

Changing Light Bulbs

3 Stories by Joe Cottonwood

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Franklin

In the autumn of 1968 I got hired to change light bulbs. It was a pleasant job in a strange year. The maintenance department at Washington University in St. Louis advertised for a "Junior Electrician," and I showed up. My job was to walk around campus with a cardboard box of fluorescent tubes on one shoulder and an 8' stepladder on the other. I was the guy who made all the clanking noise in the library setting up the ladder, opening the casement, dropping 20-year-old dust on your table when you were trying to study. I wasn't allowed to change ballasts or cut any wires - that was a job for a "Senior Electrician." But I had plenty to do. Washington University had a large campus. Changing light bulbs was a full time job.

Franklin showed me what to do. In spite of his rank as a "Senior Electrician," Franklin was about my age, maybe a year older. I was a bearded scruffy draft-dodging beatnik commie antiwar protester - on the surface, in the eyes of St. Louis - and Franklin was a clean-shaven churchgoing sir-saying fresh-faced piece of draft bait. I was white; Franklin was black - well, sort of medium brown. Despite all this, we hit it off because - beneath the surface, in our eyes - we saw kindred souls.

First day, in the stifling St. Louis heat walking across campus to our assigned building, Franklin asked me how I'd spent my summer.

"Long story," I said.

"Go ahead," Franklin said, stopping under the shade of a tree. "We got all day."

Students were hustling around us, heading for class. Hair was longer this year, skirts shorter, attitudes ... goofier.

I gave Franklin a brief synopsis of my summer. It included being turned down for a summer job at Jack-In-The-Box - thank God! -

hitchhiking to California and somehow winding up in a hippie commune in Big Sur, hitching back, a Hells Angel, a man who owned 7 brothels, a stolen truck, a night alone in the middle of the desert, a drunk cowboy, a day in the Winnemucca, Nevada jail, a Mormon missionary, hopping a freight train, joining my girlfriend in Colorado and driving her beat-up old VW bug to a ghost town in New Mexico and then to Vancouver, Canada and then across Montana to Madison where at a party we met Miss Wisconsin who was tripping on LSD, and then to Chicago just as the National Guard was pouring in for the Democratic National Convention, and then to Washington DC to see our parents, and back to St. Louis. And so here I was. "What about you, Franklin? How'd you spend your summer?"

"Right here," Franklin said.

And there it was: I was working my way through college; Franklin was just working.

We started in Dunker Hall. Franklin parked the ladder under a fixture, climbed up, opened the casing and began my training on everything there is to know about changing a fluorescent tube. Two minutes later, Franklin said, "Okay, you got it." He folded the ladder, leaned it against a wall, and showed me how to hide from Boss-Man: a little storage closet tucked into a wall of the English Department. The closet was about 4' high, 4' wide, and 8' deep - just big enough to hide inside. He said when he had my job, he used to go in there and stay all day.

There was no light in there. It was a wooden box. You close the door, and you might as well spend your day in a coffin. Actually, a coffin would be better: at least it would have bedding.

I'd rather do a day's work. So I said, "Um, not today, but thanks, Franklin." Then he offered to climb in there with me. So I said, "Um,

really, Franklin, no."

"Can I ask you something?" Franklin was scratching his chin.

"What?"

"Why do you want a beard?"

"Girls like it," I said. Not true, actually, but I didn't want to admit that I was following hippie fashion.

"Girls, huh." He turned and started walking. "Follow me."

He took me to the Art School building - Bixby Hall, I think - up to the top floor where in another hallway there was another little door. It was a metal door, an entry to the air vents. Franklin held the door open. "Go on," he said.

"Why?"

"Live models," he said. "Naked." And by golly, Franklin climbed right into the air vent.

"I dunno, Franklin..."

"Would you shut up and get in here?"

I followed. What can I say? Adventure beckoned.

Okay, we're in the air vent. It's about 3' across the bottom, 2' high, sheet metal. It smells like stale dust. It rumbles and creaks and booms like thunder when you move. (And it's probably full of asbestos - but who knew at the time?)

"You have to slide yourself real easy," Franklin whispered, and he started squeezing along this tunnel that was angled slightly downhill. Cautiously, I followed.

I would've bet everybody in the entire Art School could hear us moving around up there.

The tunnel made a transition from rectangular to round. At the bottom of the round section was a big circular metal grate. This grate, Franklin said, looked out over the art studio. Franklin was on his

stomach, slowly sliding feet-first down toward the grate. I was a few feet behind him, facing forward. I was wondering how Franklin expected to see anything if his feet were where his eyes needed to be.

At about this point it dawned on me that Franklin had never actually done this before. He was just trying to impress me.

The last 10' or so was at a slightly steeper angle, and that's where Franklin lost his grip. The metal was slick and the dust made it slicker.

Franklin went booming feet-first down that air tunnel and came up hard against the grate. There was a CLUNK and then a POP and all this time I was leaning forward trying to grasp Franklin's outstretched hands. Franklin was desperately looking up at me and waving his hands around toward me and couldn't see that the grate had popped off and he was starting to slide out.

Now, imagine you're in the art class. You're the basic zoned-out art student. It's one of those big airy studios with skylights and a high ceiling. You hear this odd noise. You look up, and this big metal grate comes popping off the wall 20' above you. You scramble out of the way. There's a CRASH and a CLATTER and a WUNK WUNK WUNK as the grate hits the floor and settles to rest. Then you look up again and see two feet sticking out of the air vent kicking wildly. Suddenly - this is where I finally catch hold of Franklin's desperately flapping hands - the feet zip back inside the vent. You hear a RUMBLE RUMBLE RUMBLE as Franklin and I scramble back up the vent and into the hallway. You run out of class to see what is going on and you run up the stairwell just as two dusty guys are running down a different stairwell with all the adrenaline that comes from sheer terror.

We ran all the way across the parking lot and up the grandiose front entry steps to Brookings Hall and across the glorious grass of the quad and back to the English Department where we opened that little

wooden door and climbed into that hard dark space and shut the door and lay there with the box of fluorescent tubes between us.

Never have I been so glad to spend the afternoon in a coffin. A dog wandered into the building and started sniffing at our door. You could hear students and professors walking by. A conversation developed just outside the closet between a grad student and a whiny-voiced professor, and it became clear that they were having an affair, that neither of them were enjoying it, and that it was going to end badly for both of them.

Nobody caught us. Officially, that is. Larry, the gray-haired "Master Electrician," who was something of a ladies man in the Fifties sense but that's another story, seemed to always be suppressing a smile as he ordered us around. Ever after the incident, Larry assigned Franklin and me to opposite ends of the campus.

Before the year was up, Franklin got drafted. On his last day all the electricians chipped in and gave him an envelope of cash, about a hundred bucks, as a going-away present. It was a tradition there. Franklin gave me his old pair of linesman's pliers with a nick in the handle where it had touched a live wire that sent him jumping.

I never saw him again. I lost the pliers when somebody stole my tool box.

Many years later, visiting Washington DC with my kids, I touched Franklin's name on the Wall.

Franklin was my first buddy in the trades.

Leonardo

Later in the school year - it's now December, 1968, and we're still at Washington University in St. Louis - they hired another student to be my assistant light bulb-changer. I was still a Junior Electrician. He was the Juniorer Electrician. His name was Leonardo and he was a tall, good-looking Italian from Chicago with curly black hair. He was involved in student government, which was called Student Union, and he had an eye-catching girlfriend who was built like Sophia Lauren. One day Masters and Johnson, the sex researchers, had given a lecture on campus to an overflowing crowd in Graham Chapel, an odd setting for a sex talk, and then opened the floor to questions. Julia, Leonardo's girlfriend, had taken the mic and asked "Just what is this thing you call an orgasm, anyway?" Leonardo had to live with that.

I trained him in fluorescents - the entire two-minute course of study. Then while we worked, we debated campus politics, which seemed meaningless to me in the context of war and assassination and race riots, and I asked Leonardo what they did in Student Union. What was there to govern? "Not much," he said. "That's why I'm working on an initiative to get all the elected members to be paid a salary."

I asked, "If you don't do anything, why should you be paid?"

"If we got paid," he said, "we might be motivated to do something."

Meanwhile campus politics were roiling entirely outside the realm of Student Union. At the Campus Police Station the black students held a sit-in. They had some legitimate grievances about their treatment by the campus police. A few white students belonging to SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) tried to join the sit-in; but their leader, a guy named Tommy, was considered even by other members of the SDS to be at best a clown and at worst a flaming asshole who was tolerated, ironically,

because he had a lot of money. The black students sized him up and said No thank you. So the white students marched into the Chancellor's Office, starting with about a dozen radicals and growing to about 300 people occupying the office, the reception area, a conference room and spilling out into the hallway while Chancellor Eliot remained at his desk, smoking his pipe, talking and listening. The black students came over and again asked the white students to leave because they were shifting focus away from the black students' grievances. The white students expressed sympathy but refused to leave, saying they had grievances of their own. So there were two sit-ins taking place on campus: the black students, focused, disciplined, and angry, plus the white students, chaotic, partying, and trying madly to figure out what their grievances were. ROTC, for one thing. ROTC should be abolished. Okay, what else?

Leonardo was there, but the campus radicals didn't trust him or even consider him relevant. Tommy the flaming asshole was there, but the SDS had very little support, even among the radicals. A bevy of freshmen girls were there looking for a party. Some professors dropped by, hoping to engage in a dialog. A number of moderates and even conservatives were there as well, watching to make sure one unhinged student wouldn't start smashing things and ruin the mellow vibe. Of the 300 people, more than two-thirds were observers, including myself.

There were three telephones in the receptionist's office, and students started calling friends and family back home saying "Hey, guess what, I'm calling you from the Chancellor's Office." In return, they learned that they had made the television network news. A chubby guy delivered pizza. Somebody offered a slice of pepperoni to Chancellor Eliot, who declined. A few of the radicals began debating among themselves as to whether they should hold the Chancellor as a hostage and how they should go about it. After a while somebody pointed out that while they

were debating, the Chancellor had put on his coat and departed.

I had to respect Chancellor Eliot. He never called for the police. He never provoked a riot. He listened, he talked, he dodged and wove. He was a shrewd judge of character.

The sit-in continued throughout the night with people chatting, sleeping, strumming guitars. I forget how it ended for the white students, whether anything was negotiated or won or lost, but I do remember that the day after the occupation ended, Leonardo and I were working. It must have been a Saturday.

I had the DX47 key. This was a master key that the maintenance department would issue me at the beginning of my shift and that I had to return at the end of the shift. The DX47 key opened almost every door on campus. The few doors it couldn't open included the nuclear reactor, the ROTC building, and the cashier's office. The fact that they let me walk around all day carrying this key seems so incredible that I have to question my sanity - or theirs. I once opened the Dean's office, found the file of my student records, and probably could have altered my grades. At the time, altering grades didn't interest me - or even occur to me. But on this Saturday, it occurred to both myself and Leonardo that the DX47 key might open the Chancellor's office.

And it did. Brookings was deserted that day. They'd sent all the workers home early during the sit-in, and nobody had returned yet. The students had made an effort to clean up after themselves. The paper cups, pizza boxes and Budweiser bottles were gone. The scent of marijuana remained. There was a fresh coffee stain on the carpet. Leonardo said, "I sat there. Eliot sat there, at his desk. He kept tapping his fingers and looking at his watch. He was smoking a pipe."

Leonardo picked up an envelope that was lying on top of the desk. On the back in pencil was written "This is getting boring."

"He said that." Leonardo put the envelope in his pocket as a souvenir. "I guess he wrote it down, waiting for us to shut up long enough to get a word in."

I thought of this friend I'd made, an older man who was a personal friend of the Chancellor and was taking one of my classes. To put it kindly, this man was a crank. Most people avoided him. He was well-known around St. Louis. He had actually run for Congress as a Democrat, a suicidal race in a solidly Republican district. My friend maintained that political rallies, speeches, demonstrations, parades - they were all an aphrodisiac. He said speeches and rallies got everybody excited but they never accomplished anything, never had any follow-up because afterwards, everybody went home and got laid.

I asked Leonardo, "What happened at the end of the sit-in?"

"I don't know," Leonardo said. "I went off with Julia."

Teasing, I asked, "She find out what an orgasm is?"

Leonardo looked surprised. "How'd you know?" he said.

There was a bulb burned out, so before we left the Chancellor's Office, we changed it. Then we moved on.

Rob, Ted, the Tower

To me Rob seemed the hippest guy in St. Louis - cool without effort. He never put me down, but I always knew my place. Like, one time, soon after meeting Rob, I made what I thought was a safely-cool comment about Sam Cooke, calling the pop singer a sellout to white culture. Rob just went "*Mmm*" as if pitying me, and he shook his head saying, "There wasn't a dry eye on the North Side the day Sam Cooke was shot." So not only was I disagreeing with Rob, I was disagreeing with the entire black population of St. Louis. It was intimidating. Embarrassing. Uncool.

Another time we were talking about draft resistance. I had applied to be a Conscientious Objector. My local draft board had already rejected the application. I'd filed an appeal.

"You'll lose," Rob said. "Then what?"

"Jail," I said.

"Prison," Rob corrected. It was the casual way he spoke that was so powerful. I was the naive suburban muffin. *Of course* Rob knew the difference between jail and prison. And of course I didn't.

Rob and I were accidental roommates. My girlfriend and Rob's girlfriend were sharing an apartment off campus, and so Rob and I tended to hang out there, too. Rob was short, black, and built like a basketball. He subsisted on a diet of White Castle hamburgers, which he bought by the dozen. He was a poet, a playwright, and a sometime student.

We were in the ratty kitchen. No matter how much we cleaned the place, it was still a slum kitchen. I was sipping from a mug of coffee. Rob was working through a greasy bag of White Castle hamburgers.

Rob kept studying me, chewing, rubbing one finger over his goatee.

He winced at some thought he was having and said: "You don't want to go to prison."

"Of course I don't *want* to," I said. I thought I was a pretty tough guy, actually. Idealistic and strong enough for five years in the pen.

"Prison *breaks* people," Rob said, wincing again.

Somehow I'd been thinking of it as a five-year sabbatical spent meditating and reading books.

"It just *breaks* you." Rob was shaking his head. "Mm-*mmm*."

And so I had a change of plan. I might go to Canada, or I might end up in Vietnam. But prison was no longer an option. Rob could do that to me: summon his street cred, speak a few words, and change my life.

Rob thought my light bulb-changing job was hilarious. With his local contacts, he picked up small handyman jobs and usually made more money in one hour than I earned in a shift.

One day Rob came to me needing help. A woman had asked him to move a bed out of her apartment, and Rob wanted a second pair of hands. It was a Sunday afternoon. The woman lived on the third floor. The bed was a double, too large to fit out the door and down the flights of stairs.

"Couldn't we just take it apart, carry it out, and then reassemble it?" I asked.

"Glued. Antique," Rob said. "They hauled it up on a rope through a double window. That's how we'll get it out."

So we walked over to the woman's apartment, Rob with a rope coiled over his shoulder. On the way - because we happened to be passing - we stopped at the White Castle on Delmar Boulevard. There was a guy in front of us ordering five burgers. "No, wait," he said. "Make it ten." He turned around, saw us behind him, the rope on Rob's shoulder. He was tall, thin, red-haired, freckled. He smiled. With

twinkling eyes he asked, "Who you gonna lynch?"

"Some old bed," Rob said. "Heavy as a Buick. Hey - you happen to know anything about knots?"

"The Buick knot? I thought you'd never ask."

Rob doubled over in laughter. I didn't see how it was that funny. But have you ever seen love at first sight? This meeting was like that.

"I'm Theodore," the guy said. "My friends call me Ted."

"And your enemies?" Rob asked.

"The Odor."

"I'm Rob."

"And your enemies, Rob?"

"I got no enemies."

Ted and Rob were the kind of people who drew your attention in a crowd. You instantly expected something wise or funny or exciting. They had harmonizing charisma. Rob's was sharp and solid, drawing on black urban soul. Ted's was goofy and broad, drawing on white pop exuberance.

So the three of us downed some burgers, and the two of them smoked a joint - and then another - and an hour later we showed up at the woman's apartment. Stephanie Friedman. She was a bit too young to be called a shrew, but she was heading there in a sexy kind of way. She was selling the bed because it reminded her of the ex-husband. She was sucking a Benson and Hedges 100, pacing, an ashtray full of thin filters smeared with scarlet lipstick. The buyer would be arriving any minute and we were two hours late and the bed was worth fifteen hundred dollars. Rob was charging thirty to move it to the sidewalk.

First we carried the mattress and box springs down the flights of stairs. On coming back up, a woman from the second floor came out her door and complained about the noise. "It'll be over in a minute, Honey,"

Stephanie called from the landing above.

"Don't honey me, Dear," the second floor woman said.

"Don't dear me, Honey," Stephanie said.

I had a bad feeling. While Ted and Rob tied knots around the side boards of the bed frame, I examined the old wood. Walnut, I'd bet. There were cracks around all the finger joints. The glue was dead.

"We could take it apart," I said. "It's already..."

"Don't you dare," Stephanie said, grinding another butt into the ashtray.

"Okay," I said. "I believe the agreement was for thirty dollars?"

Stephanie grimaced. For some reason she'd taken an instant dislike to me. And I to her. But she opened her purse, glared at me, and handed three ten-dollar bills to Rob.

Ted, Rob and I lifted the bed frame and staggered to the open window. We'd removed the bottom slats so all we had were the four sides. I'd placed a blanket over the sill to prevent scraping. Angling the headboard out first, we dented the top of the window trim and knocked a floor lamp which Stephanie caught as it was falling.

"Careful," she said.

"This *is* careful," Rob said.

With the bed resting on the blanket, headboard outside, we shifted places so that Rob was holding the rope while Ted and I eased the bed out. There would be a critical point where the weight of the bed would shift on the fulcrum of the window frame. We had to work our way along the side of the bed, edging closer and closer to Rob at the foot as the bed tilted higher into the air. There would be a moment when we'd have to let go of the bed and join Rob at the rope. In that moment, Rob would be the only one holding the weight of the bed. We were paying such close attention to that upcoming

moment - and struggling to hold the bed as it rose higher above us with ever more weight dangling outside - that we didn't notice the frame going out of square until it was too late.

The frame flattened upon itself - like squashing a box - with a rush of ticking noises. The headboard separated. It hit the sidewalk with a sound like a splash. Meanwhile in our surprise - and fascination - neither Ted nor I had moved to help Rob hold the rope. As the bed folded upon itself, it wrenched out of our hands. The weight pulled Rob stumbling toward the window. He stopped with his feet braced against the wall - and I grabbed the rope - and the foot of the bed, now dangling outside the window, popped loose and sailed, spinning like a lazy frisbee, to land at the edge of the parking lot. Meanwhile the two sideboards had gone vertical and slipped right out of their knots, plunging like spears into the petunia garden.

I leaned out the window, transfixed by the wreckage, the rope still in my fists. It was only a few seconds, but when I leaned back inside, I was alone with Stephanie Friedman. Rob and Ted had disappeared.

She was speechless. She had bitten the end off her cigarette. She spat the filter into her hand.

"Uh, sorry," I said, unconsciously bunching the rope against my chest. "I'll ... uh ..." I ran down the stairs.

Outside, there were splinters and fragments of walnut among the grass, the sidewalk, the petunia garden. Rob and Ted were nowhere to be seen.

I could guess where they'd be.

Sure enough, they were sharing a bag at White Castle. When they saw me, they broke out in laughter. "You even saved the rope," Rob said, and he handed me the thirty dollars. "Man, it's all yours. I never woulda thought to ask in advance."

Ted asked, "Did you know?"

"Not what I expected," I said. "But the karma in that place was... was..."

"Shit," Ted said.

And from then on, shit karma was a private joke, sort of a password among us. But also from then on, I saw less and less of Rob. He and Ted were instantly tight. They became roommates, Mr. Cool and Mr. Clown, each a connoisseur of ways to get high.

Then one day Ted the prankster got arrested for an antiwar activity, destruction of military property, a felony, serious business. Who'd a thunk it? And Rob - who'd never been more than 30 miles from St. Louis and spoke no foreign language - got offered some kind of playwriting fellowship in Sweden of all places, starting next year. How's that for cool? It seemed as if some great hand was reaching into the campus and plucking us, one by one, into the real world.

Meanwhile, I got fired from my job.

The Washington University maintenance department - including Larry, my boss - expected me to work through school vacations. I disagreed. After Christmas, Larry chewed me out royally. He warned me about Spring Break. When I returned after Easter, Larry called me into his office with what was known in the department as the Beckon of Doom.

"You can't just disappear when you feel like it," Larry said. "You're an employee."

"I'm a student," I said.

"I was hoping you were a man."

That stung. As we spoke the radio outside in the equipment cage was playing oldies. Everybody in St. Louis listened to oldies. It was an oldies kind of city. Cannonball Adderly was playing "Mercy, Mercy,

Mercy." I will always associate that tune with this moment. "Just let me work this one day," I said.

"Why?" Larry asked.

"I want to go out on a good note."

"D flat?" Larry asked. He could be a stern boss but with a sense of humor.

I signed out the DX47 key, slung a box of tubes over one shoulder, a ladder over the other, and I set out. In a normal day, I might work two or three buildings and replace 20 or 30 tubes. Expectations were low, and I met them. You weren't supposed to hustle on salary work.

On this final day, I replaced 156 tubes. I worked 14 buildings. For my final act I went to Brookings Hall. With the DX47 key I unlocked the tower. Brookings Hall is the flagship of Washington University. In the center of the building is a lovely archway, and above the archway are four stone towers, the kind you'd expect on a fairy castle. Nobody was allowed up there. Spiral stairs wound upward and opened to a small turret with a magnificent view.

And I know that she knocks me off my feet, have mercy on me.

The breeze ruffled my hair. It was April. The sun was low in the west. Brookings and its towers cast long shadows to the east. Beyond the shadows stretched the green swath of Forest Park, the zoo, the lakes with lazy paddle boats, the golf links, the bustling hospital complex at the eastern edge of the park. And I could see beyond to the crumbling factories, the smokestacks, the railroad tracks, the gray offices of downtown, and beyond further across seven miles of city to the stainless steel rainbow of the Gateway Arch at the edge of the Mississippi River.

When I had arrived as a freshman, the Gateway Arch had been under construction. Each day I would stand in the breezeway of Brookings and check for progress, and each day the two edges of the

Arch were closer together, section by section, a stunning piece of construction. Now from the Brookings Tower the Arch seemed a defiant act of beauty over a city that was rotting.

I was near the end of my senior year. As the Arch had grown and become a part of the life of the city, so in a small sense had I. As a dishwasher, soda jerk, bus driver, and of course as a changer of light bulbs, I had paid my way. I had demonstrated against the war when there were only three of us - when we were photographed, investigated, spat upon, shouted at - and now we were thousands. I was creating a new student program of residence on a farm; I'd tutored children; I'd written an unpublishable novel; I'd learned how to survive on my own, how to make friends, how to love a woman. I'd gobbled knowledge in the classrooms of a challenging university and on the streets of an approachable city, a collection of neighborhoods, each a small town.

People passed through the breezeway below me and down the wide entry steps, chatting, unaware of my presence above. Wafting in the air hung the scent of decay from the chemical plants of East St. Louis.

Now, descending the grand Brookings stairs toward the city, I saw two figures side by side. One was tall and thin; the other was built like a basketball. So - news flash - Ted was out on bail. I felt a twinge of jealousy. Shit karma. Part of me had always wanted to be Rob's best buddy, and Ted had just walked right in. For Rob I was too serious, too goal-driven, and too much in love with one woman. You could do worse.

None of us knew it, but the campus was heading for a year of tragedy, the burning of a building, arrests, the killings at Kent State, a complete shutdown of classes and a canceled graduation. Today though, all lay calm in a cooling breeze. The long shadows of the city, the gleam of the Arch, the Laurel and Hardy partners descending the stairs, all seemed at peace. It was a season of hope. Of new growth. And

suddenly I realized - as I should have from the start - that I must return those thirty dollars to Stephanie Friedman. I was obliged. If I could find her. If I could face her.

I climbed down from the tower. In the maintenance building, the equipment cage, the radio was playing Sam Cooke. *Darling you, you you you, send me...* I returned the DX47 key, reported my totals on the form they shove at you after each shift. Larry raised his gray eyebrows. Nobody had ever replaced 156 tubes in one day.

"So am I leaving on a good note?" I asked.

"B sharp." Larry was not a gusher of praise. "Good luck," he said.

We shook hands. "Thanks." I held his hand. "Really.

"Really what?"

To me Larry was St. Louis in person: good-natured, easy-going, a step behind the times. He enjoyed a good beer, a friendly woman, an old song. He could appreciate small pleasures and had no desire to change.

"Really. What are you saying?" Larry asked.

"Thanks for so much." I couldn't say why, for what, to whom. But I meant it with all my heart.