny little Appleton girl?

Well, three cheers for the Wendlestad. Man. Davey Wendlestad, family man. Wow.

Okay, Wendlestad. Well, I suppose you're wondering what the hell I've been up to. Well, I'm glad you asked because it has been one helluva a ride.

As you probably remember I had a little tussle with the coppers over some pipe bombs senior year. I was never gonna hurt anybody. I was just building them to blow up bunny rabbits. You can hardly blame anybody for that.

Anyway, I got out of that with fourteen months of probation, graduated by a pubic hair, and decided to get my life together and join the military, see if I couldn't fuck some shit up in Eye-ran or Libya or something like that.

Jesus, Wendlestad, what do ya mean, what branch? Do I look like a military guy to you? Cripes. Naw, I left town and spent five years of my life traveling around getting blazed and blasted out of my friggin' mind. Not a single, solitary day of soberness. I know it's no formal education like yours, Wendlestad, but I guarantee I could freebase the crap outta ya. I mixed through so many pipes and pills that when I got into my twenties, I forgot to tell time, digital or tick-tock. It was pretty bad.

And good, boy, did I like to feel good. Not a worry in the world when you're coked the gills, five fucks to the wind, crashing on the couch of an African meth-amphetimine dealer named Jumbo, giving him blow jobs three times a day because you got no scratch and you gotta feed the monkey.

Frankly, I don't regret it a bit. I seen shit in those years that a family man such as yourself couldn't possibly imagine. I don't remember any of it. But when I die and my life flashes before my eyes, I will be way more entertained than if I'd gone to Georgetown or Rutgers or some shit.

Seriously. Exempla gratia, this one day my buddy Trouncy barged into this club we used to go to, The Pearl Dump—I think it was somewhere in Nevada. So he barges in on a llama with a machete and a starter pistol, and the place goes apeshit. And Trouncy is firing blanks at the ceiling, waving the machete around, trying to “assassinate Kennedy.” Which one, I'm not sure. They're all dead by that point. Well, the cops came, and in the mass confusing, they try Trouncy right on the spot. The bartender and dancers are the jurors. I'm his lawyer, but I don't know jurisprudence from a hole in the crotch. And right about the moment they're gonna read the verdict, everything fades to orange. Orange. Now, Wendlestad, I don't know if it was real or not, hard to make that distinction on blotter acid alone. But man-o-man, the things I could tell you. Those were the days.

Then one night, Wendlestad, not long after, I quit. Just like that. Ate the entire cold turkey. I said to my friends, “My friends, I will see you around.” And I walked away from it all.

Damn.

What? What next? That, Wendlestad, was the question. I had no idea. I didn't even have a place to live. I had a little money, swiped it from Trouncy. It was only about sixty bucks, but he'd never paid me for representing him. He'd never miss it anyway.

Well because, Wendlestad, he was riding around town on llamas, for cripe's sakes. Hard to keep track of your money on a llama.

So I took Trouncy's sixty bucks, and I check into a hotel. Well, it was more of motel. With cockroaches. And spiders. And what appeared to me to be a dead body in the bed. And I was coming down off a five-year high, so the cockroaches are strikingly disturbing at this point. The size of—I don't know—Patrick Ewing, if you get my drift.

I crash, though, pretty hard and wake up in the middle of the night. I forgot to mention that I always wake up at least once in the middle of the—well, it was the middle of the day when I was on drugs, but night at this point. So I always wake up to take a piss.

I am pretty groggy now, and I look over to the other bed and see some doofus cutting up the dead body with an exacto knife. And I'm thinking it's still the drugs. But the more I watch, the more I come into myself, and then off comes the left arm. Then I'm like, "Holy two shits from Chicago! What's going on here?"

The doofus looks over and sees me. He shows me the exacto knife with the guts clinging to it, and he says to me, "This does not concern you."

Of course now I think, "The hell it doesn't. It's my motel room." But back then I was just a wimpy kid, so I said, "Okay." And I went back to sleep.

Well, the coppers knocked down the door a while later and hauled my ass off to the old clink and booked me for murder, among other things. I didn't even know the girl. It's not like I coulda killed her.

Well, they got me in one of those rooms, and I'm a little scared. But I'm more concerned with my withdrawal symptoms, I'm shaking like Michael J. Fox and pumping back glasses of water like it's Milwaukee's Best. And these two cockgobbling coppers, Leo and Manzetti, are giving me the third degree, asking me what made me do it and how do I know The Duke and do I think the bush deserved this fate. And, Wendlestad, do you think I had a single serviceable answer for these fascist assholes? I was freaking out so much from the withdrawal that I couldn't even keep track of who was the good cop and who was the bad cop. I had nothin'.

So they threw me in the slammer and let me sweat it out. At first, that was some of the worst days of my life. The withdrawal I mean. Not jail. Jail was great. Television, three squares, hilarious guys in there just shooting the shit while they're trying to bust past their B&E and check-fraud raps. They heard I killed a bush, so I was like King Bert around that place.

Plus, they were afraid of my drug shakes. But I was in there for like four months. No arraignment or trial or anything. They just left me there. Forgot about me. But I was having such a good time with the fellas, I didn't even think twice about it.

Then one day this young, clean-cut kid named Garbonzo shows up at my cell and says to me he's sorry. And I says, "Why's that?" He says they been keeping me here with no cause. And I says, "No cause?" He says yeah. And I say, "No shit, Garbonzo." So then he lets me out, tells me they know I didn't kill the bush. It was the Duke and some motel cook. "The motel cook," I said. "Of course ." Then he gives me a hundred bucks and a Greyhound ticket, as long as I sign this form not to sue their asses. I signed it, of course, Wendlestad. I'm not the suing type. And shit, I never had a hundred bucks in my life.

So I got directions and hoofed it over to the Greyhound station. First bus there is heading to Milwaukee. So I tell the clerk at the ticket thing, "Well then, I'm going to Milwaukee."

I get on the bus, settle into my window seat, got a hundred bucks in my pocket, getting ready to hit the open road, head into the sunset. I guess coming from Nevada, we'd be heading away from the sunset.

Then this old lady sits down next to me. I mean, she's old, like eighty, frail and kinda tiny. But she has got the biggest bazongas I have ever seen. The double-take and stare kind. And sure, through no fault her own, they're hangin' past her belly button, but there's no stopping gravity, Wendlestad. And these things—Jesus! How am I supposed to enjoy the countryside when I have to deal with these things.

Well, the old woman finally notices my stare, and she nudges me in the arm and says, "You think these things are special, you should see the size of my bush."

Jeepers creepers, Wendlestad, I flew up, lookin' for another seat. But by then the bus is filled, and I had to sit back down. The old woman touched me softly and tells me don't worry it's just an icebreaker. And then she asked where I was going. I thought a little conversation would maybe calm me down a little bit. So I told her. And she said she was going to Milwaukee too. She was out west for her sister's funeral. "I'm sorry," I said. But she said there were no worries. When you get to be her age, seeing people you love that die is a common thing. She had already buried two husbands, three children, and thirty-four cats.

Well, wouldn't you know it, Wendlestad, me and the old lady hit it off. Talked the whole way to Milwaukee. Course it comes out that I'm going there on a whim and have no idea what to do there, so she invites to me stay with her, help her out around the house, do errands, groom her cats, cook her food, help her keep warm at night. Don't get me wrong, Wendlestad, it had nothing to do with sex. I would've crushed her. No sex. None whatsoever. Despite the bazongas. And the bush. It was a relationship based purely on mutual respect. A type of love I had never experienced and have never experienced since.

Ain't that neat? Of course, I found out four months into it that she was filthy rich. Four million in the can. The mailman told me. So you can well imagine that I hung around for a while. I figured if I could get my hands on some of that loot, I'd be sitting pretty on the high horse if you know what I mean.

As it turns out she lasted six years, finally succumbing to cancer in those bazongas. I hang around, set up a very pleasant funeral for her, very well attended. Then it's lawyer time. The suit gets me in his

office, little smirk on his face, a real soothing, apologetic voice. "You'll be pleased to know, Mr. Bertleson," he tells me, "that the entire estate, after liquidating the assets, will be set up as a trust fund for the four remaining cats." The goddamned cats.

Well, ain't that some shit, Wendlestad. Six years of my life. And I loved that woman. Now the freakin' cats are living the good life, eatin' wet food every meal and napping on a bed of Persian sweaters, and I'm out on my ass.

Jesus. And so it goes.

Well, I figured there was no use moping about it, I outta find myself self a place and a job. Twenty-nine years old, never really had gainful employment. So I picked up a Journal-Sentinel, see what the world has to offer. First listing I see, they're hiring over at Brew Town Title, no experience necessary.

You know what title insurance is, Wendlestad?

Well, neither did I when I walked into that place. You just know you need it if you're buying property. It's basically assuring that you and that skinny Appleton girl legally own your house, making sure there are no outstanding loans on the place, making sure some dick doesn't show up some day, says, "I've been in Aruba, I own this mother. Get your wife and your three kids outta my house, Wendlestad." A title insurance company insures that that won't happen...or your money back. It's a total racket, but it draws in some major scratch.

So anyway, I show up at this title place, and find these two young guys, around thirty, good-looking, in suits. And come to find out they're runnin' the place. Peter and Peter. One of them has a little experience in real estate. The other has a little investin' money. They figured it was time to start a business, make some scratch for themselves.

We take a seat in their office. They tell me to tell them about myself. So I let them in on the pipe bomb fiasco, the drinking and the drugs, the dead bush in the motel, and the old woman. And when I'm through, they look at each other for a moment then look at me and tell me they've made a decision. And I says, "What's that?" And they says, "Welcome to Brew Town Title."

Well, that was easy. I started doing some typing and some phone answering, broad's work, but I had it from on high that I wouldn't be doing it for that long. And even though Brew Town Title was small, these Peter guys had a good thing going. More and more business is coming in, and they hire some broads to do what I was doing. They see I'm paying attention, and I get bumped up to searching for titles and mortgages.

And the company is growing. More people are hired. All young people, outta college, outta high school. All partiers actually. Tons of drinking, in the office, at lunch, after work at Jingles, the bar next door. At first, I can't believe the Peters are allowing this to stand, risking their growing business with a bunch of winos. But the more they allow it, the more I realize it's all part of their grand scheme.

It was a business tactic, you see. Let employees have fun. Then take clients from the banks, from the real estate companies and just get them drunk, have a good time, take them to Brewer games, foot the bill, become buddies with them, call them to hang out on Thursdays and Fridays and Saturdays, call and tell them you'll watch their kids so they can take their wives out, show them a good time and get laid for once. Hire young broads, prone to putting out, make sure all the hard-working singles are taken care of. And everybody'd come into work the next morning tired and glazed. Then they'd do it all over again. Our company, young people, we were relentless.

I, by the way, was only partying in moderation, four, five nights a week. I didn't want my past abuse to come back and haunt me, you see.

But the thing was, all this was working. Banks and closing officers and realtors started bringing their business to the Peters. I mean, you got friends, Wendlestad, if you were a banker you'd want to bring them your business, not to some jackoff title company that's going to try to short-arm your client out of a hundred bucks. The Peters made friends with the right people. They made millions. They were geniuses.

By this time I had worked my way up, become an underwriter and then later a closing officer. I was doing well for myself, still a bachelor, so nobody to spend my scratch on but myself. So I started buying a ton of senseless shit, organic milk, seventy-two-inch televisions, singing Santa decorations. I had the money, so why not? Bought a house myself, bought a second place Up North. Thought of getting into fishing? Bought a boat. And maybe I was spending a little more than I had, but I had a good job. No worries.

Then after about ten years there, the Peters had their fill of the loot, and sold off to a big title insurance corporation, Global Title. Then they went into semi-retirement. At this point, a lot of the employees are getting a little older. They got kids of their own now. The party days are winding down. Perhaps we weren't connecting with the young kids like we used to. The Peters saw that, and knew it was a good time to get out.

So under Global Title, all our jobs stayed put for a while. The corporation sent in a manager. It was kind of a pain in the ass, but most everything stayed the same. Then a year later, industry took a

bit of a hit. High interest rates, nobody really refinancing. There were a few layoffs at the lower level. Then my paycheck got pinched a little. Well, it was kind of a lot. I panicked because I got all these bills.

Office morale is going down the tubes. Everybody is looking to the Peters for support, but the truth is, it's out of their hands. They got their money, they're just employees now.

So I'm bitchin' and moanin' about it one night over beers at Jingles. My buddy, the developer, Ollie Adamly, is listening with a friendly ear. When I finish my rant, Ollie says to me, "Well, Bert, maybe I can help you out."

I'm listening, and Ollie explains. His company Ollie Adamly Builders—famous for the commercial: "Want your dream home? Old Ollie'll build it for ya!"—well, they're puttin' up a new development in the northwestern suburbs. Seminole Gardens it's called. Eighty to a hundred lots. He wants to close them all with me.

"I like the sound of those commisions," I say to him.

He says that's good. Then he says if I make sure to handle every one of them, he'll have an extra \$200 per closing for me. A consultant's fee. Ollie likes to spread the wealth.

I said, "Well, I'm in." This is the kind of good luck I needed, Wendlestad. The kind that always followed me when things got rough.

So Seminole Gardens houses are going up, they're selling like hot potatas. By the next spring, I'm closing three, four of them a week. That extra scratch is helping me out a great deal more than somewhat.

So Ollie has mortgaged all the lots at Seminole Gardens with the First Federal Bank over in La Crosse, right around about \$50,000 per lot. You don't have to memorize the numbers, Wendlestad, just the general information.

Then one weekend in July, a couple of First Federal bankers came down for a Parade of Homes in Seminole Gardens. And they start noticing all these houses have occupants, figure Ollie had sold those lots, which he did. They go back to work the next week, start retracing the loans, come to find out Ollie never paid those loans off, yet they were signed off by the closing officer of the title company. The closing officer from Brew Town Title. That closing officer being me.

Well, Wendlestad, that's when the fit hit the shan. The Peters and the corporate manager barge into my office one day, throwing closing statements at me, demanding to know what the holy hell was going

on. I freaked out because I had trusted that Ollie would pay off those loans. I assumed he had paid off those loans. Well, assumptions and a cup of coffee, Wendlestad, will get you a suspension without pay, effective immediately...and a cup of coffee

But that really didn't matter because by the end of the week, the coppers were involved. They see I got extra deposits on my bank statements, matched them up to all the loans that I had cleared on good faith. Came out to around \$200 for each of them. Almost eighty in all. I'd made sixteen grand off the deal.

Then Ollie tries to skip town with his loot, he gets caught too. I try to tell them I didn't know about anything. Which was the truth. But they saw my pipe bomb conviction and that I was questioned about a murder in Nevada a while back. My lawyer's daughter got head lice my day in court, so he bailed on me. I'd sold my boat and house Up North to pay the slimy S-O-B. I got nailed, had to sell my other house to pay the fines, and then spent eight months in the slammer. Blue-collar guy like myself, doing white-collar time. Easy time. But eight months, man. Go figure, Wendlestad. Lost my job, of course. Lost my self-respect. Naw, just kidding about that.

But it's tough, walkin' out of the slammer, nobody waitin' for ya, your life thrown for a loop once again.

I step outside into the cool winter breeze. I take a breath of free air. And that's when this courier taxi pulls up in front of me. Kid with pink, spiked hair gets out, asks me if I'm Bert Bertleson. And I says, "Who's askin'?" And he says, "Cause, dude, I gotta a letter for ya."

I take the letter, open it up. It's from Ollie Adamly. It's a thank you note. Says he's doing three years up in Black River, which I'd heard through the grapevine. But then he said he stashed all the scratch he made, from the Seminole Gardens deal. The cops never found it, he declared bankruptcy, and all the damages done had to be paid off by the title company, Global Title. And when he gets out, he's gonna go get it, and live the high life.

Then—and get this, Wendlestad—he says he's sorry and to prove it, he's got a large sum of money for me that he left with a fella he trusts in New Mexico. Says there's upwards of \$600,000 there. And it's all for me. I just gotta go and get it from this fella. Hopefully after I get the loot, my time in the slammer won't feel like such an inconvenience.

How about that, Wendlestad?

So I hop on a Greyhound and head to New Mexico. The fella I gotta see is a man by the name of Indian Jeff. And Indian Jeff hangs out in a bar in Socorro County called the Roust-A-Bout, plays in the house band, The Ten Little Indians, the joke being there are only five of them.

So it takes me a couple of days, and I get to Socorro County. And I find this Roust-A-Bout place and head in there at four o'clock in the afternoon one day. And I find the bartender and the Ten Little Indians sprawled out all over place, marijuana smoke everywhere, needles in their arms, empty shot glasses scattered all over the place. It was a sorry site to say the least.

So I says to them, "Which one of you is Indian Jeff?"

One of the Indians raises his hand, I walk over to him, and he says, "That one over there."

I turned around, and this Indian Jeff fella is half-naked, the bottom half, and he's sitting Indian-style between two bar stools.

I says to him, "Indian Jeff, I'm Bertleson. Ollie Adamly says you got my loot. I've come to pick it up."

Indian Jeff just stares straight ahead, doesn't answer me. I ask him again. Nothing. I walk back over to the first guy, and I says, "What's the matter with Indian Jeff?" And the guy laughs at me, tells me the money is gone. "Go home, muchacho," he says to me.

I walked outside of the Roust-A-Bout, a little disappointed I didn't have a sack of loot in my hands. I didn't trust those Ten Little Indians one bit, a bunch of goddang drug addicts. As you know, Wendlestad, I had a little bit of experience dealing with drug addicts, and let me tell you, we're not dealing with rational people.

I wasn't sure what to do next, thought I'd hitch a ride to the nearest town, find a place to stay. I get picked up by a cement truck on its way to Albuquerque. Driver's a guy named Pecos Bill. Helluva nice guy, come to find out he raises livestock of various sorts. Says if I need an exotic animal in New Mexico, he was the guy to go to. And I says to him, "Pecos Bill, are you telling me tall tales?" And he says no way. I can come to the ranch and see for myself. So I did. And his gal Penelope made us a fine dinner and invited me to spend the night. And later I took a look at the animals, and he's got emus and llamas and pygmy goats, tortoises, and even a couple of bengal tigers.

And, Wendlestad, funny piece of luck, this running into Pecos Bill, because that gave me an idea. And the next day after breakfast, I rounded up a calvary of items in Albuquerque that I thought I could use to convince the Ten Little Indians that the scratch they had stowed away for Ollie belonged to me.

Pecos Bill gives me a ride back down to Socorro County, and I sit outside the Roust-A-Bout, waiting for them Indians to show up for the evening. And one by one they did. And I gave them a little time to get good and high and liquor up that bloodstream.

Then right about at dusk, I figured it was time to make my move. I climbed up on the stud-quality llama I'd rented from Pecos Bill at double market price. I pulled up the machete and starter pistol that found at a pawn shop in Albuquerque. I says to myself, "Here goes nothin'." And I burst through the door of the Roust-A-Bout, screaming at the top of my lungs.

The llama starts screaming too when I fire the starter pistol. And when the Indians look up and see that machete, they start diving for cover. I jump off the llama, start bashing the bar with the machete, and tell them I'm going to kill Kennedy if anyone moves. They're all swearing in English, in Spanish, in Laguna, screamin' for their lives.

Finally, Indian Jeff runs out into the middle of the bar, cringing. Says he'll get me the money.

"What about Kennedy!" I screamed at him.

He shrugged, and kinda sheepish, he says, "Follow me to the safe?"

So I did. And then he explains that they spent about eighty thousand on drugs, and it was his hope I wouldn't kill them for it. There was still over five hundred grand left. I told him that sounded good to me. Eighty thousand I can get by without. A finder's fee, I told him. I like to spread the wealth.

He pulls a giant duffle bag out of the safe. I take a peak, and sure as shit, Wendlestad, there's a helluva a lot of money in there.

We walk back out front, and I find the other high Indians petting the llama. One of them says to me, "Can we have it?" Do you see what I mean, Wendlestad, they're not rational people. So I says to them, "Don't look at me. You'll have to take that up with Pecos Bill."

I lead the llama outside. Walked it a few miles to the Days Inn in Socorro. Paid the clerk two hundred bucks to let me bring the thing inside. Pecos picked him up the next day. I decided to take my loot and start a new life wherever the next Greyhound was headed. Boise, Idaho, as it turned out. A month later, I get an invitation to this thing. Don't know how those class officers finds us, Wendlestad, but I guess that's why we elected them in the first place.

Uh-oh, Wendlestad, incoming fat girl, two o'clock.

Uh, that's the skinny Appleton girl? Yikes. Sorry. I guess three kids and twenty-five years aren't kind to the skinny part, huh? Well, to each his own, Wendlestad. Whatever the fuck that means. Gonna go talk to Freddy Wilbanks. See if he's still doing that Greco-Roman shit. I'll see ya around.