**This American Life - 610: Grand Gesture**

Prologue

**Ira Glass**

So Miki, this is your high school.

**Miki Meek**

This is my high school. And it's really weird to be here with you, even though I suggested this. Even though this was my idea.

**Ira Glass**

We're in Payson, Utah, a small town about an hour south of Salt Lake City. It's me and Miki Meek, one of the producers here at *This* *American* *Life.* She hasn't been back to her high school since she graduated, but says it looks the same. And same groups of kids too-- jocks, stoners, cowboys, regular kids.

**Ira Glass**

And which were you?

**Miki Meek**

I think I was a regular kid. Regular kid/county kid.

**Ira Glass**

OK, so you guys lived in the country.

**Miki Meek**

We lived in the country, yeah, yeah. Let's see, where are we are walking by now? Just walking through the hallway. This is the main hallway. Opening scenes of *Footloose* are right here.

**Ira Glass**

Oh, right. Payson High School is where they filmed *Footloose.*

**Miki Meek**

Yeah, the opening scene, so Kevin Bacon's first day of school. He walks past the cafeteria in this hallway, and a cowboy confronts him, right in this spot.

**Ira Glass**

Right in the spot where we're standing?

**Miki Meek**

Right in the spot where we're standing, yeah.

**Ira Glass**

I downloaded the film later. Totally true. But of course, America, everybody knows there's a time to be born and a time die, and a time to dance, and a time to talk about *Footloose.*And this is not that time.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

We are not here in Miki's school to talk about a movie about dancing. We're here to talk about real life dances at this high school, and more specifically, the way that the real life students ask each other to dances.

**Miki Meek**

You ask someone to a dance, you've got to go big. Which means you've got to leave something on someone's porch. You gotta decorate their car. You gotta break into their bedroom. You gotta send them on a scavenger hunt.

**Ira Glass**

Break into their bedroom and do what?

**Miki Meek**

Decorate it, trash it, leave a message.

**Ira Glass**

The very minimum anybody does is a bit of prop humor. You leave some object and then a pun written on poster board. Like Owen Grimshaw was just asked to the Sadie Hawkins Dance this way.

**Owen Grimshaw**

They had pants in a box. And they said "I'd ship my pants if you went to Sadie's with me."

**Ira Glass**

A senior, Ivan Webber, Told me about last year's Sweethearts dance, he took a laminated name tag, wrote a message on it, and then froze it in a block of ice, which he was very proud of.

**Ivan Webber**

I was just like, "Going to Sweethearts would be cool." And it was like, "it's pretty chill." Like, chill. OK?

**Ira Glass**

No, I get it.

Sometimes the props they use are living animals. And some of these kids have access to farms. Ivan's little sister Mariah left a pair of goats at a guy's house with a poster.

**Mariah Webber**

And it said, "I'm not kidding. I would love to goat to Sadie's with you."

**Ira Glass**

Slight variation on that, senior Alyssa Sutton left a guy a basket with four baby kittens and this message.

**Alyssa Sutton**

"I'm not kitten when I say I want to go to Sadie's with a cool cat like you."

**Ira Glass**

Senior Ashlynn Yul left a chicken for a guy who asked her to a dance, a live chicken and Starbursts. The message?

**Ashlynn Yul**

"I'm not going to chicken out on you. I've been bursting to say yes."

**Ira Glass**

The guy actually returned the chicken. The goat got returned too. The kittens stayed. Junior Caitlin Mitchell left a tree for her boyfriend.

**Caitlin Mitchell**

And I asked him, "It would be tree-mendous if you'd go to Sweethearts with me." And he answered back with "Needle-less to say, I'd be burning up if I'd said no." And he lit the trees on fire in my front yard.

**Ira Glass**

Wait. He set them on fire?

**Caitlin Mitchell**

Yeah. There was snow in my yard, so-- I mean--

**Ira Glass**

Saying yes, you're supposed to be as creative as the person who asked you. Tyler Johnson told me about the time that his sister had a neighbor help her out with that. The neighbor was a policeman, and she hid in the back of his police car as he spotted the guy who asked her to dance.

**Tyler Johnson**

So I pulled him over. And at the time, the kid had a few-- I don't know, the point system, where you can get your license suspended. He was really close to getting his license suspended, so I thought it'd be extra funny. And so he pulled him over. Officer told him all these things that he did wrong. And he was freaking out. And then the officer gave him a ticket, and the ticket just said "yes," and then my sister's name on it.

**Ira Glass**

Incredibly, the guy still took her to the dance. It can be a ton of work doing these things. The most elaborate one I heard about was I met this one couple, Tyler Batty and Liz Callahan. And Tyler kidnapped Liz, this elaborate kidnapping-- duct tape, blanket over her head. She knew it was fake, by the way. Was not scared.

**Liz Callahan**

There was three boys, and they were talking. They were trying to sound like they're terrorists kind of. They were trying to talk him in some weird language.

**Tyler Batty**

And we'd just kind of shout gibberish, just a mix of any foreign words we know from Japanese, Russian, Korean, kind of sticking to mostly like a Russian accent. Like this, deeper.

[SPEAKING GIBBERISH]

Just kind of random stuff like that.

**Ira Glass**

Give me a little more.

**Tyler Batty**

It's not logical. Just shout random words.

[SPEAKING GIBBERISH]

Just random syllables and funny stuff, goofy stuff, yeah. But I mean, if you were wrapped up in a blanket and someone's talking like that, you're more than likely to be scared.

**Liz Callahan**

I was like, I know it's you guys. And they were like, no you don't! What?

**Tyler Batty**

There's no way she could have known who it was.

**Liz Callahan**

So I was calling all their names out. I was like, I know you guys are right there.

**Ira Glass**

They threw her into the back of an SUV and then swerved around the roads, up into the mountains. And then Tyler staged a rescue in a Batman costume, supposedly saving her from the fake kidnappers.

**Tyler Batty**

I just start flinging open doors, kind of punching my buddies kind of hard, so it sounds realistic. Of course, it's not super hard punches, but just they're grunting, and uh, oh. They're yelling stuff. "Get him. Where is he?" So I throw open the back hatch.

**Liz Callahan**

He had his Batman mask on, and he has this Batman voice that he likes to talk in. And you can't really understand him.

**Tyler Batty**

And I said-- man, what did I say? "Don't move. I'm here to rescue you."

**Ira Glass**

We came to Payson High School because our show this week is all about grand gestures. And while you hear about schools where kids do these kinds of things for prom-- in fact, right now MTV is casting a TV show called *Promposal--* here in Utah and a few other places around the country, they make the grand move every dance-- homecoming, Sweethearts dance, Sadie Hawkins, Winter Ball. And when I was going around meeting kids and I'd break the news to them that kids elsewhere do not do this, they were surprised.

**Juddy Bear**

Really?

**Ira Glass**

This is a junior everybody calls Juddy Bear.

**Juddy Bear**

No other states?

**Ira Glass**

Most places don't.

**Juddy Bear**

Wow. Well, that would be terrifying, because then she could say no to my face, rather than say no through a creative way.

**Ira Glass**

Alyssa Sutton knew the truth about how kids elsewhere ask each other to dances, but she had a special source that gave her insight into how people live outside of Utah.

**Alyssa Sutton**

I found that out from reading *Harry* *Potter.* When they just asked each other to the Yule Ball, I was like what the heck? Do people actually do that? And I was like, I thought it would just be so awkward, though, to walk up and be like, "Hey, so you want to go to the dance?" And then you wouldn't know. You don't have anything to post on social media and say like, "Oh, they asked me with kittens or on a scavenger hunt."

**Ira Glass**

The kids I talked to said this idea of just walking up to somebody out of the blue, and then just asking them to a dance, it seems lame. Like, where is the effort? If doing these elaborate schemes just sounds like so much work and so much fuss just to ask somebody to a dance, a bunch of kids told me, no, no, no. It's like this project. You draft your friends into it. The invitation is a whole activity itself.

**Ivan Webber**

She lives just over here, and there's a little park right next to her house. And that's where we're gonna bury it. Hopefully, she doesn't see us as we drive by.

**Ira Glass**

Case in point, one day after school, I joined Ivan Webber-- the kid who froze the laminated name tag and thought it was chill-- and his little sister Mariah, and his friends, Ezri, Max, and Kylie, to bury in the snow a little treasure chest-- actually an old wooden jewelry box Ivan got at a thrift store.

It has a note inside to the girl who asked Ivan to go to the Sweethearts dance, a note saying yes. We get to a little park about a block from his date's house. It's a bright, clear sky day. Ivan is like a skinny, teenaged Tom Hanks, wearing just a green t-shirt, even though it's freezing outside.

**Ivan Webber**

OK, we may have spray paint and a shovel, but we're definitely not going to be using them in a murder vandalism type way. Yeah, so the spray paint is to make the X for where we're going to bury the treasure chest in the snow. And the shovel is for her to dig it up. And this is where we have our note. This is our note. We're going to put it on the shovel and leave it at her doorstep.

It says "It would be neat if you went down the street. The X marks the spot. There may be treasure, or maybe not." That's pretty good in my opinion.

**Ira Glass**

We tromp around a little bit. The snow's maybe a foot deep.

**Ivan Webber**

OK, where do we want to bury this? We do it by one of these trees? We'll do it by that tree. OK, what if we just do it right there? That looks good. What if we just do it right there?

[SHOVELING]

**Ira Glass**

They put the wooden box in the hole, cover it over again with snow, pat it down.

**Ivan Webber**

Yeah, we're going to spray paint it now.

[SHAKING SPRAY CAN]

OK, drawing an X.

**Ira Glass**

What color is this?

**Ivan Webber**

It's the leftover stuff we had in our garage color. That pinkish, fleshy, salmon color.

**Ira Glass**

Ezri points out it's less pirate and more bladder infection. Our treasure marked and now buried in the snow, Ivan takes the shovel and the note and heads up the street one block to leave it on the girl's porch. Her name's Makadie. I pin a wireless mic to him.

**Ivan Webber**

OK, I'm now walking up to her doorstep. Just gonna set this here. OK. We've got a shovel set down by her door. I'm just gonna open up the glass thing, hit her doorbell, and knock. Now, I'm running, I'm running, I'm running, I'm running, running, running, running.

**Ira Glass**

Fast forward 36 seconds.

**Ivan Webber**

OK, in the car.

**Ira Glass**

There's a big SUV between our car and the path that Makadie's going to walk to the park. So if we all stay low, it's possible Makadie will not notice that we're here. And so we all crouch down, and we take turns peeking, to see if she's coming.

**Ivan Webber**

Oh, I see her. I see her. She's right there. Yeah, OK. She's leaving her house, isn't she? Yeah. Yeah, she's got the shovel. Oh, oh, yeah. Well, she's looking around. She doesn't know which way to go. Dang it. I hope she guesses right. She doesn't know which way to go.

**Mariah Webber**

Wait, we didn't include that in the note?

**Ivan Webber**

Well, it didn't rhyme, OK?

[LAUGHTER]

**Mariah Webber**

Wait, nowhere in the note did we say "go to the park?"

**Ivan Webber**

Someone send her a text. Ezri, send her a text. Just tell her, "go south." Oh, she's figuring it out.

**Ira Glass**

Makadie and her sister walk towards us and the park. They get closer and closer. We are all as low in the car as we can be.

**Ivan Webber**

Ira, think you have the best angle. Can you see? Is she there?

**Ira Glass**

I can't see if she's in the parking lot. So to see what's happening, Kylie, who's in the driver's seat, takes the little square mirror that she got at Walmart to check her eyebrows during the day, and thrusts it in the air like a periscope above the steering wheel, and then--

[HONK]

[SCREAM]

**Ivan Webber**

Kylie!

**Ira Glass**

Hits the horn.

[LAUGHTER]

**Ivan Webber**

Stay down, stay down.

**Kylie**

She's coming for us!

**Ivan Webber**

No, no. OK, Kylie, drive us away.

**Kylie**

She's coming for us.

**Ezry**

Get down, Ivan.

**Ivan Webber**

I'm down, I'm down. I'm hiding.

**Ira Glass**

We pull out past a very confused looking Makadie and her sister, cruise up the street. Kylie repeats how sorry she is in between laughing. Ivan looks out the rear window at the park.

**Ivan Webber**

Look, look, they're finding it. I think they're finding it.

**Ira Glass**

It this more fun than the actual dance?

**Kylie**

Yes. It really is. I mean, in this case, the dance is not going to compare.

**Ivan Webber**

This has been quite an experience.

**Kylie**

It's just so fun to get it together and then have all those embarrassing, scary, anxious moments. I don't know. It's fun. It's the best part.

**Ira Glass**

Other kids I talked to said the same thing. In fact, the elaborateness of these stunts does not necessarily mean that the kids feel strongly about the person the stunt is for. The guy who kidnapped the girl and dressed in a Batman costume to stage a fake rescue? She and he both told me it was not romantic between them. They don't even like each other as more than friends. He and his buddies just thought it would be cool to stage a kidnapping.

Well, today on our program, we have stories of grand gestures, and so many of them are like that. They're an end in themselves. Even when they seem like they're trying so hard to say they're about love, and devotion, and some beloved person. From WBEZ Chicago. Oh wait, I do not need to say this myself. Can you say this for me? "From WBEZ Chicago?"

**Batman**

From WBEZ Chicago.

**Ira Glass**

It's *This* *American* *Life.*

**Batman**

It's *This* *American* *Life.*

**Ira Glass**

I'm Ira Glass.

**Batman**

I'm Ira Glass.

**Ira Glass**

Stay with us.

**Batman**

Stay with us.

**Ira Glass**

That was good. That was good. OK, we'll start the show right there.

**Act One: Dr. Strangelove.**

**Ira Glass**

Act one, Dr. Strangelove. OK, this first story is about a guy who goes so far in his grand gestures that I need to say before we start, this story is not for kids. OK? Here's Miki Meek.

**Miki Meek**

I have a pile of newspaper articles about the story I'm going to tell you. It's a love story from Florida in the 1940s. The papers went nuts for this story. It's about a man who loved a woman so much that he never got over her death. *The* *Miami* *Herald* at the time ran their love story across the front page.

The man's name is Carl von Cosel. There's a giant photo of him, where he looks charming and fragile in a white suit. Right next to that is a photo of Elena Hoyos in her wedding dress and a tiara. Her hair is in perfect black ringlets. She's beaming.

Elena died young. She was just 22. After her death, Von Cosel visited her grave every day and brought flowers. He built her a fancy mausoleum with a dome, surrounded by palm trees and flower pots.

And then this is the thing that made it a news story. Von Cosel stole her body from her grave, and then kept her in his house for seven years.

From the time von Cosel first met Elena, he launched into a series of grand gestures, each bigger than the previous, until he went too far.

They first met at the hospital in Key West. Von Cosel was an x-ray technician, and Elena was 20 years old and sick with tuberculosis. Back in the '30s, TB killed a lot of people. There was no cure.

I talked to a guy named Ben Harrison. He wrote a book about the two of them. He lives in Key West and got curious about the case when he moved there. He says that von Cosel fell in love with Elena right away.

**Ben Harrison**

She apparently was strikingly beautiful. He took a blood sample from her finger. Normally, he would take it from a patient's ear, but hers was far too lovely to mar.

**Miki Meek**

Is that what he said?

**Ben Harrison**

Yes these are in his journals, that he didn't want to in any way disfigure her beauty.

**Miki Meek**

This was the kind of guy von Cosel was. He wrote a memoir, where he said things like he didn't want to disfigure Elena's beauty, and that her voice sounded like a mockingbird's song in spring. He considered himself a scientist/inventor and claimed to have multiple university degrees in subjects like chemistry, philosophy, and physics, although Ben says he never could verify any of that.

He told me von Cosel's first grand gesture is telling Elena, sure, science hasn't developed a cure for TB, but--

**Ben Harrison**

Not to worry. He has revolutionary new cures, and he will cure her.

**Miki Meek**

And what were they? I mean, how was he going to cure her?

**Ben Harrison**

Well, he at first started radiation treatments there at the hospital. Then, as her illness progressed, he came by and started treating her in her home. He made this Frankenstein-ish electrical contraption.

**Miki Meek**

What did it look like?

**Ben Harrison**

It looked like a big globe, and it had sparks inside. And he put electrodes on her chest, and they would shock her. He claimed that this put thousands of neutrons in the air, billions of neutrons in the air. And these were going to help cure her.

**Miki Meek**

This gets weirder and weirder.

**Ben Harrison**

It was pure nonsense. It was just not going to work.

**Miki Meek**

Did she want the treatments, though?

**Ben Harrison**

I mean, there was just nobody else who offered any hope whatsoever. So this was her only chance, because he was the only one offering a silver bullet.

**Miki Meek**

Von Cosel was full of confidence about his own abilities. For example, he was trying to fix up a broken airplane he'd parked behind the hospital. It didn't have wings. He lived inside it. He was a German immigrant in his 50s, with a trim beard and wire-rim spectacles, walking around town, wearing all white, and carrying a cane.

So far, their story has the makings of a great tragic love story. He loved her on sight. She was sick with an incurable disease that he'd do anything to cure. But there's one detail most of the newspapers left out. She never loved him.

Elena was actually married to another guy. But after she got sick, he left her. So she moved back in with her family. They didn't have a lot of money.

Von Cosel pursued Elena with the same arrogance and optimism he did everything else, giving her gifts, jewelry, a catalog where he told her to pick out whatever she wanted. But Elena's sister, Nana Medina, says it wasn't mutual.

She gave a long interview to the *Miami* *Herald,* where she said, quote, "She never loved him. She was only nice to him because my mother told her she should be kind to those who were kind to her. She looked upon von Cosel as a grandfather. And when he proposed marriage, she always told him 'You are too old. Why, you are old enough to be my grandfather. What's more, I do not love you.' He became so persistent that we asked him to stay away from the house."

Elena died about a year and a half after she met von Cosel. When he heard the news, he rushed across town to be by her side. Here's how he wrote about it in his memoir.

**Von Cosel**

I went down to my knees before the bed. Elena's jaw had dropped, but her eyes were bright and clear. They had a faraway look. And as I gazed into those beloved eyes, they seemed to become deeper and deeper, like wells, which, with magnetic power, drew me in. I could not tear my eyes away from her. I could look forever. My poor, darling Elena.

**Miki Meek**

So many of Von Cosel's choices during this period of time illustrate just how thin the line is between romantic and creepy. Gestures that seem romantic when someone loves you immediately flip to disturbing when they don't. Von Cosel paid for Elena's burial and for a headstone, which did not include her married name on it. But it did have his name inscribed on the lower half. Again, here's Ben.

**Ben Harrison**

Because for one, her married name is Mesa, and he wasn't about to put her married name on a headstone that he had bought.

**Miki Meek**

On his daily visit to Elena's grave, von Cosel starts worrying about rainwater seeping into her casket, and convinces the family to pull it from the ground. He begins building a mausoleum.

**Ben Harrison**

Von Cosel talks to the funeral director, or the night watchman, or whoever, that he needs to come in and rebed her body.

**Miki Meek**

What does that mean?

**Ben Harrison**

She's been dead for long enough so that she's decomposing. And he is very upset, because he claimed the mortician didn't follow his instructions as far as embalming goes. And so he puts new cloth on it, and cleans up the casket, and he takes off the dress she was buried in.

**Miki Meek**

Man.

**Ben Harrison**

Because it's rotted, and replaces it with cloth, and I think he put some new felt underneath her. He loved her that much.

**Miki Meek**

That's one way to describe it.

**Ben Harrison**

Yeah. And he was becoming more and more delusional.

**Miki Meek**

Elena, of course, didn't ask for any of this. She didn't love him. She's paradoxically at the center of this story and utterly left out. Still, von Cosel kept going. He put Elena in a double casket. That's one casket inside of another. He said he wanted to protect her.

**Ben Harrison**

I really don't think he accepted the fact that she was dead. I think he still felt she was alive, because I think he had valves on this thing.

**Miki Meek**

For what?

**Ben Harrison**

So he could speak with her directly into the casket.

**Miki Meek**

He wrote in his memoir that, to him, these weren't one way conversations. He would sit there in the mausoleum, and talk to her, and she spoke back to him, and sang.

**Von Cosel**

Ever since the moon began to wane, Elena had begun to sing in her casket with a very soft, clear voice, which became just a little stronger from night to night. It was always the same old Spanish song about a lover who opens the grave of his dead bride. I could distinctly hear and understand every word.

[SINGING IN SPANISH]

**Miki Meek**

The song is a Cuban bolero called "Black Wedding." Ben found out it was one of Elena's favorites after talking to her friends. Presumably, von Cosel knew this too.

[SINGING IN SPANISH]

I asked Ben to translate some of the lyrics for me.

**Ben Harrison**

A young man's lover died before their wedding. Without her love, he simply could not reason. At night, he would visit the graveyard and dream about the days she was alive.

His tears would fall upon her tombstone, the tombstone of the girl to be his bride. On a night when thunder roared and lightning flashed, he broke apart the tombstone of her grave. And with his hands, he dug into the earth, and in his arms, he carried her away. By a flickering funeral candlelight, on his bed that flowers covered, he gently laid the body of his sweetheart, and said his wedding vows to his dead lover.

**Miki Meek**

The song was written to be tongue in cheek, ironic and inappropriate, but von Cosel took it literally, as inspiration for everything he's about to do next.

**Ben Harrison**

According to von Cosel, this is her plea for him to please take her home with him, the same way the distraught lover does in the song.

[SINGING IN SPANISH]

**Miki Meek**

Von Cosel wrote that he waited for a new moon, got a wagon, and stole the casket. He brought Elena home, and tried to repair her decomposed body.

**Ben Harrison**

Her face was in such poor shape that he had to do something, and so he put on this gauze wax concoction, and fastened it to what was left of her face.

**Miki Meek**

He did this to the rest of her body too, inserted glass eyes and painted on eyebrows. Von Cosel hadn't been deterred by what Elena wanted back when she was alive. Now that he had her dead body in his home, he could play house, dress her up, have sex with her. And he did all of those things.

He wrote in his memoir that he made Elena breakfast, eggs and a cup of Lipton tea. He filled the vases next to her bed with flowers and sometimes just talked to her about the weather.

**Ben Harrison**

She was kind of his living doll, there in their little household. And they celebrated Christmas together, and he put a Christmas tree there, and put 13 candles and said he played his organ to her until the candles burned down.

**Miki Meek**

This went on for seven years. He also conducted experiments to try to bring Elena back from the dead. In his memoir, he wrote that he gave her radiation treatments, and submerged her in a tank filled with quote, plasma fluid.

Eventually, Elena's sister, Nana Medina, started to suspect that something was up. There were rumors. And she asked von Cosel to open Elena's mausoleum for her, but he refused. So one day, Nana showed up at his house.

**Ben Harrison**

Well, she walks in and sees this effigy, this Elena, in a sort of wedding, gauze wedding thing lying on the bed. I mean, as she describes it, it was the most horrific thing she'd ever seen in her life. But as upset as she was, she said, if you will take the body back and put it in there, we'll just let this go.

**Miki Meek**

Von Cosel didn't return the body, so she went to the Key West police. They arrived at his house in a motorcade, and von Cosel confessed immediately.

And that's when the gifts started arriving at the jailhouse. People brought him fruit, cookies, and hot tea. They serenaded him at night. A group of women from Tampa brought him money. Locals posted his bond. An attorney took on his case pro bono.

People were captivated by this story. A newspaper quoted von Cosel saying, "I did not want one so beautiful to go to dust." A radio station in Havana ran a soap opera about Elena and von Cosel's great romance.

**Ida Roberts**

He was in love with her? OK, he was in love with her and he wanted to make her better.

**Miki Meek**

This is Ida Roberts. Her mom was good friends with Elena, lived down the street from her. I talked to her for a while about this question. How could people see this as a romantic story?

Well, for starters, Ida's mom didn't know at the time that von Cosel was having sex with Elena's corpse. There were rumors, but the truth didn't come out for decades, when a doctor from her autopsy wrote about it in a medical journal. But still, that doesn't change the story so much for Ida.

**Ida Roberts**

My mother knew Maria Elena. And because she accepted him, my mother had no problem was with what he did.

**Miki Meek**

I mean, was your mom upset that he had had the body for so long?

**Ida Roberts**

No.

**Miki Meek**

Really?

**Ida Roberts**

She was not upset.

**Miki Meek**

But isn't there something also later? The autopsy report came out he was having sexual relations with her, or attempting to?

**Ida Roberts**

Well, I guess he was in love with her, and he made love to her. And he didn't care whether she was dead or not. In fact, he never-- he never wanted to think that she was dead. He wanted to think that she was coming back. She was asleep.

**Miki Meek**

I think, Ida, you are a very hard person to shock.

**Ida Roberts**

Yeah, mhm. Just remember, this was a very small town and very close. Everybody was very close. And I believe that's the way, laid back in Key West like we are, we just accept things.

**Miki Meek**

I heard this from a lot of people I interviewed down there-- live and let live. They take pride in their history of being home to people who didn't fit in-- bootleggers, drug smugglers, people who dropped off the grid.

But Ida's pretty straight. We talked in her office at a Catholic school in Key West. She's the director of Religious Education for kids there and looks like somebody's nice grandma.

**Miki Meek**

When you look at this story now, the story of von Cosel, I mean, do you view it as romantic or completely nuts?

**Ida Roberts**

I think it's a nice love story. I do. I wouldn't have any bad thing to say about him. [CHUCKLING]

**Miki Meek**

Why is that? Explain that.

**Ida Roberts**

Because he was in love with her. I mean, he was eccentric of course, you know crazy thoughts he had, but I mean, he wasn't there to abuse her or anything. You know, I mean--

**Miki Meek**

According the record, he was.

**Ida Roberts**

Wait, but he didn't chop her up and throw her in the ocean or anything, like a lot of people have done, you know? A lot of spouses. But he took good care of her. And he wanted-- he just didn't want to let go.

**Miki Meek**

I mean, definitely selfish, though. In a lot of ways, I mean, he's doing what he wants to do, and not necessarily what the family would have wanted her to do-- wanted him to do, or even Elena.

**Ida Roberts**

Love is like that. Love is kind of selfish, isn't it? When you find somebody you want, you want them regardless.

**Miki Meek**

Love is an excuse for all sorts of behavior. I can understand why so many people wanted to believe this version of the story. It's much easier and nicer to see this as a grand gesture of a lovesick man than the abuse of a delusional pervert.

In the end, the charges against von Cosel were dropped. The court looked into whether he was insane and decided no. They called his obsession with Elena a quirk.

Even when the public was presented with physical proof, Elena's body, they chose to see the story this way. After police took Elena's body from von Cosel, the funeral home, incredibly, put her out on display, probably without the family's permission.

**Don Carbonell**

It was a big crowd that day, I think, and we just followed the crowd.

**Miki Meek**

That's Don Carbonell. He was a kid at the time and lived across the street from the funeral home. There's actually a photo of Don in the newspaper spread, standing in a big crowd right behind Elena's body.

**Don Carbonell**

I might have even been playing in the yard with Frank, whose father owned the funeral home at the time. And they opened the embalming room doors.

**Miki Meek**

And how close did you get?

**Don Carbonell**

I was probably six to ten feet away from the table that they had her laid up on.

**Miki Meek**

And what do you remember? Do you remember what she looked like?

**Don Carbonell**

Yeah, vaguely, I remember. She had glassy eyes, and she just-- she didn't look real. She didn't look real. Looked like maybe somebody made up a body. That's the way she had impressed me. You'd say a big, overgrown doll.

**Miki Meek**

The newspaper articles quoted people who said she looked beautiful. "Von Cosel did such a good job preserving her." One woman wrote a letter saying, "they should enclose Elena in a glass case and turn her into a Sleeping Beauty attraction." Which is basically what's happened to Elena and her story today.

**Key West Tour Guide**

All right, our story takes place here in 1930, and involves this young girl right here.

**Miki Meek**

This is from a trolley tour of Key West for tourists these days. All the disturbing facts of the story are now out. And our ideas about sex and men and women are dramatically different. But listen to this. They still tell this story as a romance, for the same reason people did in the '40s. They like it.

**Key West Tour Guide**

Well, I thought we'd discuss a love story, an undying love story, a story that involves grave robbing and a corpse bride. Who's interested? All right, good.

**Miki Meek**

And here's another.

**Key West Tour Guide**

By show of hands, how many of you believe in true love? Just trying to set up this next tale-- this is a tale of true love, Key Weird style with a twist. It starts with a gentleman by the name of Count Karl von Cosel. Enter into the picture a beautiful Cuban girl. Her name is Elena.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**Ira Glass**

Miki Meek, Payson High School class of none of your business, is one of the producers of our program. John Ellison Conlee read the excerpts of von Cosel's memoir. Ben Harrison's book about von Cosel is called *Undying* *Love.*

Coming up, what happens when sky writers make mistakes, and a few grand gestures that actually go right. That's in a minute from Chicago Public Radio when our program continues.