

Romance and Real Estate

By George Cunningham

If you have ever been to West Texas, you will know what I mean when I say it is one wide-open, oh-say-can-you-see piece of America. You can drive for mile-after-mile with nothing at all to obstruct the view of nothing at all. Wilderness and desolation as far as the eye can see, hardly any traffic on Interstate 10, and a posted speed limit of 80 mph, which means everybody is doing 85 or 90, except those brave folks who flash by in the triple digits.

And then, every once in a while, a sign. Like the one I spotted as I cruised by with my wife Carmela on a brisk spring day recently – 20 acres, \$16,000, and a phone number. “Wow,” I say to Carmela. “Twenty acres. \$16,000. What do you think?”

“What do I think about what?” she asks.

“Buying some land, here in West Texas,” I say, a little indignant at her tone. “Look out the window. Wide-open spaces. No people, no trees, just jack rabbits, armadillos, coyotes, and buzzards to clean up the mess. This is God’s country. It hasn’t changed since the pioneers came across it in covered wagons.”

“What would we do with a bunch of land out here in the middle of nowhere,” she asks.

Now I am a little offended because she just doesn’t get it.

“Why it would be our land,” I say. “We would own it. We would walk around on it. We would wake up in the morning and gaze out at the vista and say THIS IS OUR LAND.”

“Well, there it is,” she says, gesturing out the window. “Pull over, get out, and walk around on it all you want for free. You can gaze at the vista and say THIS IS OUR LAND all you want, and nobody is going to care because nobody is going to hear you.

“And think about all the money we’ll save by not actually buying it.”

I shouldn’t be surprised, because I have always known that men are more romantic than women. Sure we may get up to go to the men’s room or to get some popcorn at the movies when the shooting stops and the kissing begins, but it’s not because we are not romantic. We just know that nothing important is going to happen in the next few minutes and this would be a good time to take a break.

The romantic part is when the cowboy straps on his guns and his sweetheart says, please don’t go, don’t leave, and he just looks at her sadly and tells her how a man’s got to do what a man’s got to do. No matter how many times I see it or how many movies I see it in, that part still gets to me.

I’m thinking that buying a piece of land in West Texas is like [that song](#) by Ernest Ball and J. Keirn Brennan:

*We’ll build a sweet little nest, somewhere in the West,
And let the rest of the world go by.*

I understand, we probably will not buy the property and build a sweet little nest, but what a nice thought. It's not reality; it's a romantic ideal, sort of like "I'd swim the widest ocean to be by your side." But that's not how women see it.

She wants to know, do you think they have sewer hookups way out here or would we have to put in a septic tank? Where are we going to get our electricity? How are we going to take a bath with no running water? Where is the nearest grocery store? And what about zoning? You don't want somebody building a 24-hour Truck Stops of America or some kind of Indian gaming casino next to your "sweet little nest."

I was kind of sorry that I brought the whole subject up. Then we get a call from our niece, who has actually been to West Texas. When she hears where we are, she talks about driving for hours through the scrub brush and rocks. West Texas, she decided on her last trip, would be a good place to bury a body.

She could have said what a nice place to plant a cactus garden or wouldn't it be fun to go rock hunting or bird watching there. No, right away she goes to burying bodies.

This is the young woman, whose feminist moment came in middle school, when the teacher remarked that virtually all serial killers are men. She immediately challenged him. "What? You're saying women can't be serial killers?" she asked him. "Girls can do anything that boys can do. We could be serial killers, just as good as them."

Clearly a different perspective on the subject of men versus women and good versus evil, but not necessarily that far off the mark. My personal experience is that women can be every bit as vicious as men, but they usually find more elegant and devious ways of expressing their anger than going on murder sprees.

In fact, I concede that women are equal to men in almost every kind of occupational and recreational pursuit. But not romance. When it comes to true romance, women have little insight about how we men feel or what touches our hearts.

And I doubt if they ever will.

Dead Fish and Soft-Hearted Women

There was this time, I remember it clearly, when Carmela and I were in the Pantanal swamplands of Brazil, fishing for piranha. Carmela caught the first one, and the Indian guide held it up by the line, the hook still imbedded in its mouth, the sharp little teeth snapping, the small but powerful body flapping around in angry defiance. With no change in expression, the guide pulled out a small club, struck the fish in the head so hard you could hear the skull break, threw its limp body into a bucket, and rebaited the hook.

Carmela was a killing machine that day. Again and again she threw in her line and again and again the ritual was repeated. By the end of the day, she had caught 12 piranha. I had caught only one. All the way back in the boat, she rubbed it in, teasing me, giving me advice on what I did wrong, telling me why I didn't catch as many piranha as she did, and generally ragging on me without mercy.

That evening in the mess hall of the little compound of cottages we shared with other adventurous tourists, we all enjoyed piranha stew. It was indeed delicious, but the teasing did not let up. I tried to be a good sport, even though you could see the macho Indian guides and kitchen staff were laughing and probably thinking, "What kind of man is this, whose woman catches more piranha than he does, and then scorns him in front of others."

Well, maybe they weren't thinking that, but that's what it felt like at the time. Nonetheless, I took it in good spirits and later I got even, but that's another story.

Flash forward now more than two decades to a 1½-acre private pond in south Georgia just a couple of weeks ago. Carmela is again fishing. This time the bait is live crickets, all held in a little metal bucket with screened sides to keep them from escaping. She braces herself, makes a face, and then plunges her hand into the bucket of bugs. One of them crawls up her arm and leaps free.

"Get him," calls my brother Bill. She reaches out tentatively, but the cricket hops off into the weeds and escapes.

Later she confesses what everybody already knew. She let him go on purpose. He was a brave little cricket, she tells us. He made his bid for freedom, and she didn't have the heart to dash his dreams.

Finally Bill gets a cricket on the hook for her, the little insect's legs kicking as he goes through his death throes, and tosses the line into the pond with a small bobber floating on the surface. The bobber dips below the water and Carmela pulls the line, but comes up with an empty hook. Another cricket and the same thing. The fish took the bait, but not the hook. A third time and again, no fish. But the fourth time, she gives the line a little jerk and out came the thief who had been stealing her bait – a brim, about four inches long with a little yellow belly. The hook was embedded so deep in his mouth that my brother had to reach in with needle-nosed pliers to get it out, and all the time Carmela is saying, "don't hurt him, don't hurt him."

This is the same woman, who gleefully pulled piranha after piranha out of the water and watched as a stoic Indian guide dispatched them to fish heaven. The piranha was different. The piranha were snapping and ready to take on the world. We had already been warned not to swim in the water. It wasn't the South American alligator known as the Jacaré that lined the bank, we were



Piranha



Brim

told. It was the schools of piranha that infested the waters that you had to watch out for. They could strip the flesh off animal or man in a matter of minutes. You would be dead well before you could reach the safety of the shore.

The brim, on the other hand, was cute. He lay on the wooden rail of the fishing dock, gasping for air, his eyes in a panic, his little yellow belly going in and out.

This little fellow is going to catch us an even bigger fish, my brother said, snagging a bigger hook through his body and throwing him back in.

Carmela is a soft-hearted woman. What she had in mind, when she asked to go fishing, was sitting by a little pond or stream, dangling a lazy line in the water, watching the dragon flies skim across the surface, and listening to the birds sing in the trees. Killing man-eating piranhas in the swamplands of Brazil is one thing. Torturing and killing cute little fish with yellow bellies, is quite another.

“I’m through fishing,” Carmela says, putting down her pole. “I’m going to become a vegan.” She is only half joking. I know my wife. She is having trouble sitting by the shore while the little fish she caught swims beneath the surface on the end of a line, in agony, waiting for a bigger fish to attack. She feels responsible.

So what happened to my killing machine from Brazil? Did she lose her killer instincts? The truth is that she has always been a soft-hearted woman. But it’s a lot easier killing and eating something, that if it got the chance would kill and eat you, than a sweet little fish with a yellow belly, just minding its own business.

It may be kill or be killed, for most animal predators, including us humans. But soft-hearted women have a better idea.

Live and let live. That’s Carmela’s credo, and she’s sticking to it.

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