



Rosebud

THE GHOST OF A MAN standing in Betty Vernon's doorway grinned at her under dark and deep-set eyes. *Skin and bones*, she thought, sizing him up. *Jeez.*

She hadn't expected it to be this bad.

Still, Betty smiled at her hollow-cheeked visitor and decided to make the best of it. When he broke the ice, blurting out, "You're so skinny!" she smiled and replied, "Look who's talking!" Then she hugged him, half expecting him to snap in two, and invited him inside.

Phil Gernhard had been her very first sweetheart, in the mid-1950s. She was Elizabeth Van Doninck then, an eighth grader at St. Martha's Catholic School in Sarasota, Florida. Phil was older, a sophomore at Sarasota High.

Nearly fifty years later, he'd accepted a Thanksgiving invitation to her modest home in Bradenton, just a few miles from where they'd both grown up. The house she shared with her husband of four decades, Jim. The house that filled up with boisterous children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren on holidays.

Gernhard had driven straight through to Bradenton from his big brick house in Brentwood, one of Nashville's most exclusive suburbs, loading an overnight bag into the back of his giant black Hummer for the twelve-hour drive south.

The Hummer was a trophy car, the kind driven by wealthy men who are used to riding high and looking down on the rest of the world, and envied by those who drove smaller and less-imposing vehicles.

He'd filled his house, and his life, with such possessions, because he was rich, and he enjoyed status symbols. Phil Gernhard was, on that Thanksgiving weekend in 2007, a successful executive in the music industry, a man who not only influenced popular culture in America but also helped to plan things and carefully make them happen. In every sense, Phil Gernhard was a player.

For three decades, he'd been the key man on the A&R (Artists and Repertoire) team at Nashville-based Curb Records, where he'd molded, advised, and worked tirelessly for such country stars as Tim McGraw, Jo Dee Messina, and Rodney Atkins, making sure they had just the right songs, recorded with the right producers, and had those songs played on the right radio stations. Without him, none of them would have made a ripple.

He'd started young. As a nineteen-year-old college student, away at the University of South Carolina, Gernhard—entirely untrained in music-making but never a fan of sitting in class—had produced a handful of singles for the rhythm 'n' blues singing group Maurice Williams and the Zodiacs. The third of these, the Williams-penned “Stay,” was issued on a national label and went to number one on the charts. It sold more than a million copies.

Back in Florida, he then cowrote the novelty hit “Snoopy vs. the Red Baron,” America's fastest-selling single of 1966. It had been Gernhard who “found” the teen garage band the Royal Guardsmen and produced a string of “Snoopy” singles for them throughout the decade, negotiating a royalty deal with cartoonist Charles M. Schulz, creator of the comic strip beagle.

“Snoopy vs. the Red Baron” sold five million records around the world.

After the novelty wore off and the public abandoned the Guardsmen, Gernhard did, too, only to revive the sagging career of one-time doo-wop singer Dion DiMucci with a maudlin ballad called “Abraham, Martin and John.” Another million-seller.

Gernhard then discovered and produced hit records for his fellow Floridians Lobo (“Me and You and a Dog Named Boo,” “I'd Love You to Want Me”), Jim Stafford (“Spiders & Snakes,” “Wildwood Weed”), and the Belamy Brothers (“Let Your Love Flow”).

Phil Gernhard was a legend.

Until he threw in his lot with Curb, he'd been entirely independent.

In the 1960s and into the '70s, independent producers found the talent, produced the records, and sold the final product—a finished master recording—to the highest bidder. They paid the production costs up front, but if a record hit, the money came rolling in, especially if the next record by the same artist sold well, too. Then all the terms were renegotiated accordingly, the distributing label more than willing to share the wealth with an independent who reliably brought them hits.

It happened with the Royal Guardsmen and Laurie Records, with Lobo at Big Tree, and with Stafford at MGM. All Florida artists, discovered and developed by Phil Gernhard. Multiple hits, bigger paychecks each time.

Gernhard was a self-made man, but he didn't get rich by being stupid. In his production deals, he almost always negotiated a piece of the song's publishing for himself—sometimes more than that. Which meant that he not only got paid for producing the record, and for delivering the record to the label; he also got paid—in part—for the songs themselves, songs he had no hand in composing.

This was fairly common practice at the time, and some recording artists considered it part of their deal with the devil—after all, Gernhard worked extremely hard on their behalf.

Others didn't take it so well.



Betty Vernon didn't know any of this until she'd received a phone call, out of the blue, in the fall of 2007, from a woman who identified herself as a private investigator. "If you're Elizabeth Vernon," the voice said mysteriously, "someone wants to give you something."

A practical, no-nonsense woman, Vernon smelled a scam, the kind of thing senior Floridians often fall prey to. She hung up, and the woman called back repeatedly over the following days. Finally, Vernon challenged her: "If you're on the up and up, and this isn't a scam, then you won't mind meeting me in my attorney's office."

The woman agreed, but at the arranged meeting she hemmed and hawed and wouldn't divulge her client's name, saying he wished to remain anonymous. Still skeptical, Vernon pressed her. The private investigator pulled out her phone and placed a call. "Unless I give Mrs. Vernon your name, she's not talking to me," she said.

The call ended, and there was a long pause before the woman spoke.

“She finally said it was Phil. He was dying, he had no family, and he wanted to leave his estate to me,” Vernon explained. “I knew he had made it big in the music industry, but that’s all I knew.”

Phil Gernhard. The skinny, red-haired kid with the adorable gap between his front teeth, who rode Schwinn bikes and the city bus with her everywhere in those sunny, halcyon days. The boy who sat in the back seat of her mom’s car, chattering away, while Mrs. Van Doninck drove her daughter to Lido Beach for crack-of-dawn summertime swim practice.

Her first sweetheart.

“He always worked,” Vernon remembered. “He told me he had a paper route when he was a kid, and it got so big he had subdivided it with other kids. He had a little business going. That young, he was already an entrepreneur.”

As a teenager, “he had a job working in the kitchen in one of the big department store restaurants downtown, and when a new Elvis record hit, he had it and he was back at my house and we were dancing. They were happy times.”

Sitting in the conference room of her lawyer’s office, Vernon stared at Gernhard’s emissary with disbelief.

“She said, ‘Do you remember the Sadie Hawkins Dance?’ In those days, girls didn’t ask boys out, except on Sadie Hawkins Day. I had invited him. She told me Phil said that was the happiest day of his life.”

Wow, Betty thought. *That’s kind of pathetic.* It was a lot for her to take in.

She remembered that she had heard from Gernhard exactly once in all the years gone by, rather indirectly. In August 1977, the day Elvis Presley died, “I got a telegram—no return address, no nothing. And all it said was, ‘Part of our youth has died. Phil.’”



She asked for, and got, Gernhard’s e-mail address, and wrote to him. At first shy and tentative, their correspondence led to a series of increasingly lengthy phone calls. “Fifty years of catching up,” they called it.

He told her he had cancer, and that his doctor had said he wouldn’t live to see the year 2010. He was putting his entire life—his decisions, the good and the bad—under a microscope. He told Betty she was the only girl he’d ever loved.

“He had a beautiful home, in a high-end neighborhood,” she said. “He told me, ‘I was sitting there thinking what am I gonna do with all this?’”

He had no children. He said, 'I'm gonna give it to Betty.' That came to his brain.

"He wanted to leave me his estate, and he wanted to set up a college trust fund for all my grandchildren." How did he know all about her? "I guess the private investigator had poked around and earned her money."

Jim Vernon, a retired civil engineer, was Betty's second husband. Phil told her Jim was a lucky guy. "He wanted to know about my grandchildren," she explained. "He wanted to know about Jim. And what happened with my first marriage."

Gernhard, who had been married four times and was at that moment well into a protracted, bitter divorce, told his old flame that he'd tied the knot only once and that it hadn't ended well. And he left it vague. "Maybe he didn't want me to think ill of him—married, divorced, married, divorced, married, divorced," Vernon said. She didn't question anything he told her.

She asked Phil about celebrities she thought a lot of; he'd met pretty much all of them, and was hard to impress. Still, he thrilled her with inside-baseball stories.

"He told me how insane it was in the '70s in California. The affluence and the corruption in the business. The drugs. He said it was like a buffet—the drugs were out on the table, whatever you wanted. He was very upfront about it. And he lost so many friends when the AIDS epidemic hit."

He told her about the artists he'd worked with, how his particular talent was matching the right song with the right performer. He told her about Mike Curb, the CEO of his record company, and how they'd been friends since the 1970s. Curb Records was almost exclusively a country music label, unlike the music they'd danced to in their youth. Phil didn't produce any more, but his ears were golden. He would be an asset to any record company. He liked Curb.

He talked about everything except his illness. He struck her as a very, very lonely man looking back on a life of disappointments and missed opportunities. He'd given every bit of himself to music.

"He says to me one day, 'What do you want? What do you need?' I had no idea what he was thinking. I said, 'Well, my car is nine years old.' Then he said, 'Where do you like to travel?' I said, 'I'd love to go to Alaska, and I've always wanted to drive down the Pacific Coast Highway.'"

Soon a chocolate-brown 2008 GMC Acadia was delivered to the

Vernons' driveway. He also made arrangements to send Betty and Jim on an Alaskan cruise, first-class all the way, then to travel by train to California, where they'd drive a rental car south on the scenic PCH and fly back to Florida out of Los Angeles.

Gernhard's Thanksgiving visit to the Vernons' house was the first time he'd been back since his mother's funeral, twelve years before. Then, he'd clashed with his father and vowed never to return.

Something—maybe it was cancer—changed his mind.

He took a suite in the Sarasota Ritz-Carlton, just two blocks from the Episcopal church he'd attended with his family in the '40s and '50s. Betty and Jim stood with him on the ornate balcony, overlooking the harbor and the Gulf of Mexico, and he sighed as he said, "I forgot how beautiful Florida is." They all went out to dinner.

More than twenty people crowded into the Vernon home for Thanksgiving, and Gernhard—dressed all in black and never removing his yellow-tinted sunglasses—surprised her hosts by acting sociable and making polite conversation with everyone, even the children.

"But he was really sick," Betty said. "Every once in a while he'd say, 'Excuse me,' and go off to the bathroom to take medicine." He had to step outside when the banquet was laid out on the dining room table—Betty thought the smell was turning his stomach.

When a Vernon family friend, a doctor, asked him what kind of cancer it was, Gernhard snapped, "I don't want to talk about it."

He did enjoy talking about his "Girl Friday," a Curb employee named Kelly Lynn. "It was 'Kelly, Kelly, Kelly.' She took care of him. She was almost like a mother figure. He had a little fanny pack thing because he was taking all kinds of drugs. He was very ill. He said, 'Kelly fixed me up here, and I'm all set. I can't function without Kelly.' He thought the world of her. He was paying for her son to go to a private school.

"There were times you could tell his brain wasn't functioning correctly, and I think that's what pushed him over the edge. He didn't want to be like that. And he was going deaf. Mike Curb had said to him, 'For God's sake, Phil. Of all people, you can't go deaf.'"

Before he left town, he showed the Vernons photos from his recent vacation to Scotland. There was no one else in the pictures; he'd gone alone. That, too, struck Betty as exceptionally sad.

The holiday over, Gernhard returned to his Brentwood estate, to Curb Records, and to his Girl Friday. The visit, Mike Curb would say

later, “brought him tremendous closure. He explained it to my wife and I . . . There was even a spiritual aspect to it that he didn’t speak too much about, but since he had never spoken about spiritual things before, it was very interesting to hear him talk about that aspect of life.”

He and Betty still spoke on the phone, but less frequently, and she could tell he was getting weaker. He would sometimes just stop talking in the middle of a sentence, his mind wandering, or searching for something intangible—or just going blank as the disease ravaged it.

As 2007 turned into 2008, she still had difficulty processing what had happened. “It was crazy; it was insane,” Vernon said. “My husband and my kids knew, but I didn’t tell anybody else because it was so wacky. It was a long time before I said anything to anybody about it.”

Betty worried about her strange, emaciated, troubled friend.

By mid-February, she hadn’t heard from him in weeks. She feared the worst.

On the twenty-second, she received a call from Steve Parker, Gernhard’s accountant and the designated executor of his will. Phil had been found dead on his bedroom floor; he’d put the barrel of a silver revolver in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

Parker wanted to talk about his bequests to Betty and her family.



He had everything, and he had nothing.

It’s tempting to dismiss Phil Gernhard as some self-medicating Charles Foster Kane, a used-up old man wandering the lonely rooms of his cavernous Tennessee Xanadu, surrounded by his trophies and awards and the possessions he never got around to uncrating.

Yet the fictional Kane focused his considerable talent, ego, and ambition on little more than the glorification of Charles Foster Kane.

Although he certainly enjoyed the money—and the notoriety—Gernhard’s focus was almost always on channeling *his* considerable talent, ego, and ambition to seed the success of others.

Still, like Kane he died alone, inside a cocoon of his own making, thinking back to happier days, to an innocent time when he knew how to love, and be loved, without suspicion or judgment.