

THE WATERMELON GOSPEL

A YOUNG HIPPIE'S RIDE
TO THE SHORES OF SURRENDER

BY
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INTRODUCTION

It was when I was watching a late-night show with President Bill Clinton when it all happened. He was sharing about his new book in the summer of 2003, his autobiography. Towards the end of the interview he mentioned everyone after the age of 50 should sit down and write his or her own autobiography as well. “For your family,” he said.

So I did. Not all of it, of course; just the significant stuff leading up to my surrender to Christ (and a short time thereafter). All that came before my first marriage and two beautiful daughters. Through the years I've honed it here and there, wanting nothing more than for it to be a give-a-way for my family. I jotted some of these adventures down, hoping I'd get to it one day. Then life happened and I forgot about it. There it lay — stashed away amidst a countless array of bits and bytes, all but forgotten in the mechanical caverns of my laptop.

Time passed. Later in life, after my daughters graduated from high school, I came across a Bible verse:

“Be careful never to forget what you yourself have seen. Do not let these memories escape from your mind as long as you live! And be sure to pass them on to your children and grandchildren.” (Deuteronomy 4:9)

Things don't often stick with me first time around, but that time it did. Thus, what you're holding here is that.

That being said, I gift these events, characters, and divine interventions to the two most favorite people in my world: my daughters.

As a memoir, I took certain liberties; some scaled back, others scaled forward, and others intentionally displaced chronologically to fit the spirit of the narrative. But it's all true. You'll learn stuff about me you may wish you never did. And you'll learn stuff about God that will probably surprise you, too. He is a passionate Being who, despite our wrestling and constant rebellion, always gets His way. At the end of the day, that turns out to be a very good thing indeed.

PROLOGUE

*White bird
Dreams of the aspen trees
With their dying leaves
Turning gold
White bird must fly
Or she will die
White bird must fly
Or she will die*

White Bird, It's A Beautiful Day

Blazing sun. Beer cans and broken whiskey bottles crackling underneath my flip-flops. The breakdown lanes' reflecting sunshine pierced my eyes like diamonds on the asphalt. I prodded onward, cars flying passed me, honking at times and mocking me as I desperately walked from one exit ramp to the next. Arm extended, thumb out, my body burning in the scorching August heat of Central Florida.

I was made for something so much better than this. How did I get here? How come everything so sucks?

I walked on, my shirt drenched in sweat, eyes stinging from the salt. Each car and semi that flew by engulfed me with a hot torrent of wind that pushed me forward and stuck my shoulder-length hair to my grimy face. Water droplets dripped from the end of my eyelashes, but I was too exhausted to wipe them off. As they grew heavier, they transformed everything I saw into prismatic rainbows, all the more clouding my vision.

With each step my anger rose, an anger against God. I loathed him. He was something “up there” who made life unbearable for me, manipulated my life until I couldn’t take it anymore.

He was up there playing *hide-and-go-seek*, while I was dying down here. It seemed like whenever I almost reached him, he would cheat on me and disappear again.

“I bet you don’t even exist!” I yelled into the blazing sky." I bent to grab a few rocks and threw them into the sky. “If you do exist show me a sign! Show me *something*, anything, to know you’re not a fairy tale.”

I snugged my backpack tighter on my shoulders and pulled my hair in a pony-tail.

“Screw this. He’s not around.”

Up ahead, through the clouded vision of the prismatic rainbows, I saw something out of place.

What is that?

I wasn’t sure if it was real or not. I approached the anomaly cautiously. I squatted down and ran my fingers across its frigid, dewy skin.

Have you answered my prayer?

Confounded and standing in the middle of the breakdown lane on I95 north, on one of the hottest days I can remember, I grew completely bewildered. Right there, in the middle of nowhere, was an ice-cold watermelon.

Is this you, God?

CHAPTER 1

OF MONKEYS, MEN, WALTER CRONKITE, AND OUTER SPACE

*There's a star man waiting in the sky
He'd like to come and meet us
But he thinks he'd blow our minds
There's a star man waiting in the sky
He's told us not to blow it
'Cause he knows it's all worthwhile.*

Starman, David Bowie

Mom and Dad met while she worked as a teller in Harrison, New York. Dad walked in one day dressed in his Air Force “blues” which cause her to place her hand to her mouth and gasp. He was drop dead handsome. Soon after they married (he being 24 and she being 19), they drove to California, bought a house, and before long there were two of us: me and my brother Henri. I got here on March 5, 1955. My brother arrived two-and-a-half years later.

California gave me my first memory — hazy, but a memory all the same. On a typical sunny southern California morning I waddled off the concrete porch onto the grass and into the far corner of the back yard and plopped myself down on an *ant nest* that, at the time, looked like a fuzzy gray pillow, soft and inviting. The next thing I knew I was in the bathtub with mom desperately trying to calm me down as she rubbed soothing soap on my legs and thighs, completely swollen from the welts.

“There, there now, Billy. You’ll be okay. Everything is going to be just fine.”

That's when I formulated the first thought of my existence. With my head drooping down to my chest and screaming my brains out, it came.

I will never do that again.

My second memory was no better and certainly no less painful. It was the result of a burgeoning inability to deal with my own curiosity. Only a few weeks after the ant incident, I was waddling around the kitchen with my diaper filled with poop and my mind filled with curiosity when I saw an interesting object above me on the stove. I reached up, pulled its handle, and spilled boiling water across my head, chest, and feet.

Back I went in the bathtub, my mother once again soothing my pain. "There, there now, Billy. Everything is going to be just fine."

I'll never do that again, either.

I survived my curiosity for another few years when, shortly after my fourth birthday, Dad landed a job as an engineer at Cape Canaveral, Florida.

Road trip!

We hopped into our 1959 Chevrolet (the ones with the wing-tipped back numbers) and jettisoned across the country, landing in a tiny duplex on Jefferson Avenue, just a few miles south of Port Canaveral. Not much to remember there. My brother and I were just a couple of mischievous bare-footed boys who hunted turtles, snakes, and fiddler crabs when we weren't eating, sleeping, or watching Ed Sullivan. A year later we moved a couple of streets over into a house that faced northwards, towards the Cape. We spent the next ten years at 305 Harrison Avenue. We got into Cub Scouts, watched loads of black and white T.V and, best of all, had front row seats with NASA witnessing hundreds of rockets as they lifted off the gantry pads heading for outer space.

Sometimes the “birds,” as they were called by the locals, blew up before they even got off the ground, right there before our disbelieving faces. Other times they'd rise into the sky and “poof” into multiple explosions before leaving the wild blue canvas and disappearing into orbit. Monkeys and men in space capsules smaller than an average bathroom... all that happening jut up the road. It was literally a blast for them and a blast for us.

Oftentimes in the dead of night, my brother and I would wake to the soft orange glow and low-end sonic sounds rumbling their way through the house, making windows rattle and our bunk-beds vibrate on the terrazzo floor.

“Henri, look!” I'd leaned over the top bunk and wake up my brother. “It’s a missile!”

“A rocket!”

“Yeah!”

We'd throw off our bedsheets and pull the curtains back to see a magnificent sight: a white metallic monster thundering upwards into the night sky, its orange glow reflecting off our widening eyes and onto our cheeks.

This was the best place in the world for a little boy to grow up. With each launch, I desperately wanted to be just like those astronauts shooting up into space.

What do they see up there? Just how does it feel?

From a very early age I dreamed of being *Ziggy Stardust*, someone I would one day grow up to emulate.

For the time being, we had our bikes. Sure, they weren't as spectacular as rockets flying into outer space, but if you clipped a couple of baseball cards to your wheels, the sound of the spokes *flap-flap-flapping* almost made it seem like we were riding rockets. It was a sad compromise, but when you're in elementary school imagination comes cheap and easy!

For me, the best part of having a rocket bike was when the mosquito repellent man came. Two or three times a week, especially in summer, the mosquito man drove through the neighborhood in his white pickup, fully equipped with a magical machine that churned our thick cloudbursts of euphoric joy into the atmosphere from a backwards-facing exhaust. From the first sounds of the mosquito truck turning onto Harrison Avenue, my brother and I dropped everything, made a run for the carport, mounted our bikes, and within moments joined all the other kids in the neighborhood following closely behind the mosquito man. We giggled, breathed in deep, and floated in the great billowing clouds as if we, too, were floating in zero gravity, headed for outer space. It was truly a *Magic Carpet Ride*. These were the years before the EPA's iron fist, so never mind the discoveries of modern science regarding the damage the mosquito man dealt us. Who knew? Who even cared? The ecstatic bliss of zero gravity was what it was all about. I can definitely say this was the first time I got high.

* * *

A lot of the kids in the neighborhood went to the same church we did: St. David's By the Sea, an Episcopal church on a canal down in Cocoa Beach. While Dad rarely attended, Mom made sure we were there each and every Sunday — and I mean every Sunday. She was very dedicated and thought we should be, too.

One day we were riding home in the '59 Chevy when she gave my brother and I a choice. "It's time for you boys to start doing things around church," she announced.

Doing things around church? Why would we need to do that?

"You can sing in the choir..."

The choir? Yuck! That's for sissies.

“Or you can be an acolyte.”

We became acolytes.

I didn't know much about God. I went through the motions because it was the right thing to do. My favorite part of church actually happened after the service in the canal just behind the buildings when all us kids grabbed paper cups of red *Kool-Ade* and headed for the canal. We loved spotting turtles, horseshoe crabs, and the occasional alligator lurking in the reeds. After church, after we got changed, we'd often go to the Wilson's house to play with the rest of the kids.

The Wilson's lived on Jefferson Avenue, where we had lived before. They had a large back yard with a really cool jungle gym that rose into the sky, about twenty feet from the back porch. Mr. Wilson (Frank) was the man of the house and sort of gave me the creeps, though I was hard-pressed to say why. He had unwelcoming, beady eyes and was as slim as the cigarette he never failed to have in hand. His family consisted of three girls: Abby, Justina, and Lilly, along with William, his mischievous son, and a wife who always seemed deeply troubled. Rumors had it that she's often be seen and heard running up and down the hallways of her home screaming. She may have been certifiably crazy. The Wilson family was a family I was glad not to be a part of.

The joke was on me, though. Fast forward 10 years, and after my parents' divorce, Mom remarried Mr. Frank Wilson and he became my step-dad.

So it goes.

* * *

One breezy Sunday afternoon after church the Wilson kids and Henri and I were hanging around on the jungle gym. One of the girls shot a hand to the sky and pointed to a puffy cloud.

The cloud game!

“Look!” Abby Wilson exclaimed. “Way up there! I see an elephant!”

We all looked, cupping our eyes against the glare of the sun.

“See it?” she asked.

“Yes!” we shouted. “Yes! We do! We do!”

“And look over there!” Oh, gross. It was Justina. She was the Wilson daughter closest to my age. I didn’t like her. She used to try and convince me that raisins were dried flies. And I believed her. Now she was pointing to the far side of the sky and yelling at the top of her lungs. “I see a dolphin! I see a dolphin!”

“Yes — yes!” we cried. “We see it! We see it!” We all shimmied to the top of the jungle gym to get a better look.

“And look over there — an alligator!”

And after the alligator, a swan. After the swan, a turtle. And so on. It was great fun. We didn’t know it then, but the grown-ups were behind the screen door, giggling and commenting on our imaginations, all the while sipping their mid-afternoon cocktails.

Lily Wilson, aglow in her bright yellow dress, spotted a “giant bald eagle” in the clouds, and all the kids turned their faces to that part of the sky and shouted at the top of their lungs, “An eagle!”

That’s when my competitive spirit stirred within me. I silently searched the sky, horizon to horizon, for something, *anything* to get into the game. Whatever it was, it had to be something big. I mean really big.

“Look up there!” I thrust my arm into the sky and pointed my finger towards a tall cloud.

“I see...”

I took a dramatic pause and squinted for a better look. “I see...”

“Yes, what is it, Billy?” someone asked. “What do you see?”

“I see . . . Jesus Christ!”

“Jesus Christ?”

That just kicked the whole cloud animal contest to an entirely new level.

“I don’t see him.” One kid confessed, looking deeply into the cloud.

“I don’t see him either, Billy.” Another sighed in agreement. “And, you what what? I think you’re a square.”

Now that was uncalled for.

“Yeah, Billy’s square!” they all chimed in. “Let’s go in. We don’t want to play with a square.”

They worked their way down from the top of the jungle gym, chanting, “Billy’s a square! Billy’s a square!”

“No! Over there!” I insisted, staying put. “ See him? Floating in the sky? It’s Jesus Christ! Doesn’t anybody see him?”

They stopped and gazed skeptically into the heavens. Nobody saw him.

That’s when Abby Wilson sighed. She whispered something under her breath to Justina.

“I know,” Justina replied with a giggle. “Such a dork.” She pointed to the opposite end of the sky. “Hey, guys, over there! Do you see that? It’s a butterfly!”

All the kids scrambled furiously back to the top.

“Yes! We see it! We *see* it!”

A butterfly? Hey, we're talking about Jesus Christ here!

“And look!” Lily Wilson exclaimed. “It’s flapping over to that sunflower!”

“Yes! We see it! We see it!”

“But what about Jesus?” I mumbled, growing more and more infuriated. No one was interested. No one was even listening.

I'll show them.

In a surge of religious fervor I climbed to the top of the jungle gym, mounted my feet on the highest bars, raised my hands to the heavens, and shouted at the top of my lungs, “God dammit, I see Jesus Christ!”

A tangible gasp came from the adults in the house, standing still at the screen door off the concrete porch. One of them dropped a glass, shattering it across the hard terrazzo floor. It was probably my mother.

* * *

A week later I was headed to the bus stop at the corner of Harrison Avenue and Orange Street with Mason Williams’ *Classical Gas* reverberating around in my brain, when I saw two groups of kids who could not have been more different.

One group was pristine, holding their lunch boxes properly, wrapped in bright color dresses or tucked-in button shirts and saddle shoes. The other was quite the opposite - boys whose shirts were disheveled, their schoolbooks tossed haphazardly into the sand with the wind shuffling their papers and scattering them across the ground. They were obviously up to no good, messy and mischievous, pinching each other’s butts, eating their boogers, and just trying in

general to gross out the girls who watched disgusted, mouths wide open, hands clinging their books to their chests.

One of those boys began throwing rocks at the stop sign on the corner. The ear-wrenching, metallic clanging pierced the otherwise quiet early morning atmosphere of the bus stop.

A voice broke into my heart. "Billy," I sensed it say gently.

"Yes?"

"Do you see those kids? The ones eating boogers and throwing rocks at the stop sign?"

"Yes." A grin began to form on my face. "I do."

"Where will you go? Who will you choose?"

"What do you mean?"

The voice got deeper. "You can go over there with the bad boys, or you can go over there with the good boys. What's it gonna be?"

I carefully studied my options, but it only took a moment.

"The bad kids," I replied matter-of-factly. "They're kinda cool."

So off I went. I learned to walk like them, talk like them, and throw rocks like them. That decision no doubt changed the trajectory of the rest of my life.

* * *

As school dragged on and summertime passed, that same voice would come and go, sometimes strong, sometimes weak, and mostly ignored. I felt it the strongest when I was sad, the times I just wanted to be alone on the beach, when I needed to get away from developing stresses at

home between my parents. The voice would be there on the beach, in the roar of the waves. That's why I loved the beach. It always was there, always constant. It always accepted me, regardless of the building storms on the horizon of my life.

As the elementary years passed I often found myself there, sitting on the sand dunes and peering out to the edge of the world to find my peace. The pounding waves formed a soundscape behind everything I thought and did, gently cleansing the back of my mind. The visuals it provided: the turquoise hues of its surging tides, the crashing waves, the crying gulls and dive-bombing pelicans, all of it came together to make it paradise for me, the place where heaven met earth.

Sometimes I'd take off on my bike and head south to Canaveral Pier, a few miles down Ridgewood Avenue. Once arriving, I'd toss my Sting Ray with the butterfly handlebars and banana seat onto the sand, flip-flop up the uneven boards of the pier, about half-way to the end of the pier, drop down to my seat, hang my feet over the edge, and watch the surfers as they effortlessly roller-coastered up and down the glassy walls of water, slicing this way and that with rainbow mist flying off their boards. I'd day-dream for hours there, fantasizing and surfing right along with them, rocketing up a crest, wiping out near the pilings, or getting barreled in the blue room.

Oftentimes, during a particularly awesome ride, the muffled music from the *Asylum* night club would rattle the entire pier with songs like Spirit's *Mechanical World*, Canned Heat's *On the Road Again*, or better yet, Steppenwolf's *Magic Carpet Ride*. I'd hop to my feet and jump up and down on the pier, clapping my hands and impulsively jerking this way and that way, as if I, too, was riding those same magnificent waves, some twenty feet below.

Paddle harder, there! You got it! Up from your knees, and swing the board around. That's it! Okay, now, drop back, squat deep, get tight under the lip. Watch the wall. Okay, out of the barrel, point the stick upwards, off the wall and into the air. Dude! Nice ride! Bitchen!

I'd drop back to the boardwalk's wooden railings exhausted, as if it had been me doing all that. I often returned from the pier completely refreshed, thrilled by the idea that one day I would be that surfer, and my life would roll out as effortless as a building swell of water heading towards shore. In short, I was living for my own Endless Summer.

This growing passion inevitably led to the purchase of my first surfboard, a red "pop-out," which is a sub-standard machine-made board, cheap enough for a beginner like me. It wasn't ideal, but it was still a surfboard, seven-feet long and extremely heavy. Unfortunately, it wasn't heavy enough to keep from getting stolen. One Easter eve, and after a day of surfing, I was just too tired and left it overnight on the surfboard racks on the car one night. Easter Sunday came and as we were heading to the car to go to church it was gone.

God dammit!

It was the first time anyone had ever stolen anything from me. It was devastating. But I wasn't so easily swayed from surfing. Soon enough I had saved up enough from my allowance and local newspaper route to buy what would become my all-time favorite stick — an eight-foot six-inch Jacobs nose-rider. It was white, with a double-balsam stringer running from top to bottom. Best board ever. The concave nose made it perfect for nose-riding the East Coast Atlantic swell.

There is nothing smoother (nor more beautiful) than silently gliding across a steepening swell with the spray streaming off the rails producing misty prismatic rainbows. You stand

almost effortlessly, toes curled around the nose, hanging ten with your baggies flapping in the breeze and the sun beaming on your face. It doesn't get much better than that.

I could do this for the rest of my life. This is what I want to be when I grow up.

Surfing was hypnotic. Back in the '60's the vibe was even greater than actual sport. Volkswagen vans filled with hippies cruised up and down the beach route, A1A, checking the break, monitoring tides, searching for that perfect better swell with 8-Tracks tunes of the British Invasion blasting from make-shift speakers they rigged from the radio. Ron Jon's had just opened up, a head shop with love beads as you entered, straw mats on the floor, display cases with skateboard parts, sex wax, wet suits, and surfboards in the back. Music like *Wild Thing* by the Trogg's and *Wipeout* by the Ventures, as well as other beach music like the Beach Boys, The Byrds, and the Mamas and the Papas filled the surf shop with a serene, other-worldly atmosphere.

* * *

It was around this time I met my best friend, Micky. He was a scrawny little runt I met in third grade with blonde hair, blood-shot blue eyes, and a passion for surfing like me. He lived down on Bahama Boulevard on a canal. We loved anything having to do with the surf culture. Just about every weekend we slept at each others' house, rising at the crack of dawn, surfboards tucked under our arms, heading to the beach as the first rays of sun beamed over the horizon. We'd paddle into the sunrise and surf the day away. I always loved being with Mick and his family. There was something about the stability in their home that was lacking in my house. I was unable to understand the tension in the house, nor the end of the matter. All I knew was that Mom and Dad were always fighting

There was a mystical ebb and flow to the ocean for me. We spend much time sitting on our boards, surrounded by dive-bombing pelicans, the squawking of sea gulls, and the occasional close call with dolphins as we waited to catch the perfect wave. Even in the fourth grade I sensed how each wave was different than the last, as if each one had its own personality, temperament, strength, and mind. Waves couldn't be predicted or controlled. You had to take them as they were.

Mick once said, "Dude, you can't make these your own. Just gotta flow with it."

He knew what he was talking about. Time and time again I marveled seeing this scrawny little kid on a board twice his size, paddling with ease to catch the waves, dropping down and scaling their walls like a real pro. To him every wave was a new song, a new experience, completely separated from the one before. That was the secret to wave riding. You rode the wave, adjusted to it, and in a sense honored her, not for what you wanted it to be, but for who it simply was.

* * *

The beach was for more than just waves, though. There were those rare times when Mom, Dad, Henri and I would hope up in the middle of the night, gather flashlights and walk down the dirt road to the beach where we'd join with hundreds of other late night observers to watch *Atlas*, *Delta*, and *Saturn V*'s lift into the sky as they bathed the entire coastline with an orange glow. I'd stand in awe, my feet in the sand, watching them rise into the sky like upside-down candles up and up and up and up until they dimmed to a star-like point in the sky. Walking back to the house and plopping in bed, I always found myself wondering who, or what, was "up there" amidst the vast array of planets, stars, and galaxies.

While the lift-offs were out of sight, the real thrill for me was the astronauts returning from outer space which created the most profound memories for me. After all, I was riding waves in the ocean, but they were riding rockets in the *stars*.

* * *

After each flight a local parade route would form on either side of A1A south to honor these modern-day heroes. They sat atop the back seats Ford Galaxy convertibles, parading their way from the Cape to the Quality Courts Hotel and Conference Center for their press interviews. These were the greats — Scott Carpenter, Gordon Cooper, John Glenn, Gus Grissom, Wally Schirra, Alan Shepard, and Deke Slayton — the Magnificent Seven. I'd often zig-zag around the people blocking my view in order just to get a glimpse of this star walkers. To me they were gods.

I'll never forget the day when one of the "Right Stuffers" turned his head and looked directly at me from the back seat of a passing Ford Galaxy. It was magical. He spotted me in the crowd, looked deeply into my soul and nodded with an all-knowing smile and wink of his eye. It was if he knew me. My knees grew weak. I was star struck. A gasp escaped me, like a crazed Beatles fan on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, and I obsessively ran after the car through the crowd, determined to get a better look at him.

"Excuse me, mister. Excuse me!"

When I finally reached the hotel lobby, I stumbled through the mess of TV cameras, cables, crowds of frantic reporters, and other important persons (many of whom wore white shirts with pen pouches, black rimmed *Ray Bans*, and plastic badges hanging from their necks),

and frantically peered back and forth to either side of the reporters to get a better look at the god de jour, my first deity, our great All-American hero, John Glenn.

This guy was in outer space and now he's sitting here, right in front of me, being interviewed by Walter Cronkite himself!

I rubbed my eyes in disbelief. A dream state took over my senses: a haze of warm light, the palpable excitement in the room, and the flash of cameras. Unearthly as it seemed, there was a sense of familiarity to the place — as if I had been there, or would be there somehow in the future. Everything suddenly made sense to me. In my mind, the Magnificent Seven were no less than gods, and I had entered their house of worship, all happening right there in the lobby of the Quality Courts Hotel and Conference Center.

John Glenn, when I grow up I want to be just like you. And when that happens, I want to be right here, just like you are, at the Quality Courts Hotel and Conference Center.

CHAPTER 2

DRIVE IN SATURDAY

*How can I try to explain, when I do he turns away again.
It's always been the same, same old story.
From the moment I could talk I was ordered to listen.
Now there's a way and I know that I have to go away.
I know I have to go.*

Father and Son, Cat Stevens

Surfing, sun, space, and lots of good, classic black and white TV; I lived in an age of all the right stuff. But there was an undercurrent of instability lurking just beneath the surface of my life.

I was young, of course, and couldn't articulate it, but it was there. Almost every night after we said *The Lord's Prayer*, my brother and I drifted off to sleep with the late night "muffled" and often heated arguments between Mom and Dad. All was not well behind closed doors. For the first time I began to wonder if life wasn't the way I thought it was.

Shortly before Dad moved out Mom got a low-paying wage working at an interior design place downtown Cocoa Beach. Often on Saturdays (and when there was no surf), we'd circle around and pick Mick up on the way it and we'd spend the morning walking around town, waiting for Mom to get out.

One particular Saturday, we were hanging out in front of a storefront when we eyed a public ash tray. Concrete and shaped like a pineapple, about two feet high, it drew me into its quicksand of smoked cigarettes and cigars, their remnants sticking out of the sand.

I eye the temptation head on. "Want to?" I asked.

Mick looked into the ashtray, then back to me, shrugging his shoulders. "Sure. Why not?"

We fingered through the butts and snuck the longer ones into our pockets. Later that day, we found matches and our very successful smoking careers began. We were still in third grade. Got dizzy and everything.

Weeks later we had another experience as we kicked around downtown with no particular place to go. A dirty-looking, disheveled and unshaven old man appeared with a brown paper bag, just off the ramp leading to the beach. He had bloodshot eyes, a skinny, pronounced nose, a pointed chin, and thin greasy hair. This guy wore a long trench coat and everything. He was the real deal.

"Hey kids." His voice gurgling with a bubble of phlegm, "Wanna see something?"

"Why not?" I drew near, but Mick moved back. "What is it, Mister?"

Mick furiously waved his hands, wordlessly reminding me that our moms told us never to talk to strangers.

But I responded with my eyes. *Don't be such a wuss. What harm could it be?*

Before long we were standing in the middle of the road, staring up at this creep. A busted beer bottle was shattered on the curb, and the smell of stale alcohol made me feel sick to my stomach. He coughed into his sleeve and wiped the goop in his beard with the backside of his hand. Then he reached into a brown paper bag with his trembling, nicotine-stained fingers.

"I bet you've never seen anything like this before."

The pictures came out. Eight and a half inch high-gloss photos of naked women.

What the . . .

Mick and I intuitively covered our mouths, unsure of whether to draw back or take a closer look. He drew back. I took a closer look.

There were three pictures. The first was a woman in her forties, taken from the side.

Whoah, I thought. I can almost see her flowers!

The second was a full frontal shot of that same woman.

Well, there they are!

“Look at those jugs,” the creep pointed out. “Have you ever seen boobs like these?”

Actually I had seen boobs like those before and was somewhat familiar with them. After all, my mom had a couple. So did Jenny, our next door neighbor. In fact, she had the first ones I ever noticed apart from a purely maternal context.

One morning I was sitting on the sofa, painting the finishing touches on a cobalt blue plastic model of a *Funny Car*, and listening to the finale to Richard Harris’ *MacArthur Park* on our humungous console stereo, when Jenny stopped by to borrow something. She stood just outside and peered through the screen door.

“Hello, Madelyn?” She tapped the door gently with her knuckles. “Kids? Anyone home?”

“Mom, someone’s at the door.”

“Go see who it is, would you, Billy?”

“Okay,” I sighed. I put the painting to the side, slid off the sofa, shuffled across the floor, and headed for the screen door. I was instantly transfixed by her brilliantly-flowered summer dress. From the top of her auburn curls down to her phosphorescent pink toenails, she became nothing less than a goddess. And I couldn’t help but notice those two delicate breasts which teased me ever so slightly from underneath her dress, swaying this way and that way in the afternoon breeze.

“It’s... Um... It’s Jenny from next door.” A zombie might have sounded more alive.

Jenny tilted her head curiously. “Billy? Are you alright?”

I swallowed hard. I couldn’t be sure.

Mom came just in time. As they talked casually about the weather, gardens, flowers and things of the day I leaned the doorframe, mesmerized by the specimen of femininity before me.

I still can't recall what anybody said. (Something about borrowing sugar, I think.) I wasn't sure what was happening with me, but my mental faculties had been rendered completely incoherent.

Mom went back to the kitchen, and there we were, just me and her in that awkwardly wonderful moment. My lips began to twitch. My eyes went cross-eyed a bit, and I started to stare.

"Billy," she asked, looking concerned now. "Are you sure everything's all right?"

A devilish grin spread across my lips. I couldn't take it any longer. Everything within me was saying *do it, do it, do it*. I couldn't hold out any longer.

"No, everything is not alright."

In a single movement, I stepped forward, sunk my head into her belly, reached up with my arms, and gently cupped my hands around her breasts.

"Oh, how I love these puffs," I sighed.

"These puffs?" Jenny's face turned as red as the hibiscus on her summer dress, though the trace of a smile broke out across her face, which she at once covered with her hand as she stepped back. "Now Billy Blomquist, you know you should not be doing things like that."

My hands dropped just as Mom appeared and handed her Jenny a cup of whatever it was she wanted, and Jenny disappeared into the daylight, leaving me standing there amidst an audio backdrop of Tiny Tim's *Tiptoe Through the Tulips*. (If this event had happened a few years later, it would have happened amidst the audio backdrop of the Cowsills' *I Love the Flower Girl*. But as things were, all I got was *Tulips*.)

And now I was standing there in the middle of a street, talking to a complete stranger, staring at breasts once again, though even Jenny's couldn't prepare me for what I saw in those photos.

Apparently not all puffs are the same. I'll need to look into that.

“Whoa.” Micky’s bloodshot eyes grew as wide as quarters. “Those are like... like watermelons!”

“Just like watermelons,” I concurred, studying them closely.

“Ah, boys, you haven’t seen nothin’ yet!” The creepy man saved the best for last. He slid another photo out and held it towards us like candy. “Get a load of this!”

It was a magnified close up of a woman’s vagina.

My jaw dropped.

Mick was speechless.

That’s it. We had seen enough. Before we knew it, we were stumbling backwards, all but tripping over each other trying to get away. We hauled two blocks with all our might and dodged around a corner, huffing and puffing the whole way, trying to make sense of what we saw.

“What was that?”

“I dunno,” I said, genuinely mystified. “That wasn’t a puff, though. I’ve seen puffs and that was not a puff.”

“It was gross!” Mick exclaimed. “Is that part of a woman?”

“I dunno.”

“I sure hope not.”

But as I sat there with Mick, up against the backside of the building, and took a few deep breaths, pure adrenaline raced through every square inch of my body. I snuck a glimpse around the corner. He had disappeared. I promised: *I’m going to find out exactly what that thing is, even if it takes me the rest of my life.*

I spent a great deal of time thinking about that experience. Oftentimes, at bedtime, after we said *The Lord's Prayer*, I'd stare at the ceiling and replay the event over and over in my mind, trying to understand just what I was looking at that day. In addition to that, each and every night the muffled conversations and arguments between Mom and Dad in the living room grew more and more intense.

And then it happened. Dad moved out of the house. He snagged an apartment across the Banana River on Merritt Island. Henri and I weren't sure what had happened or even why it happened. All we knew was that we got to visit him every other weekend. It was a scantily furnished apartment with *Playboy* magazines on the coffee table and a community pool. One of those weekends Dad took us out to a drive-in movie theater.

Drive-in movie theaters were the best. You'd tell the attendant at the booth how many people you had and make your way up and down long rows of cars until you pulled in up at the perfect place - leaning uphill in front of a ginormous screen. A speaker would be attached to the window, the volume would be turned up, and you'd be at the movies, complete with pajamas and soft blankets for snuggling!

On this particular night, the movie was action packed: guns, fast cars, black suits, submarines, and helicopters. I was in the front seat, feet on the dash. Henri was in the back, his arms propped up between me and Dad.

Then, swiftly and without warning, just when the good guys were shooting up the bad guys, Dad sighed deeply, tapped his fingers on his knees, reached for the big, black knob on the speaker, and turned it off. "Sons, I have something to tell you."

“Aw, Dad! This is the best part!” I slammed my fist against the door and hit the dash, staring intently at the screen.

“Daddy?” Henri dropped to the backseat and crossed his arms. “I thought we were seeing a movie.”

“Now, just a minute, boys. I just want to tell you how it all works.”

How it all works? How what works?

“I want you to know how a baby’s made.”

How a baby’s made? Can’t you see there’s a war going on here?

“ Well, it happens when a man puts his . . . Well, you know, his private part in her . . .” He groped around for the words, “into her private place.” He sighed deeply, relieved, as if he had just had a baby himself. His voice lightened. “Then the woman gets pregnant and, well, it goes from there. That’s how little boys and little girls are made.”

You’re kidding, right? Right here, right now? You are so uncool. My dad is a total bummer.

“Okay, boys, that’s it.” He turned up the volume to the movie. “Now where were we?”

But it was too late. The moment had come and gone. The good guys had won, the war was over, and we missed the homecoming. I hated him for that. We drove to the apartment in silence.

“I want to go home.” Henri couldn’t have said it more clearly, “To Mom’s house.”

“Yeah, Dad. Me, too.” I gazed out the window in a complete fury.

Why did he need to go into all that stuff, anyway?

Three weeks later we found out.

* * *

We had just returned from Publix super market (“Where Shopping is a Pleasure!”) on a blinding sunny afternoon. Me and Henri were back at the car unloading groceries, when I came across a box

of *Tampons*. Fascinated, I opened the box to find a few blowgun-like contraptions. I didn't know what they were, but I unpacked a couple and held them up.

"Look, Mom!" I put them over my eyes. "Telescopes!"

This wasn't the only prank me and Henri used to play on Mom. Every so often, when we drove across the Banana River and came up to the toll booth, Henri and I would scribble something to the effect "Help! Help! We're prisoners" and slap it against the window behind her so the man in the toll booth could see it.

"Mam," a polite, well-meaning person once asked. "Is everything alright? These are your children, are they not?"

"What?" She turned back and caught us and gave us "the look."

"No, sir. Everything is fine. They are just my children."

As we drove off me and Henri giggled like crazy in the back seat.

"Telescopes' - What?!" Mom snatched the tampons from my hands and slid them back in the box. "Those *aren't* telescopes. Just go out and check the mail. Your brother and I will unload these."

Jeesh, can't she even take a joke?

I meandered out to the mailbox and opened the rusty door with a squeak. The usual junk was there, food coupons from *Winn-Dixie*, *Woolworth's*, and the like, but then I stumbled across a random post card, a picture of a man loaded with binoculars and cameras around his neck sitting in a little cart with big wheels and long rods sticking out the front. Another man wearing a funny straw hat was pulling the cart down a busy street, all surrounded by sidewalks, markets, and people.

"Any mail?" Mom asked. She and Henri walked towards me.

"This is weird." I handed her the card.

She flipped it over and read:

Dear Boys, arrived in Saigon safely. Talk to you soon. Much love, Dad.

I squinted up at Mom in the sunlight. "What's a 'Saigon?'"

That was another one of those moments where all was not what it seemed, another tear in the fabric of what I always thought would be, but wasn't. All things good - my best friend, my dog, my bunny, my iguana, my budding surfing career - seemed to disintegrate before me. I didn't know it then, but I was becoming increasingly numb to the abandonment of a father who never even bothered to say a real "good-bye."

* * *

Everything got weird after that. It was like the very foundation of all I knew turned to quicksand. I questioned everything and everyone, trusting nothing and no one. The carpet had been pulled from under me. Nothing was real. Nothing would last. The proof was all around me.

At the annual Christmas bazaar at *St David's By the Sea*, "Santa" was walking around saying, "Ho, Ho, Ho," giving out toys to all the kids. Afterwards I went to the bathroom and saw my Santa getting undressed and changing into street clothes. His red cap was on the sink, his white beard was on the paper towel dispenser, and his thick black belt hung loosely from door of the the stall.

Santa?

Then there were times when unfamiliar men would show up and sit on my sofa, waiting for Mom to get ready for their date. They'd talk to me, but they didn't really care. They had other things on their mind.

There was also the time when *Curious George*, my pet iguana, died. I stared into the terrarium and sobbed through tears, hoping that God would resurrect the little fellow from the dead.

As if by magic, Father Butler, showed up, stuck his head into my room and asked, “What’s the matter, Billy?”

I couldn’t speak.

“Oh, he’ll be okay,” Mom assured him. “He only lost a lizard.”

“I’m sorry, Billy.” He patted my back and left the room. “You’ll be okay.”

Just 'okay?' Don't you even want to pray for my lizard, or anything?

I threw myself on the bed. Maybe my expectations for life were too high. I wanted to scream but managed to hold it back. I squeezed my pillow into my chest with all my might and learned then, just a little bit more, on how to stuff my emotions.

Big boys don't cry. Big boys don't cry.

* * *

When we were little boys, Dad used to tell us that we, meaning Henri and I, were better than everybody else in the world. We were stronger, more resilient, and we didn’t cry. We would never need to. We didn’t need to justify anything we did, for that matter, or explain ourselves for what we said or even did.

“You’re a *Blomquist*,” he’d say. “You stand up for yourself. Never let them see you bleed. You always tell the truth. You stay strong. You work hard - right?”

“Yes, Dad.”

“You do the best you can.”

“Always, Dad.”

“You’re not like other people. You’re strong - right?”

“Yes, Dad.”

“Because you’re . . .”

“I know, Dad, because I’m a *Blomquist*.”

This emphasis on the uniqueness of being a *Blomquist* came out of a childhood of some pretty hard knocks. My Dad and Walt, his twin brother, had been determined to make something of themselves, no matter the cost. Back in the early 1900s, their parents lived in New York City with six kids to feed. One day the doctor told my grandmother that if she had any more children she would die. She had one more. And she died.

Not long after her death, my grandpa and a buddy came home after a night of drinking and accidentally killed themselves when they boiled some water in a coffee pot and it overflowed, extinguishing the stove flame while the natural gas continued to seep into the tiny apartment. When Social Service came for the new orphans, they went from a group of seven to individuals dispersed in foster homes all across Long Island.

Just like that.

Most of the orphaned *Blomquist*s wound up in stable homes, but for one reason or another “the twins” ping-ponged from one home to the next until they finally arrived at their final home in Harrison, New York, some 12 years later. Life was good for them in Harrison. It included *Boy Scouts* and the Episcopal Church. Sadly, as I learned shortly before his death in 2002, Dad had absolutely no memory of anywhere he ever lived before he and Uncle Walt landed there with the Lange family.

“You mean you can’t remember anything that happened to you before the age of 14?”

“Nothing,” he nodded. “Nothing until Harrison, New York.”

That’s why it was so important for him to be a *Blomquist* and to make sure Henri and I would be *Blomquist*s, too. He always stood up for himself, did anything he wanted, remained emotionally isolated from his kids, didn’t let us see him bleed, and so on.

And he never cried.

(To be fair, all of this hard-won emotional suppression worked for me on some level. I got really good at stuffing emotion, and in the days of this familial turbulence, it helped me to survive.)

When I went surfing after a hurricane and the board smashed into my face, broke my nose, and gave me two black eyes. I wanted to cry, but I didn't.

I was a *Blomquist*.

When astronauts Grissom, White, and Chaffee were burned alive in the *Apollo Command Service Module* up at the Cape and I heard the ambulances screaming up A1A and I knew something had gone terribly wrong, I wanted to cry but didn't.

I was a *Blomquist*.

When the coolest President in my world, John F. Kennedy, was shot in Dallas, Texas, I went into Mom's bedroom to wake her from a nap and break the news. I wanted to cry like she did, but I didn't. I couldn't.

I was a *Blomquist*.

When the kids at school laughed at me for wearing "girlie sandals," and I hid my feet behind the legs of the chair from shame. I wanted to cry, but I didn't.

I was a *Blomquist*.

And when I got those little three inch reel-to-reel tapes from Vietnam and heard Dad tell me how wonderful his life was, how much money he was making, how he missed us, and how in three months he was going to come back and take us on a cruise to the Bahamas, a diving trip to the British Virgin Islands, or to *Disneyland* I wanted to take that stupid little tape machine and smash it against the wall into a thousand smithereens, because he never bothered to simply say, "Good-bye."

By the ripe old age of ten I was getting used to stuffing stuff down. He had taught me well. I didn't smash anything, and I didn't cry. I just sat there.

After all, I was a *Blomquist*.

CHAPTER 3
ROCKET MAN

*Your head is humming and it won't go
In case you don't know
The piper's calling you to join him
Dear lady can you hear the wind blow and did you know
Your stairway lies on the whispering wind...*

Stairway to Heaven, Led Zeppelin

1969 rolled around and so did age fourteen. We were still living in Cape Canaveral when I received some information that sent me over the psychological edge. After the divorce Mom had been dating three different men regularly. One was a nerd who worked at the Cape. Another was the dad of one of my best friends, whom I loved. (He had a boat, a ham-radio, and lived in a really nice trailer down the street.) The third man was that old beady-eyed Frank Wilson.

I was a short conversation. I was eating my bowl of *Life* cereal, getting ready to head out the screen door for the bus, when she looked back from the stove with a cautious smile.

“You know, Bill,” she began. “I’ve been thinking.”

“About what?”

“You know how I’ve been dating, right?”

“Yep.” I slurped the spoon. “So?”

“Well, do you remember... Frank Wilson?”

“Mr. Frank? Uh huh.” I finished my glass of fresh-squeezed orange juice, which seemed unusually bitter that morning. “Isn't he the one with the red convertible Ford *Cougar*.”

"That's him."

"What about him?"

“Well, last night he asked me to marry him.” She turned and faced me, clutching the spatula.
"And I've decided that I will.”

“You're going to what?”

“I am going to marry him.”

“Marry? Mr. Wilson?”

I remembered his backyard and the jungle-gym, where we watched cloud animals graze across the blue sky on Sunday afternoons. A sense of grief welled up inside me, but I pushed it down. It meant nothing.

“Cool, Mom.” I nodded with a smile and finished my bowl of *Life*.

Then came the second but more final blow.

“Of course, you know that means we will be moving to Massachusetts.”

My spoon slid from my fingers into the milk. Not unlike Marty McFly's Polaroid picture in *Back to the Future*, my very existence, began to fade away.

I swallowed hard; tightening my fist and stuffing every bit of emotion, channeling it into a flat-lined stream of "coolness" in order to clarify the most important issue of my life.

“Do they have surf there?”

“Surf?” She laughed, turned around, and flipped an egg on the stove. “Who knows? But they do have snow.”

Snow?

“It’s cold there, too,” she continued. “We’ll get you and your brother some warm clothes.”

That morning I stepped onto the flat-faced yellow and black *Blue Bird* diesel bus headed for Roosevelt Junior High School completely numbed, oblivious to everything around me. Second period came and I was heading across the eighth grade commons when I ran into Micky. We were still best friends and by this time in our relationship doing everything all the other boys were doing: buying our own cigarettes, having sleep-overs, surfing every weekend, obsessing over girls, looking at *Playboys*, and growing our hair.

“Hey, Micky.”

“Yo, dude.”

“Like,” I cleared my throat. “If I was to move away or something, do you think we could still be friends? Like, do you think I could come back and visit you?”

“You’re moving?” His blue bloodshot eyes glanced at me. He wrapped a strand of his shoulder-length blonde hair around his ear. “Far?”

“Boston, I think.” I bit a fingernail deeper than I intended. “My mom’s getting married again.”

He questioned me seriously. “Is there surf there?”

“I dunno,” I shrugged. “It sort of sucks.”

The late bell for class rang, almost deafening our conversation. Mick took off running to his classroom, his surfer-slaps echoing down the hall.

"I'm late again!" Looking backwards, he hollered. “Sure, Bill. Come down anytime! Stay at my place if you want. My mom really loves you.”

His words echoed through my head.

Come down anytime.

1969. Mom got married. We had all been uprooted from our house. And I was staring down from the window seat of an *Eastern Airlines 727* onto some hilly green terrain where I thought New York ought to be. I would have wanted to be anywhere but on the plane heading to Boston for the rest of my life, with no surf. Somewhere down there among the trees and farming communities there were hundreds of hippies just like I wanted to be, all dancing and grooving to music - dropping acid, turning in, tuning on, and dropping out - called Woodstock.

One day I'll get there. My life so sucks.

* * *

I entered 9th grade at Bedford High School a very angry and disenfranchised ex-Floridian-surfer-hippie-wannabe. My life had been uprooted, chewed up, thrown away, and destabilized on all levels. I had been closed out, wiped out, crunched, and slaughtered. I would never be the same.

We ended up in a duplex house just to one side of *Hanscom Air Force Base*. It was a complete culture shock. The teenagers all wore leather, had chains around their belts, rode mini-bikes, talked in thick New England accents, and thought that “pie” was a swear word.

You gotta be shittin' me.

I hated my life. But through it all, I remained cool. I had to.

After all, I was a *Blomquist*.

It may have been easier to pay this price if it had all happened out of true love, but in the years to come, Mom would wish us that she had married Mr. Wilson to get us away from the vast quantities of drugs and the hippie-surf culture back at the *Space Coast*.

“To keep you boys safe,” she said.

But it didn't work.

Once I hit the ground, I made a beeline for the kids doing drugs and before the end of my first year in high school I had dropped acid numerous times. The best highs and most colorful hallucinations happened while lacing the acid with hefty swigs of *Southern Comfort*, *Bacardi* rum, blackberry brandy, pot, hash, and peyote.

No beer, though. I hated beer. "Beer is for sissies," I told Sally Robinson one Friday night, just after dropping enough acid to last me the weekend.

Sally was a friend who lived just off the back parking lot of the high school. Just about every weekend we'd either go to her house or Nancy Mumford's house (just next door) and party our brains out to the tunes of Rod Stewart, the Almond Brothers, Steely Dan, Jeff Beck, and Pink Floyd. The day that Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* was released I brought it over to Sally's house and dropped the stylus in the groove.

"You're gonna love this," I assured her.

We sat on the floor across from each other, playing some kind of card game and smoking a joint, when the song *Time* began to play, a rancorous clamoring of alarm clocks, bells, and gongs at the start. I fell back to the floor, eyes closed and thoroughly engaged, when out of the blue she said, "Bill, you're such a freak."

No one could have said it better. "Freak" had a clarifying identity to it. It became my new persona. I lived into it wholeheartedly. My absolute drug of choice was acid, a near religious experience, so very sacred that I considered it chemical blasphemy to merely "drop it" merely for a concert, party, or a one-time, hourly event. I considered tripping so sacred that it demanded at least 48 hours of tripping to fully realize its mystical qualities.

A typical weekend went like this: Me and a close circle of friends would drop a "quarter hit" sometime mid-afternoon just after school on Friday and smoke a bit of weed to get the buzz off. An

hour or so later, we'd drop some more, a half-hit this time. Now we'd be getting into some colors. Four to six hours later, depending on the kind of acid (Orange Sunshine, Purple Haze, Window Pane, Barrel and Blotter Acid, and so on), something called "peaking" happened. Peaking was the top of the bell curve, where all the best hallucinations happened.

"Got to keep the peak," I'd tell my friends. "For as long as possible."

Varying amounts of weed and drink allowed us to keep the peak until it was time to come down some 30 hours later. Re-entry best happened with lessening amounts of pot and softer beverages until everything got brittle and our minds crispy. Then it was time to go home and crash.

Parachuting back to earth, especially early Sunday mornings, oftentimes included swinging by the local church and acolyte on the way home. Strange at it may seem, most of the years through "high" school, I maintained loyal duties as an acolyte in the local Episcopal church, St. Paul's, Bedford. Though I didn't believe a word of it, I somehow felt it was my duty to maintain my a devout appreciation for the tradition.

After all I was a Blomquist.

Once, after a hefty night of opiated hallucinogenics, I looked up to see the large cross hanging behind the altar turn to liquid and melt across the communion table.

What was that? Did that just happen?

For me, "crashing" happened best soaking in a tepid bath, clutching the sides of the tub with trembling hands, listening to Pink Floyd's *Meddle* LP or, oddly enough, *Bach's Brandenburg Concertos*.

* * *

For all its downsides - chromosomal damage, physiologically crippling sweats, tremors, loss of time and identity, severe depression, psychosis, and the unexpected flashbacks that continued into the

years to follow - I believed it was worth the trouble. My lingering emotional pain was easily overshadowed and comfortably numbed by the buzz of it all. When the next weekend came I was ready to do it all again.

For me it was true escapism. Hallucinations were what I lived for. I loved sitting in a comfortable chair and watching everything outside the window - trees with their snow-laden branches - gently drift passed me, as if I was on a slow-moving train. Once, while peaking, I found myself in the bathroom staring into my own eyes in the mirror, watching beautiful flowers blooming in the deepest parts of my irises like they did on *Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color*. Another time, I was so waisted watching T.V. that Johnny Carson's hand from the *Tonight Show* reached out from the television set and turned the volume down. Another evening, my friend Rick from Hawaii were tripping our brains out and wound up playing a game of chess on the black and white art deco bathroom of a neighbors tile floor. The only problem there was trying to keep the chess pieces from floating off the game board into the air.

The highest (and scariest) event happened when another other friend, Eddie Ferguson, and I accidentally dropped four hits of blotter-acid each. Blotter acid was the purest form of LSD, sold on small pieces of pieces of paper upon which a single drop of acid was "dropped." It looked like a clear-yellow stain on the paper. Eddie and I were in the 11th grade during this mishap.

We scored the blotter acid on the Boston Commons to three pushers who initially thought me and Eddie were Narks.

"We are not Narks," I assured them. "We're just kids from the country that want to score some good dope. That's it."

"You know, I don't believe you." They circled us and drew closer. "Let me see your wallet."

"I'm not going to show you anything." I scoffed and looked at Eddie. "Come on, let's blow this joint."

"You ain't going anywhere. I want to make sure you're not Narks." With that one of the pushers got behind me, slid his hand into my back pocket, tore it away, and nabbed my wallet.

"What the *fuck!*"

"It's cool. It's cool." He retorted, thumbing through my wallet. A moment later he nodded and handed it back to. "He's cool."

I felt completely victimized and would have turned around and hit him in the gut, but I held it in. After all, I was a *Blomquist*.

"Okay, kids, here's the rap - you wanna scorah, right?"

I glanced at Eddie and sighed heavily. "Yeah."

"Okay. Herah ya go."

We exchanged materials, money and acid. As we were heading out one of the pushers yelled back to us. "Remembah, kid, you got foo-ah hits there, you he-ah? That aint one hit. *Foo-ah hits.*" He held up four fingers. "Look at me, kid. Get it? Foo-ah hits."

"Yeah, man. I know how to count."

We got to Eddie's house in Bedford and made a beeline to his bedroom. I took my paper. Eddie took his. It was like being strapped into a capsule and headed for outer space. Within the first 20 minutes of dropping the "foo-ah" hits of acid, Eddie's larger-than-life-sized poster of Jimi Hendrix, decked in a colorful display of a tie-died satin shirt and headband at the *Monterey International Pop Festival*, hanging on the wall just above a three foot high *Marantz* stereo speaker, came to life and actually began to play in sync with the music. I looked at Eddie. His flesh was melting off his skull.

Did you see that?

It became clear we needed to get out of there. We dribbled downstairs and floated into his phosphorescent-orange *VW Bug* and buzzed like a fire-fly, driving for hours into Western Massachusetts, completely tripping our brains out and listening to distorted music at full volume. At one point, Deep Purple's *Space Truckin'*, the road completely lifted off the ground and tied itself around a tree at the bottom of the hill. I stared in disbelief.

How in the world are we going to get around that?

Later that night we wound up camping on some private property somewhere on a lake. Soon enough I passed under the serious moonlight with vomit on my bubbling down my flannel shirt. This happened when I choked while eating a chunk of cheddar cheese thinking it was a Macintosh apple. Eddie was halfway through a fifth of whiskey, and dancing around the campfire to the psychedelic melodies Aphrodite's Child's *666*, drifting from from one speaker of the boombox to the other with the notes visibly rising into the air chasing each other around the trees.

That night ended us in a local jail, charged with misdemeanor of trespassing on private property, fishing without a license, disturbing the peace, public intoxication, illegal possession of alcohol (me), and contributing to the delinquency of a minor (Eddie). Lucky for us, we happened to be in the same vicinity as my x-girlfriend Reagan. A phone call later, her dad showed up and bailed us out.

So it goes.

* * *

Through all the parties, concerts, and mind-numbing behavior, the tropical breezes and beaches of Florida continued calling me home. Through the snow, sleet, and blizzards I could never did get the beach sand out of my sandals. Whenever I had four or more days of vacation, I always headed back

south to see my best friend Micky, who like me, turned out to be a real stoner, too. No surprise there. Each visit to Florida was like an evolving snapshot. Hair grown out another 6 inches, fingers yellowed by more cigarettes, and familiar exploits of getting girls in the sack. We lit up, doped up, dropped in, and smoked up the whole time. At the end of the visits I'd hop in the car heading back to Boston dreaming of the next time I could return.

In those days my moral compass was constantly readjusting. In the early days, I vowed only do organic drugs: marijuana, opium, hash, and so on. But that all changed after my first trip on Orange Sunshine. Later down the line, I learned cocaine came from the cocoa plant. It was organic enough. So my standards shifted again.

Relationships were no different. At first it was, *Don't sleep with anyone unless you love them*. But then it became *Never tell anyone you love them*. Drugs, sex, and other hedonistic pleasures drove me to self-servitude, an undefined immoral blob of testosterone-driven male humanity. Before I graduated from High School, something somewhere along the line turned a corner for me and didn't care about anything anymore. My moral compass was broken, twisted, and left for dead. At the end of the day I had completely bought into the lie. It was sex, drugs, and rock and roll. That was it. nothing really mattered. Nothing really mattered to me.

CHAPTER 4
CALIFORNIA DREAMING

*I, I love the colorful clothes she wears
And the way the sunlight plays upon her hair
I hear the sound of a gentle word
On the wind that lifts her perfume through the air.*

Good Vibrations, The Beach Boys

One day the phone rang. I didn't know who it was, so I handed the phone to Mom. Her name was Nancy, the daughter of my Aunt May, one of Dad's sisters. She was a year older than I, a first cousin, sounded really hip and wanted to come out East.

“Bill, how about you take the car to pick her up?”

“Sure.” It was exciting. Just to meet anyone from the great state of California would be a magical experience for me.

The day came to pick her up at North Station, Boston. Me, my brother, and a border friend of the family named Scott (who I remember as being really cool because he taught me how to roll my own cigarettes with *Bugler Tobacco*) piled up in the family's evergreen Mercury *Marquis* station wagon and headed to the train station. Halfway down Route 128 we were rocking to The Beatles' *A Day in the Life* when one of the tires blew out.

POW!

We pulled over and pulled the jack and accessories from the car and got to work right there in the breakdown lane. While we were changing the tires out I mentioned that since Cousin Nancy had never seen us before it would be cool to prank her with a some sort of trick.

“A trick?” Henri looked up at me with suspicion as he tightened the final lug nut on the spare tire. “Like what?”

“We could have her play a guessing game as to who the real Bill Blomquist is.”

Henri threw the crowbar to the ground, got up, and brushed the dirt off his jeans. He was less than enthused.

“I like it.” Scott inhaled his hand-rolled cigarette and extinguished it under his boot.

“Whatever.” Henri pursed his lips and shook his head. “We're going to be late if we don't get going.”

We threw the flat tire in the back with the tools, hopped into the car, and headed to the train station.

Nancy was the last person off the train. She was immediately recognizable: Long wavy hair, dark ginormous sunglasses, blue jeans with holes in them, a paisley blouse, no bra, a brown suede jacket with tassels, and red Keds sneakers. I was speechless. She was the real deal.

California.

She approached us in the parking lot. None of us said a word. There we stood, three stoned high schoolers wearing flannel shirts, blue jeans, and boots, arms crossed and leaning against the car, smiling.

“Which one is your cousin Billy?” someone asked.

“It's a game,” said another.

Nancy smiled radiantly as she set down her denim backpack and *Ovation* guitar. She examined us one by one, staring deep into our souls. After a couple swipes she settled on me.

“You’re Billy, I can feel it man. It's the vibe. You dig?”

What on earth did she just say?

We laughed, hugged, introduced each other and piled into the car. Ever since Cousin Nancy and I have had a special connection.

Cousin Nancy was so cool I couldn't believe we were cousins. She was a foxy Southern California girl holding a guitar in one hand and a Joni Mitchell song book in the other and spoke otherworldly words like, *groove, hip, dude, vibe, shine-it-on, stoked, groovy, and bitchen* in just about everything she said.

When we got back to the house we were laughing at the prank we pulled on her. She flew herself on the guest bed and laughed until tears ran down her face. "Billy, man, I knew that was you at the station You put of such a hip vibe that it completely stoked me. I mean this place - your house - everything here is just so *frickin' bitchen*."

What did she just say?

We also looked rather similar. At first, my hunch was that Nancy was a long-lost sister no one had told me about. But the similarities made sense, even if she was my cousin. Her mother (my Aunt May, a Swede) married Joe the Sicilian and had kids. Dad (also a Swede) married Madelyn, a woman of Hispanic descent, and had kids. In both cases, the Swede-Mediterranean mix was going on, and there we were, the end result. All in all, I was "stoked" by Cousin Nancy. She brought an outsider’s perspective to just about every part of my life.

One day we were walking in the woods when Cousin Nancy went up to the trees and placed her hands on their trunk, as if to communicate with them by touch. She sighed deeply and looked over her shoulder with her brown almond-shaped eyes.

“Isn’t life hip, Billy?”

“Life?”

“These trees, the air,” she said, stretching her arms to the sky. “This cosmic creation. Life! I’m talking about the creative energy here, you dig?”

I was dumbfounded. “Nancy, is everyone in California like you?”

“Oh, Billy, it doesn’t matter,” she laughed and began whirling in circles across the forest floor, arms wide, face to the sky. “Just live your life! Stay hip, you dig?”

Who is this woman?

She wasn't into drugs. She didn't sleep around. And she was totally hip.

One day I got home from school early and noticed her sitting outside, underneath our weeping willow, chording around the neck of her *Ovation* with the Joni Mitchell songbook open on the grass. The screen door slammed behind me, and I wandered into the shade.

“May I join you?”

“Sure, Billy. That would be groovy, man.”

I dropped to my seat and leaned back in the grass on my elbows, staring up into the hanging branches of the weeping willow flapping in the breeze. Her voice was hypnotic. I closed my eyes and sighed, enamored by her velvet voice and the sound of fingers sliding up and down the guitar’s fretboard.

How did I score so greatly to have such a cool cousin?

Then for no apparent reason she stopped.

“Billy? Like, dude, do you believe in God?”

God? What does he have to do with anything?

“I dunno.” I shrugged my shoulders and placed a strand of grass in my mouth. “I guess. I mean, sometimes I think we just made him up.”

She placed her elbows on the body of the guitar and stared at me in disbelief. “Billy, look around. God is everywhere. Can't you see that?! Look at the trees.”

“So?”

“So? Did this. How can you *not* believe in him?” She looked deeper. “You shouldn't be afraid to believe in Jesus, Billy.”

“Who says I'm afraid?” My defenses rose. “I just don't know.”

I thought you were cool, Cousin Nancy. Now, maybe not so much.

“Listen, Billy - dig.” Her voice dropped to a whisper with great passion. She leaned across the body of her guitar with a twinkle in her eye. “I want to tell you something. Are you listening to me?”

“Sure, Nan.” I looked back.

“Billy, God is *so cool*. He's a righteous man. Even Bowie believes in Jesus!”

Bowie? David Bowie? Ziggy Stardust Bowie?

“Billy, don't throw away your life. You should trust him. You're not on drugs, are you?”

“Not really,” looking away.

“Let me tell you something. You're too good for that. Get into God, man. He is just so . . .” moving her hands around in the air, “just so stinking *bitchen!* You ought to check him out. He's a real stoker!”

Now, that's what I love about this girl.

She returned to her instrument, chording up and down the neck to *Both Sides Now* without a care in the world. A cool gust of wind filled the weeping willow with a soft rustling of branches. I couldn't deny it. For that short magical moment, God seemed to make sense.

CHAPTER 5

MAGIC CARPET RIDE

*Well, there is a house in New Orleans
They call the Rising Sun
And it's been the ruin of many a poor boy
And God I know I'm one*

House of the Rising Sun, The Animals

You can't see pictures of a woman's private parts, get the baby-making talk from your Dad at a drive-in, and touch the next-door neighbor's puffs without it having some effect on you.

The longing was indefinable. I was never sure where it came from, but it was there. Girls came and went through the years. They served in part to numb a longing for intimacy that I can discern only now as I look back. At the time, I was blind to true intimacy or the real source of the nagging sense of emptiness within me.

Once sitting in the back seat of the car when I was about ten years old crossing the railroad tracks on Dixie highway at the *Belk Lindsey Plaza* one night I looked out the window to see the bright multi-colored lights of a circus. The ferris wheel, merry-go-round, smell of fried food, all seemed fun to me, but we were too poor to stop. Mom and Dad had divorced, my world was tearing apart, dreams were vanishing, and I had lonely hole in my soul - for which (even as a pre-teen) nothing could fill.

I wish I had someone to go to the circus with.

As I grew somehow that lonely hole translated needing a girlfriend. I couldn't get companionship or much from my parents, so I thought I'd find it in others, preferably girls. The way their hair waved in the ocean breeze, their flirtatious smiles, intrigued me and made me determined to figure out what made them tick. That kind of thinking was going on well before I entered puberty. I was in for a rough road.

In first grade, I got off the school bus and kissed Anita in her front yard. In fourth grade, I had my first sleepless night over Holly, when she told me she thought I was cute. My heart raced as I rolled over this way and that, knowing that when I kissed her my world would get better.

In fifth grade, I couldn't say why, but I became a real flirt. Once I was walking back from the beach with a girl named Janice who lived down the street. A hurricane had just come through and the roads cluttered with driftwood, pop cans, sea rope, and other debris. Trudging through the sand and rubble, we stumbled upon something that looked like a deflated balloon resting to one side of a mud puddle.

"Billy, do you now what that is?" Her voice grew excited.

Janice was a teenager, with shoulder-length hair, a few freckles, long legs, and a wide all-knowing smile. Truthfully, I didn't know what that deflated balloon-shaped thing was, but I had a feeling it had something to do with making a baby.

"Sure I do. I mean, who doesn't?" I shrugged my shoulders, keeping the cool factor. "I see those things all the time, probably have a few in my dresser."

She leaned closer, her hair caressing my bare shoulder. I noticed her cleavage peeking out from underneath her bathing suit, and whispered, "Do you want to try it?"

Try what? I had no idea what she was talking about, yet I was intrigued all the same.

“Well, um, no . . . I mean, of course! It’s just that I gotta get home for dinner. Perhaps another time?”

“Sure, Billy.” She cupped her breasts in place. Not so subtle. “Anytime you want.”

I raced into my house and threw myself on the bed, petrified. It never happened with her, but the event fueled my curiosity and aroused my latent libido.

There was a fellow six-grader named Rachel Elizabeth Huffington, who lived on the canal just down the street from Micky. She swooned me. She had brains, a good heart, and was really cool. It was the first time I realized intimacy had to do with more than being physical. Emotions, love, vulnerability, and friendship through thick and thin; those things were usually the last things on my mind. I realized it was part of what I wanted, though nothing physical ever happened between us. It was more in my head than anything else. She was just “too high above me” for me. I may have kissed her on the cheek once, but aside from floating around on surfboards in the canal and being mesmerized by the sunlight dancing across the ripples in the water, that was all. It was a rush just to feel her arm touching mine while floating on my surfboard.

* * *

The move from Cape Canaveral in to Bedford in '69 did nothing but accentuated that inner loneliness. The lie that girls would make it better snowballed into a secret life and a public obsession to get to know young women. In addition, the arrival to two sun-bleached tanned boys from Florida into the small community only added to the newfound attention (and opportunities) I was getting. Sometimes it happened in the dark room in the school’s photography department, sometimes under the bleachers at a football game, sometimes in my basement after getting high. I couldn't get enough physical intimacy.

Halfway through my freshman year I was invited to a party where we ended up playing "spin the bottle." Denise Brady was there. (Everyone knew her as "lava lips.") She was a seriously flirtatious girl in my ninth-grade biology class, built like a blonde-bombshell, with a lips that ran from ear to ear. As luck would have it, on my first spin, the bottle swung around and around, stopping smack-dab pointing to her outstretched her legs.

Yes!

The hesitancy around the room was palpable. For one thing, everyone knew she was dating Mike Armstrong, first trumpet player in the band and a real jock who hated young hippies like me. After the initial uncertainty, the usual chanting began: "Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!"

Well... If I have to.

One kiss led to the next and for the rest of the evening, Denise and I were lava-lip-locked, her tongue half-way down my throat, lying horizontal on the living room sofa, oblivious to everybody else in the room.

Sure I knew she was dating the first trumpet player in the band and that he hated young hippies like me, but for the pain-numbing euphoria, I figured whatever his reaction would be worth it. It was a little fling, and no one would care.

Then came Monday.

Still soaring from two nights before, I was standing in the school lunch line when one of the football team linemen edged up to me, leaned into my ear, and said in a plain, emotionless voice, "Mike Armstrong is going to kill you."

"What?" I kept my gaze on the macaroni and cheese and shrugged it off as I moved my tray along the cafeteria line. "I don't even like her. Besides, it was a game."

"A game?"

“Yeah, you know. A *kissing* game? You mean you don't have those games up here in this little town of yours?”

“Right.” He maneuvered around me and shoved me into the table with the cash register. “A game.” Try telling that to Armstrong.”

Still, just to be safe and knowing he was in my next class, I decided to take the back route to the band room after lunch. I snuck into the auditorium, crept up the stairs to the stage and was searching through the curtains for door to the band room when something like a brick sunk into the side of my face. I saw a bright light, some stars, and slid a few feet across the floor on my butt.

“That’s for kissing my girlfriend you freak!”

“It was a game!” I rubbed my swelling lips and tasted blood. “Get it? A game!”

Tears swelled in my eyes and trickled down my face. Action and consequence were rare occurrences in my life. Truth be told, I knew it hadn’t really been a game. For the thrill of it all, I’d probably do it again if I could. I’d do anything for what I felt that night.

And the beat went on.

* * *

One of my favorite places to do it was in the photography department's dark room. It was a dimly-lit and romantic environment with its red light and blurry atmosphere. Besides, there was really nothing else to do while the chemicals were bringing out the image. I thought I was getting away with it, until half-way through the school year when the photography teacher announced to the class after I emerged from the darkroom with Heather Pearson. “Ladies, watch out for Mr. Blomquist. Blomquist is in perpetual heat.”

The one high schooler I really fell for was Reagan Richardson, my first true love. I met her in the 10th grade. We'd spend hours together, sometimes skipping school just to be with each other.

Much of our relationship was completely wholesome: snowball fights, walks in the autumn, listening to music like James Taylor or Seals and Crofts, and going to parties. Reagan was like water to a thirsty soul, the way I always knew it should be.

As far as intimacy, Reagan tipped the scales. I realized there was more to a woman than the pictures that dirty old man showed me and Micky back in the day. Intimacy was at its heart a profoundly spiritual experience that could swing either good or bad. Sometimes I felt a force driving me to get down and dirty. Other times I felt we'd be just as happy if we'd never made love again, as if I had a demon on one shoulder and an angel on the other, each vying for my attention.

Once Reagan was babysitting and she invited me over. It was a usual place for us. We had this routine whenever she babysat. We sneak drink the vodka from the bar and compensate for what we drank with water. This evening was no different. The kids were in bed and we were in the living room talking. As the vodka did its thing, we fell in that dreamy instrumental from Santana's *Blues for Salvador*. We nestled into each other lying with all the passion of young lovers when suddenly something gripped my heart, an overwhelming sense of conviction.

At my core, I knew I shouldn't be doing the stuff I was doing (but knew I wasn't going to stop it either). From out of the blue, the hand of judgment sobered me up with a jolt. I froze. Not only did I know our actions were wrong, but in that moment, I sensed the real spiritual and emotional damage we were wreaking on one other.

"Bill?" Reagan picked up on it to. "What's going on?"

I reached for the end table and downed my drink to numb the existential realization. There was no way some superstitious belief was going to talk me out of getting what I needed from Reagan.

"We're good."

But I couldn't carry on. I bit my lower lip, took a couple deep breaths, and dropped to one side of her. Gripped by conviction, I stared at the popcorn ceiling above.

"Is everything alright, Bill?"

"I'm just a bit buzzed, that's all." I lied.

"You seem," she struggled to articulate her description. "Strange."

Guilt bubbled up again from deep within me.

Why should I feel guilty? I love this chick, so let's do this!

But it was more than just a conviction of guilt. I felt in that moment that something or someone was there with us, watching us. I looked around the room. For a moment, I thought I saw a form in front of the stereo, a lighted mist, or was it a shadow? It was something just beyond my ability to see. It wavered in the atmosphere. I could sense it staring at us. I tried to ignore it but the spiritual spectator didn't go away. It came closer, and the mounting pressure of anxiety grew, but I refused to admit its power over me.

I looked at Reagan. "This is going to seem really silly, but I have to do something here."

"What is it?"

"Just go with it. I'm not crazy. It's just something I have to do."

Her puzzled eyes grew with concern. "Sure, Bill. Whatever."

I turned and faced the direction where the anomaly was standing. First I mumbled the words, but after a couple times decided to yell them louder and louder until I was at the top of my lungs. "Go away, go away, go away - you hear me? We don't want you here!"

With a slight shimmer in the atmosphere, the mist vanished.

Just like that.

I looked at Reagan, staring at me, petrified.

"It's okay, babe." I sighed and cuddled closer. "Now we can get back to business."

* * *

After that night, life went on as usual, and so did my libido. There was a whole industry dedicated to making people like me forget the dull pain lingering in the back of my mind. I began to get into pornography and loved it. I frequent XXX drive-in theaters in Boston's then-notorious "combat zone" and had my mind set on growing up and writing and directing so-called "adult movies."

I would love to do this for a living.

Yet, in my late teens and early twenties, no encounter fulfilled the ache inside but only added to it, whether I was reading porn, doing porn, engaged in a one-night stand, or involved in a long-term, but ultimately doomed, relationship. I knew my extreme need and behavior was affecting the women who were sincerely seeking build a true relationship with me, though it went unspoken. I didn't like that. I never liked hurting people, but the pleasure was worth it to me, at least for a while.

Shortly after graduating from high school I had moved to Cocoa Florida and attending Brevard Community College. Somehow I met a young local named Mandy. Within weeks we had moved in together. We were in a long-term relationship, as passionate as any other I had known, with the usual ups and downs. One night we were at a country bar on US1 south on the mainland in Cocoa. It was Friday Night Happy Hour and the place was thick with smoke, a party atmosphere, and the sound of billiard balls snapped on the tables. Lennard Skynnard's *Free Bird* was playing on the juke box, and the place was a-buzz with \$5 pitchers of *Budweiser* flowing like water in Aspen.

Mandy and I sat at the bar facing the low hanging fluorescent lights over the billiard tables. She was quiet, always looking away from me.

What on her mind?

"I've got something to tell you."

"Sure. What's up?"

"I'm pregnant."

"You're joking -right? Your pregnant?" I shouted above the music. "Us? Pregnant?" I couldn't believe my ears.

She hammered down a shot of *Jim Beam* and ordered another. "Yep."

A rack of billiard balls broke and echoed across the room. *The Devil Went Down to Georgia* by the Charlie Daniel's Band cued up and the lounge was hopping.

"What are we going to do?"

I stared into her face, her eyes hidden behind her brown bangs. She no longer looked cute to me, no longer a passionate lover caught up in the euphoric buzz of incense, candles, and satin sheets. In that moment she was hardened and distant. She swirled the ice cubes around in the glass. When she looked at me again, her sweet blue-eyes became, well, not so sweet.

"I don't know," she mouthed emphatically.

We sat in silence for a long time. *Whipping Post* by the Allman Brothers filled the room.

"It seems to me we should get married." I shouted into her ear. "Don't you think?"

"Married?! - *Married?*" she exclaimed. "Are you fucked up or what? Why would I want to marry somebody like you?" She slid her empty glass in the direction of the bartender for a refill, leaned into my face on her stool and stared at me seethingly. "I am not getting married to you. Why in the hell would I want to do that?"

“Cause we’re in... love?” I didn’t believe it myself, but the words sounded right. What else could I say?

She clutched the glass, her eyes as cold as the ice cubes. “Fat chance,” she muttered. “You never loved me.”

“So how about we raise the baby, and we just live together?”

“No. I know what I have to do.” She rummaged around her purse for a smoke, lit it up, and inhaled deeply. “It’ll cost you \$150.”

Another rack of balls exploded on the pool table, it’s sound cutting through the fog and snapping me back to reality.

“You want to kill our kid?”

“Don’t worry about it. I know you don’t care. I know of a place in Gainesville. I’ll go up in a couple of weeks and do it. It’s that easy.”

I was horrified, staring at a woman I thought I knew, trying to wrap my mind around the decision before us. Appalled as I was, I didn’t have it in me to argue.

“At least let me go with you. I’m part of this, you know. I mean, he’s mine, too.”

“No, I’ll take care of it.”

She reached into her purse, smeared up lips with dark color, dabbed patchouli oil behind her ears, laid \$5 on the bar, slid off the stool, flipped around on a heel, and walked towards the door squeaking rubber flip-flops, loose tank-top, and cut-off shorts.

Someone dropped a coin in the jukebox and Cat Stevens' *Wild World* had me holding back the tears.

You know I've seen a lot of what the world can do

And it's breakin' my heart in two

Because I never wanna see you sad, girl

Don't be a bad girl

But if you wanna leave, take good care

Hope you make a lot of nice friends out there

But just remember there's a lot of bad and beware

“Just give me the money,” she said, looking back one last time. She flung her straggly brown hair over a shoulder and disappeared out the door. So did my baby.

I was destroyed. But I got through it.

After all, I was a *Blomquist*.

CHAPTER 6

WHITE PUNKS ON DOPE

*Want some whiskey in your water?
Sugar in your tea?
What's all these crazy questions they're askin' me?
This is the craziest party that could ever be
Don't turn on the lights 'cause I don't wanna see*

Mama Told Me Not to Come, Three Dog Night

The year was 1973. The day I graduated from high school, Mom and my Frank, my stepdad, threw a party for me. A nice gesture, but I had Friday on my mind and, in particular, Cocoa Beach. I couldn't wait to get back to where I knew I once belonged. Within a week of graduation, I was at *Logan International Airport* heading south to the Space Coast of sunny Florida.

Before the days of TSA we all had to walk through a metal scanner to get to the gate. On that particular day I was wearing a grey sports coat with a newly purchased bag of weed in my inner chest pocket. It wasn't metal; I knew I'd be okay.

Mom and Frank watched me pass through the metal detector after our saying our "goodbyes." All was going well when, and much to my surprise, a long loud mechanical warning beep stopped me in my tracks.

What the...

"Young man, could you step over here and empty the contents of your pockets, please?"

I was petrified. Was I going to get busted right there in *Logan International Airport* with my mother standing there watching me?

“Yes, sir.”

I emptied my pockets, my wallet, and some loose change.

“Nothing here, sir.”

I was reloading my pockets when he spoke up again. “Would you please empty the contents of your jacket?”

“My jacket?”

“Yes. Or we will have to do that for you.”

“Oh, no, sir. Not at all. Would be happy to.” I slid my hand into my inner pocket, fingers trembling around the dime-bag of pot. Then I found it. With a sigh of relief I pulled my hand out and, much to everyone's surprise, exclaimed, “Look! It's my harmonica!”

I even tooted it to show them it was real.

I was elated. So elated, in fact, that somewhere at around 29,000 feet, I went to the bathroom and celebrated by smoking a freshly rolled joint. I emerged from the lavatory in a puff and smoke and worked my way back up to my seat and everybody on the jet was staring at me.

* * *

Back in Florida, I moved into a downstairs room with some old family friends, the Robinsons, in Merritt Island. Richard worked at the Cape and Elizabeth, his wife, was a social worker. Sean, their son, had the longest hair of any man or woman I had seen up to that point and was a year younger than me. René and Alyssa, the two daughters, were my age and a year older and - well they were just smoking-hot. Their lovely two-story home on the banks of the Indian River near the

southern tip of Merritt Island was a fabulous place. A balcony overlooked the river with its amazing sunsets, a *Tarzan* swing flew you through a grove of banana trees and sent you flying into the water with a splash, and a large pot plant grew on top of the TV set.

The Robinsons were alternative people. Elizabeth slept upstairs by herself and, for whatever reason, Richard slept downstairs where all the action was. A room with a bar, a pool table, and some adjacent bedrooms led out to a garage and the street. René and Alyssa's hotness brought plenty of guys and girls, who would congregate, party hard, and get into mischief.

Shortly after I moved in, I learned about one of those secret things grown-ups kept under wraps: mediums. And Mrs. Robinson was one of them.

A medium? How exciting!

It was just what I wanted. Invoking spirits through the *Ouija Board* and learning all about life from a spirit's point-of-view fed my curiosity, and I jumped in with both feet. The only problem was that once we invited spirits into the house it was hard to get rid of them. The Robinson household was not only a home for living humans. I had many experiences that would haunt me. Sometimes nightmares would plague me at night, and I would wake up screaming or in a cold sweat. Other times, I could sense something in the house watching me.

No matter how disturbed I felt, Elizabeth didn't think much about it. During one of her sessions, just as we were shutting it down, the water faucet in the upstairs bathtub turned all the way on. There was no one upstairs. In her peaceful southern-accent, Elizabeth said, "Could one of ya'll get up, go into the bathroom, and turn off the water?"

The longer I stayed at the Robinsons, the more terrified I should have been at all this spiritualism, but I was assured this was harmless.

"White magic is done for the sake of good." René explained to me one night. "A black witch does magic to harm others, so we are all fine."

I also learned through the *Ouija Board* that Alyssa Robinson was considered a "love child" by the entities on the other side of the board. "A love child," she explained, "is a person who is living the first of many, reincarnated lives."

* * *

Every weekend was a party at the Robinsons. Young adults floated in and out of basement, most of whom I never knew and never saw again, from dusk to dawn. They were all druggies, lost dogs, just like me. Some hitchhiked in, others came on motorcycles. Most arrived via vans that had curtains over the side and tinted windows with loud pulsating bass beats that vibrated across the driveway into the house. Clouds of pot smoke always followed the emerging passengers.

One of the partiers, though, stood out among the others. He looked like us, talked like us, but he had "a different vibe," as Cousin Nancy might have said. A short man with deep brown eyes, he wasn't particularly striking, but always had a confident, joyful glow about his face. No one knew who he was or where he came from. To my knowledge he never did drugs or got crazy with us. He simply watched us with no judgment that I could perceive. An interesting thing about this guy is that he knew all the words to all the songs we played on the record player at any given moment at any given party. And he sang them, too. His voice was smooth as silk, rich with the passion of his heart, as if he had written them himself. These were the same old songs we heard time and time again, but when he sang them, they seem to come to life. The other thing that was weird is that, when he sang, it was as if he was singing directly to me (no matter where he was standing).

Once we were in the garage getting high to The Moody Blues' *Dawning is the Day*. I had never paid much attention to the lyrics until he sang them.

Rise, let us see you

Dawning is the day

Miss, misty meadow

You will find your way

Wake up in the morning, to yourself

And leave this crazy life behind you

Listen, we're trying to find you

The lyrics felt like they were composed especially for me. It was unnerving because someone was reading my heart's desires, but comforting because there was some hope, some higher call, some thing for me to ascend to.

On another occasion we were mellowed out on the couches and listening to Janis Joplin's *Summertime* when the stranger showed up out of the blue and began tugging at my heart through the song.

One of these mornings

You're gonna rise, rise up singing

You're gonna spread your wings, child

And take, take to the sky

Lord, the sky

I couldn't figure this guy out. He always sang the songs that matched exactly where I needed to be or what I needed to hear, precisely at the right time. He was a real enigma. I asked around and we never learned where he came from or where he was going. He sang songs that deeply touched me, songs I wanted to believe were true. At the least, his presence made me think about something bigger than myself and, just maybe, that God was trying to get my attention. Often, just before leaving, he would give me a kind gaze for a moment before vanishing into the early morning hours, until he stopped coming around altogether.

* * *

The Robinson home was generally a place where everything I learned in Sunday School was tossed to the wind. There were no morals, no set rules, no judgement or accountability. The scene was an animal house, a circus side show. It had the frivolous feel of *For the Benefit of Mr. Kite* by the Beatles, laced with the prophetic overtones of *Life in the Fast Lane* by the Eagles.

Just the outside the laundry room door, my friend Paul would dance around in circles like a crazed Indian Shaman, his afro-American hair tied back with a rainbow headband. He had been high for a week straight and would at times wave a loaded spear-gun in one hand and guzzle a fifth of Jack Daniels with the other, while slurring through the words of *Rocky Mountain Way* by The James Gang.

Behind the garage, Tom-Boy would be down by the *Tarzan* swing and, after tossing aside an empty quart of *Shultz Malt Liquor*, lunging for the rope that swung down through the banana grove. At the bottom of the run, just before swinging into the air, he'd reached down and sweep up

a can of *Bud Light* off the coral shore and drink as much as he could before releasing the rope some thirty feet above the water, and come crashing through its surface with a hoot and a holler.

Just outside the sliding glass doors to the backyard, Jimbo stood with a friend on the concrete porch with a loaded .22 rifle at his side. Between alternative swigs of whiskey and hits of hash, he'd take potshots at small *Cessna's* and other private planes flying over the house. Once, after hearing the "clink" of a bullet hit the plane Jimbo dropped to his knees hysterically laughing.

Inside the house, Gary and Jessica swayed in slow motion while snorting white-powdered lines in the crease of Bowie's double-album jacket of *Diamond Dogs*, with a tight \$50 bill.

The only adult close enough to do anything about all the craziness was Mr. Robinson, who stayed in his room with the door closed. It was always quiet. No telling what happened in there.

Then there was me, sitting inside the backyard doghouse with my friend Sean. We heard in a song by Donovan called *Mellow Yellow* that you could get high smoking dried banana leaves. All we got were a couple of scorched throats a pounding headache.

* * *

Then there were the "magic mushrooms." Psilocybin 'shrooms were the best because they were organic, gave you great hallucinations, and you didn't have to ruin an entire weekend for a good trip. In addition, they could be ingested and just about any way possible. I was very creative and tossed them into just about every recipe I could find. I used them in everything from tea, salads, and *Kool-Aid*.

One day Mick suggested we drive out to the cow-fields in west Melbourne and pick some 'shrooms. Ironically enough, they grew in cow dung.

Lovely.

So five of us piled into his washed-out green GMC van, pushed in the eight track of Peter Frampton's *Do You Feel Like We Do*, and headed west for the cow fields. Once there, we pulled over, distributed our paper bags, hopped through barbed-wire fence, and walked halfway into the cow field, beginning the rank business of digging through cow patties and plucking out the specimens.

"Just the ones with the purple rims around the stems," Mick warned. "The other one's will kill you."

Kill you? I sighed and carefully examined my stash. *I'm too young to die.*

"You blasted hippies!" A voice cut through the still farm air like a shotgun blast. An old man appeared on his front porch holding a shotgun. "Stay off my property!"

A real shotgun blast froze us in our flip-flops. We stared at one another.

"What was that?" I asked.

"Oh, just some old fart." Mick replied nervously.

An old fart with a gun, that is.

He reloaded and fired a second shot, this time in our direction.

We hit the ground. Shimming across the thorny field, we slid under the barb-wired fence, scooted down the grass bank, and back into the van, slamming the double doors behind us. Like war commandos emerging from battle, we piled into the side doors clutching at our 'shrooms like well-earned spoils. Mick hopped into the seat, threw the van in gear, and stepped on the gas, the tires screeching under us with *Light My Fire* by The Doors blasting from the 8-Track.

It was a momentous escape.

When we got back to the Robinsons, I proclaimed we would celebrate our bravery in a uniformly unique and patriotic way, because of the tremendous sacrifice displayed among our troops in securing the goods.

“To consume the ‘shrooms!” I shouted, waving my bag to the sky.

“Consume the ‘shrooms! Consume the ‘shrooms!” we chanted in unity.

“Now, how should we ingest them? We need something... something fresh,” I suggested, circling a finger in the air and looking around the kitchen. “Something new and creative. A recipe we haven’t tried before.” I thought a moment and I got it. “I know, we’ll make *Lasagna!*”

We went wild and danced around the kitchen like goons. “Lasagna! Lasagna! Lasagna!” we chanted furiously.

They emptied the bags on the counter and I went to work. Cottage cheese, mozzarella, ricotta, pasta, fresh tomatoes, garlic, a hint of parsley, some fresh basil from Mr. Richard’s garden and, of course, fresh ‘shrooms. Within an hour, the entire house was filled with the mouth-watering aroma of baked lasagna. I peeked through the oven window and saw it bubbling in its juices, spreading its Italian allure throughout the house.

It was as we were setting the table for the feast when an automobile pulled into the circular driveway below. We peered from the kitchen and grew astonished to see Richard and Elizabeth Robinson return unexpectedly home from work.

“It’s the Robinsons!” We murmured under our breath. They’re home early. What do we do?”

“Nothing. Just stay cool,” I assured the troops. “They’ll probably just go into their bedrooms and take a nap or something.”

The door swung open. Richard and Elizabeth tromped up the stairs, turned the corner into the kitchen, and dropped their bags on the sofa in front of the TV.

“Bill, are you cooking?” Mrs. Robinson seemed mildly relieved. “What a surprise!”

“It smells delicious,” her husband agreed. “I was wondering what to cook for dinner tonight.”

I sheepishly covered my lasagna with a dishtowel.

“It’s nothing, really. You probably don’t want any. I mean, I made it just for us, you know, just the five of us here.”

“It’s perfect!” said Elizabeth, peering into the bubbling cheese and simmering sauce, as if reading tea leaves. “And - look. Are those mushrooms?”

I glanced frantically to the troops, then back to the dish. “Um, yes, Mrs. Robinson. I believe they are.”

“Wonderful!” Richard loosened his tie. “It’s been a grueling day. Is there enough to share?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Why not? I’ll set a couple more places.”

After all, there’s a pot plant growing on the TV set.

That was one of the most unusual family meals I ever had. We talked for hours, having firsts, seconds, and some of us even thirds. The lasagna floated its way around the giant picnic table time and time again amidst a backdrop of laughter, giggles, and mindless conversation. The meal lasted into sunset, while just off the balcony and across from the Indian River the sun was sinking like a massive fireball into the darkness, bathing our faces and the entire room into an orange haze.

Kids, the parents, all of us getting high together. Nothing too strange, here. Perfectly normal. Just another day at the Robinsons.

* * *

A psychedelic mushroom lasagna may have been the healthiest drug I ever experimented with. In the year to follow the hedonism and absolute lack of wisdom began taking its toll on my body. One of the most disconcerting effects was my increased inability to make rational decisions. My thinking became clouded, and I began to wonder if real damage wasn't being done to my brain. My coordination also faltered, and I would often trip, walk into walls, stub my toe, and bump into furniture. My entire body felt numb at times, and my internal perception was going to mush.

Psychologically, and especially in social circles, I had difficulty distinguishing myself from the other personalities around me. What, exactly, is a *Blomquist* and who was I? Where was Bill? Who was Bill? I became paranoid about going to parties because I knew there was an expectation for me to be "Bill," but I was forgetting who "Bill" was supposed to be. In short, I was a poster boy for the New York Dolls' *Personality Crises*.

Lost myself amid the crowds, the drugs, and the music, there was that small person clamoring from within who knew he needed help from something greater. Desperate, I turned to the spirit world again, riding on the spiritual coattails of Mrs. Robinson and her seances. She helped me get in touch with "reality" and an energy force out there, if not a God. Cousin Nancy assured me of his existence but that seemed so far away now. The god I chose wasn't like the god I heard about at Church. It didn't matter. All I knew is that there was something out there, and I needed help.

So I became, as The Tubes sang, a *Space Baby*, thoroughly diving into every paranormal topic I could get my hands on: UFOs and aliens, the Bhagavad Gita, cults, witchcraft, ancient religions, extra sensory perception (ESP), aura-reading, and transcendental meditation (TM).

Through it all, however, I noticed an interesting dynamic occurring. The more I delved into these things in my search for “God,” the further away from becoming "whole" I felt. If there was a God, I reasoned, I should be feeling *better* about life and even about who I was, not worse. But as I delved deeper into the occult things got worse, not better. Instead of God and enlightenment, I found only an inability to be content with life as I knew it.

CHAPTER 7
SWEET HITCH-A-HIKER

*Busted flat in Baton Rouge, waiting for a train
I was feeling near as faded as my jeans.
Bobby thumbed a diesel down just before it rained,
And rode us all the way to New Orleans.*

Me and Bobby McGee, Janis Joplin

I loved to hitchhike. I took my hitchhiking very seriously.

Several decades ago hitchhiking was safe, and fun. People used to “thumb” all over the place. You met interesting people. You heard fascinating stories, all kinds of drama, and even personal confessions from people who knew they would never see you again.

You got to ride in all kinds of cars (my favorite part). Vans, pickup trucks, convertibles, everything from Buicks to Bentleys, each with its own scents, smells, and specialized music playing on their cassette radios. I have literally hitchhiked tens of thousands of miles with very few threatening situations. Most trips went off without a hitch. Others? Not so much. Some were even quite humorous.

* * *

Mick and I were heading up from Sebastian Inlet to Cocoa Beach, standing in excruciating heat as we waited for a ride, thumbs out, hair pulled back, all to no avail. We waited

for hours, two long-haired-hippie-type-freaks, slouched over with heat exhaustion, torn T-shirts, flip-flops, arms drooping, standing there like wilted cacti in the high heat of summer.

Cars, vans, and pickup trucks flew past. Many drivers slowed and stared at the side show before speeding away, back-grinding grit and dirt onto our sweaty faces. Trying to make the best of it, I began singing The Loving Spoonful's, *Summer in the City*, but was interrupted by Mick's voice of despair.

“This so sucks. I’m done.”

“Me, too.”

Before my disbelieving eyes he broke the cardinal rule of hitchhiking etiquette: he sat down, right there, on the side of the road.

What is he doing Doesn't he know a person who sits down while hitchhiking is forever doomed to remain rideless until your body rots and the vultures prey on your very bones?

“Dude!” I yelled emphatically above the roar of the oncoming semi-truck. “No one’s gonna pick us up now!”

“Who cares?”

“Who cares?”

Things were not going well at all here. Something had to be done. Drastic times require drastic measures.

Just behind us, a construction crew worked framing a house just off the beach, hammers in hand, power tools buzzing, with the sound of the high surf roaring behind them. Upon closer observation, I noticed one of them guzzling water from a cone-shaped paper cup.

My eyes grew as wide as saucers. “That’s it! Micky, get off your butt. I have an idea.”

Mick lifted himself from the puddle of sweat on the asphalt with a sigh. “What now, Bill.”

"Wait here. I'll be right back."

I bee-lined around endless piles of trash, twisted metal, scrap wood, and empty *Bud Light* cans until I arrived at one of the guys in the construction crew where I introduced myself, told him a bit of our dilemma, and politely inquired about the water from the phosphorescent orange *Igloo* water cooler sitting there on the tailgate of the *Ford 250* pickup truck.

“Sure, help yourself, kid. Drink all you want.” A well-built, shirtless man, blackened by the sun smiled at me. He wiped the beads of sweat off his forehead with a dirty cloth and spit into the sand. “Sure is a doozy out here.”

“Actually, we don’t want the water, sir. Just the cups, if you don’t mind.”

He shrugged, adjusted his tool belt, and returned to the job site. “Suit yourself.”

I snagged two cups, zig-zagged with excitement through the array of steel, wood, and trash and wound up back at the road with two perfectly-formed paper cups.

"Dude check these out."

“What are you doing?” Mick looked suspicious. “Where’s the water? I thought you were getting us something to drink.”

“Just wait and see,” I assured him, untying my hair and letting it fall to my shoulders. Ever so carefully, I positioned one paper cup under one side of my t-shirt and the other across from it.

“What the heck?” Micky’s bloodshot blue eyes bulged. “You’re putting on boobs?”

“Just work with me here.”

“Dude, this is so uncool.” He moved away from me in disgust.

“No, dig, we can do this! It doesn’t mean we’re gay or anything.”

I adjusted my chest so it looked perky, draped my hair across my face, revealed a little more leg, and stood behind my shell-shocked best friend with one of my new paper boobs resting gracefully atop his shoulder.

“Now stick out your thumb.”

“I’m not going to stick out my thumb for anybody,” Mick said.

“Just do it.”

“ This is so uncool,” he said again and apprehensively lifted his thumb into the oncoming traffic. “There is something so wrong about this.”

“It’s awesome!” I giggled like a school girl. I positioned my arm under his, and stuck out my thumb, too.

The next car pulled over to pick us up.

“What’d I tell you!?” I said with triumph. “We rock!”

The car slowed to a stop, just 10 away. Mick hopped in the front seat. I hopped in the back and immediately removed my boobs. As we pulled out, the man turned down the AM news station and asked Mick where he and his foxy "girlfriend" were headed.

“Just up the street.” He looked away, staring distantly out the window and mumbling, "Besides, she's not my girlfriend."

"Not your girlfriend, eh?"

The man glanced over his shoulder with expectancy and did a double take that almost took us all off the road.

“Yeah, just up the street,” I echoed, in a most manly voice. “Thanks for the lift, man.”

A few weeks later, my stoner-friend Tom-Boy and I decided to hitchhike from Cape Canaveral to New Orleans for a little party in Louisiana called *Mardi Gras*. We had good long rides with truckers (always the best rides for long trips), met up with some friends in the heart of the city, and plunged into the circus-like atmosphere of kings, queens, parades, parties, flying necklaces, and topless flashers.

And I thought the Robinsons lived on the edge!

After a few memorable days in the heart of Cajun country, we got back on I10 East, stuck out our thumbs, and made our way home. After a couple fortuitous car rides everything went dead and we found ourselves standing on a nowhere corner on a nowhere back road in a nowhere town in rural Alabama for what must have been over four hours. Many cars slowed and peered at us like we were zoo animals, or aliens from some distant planet, but no one stopped. Some even threw bags of trash and empty beer bottles at us as they flew passed. At one point a rusted red pickup screeched around the corner blasting Creedence Clearwater's Revival's *Born on the Bayou*. A red neck, wearing a backwards baseball cap with a Dixie patch and guzzling a *Pabst Blue Ribbon*, stuck his arm out the window and gave us the finger.

“Damn hippies!” he yelled. “Go home!”

We're trying!

At the top of the fifth hour we had a breakthrough. A powder-puff blue convertible Cadillac *Eldorado* loaded down with all sorts of lamps, furniture, clothes, and other stuff in the back seat with California plates whizzed past. I watched curiously as he slowed down, made a U-turn, drive back around, slower this time, turned around at the median, pull over right next to us. Sitting inside was a remarkably-groomed man with gold bling-bling hanging around his exposed

chest, rings on just about every finger, and a song by Mott the Hoople blasting on the cassette radio.

“Hey, dudes!”

Cautiously I stooped down to scan the car. “Thanks for picking us up, sir.” It all seemed good, yet there was a certain unease I couldn’t pinpoint. “How far are you heading?”

“Orlando.”

“Orlando! Orlando, *Florida*?” Tom-Boy went ballistic. “That’s like an eight hour ride.” He pulled me back and whispered in my ear. “This is perfect, dude.”

I suck my head in the window. And scanned the interior. “I dunno, Tom-Boy.” I mumbled “Something smells fishy here.”

"We’re heading for Canaveral. This is going to be perfect!" Tom-Boy exploded with enthusiasm.

Awkward silence.

“Look, I’m going to be straight with you guys.” The remarkably groomed man from California reached and turned off the radio. “My name is Donnie. I’m moving to Orlando. I’ve been driving nonstop since L.A. I’m gay, and I’m lonely. I just picked you up because you were two young dudes and thought we could get something going.”

Get something going?

I swallowed hard. Somehow Orlando wasn’t sounding so good after all. I remembered a previous trip with a guy who picked me up and put the moves on me. It was a regretful ride that confirmed that even though it really wasn't my thing, certain men found it hard to take no for an answer. I wasn’t ready to go down that road again.

“No, we’ll take it.” Tom-Boy’s voice was firm. He opened the door and pushed me into the front. “Here, Bill, you sit in the middle.”

It was smooth going at first. Three guys sat with pillows and blankets across our laps with songs like *Afternoon Delight* and *I Believe in Miracles* playing on the music machine. Then night fell, and time began to take its toll on lonely Donnie. Somewhere between ABC’s *The Look of Love* and David Bowie’s *Aladdin Sane*, Donnie made his move. His right hand slithered off the steering wheel and onto my leg. I jerked away and glanced at Tom-Boy, who was nodding off and oblivious to my predicament.

“Tom-Boy,” I whispered, frantically. “This guy’s putting the moves on me.”

“Dude. Huh?” He pushed his hair out of his face and drew near my shoulder.

“Donnie, he’s on me. What do I do?”

“Whatever. It’s a ride,” he mumbled back. “Just go with it.”

Donnie pressed in a little harder.

I had to get out of this. My mind went scrambling. *Maybe if Donnie thinks that Tom-Boy and I are lovers he’d back off.*

“So, Tommy-Boy.” I cleared my throat and broke the silence. “That reminds me. What day is today?”

“Beats me,” he replied, sleepily. “Wednesday maybe?”

“I mean the date. Isn’t today our... anniversary?”

“What?” Tom-Boy’s eyes flashed open and stared at me with disbelief.

“I mean, how long have we been dating anyway? A year or two now? It seems like only yesterday.”

“Dude, we are not dating. And we are not gay.”

I slumped into the seat.

So much for that idea.

As we drove deeper into the night, I had to physically take Donnie's hand off my thigh and place it firmly on his own knee numerous times. Loud and clear but not a word spoken. He eventually got the message. We pulled over at the next rest stop, and he suggested Tom-Boy and I exchange seats.

Oh, yeah, Tom-Boy. It's payback time.

"Why don't you sit here in the middle, Tom-Boy?" He patted the seat with his hand.

"Right here."

"That's a wonderful idea, Donnie!" I exclaimed with a smile. "My legs were getting a bit stiff there anyway."

I hopped like a rabbit freed from a cage and we traded places. Back on the road again, Donnie slid in Side A of Lou Reed's *Transformer* cassette and fast-forwarded to the tune *Walk on the Wild Side*.

Holly came from Miami F.L.A.

Hitch-hiked her way across the U.S.A.

Plucked her eyebrows on the way

Shaved her legs and then he was a she

She said, hey babe, take a walk on the wild side,

Said, hey honey, take a walk on the wild side.

It was a mere ten miles out when the tension in the car grew so thick you could cut it with a blade. Twenty miles out and I knew what was going on under the pillows. Donnie's busy hand was moving up Tom-Boy's thigh.

Not so fun, is it? It's okay. Just go with it.

For the next 50 miles, Tom-Boy squirmed around in his seat, readjusting the pillows, coughing, clearing his throat, desperately trying to catch my eyes as I gazed distantly out the window, pretending I didn't know what was going on. The ride seemed to last for hours. Then it happened. Tom-Boy began pounding his fist on my knee under the blankets. Donnie must have zeroed in.

"I know, dude." I mouthed at him. "I told you!"

He cleared his throat and said, firmly but gently. "Really, Donnie, I rather wish you wouldn't."

"Okay," said Donnie, disappointedly. "I understand."

We rode in silence for the remaining four hours, the most uncomfortable, awkward, longest four hours of my entire existence. No one was happy. Everyone was frustrated - but for very different reasons. Eventually we made it out of Donnie's' powder-puff blue convertible Cadillac *Eldorado* somewhere on the outskirts of Orlando and watched him disappear into the orange sunrise.

"Well, at least we got a decent ride," throwing my backpack across my shoulder and walking up the ramp.

"Yup!" agreed Tom-Boy. "Not bad at all."

CHAPTER 8
ALL THUMBS

*Sometimes the light's all shinin' on me
Other times I can barely see
Lately it occurs to me
What a long, strange trip it's been*

Truckin', The Grateful Dead

By far, one of the most memorable hitchhiking adventures was a trip that began on a Fall evening in 1976.

It was six o'clock on Halloween night. Mick and I were downstairs at the Robinsons listening to *Layers* by Les McCann, completely bored out of our minds, when I got a killer idea.

"Hey, Micky?"

He glanced at me with his blue bloodshot eyes and his shoulder-length, platinum-blond Gregg Allman hair resting on his shoulders. "Yeah?"

"We need to do something fun, something that kicks butt. We just can't sit around here bored all night."

His eyes widened. "Like?"

"A road trip."

Outside a lightning flash lit up the sky, followed by a distant thunder.

"It'd be rad!" I reassured him. "You know, like when we hitchhiked to Sebastian that day, and I nabbed those paper cups from the construction guys?"

"That was weird, Bill."

"But not like that." I groped for the right sales pitch. "Something bigger and without boobs. Like a real adventure, dig?"

"I dunno. I think it's going to rain. And I'm kind of tired."

The LP stylus got to the end of the track, lifted up, and slid to the outside of the turntable, clearing the way for Side 1 of Peter Frampton's, *Frampton Comes Alive* to drop down in its place.

"I got it!" Like a kid at the circus having his first taste of cotton candy, my eyes grew twice their size. My voice dropped to an excited whisper. "Let's hitchhike somewhere?"

"Right now? Tonight? You're crazy, man."

"Let's hitchhike to," I persisted, "*Massachusetts*."

"Massachusetts?" Mick looked grave. "You gotta be kidding."

"No," I insisted. "It'll be rad, man. And my mom and Frank Wilson would love to see us."

"That's like," Mick struggled for the words, "near Boston, isn't it?"

Thunder rattled the house. I pulled a fingernail, waiting with bated breath. As the rumbling faded, Mick shrugged his boney shoulders and said the word that set the whole thing in motion.

"Sure."

We tossed some clothes in our backpacks, slammed the garage door behind us, and began the 1,300 mile journey from Merritt Island, Florida, to Bedford, Massachusetts.

Just like that.

As we walked up South Tropical Trail to 520 West, we lit up a joint and danced like maniacs in the darkened street, singing Steppenwolf's "Born to Be Wild."

Get your motor runnin'

Head out on the highway

Looking for adventure

In whatever comes our way

It was a rough start. Numerous random rides got us over to the ramp at I95 North but made a 30 minute drive a couple hours long. Then the storm hit us full force, and it began to rain. With no waterproof gear, this wasn't looking like such a "rad" idea after all.

We stood anxiously at the top of the ramp for I95 North and stuck out our thumbs. Forty-five minutes later, soaked to the bone and nearly blinded by oncoming headlights, an older hippie-type person in a pickup truck pulled over. We were extremely grateful to see him. I scooted across to the middle of the seat.

"Thank you, sir," I said gratefully, rubbing my hands briskly. "It's crazy rain out there."

"Yeah." He turned his windshield wipers up all the way and peered ahead. "A big storm is coming in. Gonna head north, right up the whole Eastern Seaboard, they say."

"You don't say," I replied.

"I just did."

"Right."

Thirty minutes into the ride I noticed that, although we were heading straight ahead at a constant 65 MPH, the driver himself was spinning the steering wheel two or three revolutions to the left and two or three revolutions to the right to keep us heading in a straight direction and on the road.

“Excuse me, sir.” I spoke politely, remembering to keep a firm and friendly hitchhiking etiquette. “I notice you’re spinning the steering wheel ‘round and ‘round this way and ‘round and ‘round that way, yet we are still traveling in a straight line.”

“Yep.” He spun the steering around a few revolutions with his pinky. “So you noticed that, huh?”

“How...” I was speechless. “Unusual.”

"It gets a little tricky in town," he mumbled.

You drive this thing in town? Mick and I exchanged widening eyes.

“So how far up are you heading?”

“Just up here," he pointed. "Next exit, Daytona.”

He spun the wheel three more revolutions to the right and one to the left and slowed to a stop at the bottom of the exit ramp.

"Here ya go, fellas. Try to stay dry!"

Mick shimmied out the truck, his sneakers landing ankle-deep in water. I followed suit.

“Happy Halloween, Mister, and thanks for the lift!”

The door slammed in sync with a nearby lightning strike, and the water rumbled beneath our feet matching the sky.

Several rides and several hours later we found ourselves in South Carolina. The nameless drivers blurred one into the next, along with each passing hour that dragged us along the highway, north on I95. As a gloomy dawn appeared the rain from the persecuting storm had now turned to sleet. We were thumbs out and shivering with drooping arms when a creepy-looking run down station wagon with an abnormally skinny spare tire on the back-passenger side and a

smoking muffler pulled over. I peered in the window to see four aged, greasy-haired red-necks, dressed in a tasteless array of Halloween costumes staring back at us.

I guess the feelings were mutual.

"Hop in, fellas," one of them said in a friendly manner. The door opened, and they shimmied around to give us room.

I eased into the car, immediately scrunched in like a sardine in the back seat between *He-man* and a fairly good likeness of *Bozo the Clown*. Each had costume make-up smeared across their face, which blended nicely with their lips full of open sores, their missing teeth, oily hair, and color-faded tattoos stretching across their arms. They spoke in funny Southern accents that reminded me of *He-Haw*.

"We's headin' home aftah a long night of trick-er-treatin'," declared one proudly.

I thought the best thing was to feign interest. "You don't say!"

As we drove north into the increasing sleet, I noticed the guy in the front passenger seat was fondling a pistol. He stared aimlessly out the window as he spun the chamber round and round, making clicking noises that pierced through the otherwise light-hearted atmosphere of the car. The gun made me feel, well, not so light-hearted.

I leaned forward to befriend the driver and the two passengers next to him. The guy in the middle had a fresh bandage on his leg just above the knee with dried blood scabbing over the surface of the gauze.

"What happened there?" I shouted above Charlie Daniel's *The Devil Went Down to Georgia*.

He turned down the 8-Track and glanced back at me through bloodshot eyes.

"Say what, sonny?"

"I'm wondering what happened there, on your knee there. Looks like you need to go to a doctor."

"Oh, that." He giggled like a squealing pig and, downing his *Pabst Blue Ribbon*, crushed the empty can and tossed it between his feet. "Got shot. Bubba did it. Last night."

"Got shot?" I couldn't believe my ears. "Who's Bubba?"

That's when the guy spinning the pistol chamber looked away from the window with dog-like remorse. "Ya know I didn't mean nothin' by it! It was an aaaccedent."

"I know, I know, Billy Rae," he laughed. "And it ain't as bad as last time, either!"

There was a last time?

I eased back in my seat and mouthed to Micky, "We. Gotta. Get. Out. Of. Here."

We did, eventually.

Twelve hours later we found ourselves standing in a full-fledged blizzard, thumbs out once again and freezing before an unending exodus of blinding rush-hour headlights. Our clothes were stiffened with ice and stuck to our shivering flesh. Micky's lips were purple, with snotcicles hanging down from his scraggly mustache. His Gregg Allman hair would have been whipping around in the sub-zero gusts if it hadn't been weighed down with clumps of ice.

I shook uncontrollably, one arm draped across my chest to keep warm and the other waving madly at the oncoming headlights, pleading desperately for somebody, anybody, to have mercy on us.

"Dude!" I cried over the howl of wind and snow. "We need some paper cups!"

"Forget it."

"No one is picking us up," I reasoned. "We're two guys and we look creepy."

He was right. We might as well start walking to Boston, and we probably would have, if our feet weren't frozen to the breakdown lane.

Then we got a break.

A car slowed, passed us, and then backed up. We wrenched our bags from the snow bank and danced through the slush and ice to get to the car.

"Dude," said Micky, grabbing my arm, "it's a pig."

"Who cares? It's a ride."

"But we'll get busted."

"Just toss the bag into the snowbank and let's go. We're cool. These guys are really friendly up here. I mean, look at this, he's giving us a ride and everything!"

Within moments we were thawing out in the cruiser's backseat, complete with an warm array of red and blinking blue lights flashing overhead and the sound of policemen talking in high-pitched, broken-sentences across the police band. From the back seat, I pressed my face against the gridded steel curtain.

"Thank you, sir."

"Not a problem, boys." His voice was soft, yet stern. He turned the squelch down on the police radio. "Where you kids coming from?"

"Florida," I said.

"Florida?" He chuckled unbelievably. "In this?"

"Oh, you wouldn't believe the night we've had." I talked as if the officer had become my best friend, pouring out the misery of the past day, and looking for some sympathy and maybe some help. "It took us two hours just to get to the freeway. Ordinarily, it's like 30 minutes. And that was just the start!"

“Yeah?”

“And then we got picked up by this guy who had to turn his steering wheel all the way to the left and all the way to the right just to keep us on the road!”

“You don’t say.”

“Then we get picked up by these rednecks who are playing with guns.”

“Guns, you say?”

“Guns! Right there in the front seat! One of them was shot, too. And was a total bummer. And now this snowstorm. We’ve been traveling 24 hours and haven’t slept, eaten, or anything!”

I sat back again and rubbed my hands briskly. “Thanks again for picking us up, sir. It’s really nice in here. How far you headed, anyway?”

“Just up the street he-ah.” He had a thick New England accent, and could barely pronounce his r’s. “The police station’s up he-ah, this next exit.”

Well it wouldn’t be a long ride, but at least it was a ride.

“A police station?” Worry flashed across Micky’s face.

“You know, a ‘police station,’” said the officer, “whe-ah we sit around drinkin’ kawfee and eatin’ donuts and stuff like that?”

A police station? And with coffee? This is great!

We got to the station and were immediately booked for hitchhiking.

Arrested. For hitchhiking? You gotta be shitting me.

We had to remove our shoes and belts and put them in a large pile of everyone else’s shoes and belts.

“Why do we have to take off our shoes and give you our belts?” I questioned, untying my thawing sneakers.

"So ya wont hang yahself, kid"

Hang myself for hitchhiking?

We were escorted to two separate cells adjacent to each other. Each had a barred window just below street level, so we could see the feet of all the passersby. Attached to the wall of my cell was a bed of rusted steel bed with no sheets. To the side was an aluminum toilet without a seat and with a of half-soaked roll of toilet paper on the floor.

I was irritable, famished, and not at all feeling the love. Before long I found myself calling at the top of my lungs to the cop, who looked like Jackie Gleason, buried in a newspaper behind a cluttered desk.

"Whaddaya want, kid?"

"Excuse me, sir, but doesn't it say somewhere that we get to make a phone call if we get arrested?"

"So?" His voice echoed down the hall.

"So, I'm an American. I want my phone call."

The sound of the chair scraping the concrete floor echoed down the hallway as he got up to make his way over. He glared at me through the bars, fiddled with his keys, and opened the cell door.

"Follow me, kid." Back at his desk, he pointed to the black, rotary-dial phone. "Heah's the phone. Make it shawt."

I would've made it short, but when I dialed 411 for local information, nothing happened.

"Excuse me, sir."

"What now, kid?" His eyes glared at me through his black-rimmed glasses. "You got anothat problem?"

"I was wondering if you had a phonebook."

He rested the newspaper intentionally across his donut-laden belly and leaned forward in the squeaky chair. "Now why the hell do you need a phone book?" He opened a drawer, grabbed the phone book, and threw it on the desk. "Heah ya go, kid. Knock yawsself out."

He returned to his paper, shaking it violently, before disappearing behind it.

I thumbed through the Yellow Pages. "Let's see . . . L, M, N, O . . . Here we are . . ."

"P," the officer chimed in from behind the paper. "Just exactly who is it you callin'?"

I ignored the question. "What's the address here?"

"The address? What the hell do you need the address for?"

"For the pizza delivery. How else are they going to know where to bring the pizza?"

"Pizza!" His voice echoed through the prison cells. "You're callin' for... *pizza*?"

"Yes, sir. We're kind of starving."

"Give me that!" He jumped up and ripped the phone book from my hands, pointing his sausage-like finger down the hallway. "To your cell!"

Back on the stainless-steel bed, I buried my face in my shivering hands, wondering what had ever happened to our justice system.

An hour passed by and a pale-faced skinny officer appeared at our cells. Through the bars, he slid a single slab of baloney pressed between two pieces of stale white bread, along with a Styrofoam cup of lukewarm black coffee.

"Don't mention it," he said simply, before walking away.

Eating turned out to be an interesting ritual. I would take a bite of the sandwich, extend it through the bars and slide it over to where Micky's boney-white fingers would take hold of it and disappear. After a moment, the sandwich would reemerge one bite smaller towards me,

where I'd reach for it and take it through the bars. We developed a similar protocol for the coffee. It was a bit cumbersome at first but we eventually got the hang of it.

Sometime during the wee morning hours a loud clank jarred us awake and echoed down the hallway. All the lights came on. Policemen appeared and, one by one, emptied all the cells, marching the night's inhabitants to a room where we were blinded by flashbulbs, fingerprinted, fashioned with numbered signs around our necks, and paraded onto a stage with black lines on the wall behind us. Beyond the glare of the blinding floodlights was a hazy room of smoking silhouetted people.

One by one we were called forward, gave our names, where we were from, and cited our reason for arrest before stepping back against the black-lined wall.

"Joe Black, heroin possession."

"Smitty Smith, money laundering."

"Tony Howard, assault with a deadly weapon."

"Micky the Greek, murder one."

"Bill Blomquist, hitchhiking."

Awkward pause.

"Vinnie the Kid, manslaughter."

And so it went.

I was back in my cell by the time the sun was fully out. The cell doors opened once again with a *chi-chink*, and Mick and I were informed it was time to go to court.

"Sift through the pile for your shoes and belts," we were told. "Gotta look presentable for the judge."

They're taking us to court for hitchhiking?

We slid off our stainless steel beds and dug through the huge pile of shoes and belts to find ours. Mick found his right away. As luck would have it, I got my belt but my shoes were nowhere to be seen.

I wanted to cry. It was so unfair. My voice was strained as I pointed to the pile. "Look, last night I was told to put my soggy shoes in this pile so I wouldn't hang myself for hitchhiking, right? So that's what I did, get it? So where are they? This isn't my problem."

The officer's face grew scarlet. He hadn't been a fan the night before, and my tone didn't help me now. He screeched back the chair across the concrete floor and, pointing his sausage-like finger once again down the hall, yelled at the top of his lungs, "Back to your cell!"

In the meantime, Micky's skinny, white body was handcuffed to a fat black man who half-dragged him along. They disappeared into a white van and screeched into early morning traffic, while the steel cell door slammed behind me.

Chi-chink.

An hour later I was sitting on my stainless steel bed, head in my hands, actually considering using the toilet, when down the hall a mad panic broke out. People were yelling. Excessive cussing, swearing, ranting and raving echoed through the jail by someone who sounded possessed by the devil himself.

Just then a brown-haired scrawny kid with a wild look in his eyes appeared. He forced the officer to stop when he saw me in my cell glared at me through the bars.

"So you're the little hippie bastard who turned me in, aren't you?" He spit at my feet.

What the fuck? Who does he think he is?

My blood began to boil. I rose to my feet and met him at the bars. "Look around, idiot. I'm in jail. How could I have turned you in?"

The psycho pressed his face hard into the bars, veins bulging in his neck and his eyes as sharp as daggers. "I remember you guys from the line up last night." His voice was seething, cold and hard as the prison bars. "You and your little hippie-girlfriend. You're the hitchhikers."

"He's not my girlfriend," I said, matter-of-factly.

His voice dropped even lower. "Listen, hippie-punk dip-shit. When I get out of here, and I *will* get out of here, I'm gonna hunt you and your little ass-hole girlfriend down and when I find you, I am going to kill you. You will regret the very day you were born."

A cold numbness washed through my body. I staggered backwards towards the aluminum toilet, heart pounding in my chest, and dropped to its seat as he was yanked away.

"Come on, let's go," the officer shouted.

I sat in horrid disbelief.

If I survive this, I'll probably end up writing about this in the future.

Within half an hour I was properly shoed and belted. I found out later that the brown-haired psycho kid had been released on bail that morning and had stolen my shoes from the pile. Consequently, he had stolen "state property" and was rearrested. Eventually I was reunited with Mick, standing side by side before the judge.

"You wouldn't believe what just happened to me," I whispered under my breath. "I'm gonna get killed by a real punk."

"Dude," Micky mumbled, as the public defenders presented our case. "I got handcuffed to *Fat Albert*."

"This place so sucks."

"I know."

The final verdict came and the judge deemed that we had suffered enough for our offense. He released us bail-free. Before we knew it we were standing in the midmorning sunlight of the marble steps of the Court House, holding our backpacks, looking like lost dogs, dazed from 48 hours of sleeplessness and hardly any food, when a nice-looking, middle-aged man appeared and walked over to where we were standing. He was chewing gum, wore dark glasses, and had on a sports coat. A gun hung at his side and a badge on his belt.

"Nice day, huh fellas?"

"Right." I reached down, picked up my backpack and looked at Micky. "Let's bolt, dude."

"Listen, you two." He looked down and scraped the steps with his shoe. "It was all a big mistake. I mean, you should have never been brought in. I saw you in the lineup last night. I'm sorry."

"You're 'sorry?'" I was livid. "Do you know what we've been through the last two days? You have no idea." I would have sunk my fist into his stomach and punch him in the face, but I didn't want to go back to jail, so I just stuffed it.

After all, I was a *Blomquist*.

"Come on, Micky. We're out of here."

Mick flung his pack over his shoulder and followed me down the steps to the street.

"Listen, fellas, where you two headed now?"

"Boston." Mick said, looking back. "His mom and stepdad live there."

"Boston, huh? Well, how ya gonna get there?"

"We're gonna *hitchhike*," I yelled back, sarcastically.

"We dunno, sir," Micky interjected, hastily. "And we don't really care. We'll find something."

"Listen." The officer's voice grew louder, more forceful. We stopped and turned around. "There's a bus station a few blocks away. Let me take you there. My car's just around the corner."

We got into an unmarked car and soon after a bus and soon after a train. As the world swirled passed, Mick and I sat in silence and stared out the window, numbed by the past two days.

What ever possessed us to take that trip in the first place?

Getting off the train at North Station, the music of The Grateful Dead *What A Long Strange Trip It's Been* played in my brain:

Sometimes the light's all shinin' on me

Other times I can barely see

Lately it occurs to me

What a long, strange trip it's been

CHAPTER 9
THE PRETENDER

*Jesus freaks out in the street
Handing tickets out for God
Turning back she just laughs
The boulevard is not that bad*

Tiny Dancer, Elton John

After returning home from Boston (by plane this time), we landed back in the heart of the Space Coast and got back to business. Mick returned to his job as a grave-digger at a local cemetery and got back into community college. We lived, once again, at the Robinsons.

The weekends were spent endlessly walking the beaches and reassessing my life. Even there, at the beach, I was unable to recapture the peace I had always felt as a young child. Life simply sucked. Everywhere I looked, everything I did, just got me more frustrated and feeling empty inside. I got the feeling life was throwing me ropes to get me out of my funk. But every time I got close to getting it right, it was pulled up, almost taunting me. Somehow I got the feeling that the episodes in my life were designed to make me look up. I didn't want to, probably afraid of what I'd find.

There's gotta be another way.

But I was growing weary. While I didn't want to admit it, I began to see evidence that something greater out there was trying to get my attention. Much of this evidence came from well intentioned "Jesus Freaks" who'd picked me hitchhiking and share their faith with me. Some were

sort of cool, actually. But it seemed they all had an agenda, and I didn't want anything to do with it.

* * *

I could always tell when a Christian pulled over. Happy-go-lucky, cheesy smiles plastered to their faces, gospel-tract in hand.

"Hey brother! Are you saved? Come on in and let's talk for a while. Where are you heading?"

Good question.

And for the duration of the ride they would pounce on me with Bible verses, all warning me Hell-fire and brimstone. This stuff was happening to me all the time and I hated it.

It was quite a dilemma. I had no car so I was solely dependent on rides to get me to the grocery store, the laundromat, or even just to get out to the beach. I didn't want to be preached at, but I needed the ride.

Then it hit me. I could get around getting preached at by learning their lingo and pretending to be one of them. It was brilliant. Whenever a vehicle picked me up with signs of Christianity (like "666 Refuse the Mark", or "I Found It", or "Get Right or Get Left") bumper stickers, flowery bookmarks on the dash, tattered Bibles on seat, Billy Graham preaching on the radio, Christian music, or any *Jesus Junk* whatsoever) I'd leverage the conversation away from God and get us conversing about the weather, the news, surf, music - anything other than the eternal state of my soul.

A typical ride by a "Jesus Freak" went something like this: Once profiled correctly, I'd take the reigns by hopping in the car with an equally cheesy smile and say, "Praise Jesus! What a beautiful morning!"

“What?” Smiles would break out across their startled faces. “Are you... Are you a *Christian?*”

"You bet, brother! Praise God!" I'd point a finger upward. "Isn't our God good?"

"Sure is, brother! Hop in." Then they'd laugh a but and further down the road say something like, "You know, I had a funny feeling you were a Christian when I pulled over to pick you up. I just knew it. Praise God!"

"You did?"

"It's the Spirit! I think he told me to pick you up!"

“And I'm so glad he did. Praise Jesus! He is a good God, isn't he?”

"Sure is! And by the way, has anybody ever told you, you look like him?"

“Who? Me? Look like Jesus?” I'd pretend to be embarrassed and would sheepishly shrug my shoulders. "Well, I do get that from time to time."

"Yeah, your long hair, sandals and all. You look just like him."

"Why, thank you, brother!" I'd look down, pause, and drop my voice slightly. "I suppose if there was anyone in the world I'd like to be like, it would be Jesus."

And so it went.

* * *

But one day it seemed Jesus caught on. I was thumbing out to the beaches from Merritt Island on 520 East on a beautiful Saturday afternoon to hook up with some friends in Cocoa Beach.

Everything was going along just fine when a young man about my age pulled over, backed up about 30 feet, and slowed to a stop. He was a tall, lanky guy, windblown curly brown

hair like the late great Keith Green, thick eyebrows and a compassionate, gentle face. He wore a dark T-shirt, some jeans with holes at the knees, and flaps. He looked safe enough. But a quick glance around the car revealed all the trappings of eternity. *Jesus Junk* was everywhere. A Bible lay on the front seat; *Maranatha! Music* played on the Sony FM Radio and Cassette Player, and a few Chick Tracts were strewn about with titles like *The Deceived*, *Burn, Baby, Burn*, and *The Gay Blade*.

“Thanks for stopping,” I said with a smile, looking him squarely in the eyes. “I’m heading to the beach. You?”

"Hop in." He moved the Bible to one side.

Once I got seated, it was show time. I stuck my elbow out the window, pushed shoulder-length my hair over my shoulder, and took a deep breath.

“Well, looking around at this beautiful day, I just have to say one thing.”

“Really?” asked the driver, staring ahead. “What would that be?”

"Praise Jesus!"

Silence.

I tried it again, this time with a bit more *oomph*. “Praise Jesus! I mean, can you dig it? Look around! It’s great to be alive - especially when Jesus is your Lord and Savior!”

More silence. It wasn't working. He was unaffected.

This is going to be more difficult than usual.

My words fell flat. I had the uneasy sense that this guy was seeing right through my hollow words. We drove for a mile or two in silence. I was chewing a fingernail, he stared strait to the narrow road. A poignant song floated through the environment which only added to the awkward silence.

Sipping whiskey from a paper cup

You drown your sorrows till you can't get up

Take a look at what you've done to yourself

Why don't you put the bottle back on the shelf

Yellow fingers from your cigarettes

Your hands are shaking while your body sweats

Why don't you look into Jesus, He's got the answer

The music captivated me, not unlike the singing of that mysterious back in the Robinson garage.

Gonorrhea on Valentine's Day

And you're still looking for the perfect lay

You think rock and roll will set you free

You'll be deaf before your thirty three

Shooting junk till your half insane

Broken needle in your purple vein

Why don't you look into Jesus

He got the answer

The driver must have sensed my interest in his music.

"It's Larry Norman," he said. "*Why Don't You Look Into Jesus?*"

"What do you mean? Why don't I look into Jesus?"

"It's the name of the song."

"Oh, right." I squirmed uncomfortably in the seat. "I knew that. Great song. Praise God."

I was mumbling now and looking nervously out the window.

He reached for player and turned down the volume. Every muscle in my body grew tense.

He cleared his throat.

"So, you're saying you're a believer?"

"Hallelujah and praise the Lord, yessiree Bob!" I belted out as good as any televangelist.

"Sounds like you are, too? I love getting rides from Christians. It just makes the day go so much better! By the way, what do think about this weather?"

"A believer in Jesus? Jesus Christ?"

Nope. He isn't buying it. I'm screwed.

But the show had to go on.

"Yeah, a believer in . . . you know, the dude of dudes - Jesus." I bit the fingernail deeper then I intended and sucked on the blood that came out to keep me focused. "I gave my heart to him about a year ago. Haven't regretted it once! Nope, not once!"

"Really? Me, too," he said quietly.

"Far out! Totally hip! That is wicked groovy. You don't say!"

We continued in silence, heading east towards the beaches in what must have been the longest, most excruciating two minutes in the world. The whole time I was listening to The Animals singing *We Gotta Get Out of This Place* in my head, breaking out in sweats and clutching

my knees, while he was most likely praying how he was going to lovingly address the spiritual phony sitting next to him.

"So, what's your name, brother?"

"Bill."

"Okay. Nice to meet you, Bill. I'm Donovan." He steered the car out of the passing lane and decreased speed, looking for somewhere on the side of the road. "Listen, Bill. I have an idea. Are you in a hurry to get to the beach?"

"No," I sighed. "Not really, I guess. Why?"

"I was thinking, since you're a Christian and I'm a Christian, that means we're brothers, right?"

Seems logical to me. All the same, I don't like where this is going.

"Okay..."

"So," he went on, "I'm thinking that since you and I are brothers, and you're not in a rush to get out to the beaches, perhaps we could pull over somewhere and spend a little time talking to our heavenly Father."

"Our 'heavenly Father?' What would you think of that, Bill?"

"Um..." I honestly had no words. It would have been doubly hypocritical to pray to get out of this mess. So I conceded. "I guess that'd be okay."

"Good." He pointed ahead. "There's a pretty happening place up here, not too far ahead."

We slid gracefully into a roadside picnic area under one of those looming evergreen trees along the southern shoreline of the Banana River. The moment he shut the car off the summertime breeze filled the trees above with a peaceful, rustling sound. The shimmering water lapped gently against the rocks. Behind us, at one of the public wayside tables, a family was having a picnic,

playing clapping games and laughing with one another. The vibe reminded me, ever so faintly, of being with Cousin Nancy under the weeping willow tree, back in Bedford.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" My Christian captor's voice was as peaceful and warm as the summer breeze.

"Yes," I said, honestly, looking back. "It is."

I caught sight of a pod of dolphins playing in the river, racing along and even jumping in the air. The unpredictable gasps from their blowholes exploded above their heads. It had been a long time since I felt so much at peace.

"Well, here we are," he said.

"Yup."

"So, you wanna pray?"

I tensed up. "I guess we can do that. I mean, if you still want to."

"I do." Smiling warmly he said, "Why don't you start?"

"Me?"

"You know." He prodded gently, "Pray?"

"Okay... yeah, right. No problem."

I folded my hands ever-so-tightly under my nose. I scrunched my face up like a television preacher. I tried to resurrect everything I had learned in Sunday School at *St. David's by the Sea*. It went something like this:

Dear, Lord, thank you.

Thank you for this day, I guess.

You are good. And you are great.

Let us thank him for our food.

I mean . . .

I cleared my throat and peeked to see if he had his eyes closed. They were. I continued.

I mean, thank you for this day

And the water and the dolphins and all that.

Totally awesome.

You rock, Lord.

Amen.

“Amen,” he echoed politely, but I could tell he was skeptical.

“Okay, I did it. You can go now.”

He smiled. The breeze swelled and blew through the car, enhancing in the sweet fragrances of evergreens.

"Would love that." He smiled. After a moment of reverential silence, he prayed two words.

Heavenly Father.

With those two words, the atmosphere in the car shifted into the tangible weight of liquid love. It felt like the breath was knocked out of me, only to be replaced with a power that blossomed my spirit. And he had only said two words.

This guy is the real deal.

He reached across and gently placed his hand on my shoulder and I was filled with a supernatural heat, a gentle warmth that reached my very core.

Thank you for my brother, Bill. Thank you, Lord, that you love him, like a true father. That you care about him, that you have a plan for his life. Your love is so awesome, God, simply amazing.

And you know every hair on his head.

He does?

You know every thought in his heart.

Oh, that's not good.

You are familiar with all his ways, the stuff in his mind. In fact, you know every temptation he struggles with.

Oh, shit.

He continued.

His fears, his hurts, and the deep disappointments of his childhood, the pain in his heart that no one else knows about but him.

You know about it all, and you love him all the same.

He prayed into specific places of my life that no one in the world knew about, only me, places in my heart filled with shame, regret, and bitterness.

How does he know these things?

He asked God to bless me, for his grace to meet me with healing, forgiveness, and restoration. I sat trembling in the seat, my heart on the brink of breaking. It was all I could do to restrain my tears, but I didn't want him to stop praying.

So I ask you, Holy Spirit, that you would bless my brother, Bill.

The more he prayed, the more I felt power come on me. Even in my confusion and delusion, I knew the power was from God and that somehow, in some way, and at that moment, I was loved.

Amen. Sound good?

The "Jesus Freak" opened his eyes and gazed into mine, smiling, as if checking to see if there was still a sign of life in there.

“Yeah,” I nodded, completely blown away. “Amen.”

* * *

After we parted ways, of course I never saw him again, but his prayer stayed with me. Within a week another sign from above hit me, this time a bit more "in my face."

It happened after a ferocious night of partying at *Fuddruckers* bar at the end of the Minuteman Causeway in Cocoa Beach. I had been popping quaaludes (horse tranquilizers) like candy and couldn't stand up anymore. I stumbled off the deck, circled around a couple of times, and passed out on the beach.

As the first rays of sun peeked over the horizon, I felt my face warm in its glow. I stretched out in the sand and took in the scents of the beach, the squawking of gulls, the pounding of the waves. I heard what could only be described as a choir of voices. Either I was still high, or I had died and gone to Heaven, (an unlikely situation). All the same the voices were all around me.

Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia!

Our triumphant holy day, Alleluia!

Who did once upon the cross, Alleluia!

Suffer to redeem our loss. Alleluia!

It was like fingernails on a blackboard. I covered my ears, but they sang louder.

Hymns of praise then let us sing, Alleluia!

Unto Christ, our heavenly King, Alleluia!

Who endured the cross and grave, Alleluia!

Sinners to redeem and save. Alleluia!

But the pains which he endured, Alleluia!

Our salvation have procured. Alleluia!

Now above the sky he's King, Alleluia!

Where the angels ever sing. Alleluia!

Please, I feel those pains. Make them go away!

I lifted my face off the sand, pushed the hair out of my eyes, brushed away the sand, and looked around, half-blinded by the light. All around me stood a forest of legs, shorts, skirts, sneakers, and slaps.

Yup. That's it. I died, and I've gone to Hell.

Sing we to our God above, Alleluia!

Praise eternal as God's love. Alleluia!

Praise our God, ye heavenly host, Alleluia!

Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Alleluia!

I lifted my head in the now blinding morning sun, squinting just enough to get a general idea of what was going on. I was in the middle of a hundred people standing all around me holding songbooks and singing at the top of their lungs.

You gotta be kidding me. What day is this?

I dug deep into my memory and recalled my early childhood at *St. David's by the Sea*.

That, along with the numerous bunnies and baskets with fake green grass in the shops up and down Cocoa Beach all led to one conclusion: *Easter Sunday*.

Well, Happy Easter to me.

A song from the Animals once again filled my thoughts. Take the cue, I slithered like a serpent on the sand, around one set of legs and then another, until I finally reaching the edge of the crowd where I staggered to my feet, slapped the sand from my bare legs, and confirmed my worse fears.

Jesus Freaks. Tons of them

A young pastor dressed in baggies and wearing a stole was explaining to the sunrise service people the meaning of Easter.

Are you for real? I mean really.

I high-tailed it up the ramp past *Fuddruckers*, crossed over to the next block, got on A1A South and hitchhiked up to 35th Street to crash on a friend's sofa.

That was not funny, God. Not in the least.

CHAPTER 10

OUT OF THE PRISMATIC RAINBOWS

*I've been lost now, days uncounted
And it's months since I've seen home
Can you hear me, can you hear me
Or am I all alone*

I'm Your Captain, Grand Funk Railroad

It was the Summer of 1977 and I had received my *Associate Arts* degree in *Marketing and Mass Communication*. It was time begin searching around for another school so I could finish up my undergrad work. If I could have gotten a degree in drugs, sex, and rock and roll, I would have. But I couldn't. I had heard about a college up in St. Augustine, Flagler. It was a ritzy private school with a cool name. *Flagler*. St. Augustine, too. How wonderful! A good name, and a good place. So one blazing hot day in the heart of the summer, I walked the ramp I95 North from Melbourne, stuck out my thumb, to give it a look.

I had fantastic rides, especially compared to the last time I was on I95 North when I was with Mick and the Providence nightmare. As soon as I stepped foot on the property it felt like home. The campus at *Flagler* was beautiful. Historic buildings with live oak trees and Spanish moss draping their branches almost to the ground were scattered about the well-manicured flowered lawns and gardens. At the top of the steps at the Registrar's building was a bulletin board.

I was studying numerous ads and opportunities when a friendly student appeared and offered a hand. “Hi! I’m Gordon,” he said.

“Hey!” I replied, taking his hand. “I’m Bill.”

With that I had an instant friend who eager to show me around campus. He took me out for dinner and invited me to spend the night. Of course, I did, thinking nothing of it until, to my astonishment, he told me he was gay.

I remembered poor Donnie at the wheel from *Mardi Gras* that night and laid awake all night expecting Gordon to put the moves on me, but to my surprise, he never did. He was just being hospitable. He gave me a place to stay and even helped me work through the numbers as I determined how much it would cost to attend school. Sometime in the wee hours of the morning, it became to clear to both of us: there was no way I could afford *Flagler*. I was heart-broken and disappointed.

The next morning, we had coffee, exchanged numbers, and said goodbye as I got back on 195 South, in my t-shirt, torn blue jeans, flip-flops, and backpack.

The road was ruthless that day. Cars and semi trucks flew past, splattering my face with dirt, dust, and pebbles in their wake. It was noonday when I got on the road and the sun was glaring with raw heat bathed in 100% humidity. It was excruciating. No one picked me up, and I found myself blaming God for my lousy luck.

Where are you now?

Dropping my thumb in disgust, I turned my back on the traffic and began to walk. I shuffled along the breakdown lane for what seemed like hours, all the while fuming and cursing and lifting my middle finger as high as I could in the sky towards a God who was to blame for

letting my life become so completely rotten. Somewhere between exits I even threw rocks at the sky and scoffed at God in very colorful language.

Come on, you [a list of expletives here]! Show yourself to me!

Mirages shimmered on the road ahead, rising above the smoldering asphalt. The closer I got to each one, the quicker it faded, just like my life, and the angrier I became. It was like God was playing hide-n-seek with me.

Ah - forget it [another expletive]. I don't think you even exist.

Sweat poured off my forehead onto eyebrows and down my blistering cheeks. My shirt was soaked. My mind was mush, my temper was fuming, and sweat drops were stung like salty daggers in my eyes. I was boiling in my own juices.

One sign, God. That's all I'm asking. Just one sign!

A semi-truck whizzed past, blasting its horn, nearly knocking me off my feet with a gust of hot wind. I trodded onwards, oblivious to everything, the sweat-drops on my eyelashes nearly blurring my vision completely, forming prismatic rainbows in my vision. Up ahead something appeared in the breakdown lane.

What the heck?

I wiped my eyes and grew confounded. Lying right there in the middle of the breakdown lane of I95 South was a red and green oasis, covered with condensation and glistening in the sun.

You gotta be kidding. A watermelon?

I bent down to touched its ice-cold surface.

But how?

I looked up with a trace of a smile.

Is this you, God?

A *Harley Davidson* hog thundered past, breaking the moment's tranquility. I returned to my feelings of From anger, arrogance, and an absolute abhorrence for anything remotely associated with God.

Right. If this is really you, there better be a stick around here or something I can eat this thing with!

Sure enough, just to the right of the watermelon there was a perfect stick, about six-inches long, almost as if it was a place setting just for me.

I fell to my knees and examined it carefully.

Is this really real?

Something deep inside told me this was a sacred moment. Awestruck, I became instantly thankful. God had seen me. He had heard my prayer. And he had gifted me with, of all things, an ice-cold watermelon.

I had the urge to pray. So I dug up something from when I was a kid.

God is good

God is great

Now I thank him for my... Watermelon!

I plopped myself on the road, took the watermelon to my chest, and with the other hand plowed into it like there was no tomorrow. All that, right there, in the middle of the breakdown lane off I95 South, somewhere between St. Augustine and Daytona Beach, traffic whizzing past and everything.

When I rose from the ground, I was absolutely covered in watermelon juice. By the end of the ravenous debacle, I was refreshed and messy. My white t-shirt was stained with watermelon juice and black seeds covered my arms, hands, and face like ginormous freckles.

Whoo-hoo!" I yelled into the atmosphere. I couldn't wait to hit the road again, get home, and tell everyone I knew that there was a God, and he had given me a watermelon.

Yet even in that state of euphoria, I had the audacity to put God to the test one more time.

If this is really you, I pray the very next car will pick me up.

I stood up, threw my backpack over my shoulder, stuck out my thumb, and the very next car pulled over.

There is a God.

The electric window dropped to reveal a friendly-looking, grandfatherly-type man dressed in a light gray suit and wearing wedding ring on his hand. He welcomed me with a twinkle in his eye.

"Hey there, young man," he chuckled. "Where are you headed?"

There was that question again.

"Just down to the Melbourne exit," I replied with excitement. "About an hour or so."

"Hop in!"

I opened the door and sunk into the seat of the nicest car interior anyone could imagine - ice-cold air conditioning, leather seats, and light-hearted baroque music playing on the radio. We reached a comfortable 65 mph on cruise control and he looked over at me.

"May I ask a you question?"

"Sure!"

"Are those... watermelon seeds on your arms and face?"

"Yes, sir!" I said, nodding. "I believe they are."

"That's what I thought."

"I just ate it, back there in the breakdown lane where you picked me up."

After a short pause, he asked, "What were you doing with a watermelon way out here in the middle of nowhere?"

I gazed out the window into the puffy clouds above and smiled.

Maybe Jesus Christ is up there after all.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you, sir."

* * *

The Melbourne exit came fast. I hopped out after saying our goodbyes and watched him merge into traffic and disappear.

"Have a nice day!"

It was my journey's last leg. If I was lucky, I could get back to the Robinson's with another ride or two. I secured my backpack between my feet, held my head up high, and stuck out my thumb. A few cars slowed, but after seeing the sight of a long-haired hippie-type with a t-shirt covered in watermelon juice and seeds, they quickly sped away.

I'm not worried. It's all good.

Fifteen minutes later a station wagon pulled up. It was old, dented, with rusted sides and a back brake light busted out. Just above the dangling muffler, the fender hung halfway off the back of the car.

I cupped my hands and peered inside. It was filled to the gills with good ole' Florida rednecks. There was an overweight teenager, a skinny tank-topped man wearing a backwards

baseball cap in the driver's seat, a rather large lady in the front passenger seat smoking a cigarette nursing an *Orange Crush*, and a bare-breasted toddler in the back seat wearing a *Ninja Turtle* saggy diaper with green snot hanging from one of his nostrils. He stood amidst an impressive array of empty beer cans, *Juicy Juice* boxes, and salsa-stained wrappers from *Taco Bell*.

The rather large lady in the front did have a few good teeth. She looked at me over her horn-rimmed glasses, took a drag from her cigarette, and smiled. "Hey, cowboy. Where ya headed?"

"Oh, that's okay," I said, moving away from the vehicle. Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young's *Déjà Vu* bubbled up from the recesses of my mind. Another ride with rednecks didn't seem all that appealing to me. "Seems you guys are pretty packed out. I'll just wait for the next car."

Wouldn't think of it," the driver said, smiling at me through dark, wrap-around sunglasses. "Hop in, fella. We ain't in no rush. We'll take you as far as you need to be. Ain't no trouble at all."

"Ain't no trouble' at all!" echoed the overweight teen as he pushed open the back door with a jerk. "Here ya go."

With that, I slid onto the red and white vinyl back seat. The driver put the car in gear and headed into the traffic. The large lady nursing the *Orange Crush* held up a pack of *Salems*. "Want one?"

I respectfully declined.

As we rambled down 192 East towards the beaches, the bare-breasted toddler with the sagging *Ninja Turtle* diaper seemed to take a interest in me. He stood on the backpack between my legs and was mesmerized by the constellations of dried watermelon seeds speckling my arms and face. One by one, he reached out and peeled them off and stared at them in his little hands.

I made it back to the Robinsons late that afternoon, just in time to enjoy a dinner of Cornish game hen, prepared by Richard. It was a fitting end to a fantastic day. I told everybody at the table about my watermelon conversion. At the end of the meal, I rose from the table, cleared my plate, and concluded my testimony.

“So there is a God! I know it for sure. You guys oughta check Him out for yourself!”

* * *

Watermelon conversions, however, like watermelons themselves, grow sour over time. Before long I was caught up in the same old parties, same old meaningless relationships, same old inner torment, and lo-and behold, the same old rage against God, who seemed to love me one minute then bail on me the next. I found no reason to change, nor did I have the power to do so. At the end of the day, I was still a hopeless white punk on dope.

There are some things even watermelons can't fix.

But God knew what I needed, even if I didn't. It was time to kick it up a notch.

CHAPTER 11
EIGHT MILES HIGH

*When I was a child I caught a fleeting glimpse
Out of the corner of my eye
I turned to look but it was gone
I cannot put my finger on it now
The child is grown
The dream is gone
I have become comfortably numb.*

Comfortably Numb, Pink Floyd

It was one of those midsummer nights when the entire Space Coast was assaulted by powerful lightning and rumbling thunderstorms, barreling inland over the horizon and towards the beaches.

Micky and I were hanging at the Robinsons. We had just snorted a few lines of something white from a powdered-mirror and enjoying the rush by dancing around the basement with broomstick guitars and hairbrush microphones, smoldering joints in our mouths and lip-syncing to Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody*.

Oh, mama mia, mama mia

(Mama mia, let me go)

Beelzebub has a devil put aside for me,

for me, for me....

At the end of the song, we twirled around on our heels and fell to the floor, laughing the whole way down.

"Hey, Micky."

"Yeah, man?"

"I got an idea."

"It's got nothing to do with going to Boston and getting arrested for hitchhiking, right?"

We cracked up laughing.

"Or..." I added, clutching my belly. "*Fake boobs!*"

Tears of laughter ran down our faces.

"So what are you thinking?"

I rolled onto my stomach and shimmied up beside him. "I'm thinking *George's*."

"George's?"

"Yes!" I repeated, eyes widening. "Let's go dancing!"

George's was a glam-rock club in the heart of Canaveral where we would often dance and drink *Singapore Slings*.

"Sure!"

Within five minutes we had picked ourselves up off the floor, gotten dressed, and skipped out the basement door, racing in the sporadic lightning flashes and thunderclaps and hopping into Micky's pale-green GMC van.

I slammed the door and my world of celebration suddenly came to a screeching halt. The metallic sound echoed like a bad reverb switch on an untuned guitar. I rubbed my ears in disbelief.

Did I just hear that?

Through the windshield in carport and above the silhouetted banana trees, low-hanging clouds flashed like intermittent bulbs in the night sky and looked like the bubbling oil from a lava lamp. Faces, angry ugly faces emerged from the seething cauldron of angst.

What the hell?

I rubbed my eyes and tried to shake the images from my head. I began to taste blood dripping into my mouth from my sinuses.

“Dude — Micky. What was that stuff we just snorted?” I asked, pinching my nose.

“Who cares?” Mick replied, unconcerned. “It’s a high.”

He fired up the van and it backfired with the sound of a cherry bomb in the muffler. The sound completely unnerved me. I clasped the armrests as we backed out the steep driveway, turned northwards, and headed north up the darkening South Tropical Trail.

With both hands on the wheel, Mick blew his Gregg Allman hair out of his face and glanced at me through bloodshot eyes. “Now, this is good stuff.”

I guess.

We turned right onto the 520 East causeway and headed east to the beaches. By this time the thunderstorm had escalated dramatically, pelting the van with hard gusts of wind as if it was being sucker-punched by a huge supernatural fist. Mick struggled to keep us on the road. The heavy sheets of rain, the blaze of intense lightning strikes, and the clashes of thunder made it next to impossible to see ahead. To make matters worse, the rubber windshield wiper blade on the passenger side had fallen off, its bare metal screeching back and forth across the rain-drenched which was slowly driving me up the wall. Jefferson Airplane’s *White Rabbit* was playing on the 8-track.

When logic and proportion, have fallen sloppy dead

And the white knight is talking backwards

And the Red Queen's lost her head

Remember what the dormouse said

Feed your head!

"Dude, I think I'm going a little crazy here." The blood still pooling in my throat, "This isn't a good vibe, man. Not at all."

A streak of lightning lit sideways across the sky, breaking off into various veins that stretched across the expanse like the circulatory system in someone's arm. The accompanying thunderclap rattled me to the bone. I sunk my fingers into my seat and tried to control my breathing. For the first time in my life, I was really scared.

Almost on the beach now, we passed the road-side park where the "Jesus Freak" and I had prayed, the one with the evergreen trees and the bottle-nose dolphins and the family and the picnic benches and the peace I had felt so very powerfully.

Where is He now?

We were nearing the end of the causeway and our pale-green GMC van was backfiring, missing cylinders and jerking back and forth like a bucking bronco. I darted my eyes across the dash frantically.

Am I going crazy? Is there a mist around me?

I breathed in deep, shut my eyes and opened them again, just to make sure. My fears were correct. Smoke was filling the van.

"Dude, what's that smell?" I yelled above the whirring engine.

Mick stared dead ahead, struggling to downshift the vehicle and squinting his bloodshot eyes to avoid oncoming traffic. "I have been having some trouble with my engine recently."

"What?" I shouted. "Pull over! Something's wrong."

"Now? Here?"

"Yes, man. Can't you smell it?"

Without warning Mick jerked the van into oncoming traffic, missing a car by inches. We swerved around a concrete median, bounced off a curb, and ran across a flooded sidewalk before screeching to stop at an abandoned *Gulf* station.

Whoa.

Outside the van, a bolt lightning flashed ahead, with its accompanying crack of thunder.

"Do you smell it?"

"Yeah," Mick replied, pinching his nose and wiping blood on his jeans. "We should probably open the hood." He tapped the top of the hood of the engine, which was between us.

"I'll get this side, you get your side."

I reached around the rim and unbuckled the latch.

Moments later the hood exploded open and an orange fireball rose to the ceiling and rolled to the back of the van like a dragon freed from its mountain lair.

"Fire!"

"Blow it out! Blow it out!" I screamed, guarding my face from the heat.

"It's the carburetor, dude."

Mick frantically huffed and puffed at the flames shooting up from the carburetor. His locks caught fire and filled the van with the acrid stench of burning hair.

"Forget it — I'll do it here." I struggled to flip my spray-painted glittered silver Swedish clogs off my feet in order so to my socks so I could smother the fire and put it out.

We were a drugged-up mess.

In that slow-motion haze of chaos, I stared frightfully through the flames to see my best friend in all the world, face sunken, hair burning, blood-shot eyes filled with fear, pitifully blowing into the flames.

God help us.

A flash of lightning cracked the sky. Through the windshield the shadow of a solitary figure emerged from the storm ahead.

A second flash brought him closer and, as if caught in a series of strobe lights, he appeared closer and closer with each strike of lightening towards our inferno on wheels.

As the figure drew near, it was a man with shoulder-length hair, dressed in a single piece of light-colored cloth, like a tunic. He reached the van in a few more flashes and stood at the window outside Micky's door.

"Micky!" I yelled. "We got company!"

"Company?" He turned from the flames to face the figure behind the glass. "What the fuck is this guy doing?"

"I dunno. Why don't you ask him!"

Micky rolled the window down and revealed the face of a person who at once mesmerized me. There was something in his sparkling blue eyes, a tranquility about him that, even in the madness around me, drew me in. Our eyes locked in the flames and my entire being was filled with a deep and profound feeling of peace. Everything around me — the fire, the thunderstorm, even the drugs — seemed to disappear.

The person intentionally and slowly scanned the scene. He looked at the fire. He looked at Micky. He looked at me again. Then he spoke with a voice that was deep, firm, and deliberate.

“You know....” He said. “ Jesus Christ died so you wouldn’t have to spend an eternity in Hell.”

What did he just say?

I struggled to get another glance at his face. Somewhere within the rising hues of fiery heat I caught a final glance. Without saying a word, his blue-eyed gaze reached deep in my heart, and I heard him say, “And you know what I’m talking about.”

The truth is, I did.

Then he looked once more at Micky, looked at the fire, nodded politely, and simply walked away.

Just like that.

* * *

A bone-rattling thunderclap jolted us back into the real world, where we were accosted once again by smoke, fire, the stench of burning hair and, of course, the blade-less windshield wiper screeching this way and that across the glass. In a fit of rage, Mick rolled down the window all the way, stuck his head in the rain and flipped him a bird.

"Hey you!" he shouted. "Jesus Freak! What the hell? Can't you see we have a crisis here?"

I rolled down my window, too, and stuck my head out into the deluge. "Yeah! Me, too. What he said!"

But the stranger had disappeared.

Mick rolled up his window with a vengeance. "What a jerk."

“Yeah,” I said. “That’s the last thing we need.”

But then again, I wasn’t so sure.

Why didn’t he offer to help us? Why was he talking about Hell?

“Dude, let’s shine this shit on.” I laughed nervously, sliding my feet into the silver spray-painted Swedish clogs and looking up at the diminishing clouds. “This is way too heavy for me.”

The flames subsided. And we re-latched the hood. Miraculously, after a few turns of the flywheel, the pale-green GMC van with the screeching windshield wiper fired up and edged us away from the abandoned *Gulf* station. With smoke-infused clothing and singed hair we shared a pipe of hash oil in the parking lot of *George’s* and mindlessly danced the night away to glitter-rock and *Singapore Slings*.

The Eagle’s sang a lyric in their song *Hotel California* that pretty much summed up that evening and the close encounter with the man who appeared in a flash of lightening.

Some dance to remember

Some dance to forget

That night we were definitely dancing to forget. In other words, it didn’t take.

* * *

A few days later I was hitchhiking home from somewhere when I decided to swing by the post office and check the mail. As I opened the P.O box 187, I was surprised to see I received a card from an old friend of mine from Massachusetts.

Donna was a large round woman with a dutch-boy haircut, twinkly blue eyes, rosy cheeks, and a contagious giggle that always had me laughing. We met while working a factory job soldering transistors and resistors into solid state-printed circuit boards for a computer company a few years back. The interesting thing about Donna was that she (like me) was absolutely obsessed with all things paranormal: ESP, dream interpretation, supernatural visions foretelling the future, reading auras, studying psychics and psychic phenomenon - the works. I thought she was the cat's meow and longed to have the power she had so freely.

After I headed south after high school, we kept up with one another quite regularly. Because of my life at the Robinsons, I was soaking up anything and everything having to do with power and the occult.

One day, however, Donna did an about face. I don't know what brought it on but she announced to me in an Easter card that she had repented and given her life entirely to Jesus.

"It's all a hoax, a deception from the satan," she wrote. "All of it, ESP, auras, visions, dreams, everything."

She's got to be kidding. How did she get to be so uncool?

"There is a devil out there, Bill, and he hates us. I gave my life to Jesus Christ, and advise you to do the same. It's the only way out."

Fat chance. She's flipped the big one.

I crumpled the card and tossed it in the trash and hadn't heard from her since.

That was a year ago. Now I was standing outside the same P.O. box with a new card from Donna in my hand.

I eagerly opened the card to see what she was up to. The card had a vase of water-colored flowers on the front. I opened the card. It read:

Dear Bill,

I had a dream of you last night. You were in a coffin.

I don't know what you're doing but you better get it together.

Loves ya,

Donna

CHAPTER 12
LIVING ON THE EDGE

*Just a song before I go,
To whom it may concern
Traveling twice the speed of sound
It's easy to get burned*

Just A Song Before I Go, Crosby, Stills & Nash

Another large, round woman, who would prove to have a profound significance in my life was a vibrant Baptist, who sat next to me in one of my final classes at Brevard Community College. Her name was Bonnie-Jean. She was middle-aged, with perfect make-up, and a high-pitched voice. She wore Jesus bling on both wrists that often clanged and clamored whenever she got excited about the Lord.

She'd often walk into the classroom, sit down at her desk, get settled, and look at me with her syrupy-sweet smile and say, "Good afternoon, Bill. Praise the Lawd. I mean, praaaaise Jeeeesus."

"Yeah, Bonnie-Jean, whatever," I'd reply. "Praise the Lawd, right back atcha." I'd open a book and proceed to ignore her.

She meant well, and I knew she was sincere, but her style just irked me.

Would I have to be like that if I gave my heart to Jesus?

"Praise the Lawd, Bill. Say it with me. You know you want to."

“No, Bonnie-Jean, I really don’t want to. You do your thing, and I’ll do mine, okay?”

Then she’d put on one of those sad, puppy-dog faces. “Oh, Bill, you don’t mean that. You know, you would be so much happier - so much happier - if you gave your life to Jesus. You know that he’s waiting for you, don’t you?”

I’d groan and drop my head in my textbook. “I am happy already, thank you very much.”

"You don't seem very happy. Are you sure you're happy, Bill?

And so it went.

* * *

Twice a week I’d walk into that classroom with my t-shirt, torn jeans, and flip flops, burned out from the night before and battle-weary from fighting my personal demons, only to feel her puppy-dog eyes digging into my head as I slithered into the chair and dropped my tangled mess of hair into my hands.

One day, about half-way through my final semester, I my head was buried in my hands when she leaned across the aisle and tapped me on the shoulder with one of her painted, gem-laden, fingernails.

“Hey Bill?”

“Yo. What is it?” I lifted my head halfway off the desk and peered at her through my bangs. “Oh, it’s you again,” I sneered.

She covered her mouth and gasped as if seeing a ghost. “Oh my, oh my, *oh my*.” She leaned closer and her voice dropped to an emphatic whisper. “Bill, I need to tell you something.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I do. You need Jesus, and you need him bad. Look at you. You’re a mess. Don’t you know he loves you?”

“I know all about him, Bonnie-Jean.”

“But have you invited him into your heart, I mean, truly invited him into your heart?”

She padded her breast with her hand, clanging her Jesus bling like sleigh bells on Santa’s sled.

“I mean, truly, right here in your heart? Where it really counts?”

“No, Bonnie-Jean, I haven’t truly done it right here in my heart where it really counts, thank you very much.” I shook my head and, staring at the ceiling, pulled my hair back and tied it with a leather strap. “Why are you always bugging me, anyway?”

“Cause I love you, Bill. And Jesus loves you, too.”

I sighed deeply. “This is how I see it, Bonnie-Jean. If there is a God, which I doubt because he’s not out there, he knows how to get me. He doesn’t need you to tell me.”

“But that’s not how he works, Bill. He talks to us through others. It goes like this; you hear the word, you confess your sins, he forgives your sins, you receive him into your heart, you take him as your Savior and Lord, you get to live forever, and you become a Christian, just like me.”

Why would I ever want to be like you?

I sat back in the chair and sighed. “Bonnie-Jean, no offense, but I don’t particularly like Christians, either. To me, they come off as fake and superficial.”

“No offense taken.”

“Besides, I don’t have to say anything. I mean, if there’s a God, wouldn’t he already know what I’m thinking?”

“No, you *do* have to say something, Bill. You do. You need to ask him to come into your heart and take him as your personal Savior. That’s what it says.”

“That’s what what says?”

"Right here." She scrambled around in her book bag, pulled out a Bill Bright tract and flapped it furiously in my face. “You read this, honey, put your life in Jesus' nail-scarred hands and your life will never be the same. The *Sinner’s Prayer* is right here in the back, see? You're a sinner. You need to pray. So this prayer's for you. Here ya go. Go ahead, you take this one. I have loads of them.”

I'm sure you do.

I politely thumbed through the booklet, making note of the little circle diagrams and gave it back.

"Thanks, Bonnie-Jean, but I’ll be okay. I like God. And he likes me, too. He gives me watermelons and stuff.”

""Watermelons'?"

Bonnie-Jean shoved the Gospel tract into her purse and clenched her teeth. Her neck broke out in red blotches. She dropped her voice and spoke with a rare intensity. “Let me ask you something, mister. Did a watermelon save you? Did a watermelon give its life by hanging on a cross for you? Did God send his only beloved... watermelon to die and forgive you all your sins? You mean to tell me you’re placing your entire faith, your very eternal destination whether you'll spend eternity in heaven of hell in a..." She moved her hands around in the air looking for the right words, "In a watermelon?"

I never looked at it that way before.

“Make no mistake, buster. Jesus Christ died for you so you wouldn’t have to spend an eternity in Hell. Receive Jesus, he’ll forgive your sin, you’ll go to heaven, and you’ll be a new creation in Christ. Just like me.”

"Just like you. Really?" I laughed sarcastically. "And tell me, Bonnie-Jean, why would I want to be just like you?"

“Listen, Bill. Don’t be a wise guy. He’s given me peace, here on the inside.” The Jesus bracelets jangled as she pounded her breast. “And I can tell just by the smell of you that you need his peace, too. All you do is say this prayer, and your life will change. You will be a new creation in Christ.”

"Okay, that’s it. I’m in.”

"You what?" She seemed surprised.

"I'm in." I nodded confidently.

Her voice softened. “You mean, you're going to say the Sinner’s Prayer, Bill? Right here and now?”

"Right here. Let’s do it.” I folded my hands on the desk and asked. “Can I say it to myself with no one listening, or do I have to do it out loud?”

"Well, I suppose you can do it any way you'd like."

She reached for a tissue to wipe a tear from her eye. “Jesus sees the heart, Bill. Go ahead. Say it to yourself.”

"Okay, here goes.” I closed my eyes and right there in the classroom scrunched up my face pretended to pray. Afterwards, I forced a smile and sighed. “There you go, Bonnie-Jean. See? I feel so much better now. Now will you stop bugging me?”

"Bugging me'?" She wadded up her tissue and threw it in my face. "You are playing with fire, mister. I feel sad for you. I really do. He doesn't like it one bit. And I mean it." She wagged her finger in my face like my mom used to do when I got in trouble as a kid. "You better be careful, buster."

With that she gave a huff, turned around in her chair, and scribbled something on a pad of paper (probably a reminder for her to put me on the prayer list at church).

* * *

I was twenty-one years when I moved out of the Robinsons and moved into a cheap apartment across the Indian River in Cocoa with Tom-Boy, my friend and fellow hitchhiker from years before. We parted ways since the "Donnie incident" on the way back from Mardi Gras but had now reconnected.

The apartment was a two bedroom, scantily furnished hang, with some colorful people living around the perimeter of the inner courtyard. It would have otherwise been a great place to live, but we were dirt poor. And I mean, *dirt* poor.

Our daily diet consisted of potatoes, fresh oranges and grapefruits stolen from a local citrus grove. Once a month checks from our dads came in and we usually splurged on Chef Salads, from *Ranch House*, binged on *Schultz Malt Liquor*, and bought sour cream for our potatoes. We had no friends, no life, and sat around at night reading articles about UFO's and the End of the World commentaries out of the latest *National Inquirer*.

Although I wasn't close to being what I would have called a "Jesus Freak," I began taking real interest in the Bible, particularly when it came to End-time prophecies about *Armageddon* or the *Last Days*. I had read Hal Linsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* and

believed everything in it except the part about taking Jesus as your Savior. Somewhere along the line I got ahold of Salem Kirban's *End of the World Study Bible*, as I called it. It was a paperback book with commentaries about anything anyone needed to know about the Rapture, the Great Tribulation, Post-Pre-A Millennial theories, satellites crashing to earth, oceans turning to poison, demonic warfare, the "Jupiter Effect," the Great Judgment Seat of Christ, the Mark of the Beast, "666", you name it. I even left it open to the first page of the Book of Revelation on my nightstand while I slept, convinced it held magical powers that would seep into my brain while I slept. I wanted to know. And with little distraction around the apartment, it seemed the perfect time and place to satisfy my growing interest.

* * *

One day I walked into the apartment, threw my bags on the coffee table, and collapsed on the sofa. Tom-Boy was sitting in the recliner, staring in evident disbelief at a piece of correspondence he received in the mail.

"Dude," he whispered.

"What it is?"

"This is amazing." He laid the paper on the chair's arm and laughed. "We're rich!"

"Right." I replied rolling my eyes. After a moment, I noticed he was pretty sincere. "Are you for real?"

"I just got the settlement check from an accident I was in a few years ago."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

"This is wicked cool."

And "wicked cool" it was." Within a matter of days, we had risen at least four levels up the socioeconomic ladder. It was a rags to riches story and, in the words of Thin Lizzy, the *Boys Were Back in Town*. It was *Schultz Malt Liquor* and sour cream every night!

As word got out our friendships increased and, most importantly, so did the number of young ladies hanging around. They showed up with smiles on their faces, dope in their purses, and friends on their arms.

One day I got home to see Tom-Boy had purchased a top of the line *Bang & Olufsen* quadrophonic stereo sound system. It was amazing. Just dropping the diamond stylus on the vinyl made the pictures on the walls, dishes in the kitchen, everything, jolt in place with the intensity of a minor earthquake.

Yet, all things being equal, deep inside I had to admit my rediscovered glory days scared me. I couldn't afford to be sucked into the vortex again. I could hear the battle begin raging in my mind as I slid downhill towards a war that, up until that moment, I had been able to witness from a distance but never re-enter. Just when I was finally getting my act together *this* comes along. I saw myself as sinking back into the mire, caught up in the same things I knew I couldn't resist. I knew the battle would kill me if I stepped back into the fray.

This is the last thing in the world I need. Doesn't God know that I'm trying to be good?

One particular Friday night, Tom-Boy and I were chilling out from a long week. He was bending over the *Bang & Olufsen* and dropping the diamond stylus on a new record he purchased by the Eagles called *Desperado*. He cautiously closed the turntable cover, readjusted the volume until it was just right, and dropped into a recently purchased recliner.

I was sitting in the middle of the sofa, Indian-style, treating myself to a delicious bowl of *Lay's* potato chips and *Lipton's French Onion Soup* mix, there on the coffee table. I was also

working to "un-hem" a pair of blue jeans on my lap (as was the style back then) with a single-edged razor blade in hand - all that with Salem Kirban's *End of the World Study Bible* open to Matthew 25 on my left knee. The procedure was fairly routine. I would take the single-edge razor to "un-hem" three or four stitches, pause, lean to the coffee table to scoop a blob of *Lipton's French Onion Dip* with a potato chip, read something about the end of the world, and after a moment of reflection, return to the blue jeans to "un-hem" a few more stitches.

Things were going pretty well until, halfway through the second Eagles' song, *Twenty One*, Tom-Boy reached behind his recently purchased recliner and pulled out a bamboo bong. He had just received a bag of Thai-sticks from a friend in Vietnam and was eager to get the weed into his lungs. He carefully unwound the red twine that fastened the buds to the stick, squished a bud or two into the bowl, and struck a match. The match lit, he brought his lips to the bong, and the pipe's soothing bubbling sounds filled the room, along with that all-too-sweet and familiar fragrance of weed.

Tom-Boy inhaled deeply, leaning all the way back in the seat, and held it as he waited until just the right moment before exhaling violently with a loud cough. Within moments his eyes glazed over. He tucked the bamboo pipe between his legs and rhythmically tapped his fingers on his knees to the music. As the needle slid onto the track, *Out of Control*, he took another hit and then another.

As for me, I was happy enough without the weed. I had my jeans, my dip, my *End of the World Study Bible*, and was listening to some really hip tunes on perhaps the best sound system in the known world. All was well with this boy.

Tom-Boy tilted the bong in my direction.

"Dude, want some?"

"Nope, trying to be a Christian." I half-smiled, only half-sure of what I had just said. "I got my Bible here and everything." I tapped it with a finger. "You go on ahead. I'm good."

"Cool." He nodded without judgment. "Whatever's right."

It was all going along pretty well until half-way through the second verse of *Tequila Sunrise*. The smoke Thai-buds crept across the room like hazy tendrils beckoning me to partake in the fragrant delegacies. Tom-Boy had just filled another bowl and struck a match.

The room got cozy.

He coughed up a cloud. "You sure you don't want some?"

"No, thank you," I said, with much less confidence. "Still trying to be a Christian."

"You know," he said, bringing his fist to his mouth to block a cough. "God created the herb, too."

Interesting point.

I gazed around the room. The vinyl was rotating at a cool 33 1/3 RPM, the blue and red lights were flashing on the *Bang & Olufsen* quadrophonic sound system, the marijuana's fragrance was filling the room, and the warm bubbling sounds tickled my ears like cotton fingers.

What would happen if I had just one hit?

"Hey, John, on second thought, I think I'd like to take a hit after all."

"Dude, really?"

"If God is so powerful, won't he be with me even if I got high?"

The record was nearing the end of *Sunrise* when he passed the bamboo bong to my hands. Our eyes met. I noticed something on his face: disappointment.

"I mean, sure — God's doesn't care, right?"

"Sure, man." He leaned back and closed his eyes. "Whatever's right."

I took the bong in trembling hands, struck a match, and sparks flew everywhere. The match went out, as if someone blew it out. I tossed it aside. After a few failed attempts, I lit another one and brought it to the bowl and placed my mouth on the water pipe before taking a drag as deep as I could manage.

Its smoke rose up the pipe and pierced my lungs like a dagger. Even as I inhaled I felt like I was falling backwards. The room went fluid. Curtains became waterfalls, pictures grew elongated like Dali paintings and swaying erratically to the *Best of My Love*. Above me the ceiling itself went multi-dimensional, ebbing and flowing like waves in an ocean above my throbbing head. I was deeply afraid. Panic took hold.

The bong fell to the floor. Its rank water spilled out across the orange shag carpet, but I couldn't care. My mind filled with the same demonic chatter I remembered, voices of regret and condemnation over every poor decision I had ever made in life. I wasn't good enough. I wasn't bad enough. I was worthless, condemned, an utter loser, and predestined to spend eternity in hell with all the rest of my friends.

I coughed violently. The *End of the World Study Bible* bounced off my knee and landed upside-down on the floor.

"You okay, dude?"

"Awesome, thanks." I remained cool. "A little lit, but groovin' to the tunes."

I passed the empty bong back to Tom-Boy. He looked concerned.

Okay, so you're a little high. Not a problem. We've been here before.

I looked down to see my jeans slithering around my lap like a serpent.

Where am I? WHO am I?

The words of the Bible floated off its cover. Suddenly I was *Alice in Wonderland*. That's when I noticed the half-eaten bowl of *Lipton's French Onion Soup* mix on the coffee table with the bag of *Lay's* potato chips at its side.

Well I may be too stoned to do much of anything, but at least I haven't forgotten how to eat.

I dipped a scoop of onion dip, brought it to my lips, and chomped down. But something was wrong. Strangely, my mouth had become numb and wouldn't work. I tried it a second time, slowly bringing the chip to my mouth and it still wouldn't work. My mouth was completely frozen.

"Dude," I laughed, "this is killer weed. I can't even chew my food!"

Tom-Boy didn't care. He was checked out. His eyes were closed, and he was grooving to the sweet melodies of *Desperado*.

I took a third stab at the chip, planning to just throw the thing into my mouth and swallow it whole. Something shining caught my eye that made me pull it back out again. Buried and half-covered under the scoop of the dip was a shiny metal object. I stared in horror as its stainless steel edge came into focus. My hand trembled violently. I realized I had inadvertently scooped the razor blade into the dip and was trying to swallow it.

A surge of panic raced up my backbone to the base of my brain. I jolted in place as if shot with a gun. In one excruciating moment I realized that I had just almost killed myself, and in that same moment I had sensed the hand of the God keeping me from doing just that.

Oh, God, what am I doing to myself?

The answer was simple, perfectly timed with the music playing on Tom-Boy's *Bang & Olufsen* quadrophonic sound system. I sat horrified as the words somehow reached my heart.

Desperado, why don't you come to your senses?

Come down from your fences, open the gate

It may be rainin', but there's a rainbow above you

You better let somebody love you,

You better let somebody love you

You better let somebody love you

Before it's too late

Monday morning couldn't come soon enough. I leapt from my bed, threw on my t-shirt, baggies, and flip-flops, and bolted for the door. When I got on campus I made a beeline for the classroom, tossed my books on the desk, spotted Bonnie-Jean, who was talking with some friends, went up to her and gently but firmly pulled her aside.

"Well, hello, Bill," she said, looking startled. "Is everything alright?"

"Okay, Bonnie-Jean." I lowered my voice to a desperate whisper. "I'm going to tell you something right now, and I want you to listen to me and listen to me good."

She stared at me, books clutched to her chest. "Of course, Bill. What is it?"

"I receive Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. Get it?"

"What?" Her eyes widened. "Are you serious?"

"See? I *said* it."

She dropped her books and threw her hands in the sky, rattling the Jesus Bling on her wrists and spinning around right there in the middle of the classroom. Without warning, she

wrapped her heavily perfumed body completely around me. “Praise Jeeesus! Praise the Lawd! I am so happy for you!”

“Yeah, praise the Lord.” I forced a smile. “I guess.”

* * *

Later that day when I got home, I went down the hall and collapsed on my bed, still feeling dazed and confused, wondering if it was genuine, back in the battle again.

I mean, this just isn't fire insurance, because I got scared, is it?

I stared at the bumps on the mundane popcorn ceiling overhead. Nothing in my world had changed. Nothing really changed at all.

CHAPTER 13
A DAY IN THE LIFE

*Streets full of people, all alone
Roads full of houses, never home
Church full of singing, out of tune
Everyone's gone to the moon*

Everyone's Gone to the Moon, Jonathan King

A few months later I moved out to the beach. It was a nice place, a duplex, just north of *Patrick Air Force Base* across from the old *Quiet Flight* surf shop.

It was me, Tom-Boy, and a new girl named Rehanah. Rehanah was a transplant from Montauk, New York and had met Tommy up at *Fuddruckers* one afternoon at Happy Hour.

"I hear you're looking for a roommate," Tom-Boy yelled above the music.

"Yes I am." She leaned closer, her body squeezed between the crowd and the bar. "You interested? It's a great place just off the beach, up at 35th Street."

"I could be. I have this friend, too - Bill. How about two roommates?"

"Bill Blomquist? "

"Yeah."

"I know him. He's cool." She covered her mouth and laughed shyly. "As long as I get the rent, you guys can have as many people in there you want."

"Cool." John pursed his lips and nodded. "We'll move in this weekend."

And so we did.

Rehanah was great. Sun-bleached hair with a red tinge, aquamarine eyes the same color as the sea, and lots of freckles. She slept in the back bedroom and worked as a waitress at *Tippy's Taco House* about half a mile up the road. The duplex, as it turned out, was the meeting place for a community of hippies, beach bums, unwed mothers, scary drifters, and people who had names like Manson and Fast Frank. Through it all, Rehanah took on a maternal role with us. We even called her, Mom.

Life with Tom-Boy and Rehanah was fluid, unanchored, and “norm-less.” We never locked the door, so you never knew who was going to show up with whatever drama was going on in their life at any given time of the day. People slept over, cooked whatever they wanted whenever they wanted, left, came back with other people, and did drugs. Lot's of drugs.

Personally, I was fried. I was fried on drugs, fried on dating relationships and just fried on life in general. The burn would ease when I got out of the house to sit on the beach like I used to. Those were the days. Other times the ocean breezes would find me, passing through the dunes and groves of sea oats, cross over A1A and flood my room with what seemed like unearthly peace.

I lived for those breezes.

God had really gotten to me, or at least, he had dug a little deeper. I still wasn't quite ready to fully surrender. I loved my life. It had become quite simple, a bohemian life that I enjoyed. When there was surf, I surfed. When there wasn't surf, I worked. And when I worked, I worked for Mr. Lee, roofing houses.

Mr. Lee was an old, crotchety 80-year-old South Carolina native, with blackened teeth from pipe smoking, brilliant blue eyes accentuated by his blackened-bronze tan, and a weathered, wrinkled face. He was about 5' tall, skinny as a roofing mop, and always walked around a little hunched over. He drove a white *Ford 150* pickup truck, and while at work, he had the habit of getting into everybody's business. His squeaky voice carried a strong southern drawl with a vocabulary that could strip bark off a tree. An excitable little fellow, his temper was notorious, and I remember him clenching his fists and jumping up and down on the rooftops when he didn't get his way.

Mr. Lee liked his beer, too. In the morning, when he picked us up and we'd hop in the back of the pick-up truck, he'd have a cold can of *Budweiser* wrapped in a paper towel. At midday, when he swung by the job site, climbed the ladders, and walked half-hunched with a limp over to see how the job was going, he had a cold can of *Budweiser* wrapped in a paper towel. At the end of the day, as the sun set and he began complaining about our long hours and how much we owed him, he had a cold can of *Budweiser* wrapped in a paper towel. Always different cans, of course.

One boiling hot August day, we returned to the job site and headed up the ladders after an extended lunch, and Mr. Lee drove up in his white *Ford 150* pick-up truck. He slammed the door and worked his way up the ladder, can of beer in hand, and walked this way and that, pointing over here and over there, cussing at us, blaming us for shoddy workmanship, and smoking his pipe the whole time. At one point he threw his hat on the tarpaper in disgust and, in his high-pitched drawl, swore to "God in the highest heaven" that if the job wasn't completed by the end of the day we would never work for him again.

"I'm sick of it," he rattled off in his high-pitched squeaky voice. "I don't pay you boys for sittin' around on your butts and doing nothing. If this job ain't done by the end of this day, it's *hasta la vista* to all of you, ya hear?" He looked at his *Timex* wristwatch tightly cinched around his brown leather skin. "And I mean it, too. You boys got four more hours. Let's get 'er done!" He disappeared quickly after that, the ladder clanging against the rooftop his whole way down.

"Hey Manson."

"Yo, bro."

"You think he means it? Like we're gonna get fired?" We leaned on our mops and watched Mr. Lee slam the door to his truck and screech down the street. He turned left at the stop sign and swerved onto A1A North narrowly missing a passing motorist. "I mean, I'm broke, man. I really need the cash."

"Nah." Manson streaked his long oily hair with bony fingers and spit on the rooftop through his thin lips and missing front teeth. "He don't mean nothin'. He talks this shit all the time."

Fast Frank came over from the other side of the roof, plopped his tar bucket down, wiped his tie-dye bandana across the grit of his forehead, and hocked a loogie onto the roof.

"Good boogers tonight, men."

Leaning on the top of his mop, he squinted at us through the blazing heat like a disgruntled pirate.

"You wanna know something that will absolutely blow your mind?" he asked, pointing down at the road.

"Dude. What."

“You ever wonder why he’s all hunched over and everything like the way he is?”

“No telling.” I shrugged my shoulders. “I guess that's just the way he was born.”

"No way." Fast Frank's eyes bulged twice their usual size and a smile broke out through his blistered lips. “He used to be normal, like us, but everything changed that day.”

"What day was that?"

Fast Frank stirred the mop once and looked off into the distance like an oarsman peering into the heart of an oncoming storm. “I remember that day well,” he began. “We were all up on a house on Merritt Island, ya see? Mr. Lee and us were on the roof, just like today, rolling out the paper and spreading the tar and all, like we’re doing now. Manson was there.”

"Saw everything," Manson testified, spitting to the rooftop. “Freakin’ unbelievable!”

"Mr. Lee was yelling at us as usual about how we were slackers and doing crappy work and all, telling us he was going to fire us, dock our pay, you know the rest, when this black sedan with tinted windows comes around the corner. These guys get out and they’re all dressed in their zoot suits and wearing sunglasses and everything. Four total, but two stay behind while the other two come up the ladders. They get up on the roof, and right here in front of us they pick up Mr. Lee and throw him off the roof.”

Manson inhaled his cigarette deeply. “Freakin’ unbelievable.”

"You're shitting me." I said, wiping the sweat from my forehead. “That really happened?”

“It really happened.” He nodded vehemently and smiled, raising his jet black eyebrows up and down like Groucho Marx. “It really happened.”

"Freakin' unbelievable."

What kind of people am I hangin out with?

"Then the dudes in the zoot suits look at us, they mumble something to each other, they go back down the ladder, get back in their car, and drive away. Just like that."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

"Freakin' unbelievable."

Fast Frank picked up his mop and tar bucket, headed over to the other side of the roof and rolled out a fresh roll of tarpaper, smeared its underside with the steaming mop, and covered the rooftop with pebbles.

"It's no joke," said Manson, snuffing out his cigarette before throwing it over the roof's edge and grinning maniacally. "Welcome to Paradise, kid."

CHAPTER 14

SWEET SURRENDER

*Ooh, that smell
Can't you smell that smell
Ooooh that smell
The smell of death surrounds you*

That Smell, Lynyrd Skynyrd

It had been a hellacious week. Every day I was roofing with hot asphalt in blazing sunshine, every night there was another party. My body ached, my mind was mush, and I was a perfect candidate for the devil's appetite.

Late Friday afternoon I got home, showered and, much to my surprise, no one was in the house. I was alone in the front room, smoking a cigarette and listening to David Bowie's *Rock 'N Roll Suicide*, trying to make sense of my life.

Time takes a cigarette, puts it in your mouth

You pull on your finger

Then another finger

Then your cigarette

The wall-to-wall is calling, it lingers, then you forget

Ohhh how how how, you're a rock n roll suicide

My brain was full of lies. It was a constant battle. They told me I was stupid. They told me I had "lost it," as we used to say. They said my dad left me because he never loved me, and the divorce was my fault.

I took another drag and sighed deeply.

I should have listened to God when he tried to show me his love with the watermelon, but I didn't. So he gave me other signs, the eyes in the fire, almost eating a razor blade. All that was over. I hadn't listened and it was too late to get it back. There could have been a plan for my life, but I had blown it. And there was nothing I could do to get it back.

You're too old to lose it,

Too young to choose it

And the clock waits so patiently on your song

God tried to save me numerous times, but I wouldn't listen. All the cool things he planned for me to do when I was born were tossed aside or, worse yet, given to someone else, someone better, somebody more together, because I couldn't handle it. The daggers of self-condemnation was ruthless. Through my intentional rebellion and a slew of bad decisions, I had painted myself completely out of the picture. I was good for nothing, totally alone.

Oh no love! You're not alone

You're watching yourself but you're too unfair

You got your head all tangled up

But if I could only make you care

I squashed the cigarette out in the ashtray and burned my thumb

Fuck me! Shaking my hand rapidly, *Ouch!*

Spiritual paranoia once again clouded and consumed my thoughts. There was nothing left to do but wait for the time-bomb of God's wrath to drop. I knew he was disappointed with me (like my dad used to get) and he had tossed me aside. How would it happen? Maybe I'd get hit by a car on the road, fall off a roof, get shot, or crack my head open on a reef while surfing. Maybe a shark. I didn't know how or when, but I knew he was going to punish me. Bowie's words attempted to sooth the pain.

Oh no love! You're not alone

No matter what or who you've been

No matter when or where you've seen

All the knives seem to lacerate your brain

I've had my share,

I'll help you with the pain

You're not alone!

But it didn't work.

Yeah right.

I threw a pillow across the room at the record machine. The needle slid back across the disc to *Hang On to Yourself* with a sonic blur. I was sorting through the roaches on the spool

coffee table when a loud commotion exploded outside. Cars screeched into the dusty parking, distorted music blaring. Within moments the screen door slammed with a hollow smack. I looked up. Manson was holding a full bag of pot in one hand and two quarts of *Budweiser* in the other, straddling the straw mat and yelling at the top of his lungs.

“PAR.....TY!”

My head fell to my hands.

This can't be happening.

Jackie followed, followed by Tom-Boy. “It’s Friday night! Let's get loaded. Woo-hoo!”

I swallowed hard. I knew what was coming. Shamed and distraught seized me even before anything began to happen. I knew what I’d be sucked into, and how I wouldn’t be able to rise above it. An all too familiar lump formed in my throat.

Just another brick in the wall.

Over the next few hours countless people poured into our living room, standing in the hallway and partying like there was no tomorrow. Beer, booze, and weed moved around the house like a pinwheel in a child’s hand on a windy day. Everyone was there: Fast Frank, Trout, Manson, Sherri, Lynn and her newborn, along with a couple of out-of-owners that I had never seen before.

* * *

Around 2AM things turned mellow as usual. People passed time and crashed in different ways. Some laid lifeless on the sofa and staring up at the *Wandering Jew* in the macramé plant holder Rehanah had made. Others flipped bottle caps on the giant-spool coffee table. Still others sat on the front porch telling surf stories.

I was heading down the hallway to take a pit-stop when a few people in the kitchen caught my eye.

“Hey, Rocket Man!” Fast Frank’s his bloodshot eyes glanced up from the stove. He reached out and pulled me closer.

"What is it, dude?"

"Check it out! This stuff will *kill* you."

One of the out-of-towners reached into a baggie, took a pinch of white powder and sprinkled it across the glowing-hot coils of the electric burner. It popped and sizzled off the stove like *Pop Rock* candy and rose into the air forming an ominous, greenish-blue tentacle of smoke.

"Quick! Get it now!" One of the out-of-towner's yelled. Fast Frank stuck his face in the cloud and inhaled as deeply as he could, staggered back to the counter, and fell to the floor.

“Dude! Free-falling!” he yelled happily in his daze.

"Bill, you try it!" coaxed another.

"Nah. Don't think I should."

“Dude, it's early! Don't shine it on now!”

Another pinch of white powder crackled and popped on the stove's red-hot coils. The smoke with its green hue reminded me of the Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wizard of Oz*.

"Jump on it, dude!" they yelled.

Someone grabbed the back of my head pushed me into the smoke. Within seconds my head was in the cloud, inhaling as deeply as I could.

In the ensuing laughter, I stumbled backwards, my heart pounding furiously to fight this new toxin absorbed into my blood. I was exploding like dynamite. I clutched the counter as the

kitchen cabinets, appliances, and the surfing calendar on the refrigerator crystalize and land in shards at my feet.

What is this stuff?

“See?” said Fast Frank. “Didn’t I tell ya? It’s a real killer!”

Not good.

I grabbed my hair in fists and shook my head. “This is not good.”

“What do you mean?” One of the out-of-towners reached into the baggie for another pinch.

I pushed away from the counter and staggered out of the kitchen like a crazed fear-driven man, through the living room and out the screen door. I zigzagged across four lanes of traffic, barely evading the oncoming traffic and ignoring their honking horns, until reaching the path leading through the bluffs and of sea oats and out to the shore.

The beach. I need to get to the beach.

Fighting my way through the spider-like branches was a nightmare. The flapping leaves of the sea oats silhouetted against the full moon and the roaring wind and thundering waves only added to my dreamy fog. But the real battle was in my thoughts.

I knew there was a God, of course, but the thought he was completely disappointed with me and that I had blown an otherwise wonderful life hit me hard and harder again. I had been told there was a special plan for me, that I could be whoever I wanted to be when I grew up, but I blew it. On the other hand I felt I was in some way holding him up from whatever plans he may have left in my life.

Nothing is real.

As I staggered down the moon-lit trail to the crashing waves, the thought of holding God up was absolutely terrifying, which all the more increased the need I felt to find him now or never, before it was too late.

I stepped out onto the sand. The ocean was stormy with crests blowing into the air. Each wave echoing in my head and growing louder with each thunderous break. My blood was pounding through my veins. Devils were laughing. I fell to my knees and looked up into the clouds racing across the blackened sky. Struggling to breath and holding my chest to breathe I cried out to God and begged him to forgive me, to let me live one last time.

One last time. Just one last time.

I yelled above the pounding surf to the God who might finally hear my prayer, honestly, sincerely, finally.

"I don't know who you are or what you are, but I have heard that I need to invite you into my heart to receive eternal life, whatever that means! So here goes!

"Lord Jesus, I can't do this anymore. I invite you into my heart to be my Lord and Savior. I can't do this!

"I... I surrender!"

I closed my eyes and passed out.

There were no fireworks, no blinding light. Nothing. But I had done it.

* * *

Hours later I rose from the beach with a deep sense of peace, a contentment like I had never had in all my life.

It had taken.

CHAPTER 15

PORN

*What's the ugliest part of your body?
What's the ugliest part of your body?
Some say your nose
Some say your toes
(I think it's your mind)
But I think it's YOUR MIND
(Your mind)
I think it's your mind, woo woo*

What's the Ugliest Part of Your Body, Frank Zappa

After that night things really did change. My thoughts became crisp and precise, and much of the shame and condemnation I carried with me for not living up to my own, self-imposed *Blomquistian* standards had simply disappeared.

In short, I had peace.

I still lived in the beach house, but despite the party atmosphere I was able to live there with ease. Sometimes I sat with the partiers, passing the joint from the person on one side of me to the person on the other side. Other times, I'd just remove myself and take a walk on the beach and talk to God. It was all good.

My roommate, Rehanah, seemed the most fascinated with me and openly embraced my conversion. A year beforehand, we had run into each other at a gay bar in Canaveral we wound up talking about God, of all things. We were both searching and wound up making a pact that she

would search for God in her way, I would search for God in my way, and after a year or so, we would check in and see what happened.

A year later, we were sitting together on the couch in the living room listening to Bob Marley's *Redemption Song* and sharing what we came up with.

"It's *Jesus*, Rehanah." I laughed, like I could hardly believe it myself. "It really is."

"Jesus?" Her blue-green eyes stared at me as if trying to assess my mental state. "You mean, like the Doobie Brothers' *Jesus is Just Alright* Jesus?"

"I wouldn't have believed it myself."

I went on and on, telling her how loving he was, how forgiving he was, how he still heals hearts and still lifts shame. I told her I didn't like most of the Christians I met, but Jesus was different.

Towards the end of the conversation her demeanor shifted. She leaned back on the afghan and laid a pillow across her flowered sundress, eyes widening with increased understanding. She had something on me. I could see it in her stare. It made me nervous.

"So what do you think?" I asked, scooting to the edge of the sofa, "about the whole Jesus thing?"

She bit the inside of her lip. After a moment's thought she said the words that would forever mark the trajectory of my life. "Bill, you should be a pastor."

"A what?" I fell back on the sofa and howled with laughter. "A 'pastor'? What does that have to do with Jesus?"

"You need to be a pastor, Bill." She repeated matter-of-factly. "Now, I have to go to work."

She got up, grabbed her bag from the giant spool coffee table and slammed the screen door behind her.

A pastor?

I wasn't sure what to make of that and often find it interesting that the first person to recognize my future call and vocation was a non-believer at the time. But over the course of the next few months, I radicalized my new-found relationship with Jesus. I burned most of my secular records (Frank Zappa, The Alex Harvey Band, Pretty in Pink, etc.) , ripped up my porn stories, three away my coveted issues of *Penthouse* and *Hustler* magazines, and gave away any items that in any way connected me with the "old Bill." I devoured the Bible for hours a day and talked to everyone I could about Jesus, especially those who picked me up hitchhiking.

I quit going to *George's* or partying at *Fuddrucker's*, and I was done drinking, taking drugs, sleeping around, and smoking pot. I was not the *Rocket Man* I used to be. Most of my friends got that. They reluctantly remained friends with the new "Jesus Freak Bill," but when I started talking about Jesus, their eyes would glaze over, and they'd shut down.

I wish they could see a sign or something that would convinced them he is real.

* * *

Once I was surfing with the locals when a rogue wave appeared on the horizon. It was the sweet spot for a perfect left. I swung my board towards the shore, paddled twice, hopped to my feet and cut deeply into the six-foot wall of liquid glass.

It was magical.

As the lip of the wave curled above my head, I intuitively centered myself two-thirds up the wall, scrunched my knees, and got in the barrel, completely engulfed in the tube, like when I

used to air-surf on Canaveral Pier as a kid. I pressed the palm of my hand gently into the wall, stabilizing myself in the thundering space where everything - my board, my skin, my whole world - was transformed by the aquamarine hues of the sunlit wave.

The "blue room," the sweet spot of surfdom. It's a timeless moment when everything is transformed into a mystical blue paradise engulfed in translucent light, with the white noise of liquid sound thundering all around. Completely barreled and hooting and hollering and praising God over the roar of the wave, I shot out of the barrel in the rainbow mist, crouched down, roller-coastered up, then down, then up again and shot completely off the lip into the sky.

I fell out of the air with a great splash.

"Whoa! Bill!" One of my surf pals exclaimed. They had seen the whole thing and paddled over like excited puppies. "Dude, you *shredded* that wave! You owned it!"

"I know! I know!" I shouted excitedly. "Did you see that? I could never have done that on my own. God is so good!"

"God?" My friends stopped paddling and sat up on their boards. "You're kidding, right?"

"Yeah, you know, *Jesus*?" I lifted myself from the water and sat on my board, too, exhilarated and out of breath. "You think I could have nailed that on my own?"

"God doesn't do stuff like that," someone chimed in.

"Oh, that's right." I smiled, squinting up to the white clouds drifting across the blue expanse. "I keep forgetting that!"

But Fast Frank got it. He looked at me and nodded, smiling brilliantly. "Rock on, Blomquist. Rock on." He turned his board and paddled towards the next set.

"Come on, let's get another one."

Around this time, the Summer of '77, I began to get restless. There was stuff to do for God and I treading water wasn't it. Surfing and roofing every day wasn't a bad life, but there had to be something more.

Maybe I should finish college. Another two years would do me good.

So I asked God about it.

A few days later I began to see, of all things, owls. Owls showed up everywhere, in pictures, gift shops, on kitchen towels, hanging from rearview mirrors in cars that picked me up hitchhiking, on bracelets, billboards, t-shirts, and cigars.

What's the deal with all the owls?

Once as I walked home from my new part-time job as busboy at *Tippy's Taco House* I spotted a giant owl graffitied on the seawall, no less than 20 feet from where I gave my life to Christ that night on the beach. I had been on that same beach surfing, sunning, skim-boarding, and girl-watching hundreds of times but never saw it before.

Later that day, I was thumbing through the most recent issue of *Surfing Magazine* when there was a knock at the screen door. One of the guys from the neighborhood came by with a college catalogue in hand.

"Hey, Bill," he said, handing me the catalogue. "I heard you were thinking about going back to school. This place looks pretty cool."

"Thanks, man."

I thumbed through Florida Atlantic University's catalogue and, as I turned the first page, I learned that of all things, it was also an owl sanctuary. That was all I needed. The next day, I

threw a backpack over my shoulder, stuck my thumb out, and headed down to Boca Raton to check it out.

I made it down to Vero Beach in record time.

Sweet!

Standing at the intersection of Route 60 and the entrance ramp of I95 North, thumb out, backpack at my feet, a smoky-gray Buick *Electra* 225 with tinted windows rounded the corner and slid to a stop. The electric window dropped halfway down to reveal an old fat man, who reminded me somewhat of *Jabba the Hutt*, leaning against the far door and puffing on a cigarette. When he saw me he immediately sat up straight, extinguished the smoke, and struggled across the length of the front seat to unlock the passenger door.

I thanked him for pulling over, smiled, and looked him in the eyes. “Are you heading southwards?”

He remained silent. Staring.

“I said, I’m heading for Boca. Are you going that far?”

“Oh, sure.” His voice was wheezy and gurgled in his throat. He motioned with his hand. “Get in. Get in.”

I placed my backpack to the floor, slid into the seat, shut the door, and at once was assaulted by his eyes, which were intentionally scanning every square inch of my body. I tried to ignore that.

As we pulled onto I95 North, his wrinkled hand reached out to turn off the FM radio. He lit a cigarette and coughed. “Where are you headed again? Boca?”

“Yes, sir.”

"I'm going to Miami." He sucked in a drag and coughed out smoke. "I'll take you to Boca."

"Awesome! Thanks for stopping. It's hot out there!"

"I can imagine," he said, turning his gaze to my legs. "Don't worry. You'll be cool in here."

A cold shiver ran down my spine.

What's up with this guy?

"So," taking a deep breath. "You're heading to Miami, huh? Business or pleasure?"

"A little of both."

"And you have a job there?" I cleared my throat and gazed out the darkened glass. "What do you do?"

"I'm in the industry. The film industry." He took another puff and inhaled deep.

"No kidding!" I grew excited. "The film industry? I've always wanted to be in a movie, but it just hasn't happened."

"You're an actor?"

"No, but I play one on TV!" I laughed. He didn't. I stiffened in the seat. "So, you make movies? That's fascinating. What kind?"

A wad of phlegm bubbled deep in his throat, all of which he coughed up and swallowed in a single motion. "Pornography."

"Pornography?" I searched around for something to say. Even though we were cruising along at a cool 55 mph, everything in my mind had come to a screeching halt. "How... How interesting."

"Yeah, I got these three studios," he said matter-of-factly. "One in Tampa, where I live, one in Orlando, and the other down here in Miami, where I'm heading now."

"You don't say."

He stretched his arm across the length of the seat, his belly pressing hard against the steering wheel. "You know, there's a lot of money to be had out there for a young fella such as yourself, in the business, that is. Someone like you could make a pretty penny."

"Really?"

"The contracts vary, of course." He looked over and studied my face. "How old are you, kid?"

It was my first real look at him. He was ugly, lonely, wrinkled and his eyes had a familiar emptiness to them. He was definitely not a great poster child for the porn industry. "Twenty-two."

"Perfect." He smiled with teeth as yellow as the tips of his nicotine-stained fingers. "So this is how it goes. You got three kinds of contracts. Each one gets you more cash. If you did an 'A' contract, you'd do it with women. That's where we'd start with you. Then, if it goes good and you got staying power, we'll get you into a 'B' contract, where you do all of the 'A' stuff but you also do men."

"Men?"

"Yeah, but don't worry," he said, trying to sound casual. "It's not that bad. Just at first. And I would imagine someone as good-looking as you could raise to 'B' status in no time. You'd make a ton of bucks. Then there's the 'C' contract."

I don't even want to know what that would mean.

"So, what do you say?" He coughed again. "Something you'd be interested in?"

I looked out the window. The quote from Bruce Brown's quintessential surf documentary, *The Endless Summer*, came to mind.

You should have been here yesterday.

I thanked God that the man hadn't been here "yesterday," or I would have jumped in with both feet.

"Sir, mind if I ask you?" I studied the deep lines in his face, his fat belly shimmied up under the steering wheel, food stains across his coat, and his tiny, trembling hands clinging to a smoking cigarette. Admittedly, maybe even without Jesus I would've had second thoughts looking at him. The man was no assurance of a happy life had in porn. I didn't know where to start.

"Sure, kid. Ask me anything."

"Are you married?"

"Got two daughters." He nodded, looking far down the road.

"A wife, too?"

"Yup, that, too." His hand tightened on the steering wheel, but his gaze remained straight down the road.

"Do they know what you do?"

"Hell, no." He moved around in his seat uncomfortably, staring more intently at the road.

"They don't know nothing."

"So," I curiously asked. "When you get home at the end of a day, what do you tell them you do for a living?"

The atmosphere grew tense, to say the least.

"My family thinks I sell insurance, kid. It's not as bad as it sounds."

I couldn't take it any longer and shifted around in the seat to face him, my back against the door.

“Sir, I used to be like you. I was into the whole deal. When I was in high school my dream was to write the stuff that you're probably producing in your studios. I loved it. I lived it, just like you're doing.”

"You got that right. Gotta love the business, kid."

"But I'm here to tell you it's a lie. It's all a lie. And at the end of the day, it will kill you.”

“What do you mean, 'kill me?'” he retorted. “I'm making money and raising my kids. It's all good.”

"No,” I assured him. “It all looks good, but it's all a deception. It's killing your soul. There's only one way out, and his name is Jesus.”

“Jesus?” he exclaimed, almost driving off the road. His belly wobbled like pudding as he shifted to catch a better look at me through his thick coke-bottle glasses. After gaining control of the car again, he exclaimed, “You're talkin' to me about Jesus? Jesus Christ Jesus?”

“Yup.” I smiled confidently. “He loves you.”

He went silent after that for a number of miles. I waited him out.

“This is ironic,” he finally said.

“How so?”

"Here you are, a young man at the prime of your life, who could literally make millions of bucks doing something you'd love to do, and you're telling me what my morals should be."

He coughed into a laugh. "Shouldn't this be the other way around?"

“Maybe one day it will be for some other young guy who needs to hear a good word from you.”

“Fat chance.” He coughed into his fist and wiggled around in his seat again. “So you think I need religion?”

"I could really care less about you. I don't know you. Its Jesus who cares about you.”

“Like I matter to Jesus.”

"Why do you think he had you pick me up? He may not like what you do, but he loves you. I couldn't believe it, either, but as sure as I'm sitting here, I'm here to tell you he'll free you from your sin and shame if only you ask him into your heart.”

Geesh! I'm beginning to sound like Bonnie-Jean!

But he was listening.

The remaining fifty miles to Boca, I told him my story; how I first heard God at the stop sign in Cape Canaveral; how my parents divorced, my dad was absent, my mom remarried, we moved to Bedford, Massachusetts, how I got into drugs, moved back to Merritt Island, and how I got into the occult and glam-rock scene. And I shared in detail how God started knocking on the door of my heart through showing me signs.

“Signs?” he interrupted. “What do you mean, 'signs?’”

"It started with a watermelon. Just back there actually," pointing over my shoulder. "A couple of hundred miles behind us on this very road.”

I shared with him about the stranger with the blue eyes in the thunderstorm in the flames and told us about Jesus. And I told him about the razor blade (which made him cringe).

"I took the blade to my mouth but God was saving me from killing myself. "He spoke to me from the stereo, of all things.”

“The stereo?” The porn producer glanced across the seat, softened. "What did he say?”

My eyes filled with tears of gratitude. "You better let somebody love you, you better let somebody love you. You better let somebody love you before it's too late."

The man nodded silently.

"And," I said, wiping the tears from my face, "I'm thinking he's telling you the same thing, before it's too late for you."

You think?" His voice dropped to a near whisper. "After everything I've done? After who I am?"

"No matter what or who you've been," I assured.

Up ahead I saw the Glades Road exit fast approaching. "This is my stop," I announced, reaching down for my backpack. "You can let me out at the end of the ramp. I'll walk up from there."

He pulled over to the breakdown lane, put the car in park, took off his thick glasses, and looked at me right in the eyes. "You know," he sighed, "you talk about God like he really exists."

"I know," smiling. "It took me by surprise, too."

"I don't know you. I don't even know your name, but I wish I could believe like you do. You make God seem... wonderful, like a dream. If I had an experience, a 'sign' or something, anything like you had, I think I'd believe, too."

"You would?"

He thought for another moment. Yes," he confessed. "I think I would."

I smiled. "Well, I'll get a man right on it."

We laughed, as I shook his hand and shared goodbyes. As he drove away, and walked up the exit ramp to Boca, I prayed that someday, somehow, he'd get that sign from heaven.

CHAPTER 16

THE VOICE

*Then out of the blue love came rushing in
Out of the sky came the sun
Out of left field came a lucky day
Out of the blue
No more pain*

Out of the Blue, Roxy Music

When I got to the campus of Florida Atlantic University I found a new Paradise. I loved everything about the city, the school, and the white beaches and turquoise water. It didn't take long to make the decision.

I returned home with a plan. I would register for enrollment in the Winter Quarter, about four months away. This would get me some extra cash working for Mr. Lee.

But life back on 35th Street was difficult, both spiritually and temptation-wise. I had lost the initial momentum of my conversion, and as they say, the honeymoon was over. If I could have discerned the devil in all this, I would have known he was doing his best to convince me my conversion was fake. But I was essentially a lone ranger in my faith and, because I lacked fellowship and teaching from older, wiser followers of Jesus, my faith was waning and I was beginning to believe him.

I found myself struggling with many of the same temptations that led me to the cross in the first place. I wasn't acting out like before, but all the same felt like a hypocrite.

"Show me your power," I pleaded to God one Friday afternoon on the beach. "I'm getting hammered down here and slimed every day. You promised me power to overcome the evil one. So, where is it?"

I was returning home through the path of sea oats and noticed a phone booth there, just kitty-corner to the *Quiet Flight Surf Shop*.

I haven't heard from Micky in a while. I wonder what he's up to?

All I knew was that he lived up in Canaveral with some friends. I dropped a quarter in the slot and dialed his number on the big black rotary phone.

"Hello."

"Micky?"

"Bill!" He immediately recognized me. "You still alive?"

"For sure," I laughed. "I'm well, too."

"Wow, it's been a while."

"It has. What have you been up to?"

"Just hanging out."

"Me, too."

It was so good to hear his voice. We caught up on life. He sounded really good, like he had a new spring in his step.

"Hold on," he said and muffled the phone with his hand to address someone else in the room. "Hey, Bill," he added, "you want to join us tonight?"

"Sure. What's going on?"

“A few of us are hitting a party up in Cocoa Beach.”

A party?

I swallowed hard. The last time Mick and I were at a party there was a kid passed out in a corner with freon tube blowing up his nose. It wasn't pretty.

“Tonight?” I squirmed uneasily in the booth. The mere thought of all that gave me the heebie-jeebies.

“Yeah, I think it starts at 7:00.” He cleared his throat. “But you can just get there whenever you want.”

“Hey, Micky.” It was time to come out of the closet. “I gotta tell you something.”

“Really? What's that?”

“Um... I don't really do that stuff anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

“Yeah...” I swallowed hard, closed my eyes tightly, and just said it. “You should probably know. My life is completely different now. A lot changed since the last time we were together. I don't party now or anything. I'm a... I'm a... *Christian.*”

I crinkled up my face, waiting for the bomb to hit.

“A what?”

“A 'Christian.’” I repeated. “You know, someone who follows Jesus, you know, like God?”

“You're a believer? Dude, what happened?”

I laughed. He made it sound like I had a terminal disease. “I dunno. I guess I just couldn't do life anymore. I gave in. And I'm happy about it, too. I really like who I am now.”

Mick was silent for a long time.

“Bill, you’re not going to believe this, but I’m dating this really cool woman, and she’s a Christian, too!”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah, and that's not all. She made me one, too!”

“You're kidding!”

“I know, dude! He totally rocks. And this party we’re going to is a *Christian* gig, with a worship band and everything! It’s going to be rad!”

I couldn’t believe my ears. My very best friend in the whole wide world, Micky Lunsford, wound up being just like me! My eyes filled with tears. After saying goodbye, I hung up the phone, ran home, took a shower, threw on some clean clothes and new flip-flops, and jumped on the road with my thumb out - way out - heading north on A1A.

I got to the address, a hotel. I got a strange sense of *Déjà Vu*, like I’d been there before. In my spirit I wavered between feeling that and sensing something really big was going to happen that night.

Once inside the lobby, I was reunited with Mick and got to meet his girlfriend, Barb, along with some of their very cool friends. We moved into a banquet hall full of people wearing flowered shirts or sundresses, with long hair and sandals, flip-flops and flaps, laughing, hugging, and got caught up in the vibe. A tangible sense of love was in that room, not unlike what I felt the day I prayed with the "Jesus Freak" at the roadside park with the evergreens, bottle-nosed dolphins, and the family having a picnic.

I walked in and had to sit down under the moment’s intensity. At the front of the room there was a stage up with huge amps and long-haired hippie-type freaks running all around,

plugging instruments in amplifiers, doing sound checks, and tuning guitars. These people were normal, and they loved Jesus, just like me. In a strange way, I felt I had arrived home.

The band walked onto the stage, bell-bottoms on their legs and smiles on their faces.

These guys are my age. How trippy is this?

The drummer clicked his sticks, counted in, and with the first strike of a chord I was showered with love. The music turned on a faucet within me that filled me with such power that it threatened to undo me. I was being showered, drenched in the cleanest, most pure water in the world. My heart began to pound and in the depths of my being, something stirred.

Something wanted out.

Apparently, the band only knew one song: *Hallelujah*. They sang it over and over again.

Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah...

It actually sounded pretty cool, and the music was hypnotizing, an angelic chorus surrounded by 200 heavenly worshippers, all with hands lifted up into the air. Looking around, I saw people who radiated joy, smiling, and singing spontaneously in an ecstasy of praise. My head dropped into trembling hands. I was in the presence of something, Someone in fact, who I had always longed for, someone I had always believed in.

Hallelujah...Hallelujah...Hallelujah...

But there was another something, deep within, bubbling up; something ugly that reacted violently to the growing crescendo of love, praise, and unity. It manifested in my throat, a buildup of deep grief and unspoken pain. It fought to get out; I fought to keep it in.

As the battle raged, a vision broke through the turmoil. In my mind's eye, I saw a thick, wooden door with intense light beaming towards me from the other side. It shone around its

edges. The door was ever so slightly ajar, but I knew something kept it from opening fully. A voice, which I knew belonged to God, began to call my name.

"Bill."

The voice was soft but firm, filled with a deep, gentle authority. "You know that I love you, right?"

"Yes, Lord. I do." My hands cupped my face. I know you love me."

"I cannot love you any more or any less than I do right now. Do you understand?"

My lips quivered, and my body began to shake. "I do."

"But, Bill."

"Yes?"

"I have more for you. Do you want more?"

I stared at the door, frightened by the light on the other side, willing the wood to hold and not burst open. I loved the safety in the darkness, but there was a part of me that longed for the light. And it was time to make a choice.

"Yes, Lord," I cried out above the music rising up around me. "I do! I want -- "

Before I could finish the sentence the wooden door burst open in a torrent of blinding light. It pierced my soul and seared me to my core. In one glorious moment, I had been set free from the darkness that had claimed me. Sorrow, despair, the years of stuffing it down, burst out in sobs and holy wailing. I fell to my knees crying like a newborn baby.

Hallelujah... Hallelujah... Hallelujah...

At once my new friends were there for me, laying their hands on my back and on the top of my head, praying for me. They sang, prayed, and whispered praises to Jesus under their breath for what he was doing in me.

Together we stood in the midst of the ongoing spontaneous praises of God's people singing around us. My head held high, my hands lifted in the air, the room took on a holy and mysterious sense, as if we had been united with all worship of all time, right there in that very place. People around me were singing in beautiful languages. Some sounded middle-Eastern, others Asian, still others Hispanic or of Germanic origins.

What are they singing?

No matter. I joined in with full passion, shamelessly joining my voice to the holy offering to Christ, hands extended, eyes closed, caught up in the moment I heard the voice of someone, somewhere singing the most beautiful song ever. It seemed to float through the air and land on our heads like flames of fire.

I've got to see who is singing.

I peaked into the misty atmosphere and searched for the voice. Hearing it with my ears and following it with my eyes I scanned the entire room and found those magnificent originating from, of all people, me.

* * *

Later, as we were walking out of the hall, someone asked. "Hey, did you see what happened to Bill tonight?" Wanting to know the answer myself I leaned in the direction of the conversation.

"No. What?"

"He was baptized in the Holy Spirit!"

What's that?

It didn't matter that I didn't really know. Whatever happened, it had been glorious. I knew that I knew that I knew. I was so filled with God, all I could think of was getting home and

looking in the mirror to see if I still looked like the same person on the outside, because I had been so different on the inside.

I ran through the living room and down the hallway to the bathroom and carefully studied my face in the mirror. It was the same face. And yet, it really was different. My eyes shone brighter. There was a lighted countenance around my face, too. It appeared less burdened, less confused, maybe even a little younger. I leaned into the glass and pointed a finger to my face.

“Don’t you ever loose this, you hear?”

The image nodded.

We both smiled.

* * *

A few weeks later, I was hitchhiking on A1A North to visit Micky up in Canaveral. At one point during a ride, near the glass bank and the two lanes come together a strange feeling of *Déjà vu* washed over me again. We were then passing the hotel where God had met me, where I was "baptized in the Holy Spirit," as they said. I studied the building intently. But it was deeper than that.

I know this place.

I studied the half-circle driveway and surrounding banana trees and the flaming Bird of Paradise plants that lined the entrance. In the daylight, it was much more familiar to me now than it was that night. From the car, I sought to peer through the lobby doors as we passed. There it was. The clouds parted, and I remembered everything, the heroes of my childhood, Walter Cronkite, John Glenn, the whole mess of TV cameras, cables, and important people all wearing white shirts with pen pouches, black rimmed *Ray Bans* - all materializing from the fog of my very distant past.

A tear of gratitude rolled down my face. Here was the place heroes were made, the place where I prayed I could be famous too, just like them, the Magnificent Seven, right there at the *Quality Quartz Hotel and Conference Center*.

CHAPTER 17
FREE FALLING

*Ease me down
Keep that promise that you made to me
Take my hand
My mind reels, all my senses rise*

Everywhere I Go, The Call

I was sitting on the beach and gazing into the sky at the pelicans dive-bombing into the sea when it occurred to me that I wasn't going to make money working for Mr. Lee. With a sure sign I'd be attending Florida Atlantic University in the Winter, I needed to get smart about making money. I hitchhiked back to New England and got a real job.

I became a housepainter.

By this time, Mom and my stepdad, Frank Wilson, had moved further north to a tiny town in New Hampshire called Epping, otherwise known as the *Center of the Universe*, at least, according to the bumper stickers sold at Phelps' gas station. I landed a job with a couple, Rocco and Delphine, who lived just across the street from Mom and Frank Wilson's house.

Rocco was a small-framed man with a significant mustache and circular John Lennon-type gold-rimmed glasses. Delphine was significantly larger than her partner, though 20 years younger. She had greying frilly hair, keenly observant blue-green eyes, a huge smile full of teeth, and a vocabulary that could strip bark from a tree. They were both very hip and had no certain religious belief other than an awareness of something "out there." Along with them and a young woman named Rose, I spent the entire summer painting houses and restoring old homes.

One day Rocco, Delphine, and I were doing a two-week gig at a beautiful outpatient facility for the mentally challenged. From the outside, the building looked like any other large New England estate: two stories high, with a circular driveway, gardens, columns, and manicured lawns. The inside, however, was a different story. It was a state-of-the-art center complete with full-time staff, eating halls, private rooms, a recreation hall, and therapy rooms.

Each morning upon arrival we were warmly welcomed with a smile by one of the staff. He or she would always appear at the top of the stairs, ask us how our morning was going and made sure we were invited to have lunch with the guests later in the day.

One day, Rocco decided to take them up on the offer. Around noon, he stuck his head around the corner where I was just finishing up cleaning some brushes.

“Hey, Bill,” he said, “we’re doing lunch with the guests — you in?”

"Sure!"

We cleaned up, went inside and entered a large cafeteria, absolutely packed with guests who sat at long tables from one end to the other. The room buzzed with conversation, clanging dishes, and laughter. We got in line, received our food, and began looking for a place to sit. Rocco and Delphine went one way. I found a place on my own between two strangers on the other side of the room.

Despite how awkward it felt, I began to enjoy conversing with the residents. They were mentally disabled, but they were wonderful conversationalists and shared a lot of interests with me. We joked around, told stories, and had a few laughs.

All too soon, it was time to get back to work, and as I began packing up my things, one of the staff members sitting at the table took an interest in me.

“What is your name?”

“Bill.” I smiled. “Yours?”

“Ralph. I’m a staffer here for the summer.”

“How cool is that?” I placed my hands on the tray and was ready to hop off the bench when a firm hand held me in the seat.

“Just so you know, we all leave together. It will be a couple more minutes.”

“That’s great, Ralph,” I replied casually, barely registering what he said and struggling to get up. “Have a great day.”

His voice and grip grew more intentional. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Gotta get back to work.” I glanced up at the clock. “You know what they say, time is money!” I chuckled. Ralph, not so much.

“Time is money, huh?” Ralph scanned me from head to toe. “Where is it that you work, Bill?”

“Just outside this wall here. We got ladders up and everything. I’m a painter.”

“Of course you are,” he replied, as I struggled to pull away from his grip. “I’m sure the painters will be just fine. We still have five minutes left before we’re dismissed. You know the routine. We eat together, and we leave together.”

Suddenly it hit me. I scanned the room with widening eyes. We were all waiting to leave together.

“Oh, no. No, sir.” I chucked, nervously. “You got it all wrong. I’m not like one of these guys. I’m normal! I mean, not normal, but . . .”

“Sure, you are.” Ralph loosened his grasp and patted my shoulder. “We’re all making progress, aren’t we?”

“No, really!” I would have laughed at the situation, if I could have gotten over the embarrassment. “We’ve been here for a couple of weeks, and we’re the painters. We joined you for lunch. That’s all!”

“We?” He asked emphatically, searching deep into my eyes.

At the other end of the long table, Rocco and Delphine were getting up to head back outside.

“Rocco! Rocco!” I yelled across to them. “Tell this guy who I am. He thinks I’m one of them!”

Rocco leaned over to Delphine, and said, just loud enough for me to hear, “Don’t do it, Rocco. Say you never knew him.”

“Oh, that is so rude!” I yelled.

Rocco wasn’t so cruel, though, and told Ralph I was with them.

“It’s okay,” I whispered as I rose from the bench. “Anyone could have done it.”

Ralph just stared into his pudding.

* * *

About mid-afternoon, I was back on the far side of the house, standing two stories high on scaffolding stretched out for the entire length of the building and supported by two ladders, one to each side of the elevated thin wooden walkway. It was a cramped space to be sure. Down below, at the foot of the ladder, a 12-square-foot patch of grass was bordered on all sides by a stone wall. In one corner, lodged where two walls met, were the remnants of a dead tree, about four feet high with dead branches jutting upwards into the air like wooden spears.

I was high above, cutting in from the gutter when I spotted an area that needed paint, just out of reach. I tried to maneuver the brush around it to each side but couldn't quite get the bristles under the rung and onto that spot. It laughed at me, as if saying, "I dare you." I wasn't going to let it get the best of me. Using my body weight, I gently pulled the ladder away the house with just enough time to dab the paint on the bare wood before landing back against the side of the house.

Awesome, just one more tug and this puppy will be finished.

With my body weight as leverage, I tugged the ladder off the house a second time. The second time wasn't so gentle.

I may have pulled this one back too far.

For a brief moment the ladder stood perpendicular to the ground, unaided by the siding, and I hung in suspended animation just long enough to think.

This can't be good.

I glanced at the other ladder attached to the scaffolding at the other end of the building. It too began to wobble under the strain. That's when everything slid away from the house in slow motion — ladders, scaffolding, paint buckets scrapers, the works. And, most unfortunately, me. We were all headed for a catastrophic landing, two stories below.

God, help me!

Just then a vision of a hand filled my mind. It was a close up of a closed hand, with me being grasped in its palm. The vision disappeared as fast as it came, but it was all I needed to know. Convinced I was in safe hands, I did the only thing left to do. I let go.

I fell out of the sky and landed in the center of the 12-square-foot patch of grass. In the momentum of the fall, I rolled over twice before rising to my feet, all in a single, grace-filled

motion. At once I hopped limberly onto the stone wall, crossed my arms, and watched in disbelief as the ladders, scaffolding, and buckets of paint crashed to the ground in a cacophony of scraping metal and flying boards.

When the dust settled, I studied the gnarled skeleton of the remains of the day. Laying next to me and propped up against in the corner of the stone fence was the ladder. It was leaning sideways across the dead tree, its sharp talons rising into the air as if still waiting to receive its prey. I had landed about three feet away. A cold chill went through my body.

If I hadn't let go when I did...

Rocco rushed around the corner, followed by Delphine. The noise had reached them at the other side of the house. They stared in disbelief at all the equipment spread out across the ground like an airplane crash, but were equally relieved to see me standing above it all on the stone fence, pulling my hair back in a pony-tail.

"Bill, are you okay?"

"Look at this!" I exclaimed, pointing to the tree. "I was nearly shish-kabob-bed. But I fell here," pointing to the patch of grass.

The two of them came closer. Delphine covered her mouth and gasped. Rocco studied the scenario silently before easing me off the stone wall. We all walked around the building to the front in a stunned silence.

Rocco poured a cup of coffee and handed it to me. "Just stay here, and take a break."

"Okay." I took the cup with trembling hands.

Sitting on the top step of the entrance, nestled between two white columns, the deep-summer breezes rustled through the weeping willow trees and washed over me. The magnitude of what had happened sank in.

I couldn't have been in better hands.

CHAPTER 18

THE PALE YELLOW EYES OF DEATH

*When I look up to the skies
I see your eyes
A funny kind of yellow*

Picture of Matchstick Men, Status Quo

Within a few months I was accepted to Florida Atlantic University. When I arrived, I found a great roommate named Doug, who happened to be a devoted follower of Jesus. He was funny, loyal, and very smart.

We shared a bedroom that was attached to a common suite with two *Soul Train* brothers from Louisiana who looked like they could have gigged with *Sly and the Family Stone*: big hair, long legs, bell-bottom slacks, golden chains and teeth, the works. On Sundays, they's often be coming home from the disco, as Doug and I were heading to church.

Most of the time they were cool. But not always. One of them, named Mel, often got on my case for reading the Bible in the common area. He would make fun of me, tell me I was narrow-minded, and offended me as much as possible.

“You better be careful, Mel,” I warned him once. “God doesn't like it when you make fun of his kids.”

“Oh, yeah?” He got in my face. “And what is God gonna do about it?”

“I dunno. Maybe he’ll...” I was looking for just what God might do, a wake-up call perfectly suited to Mel and what he cherished most. “Maybe someone will break into your car and rip off all your music or something.”

"You don't know nothing with your head in that book all the time."

Needless to say, he didn't believe me. But one week later Mel came crashing through the front door, charged into his bedroom, and began digging furiously through the trunk at the foot of his bed.

“What’s up, brother?” I asked, looking up from my my book. “Everything cool?”

“No, everything is very uncool. I’m looking for my gun. Someone broke into my car and ripped off all my music!”

I don't think he made the connection.

* * *

One Friday afternoon, I was planning to hitchhike up to Melbourne to visit my Aunt Martha. I usually tried to get up there once a month. As I was packing I noticed a rash all across my skin. It was a serious case of itching. I thought it might be lice or some other contagion, so I cancelled my trip and planned it for the next weekend. Within hours of making that decision the itching disappeared.

Well, that's weird. What was that all about?

A few days later at the campus Baptist Bible Fellowship, one of the students named Terri asked me if I went to Melbourne. Terri was a skinny southern girl with straight dirty-brown hair, a Pentecostal passion for Jesus, and a sweet, drawn-out Alabama accent. I explained what happened and told her I would be getting on I95 North and leaving Thursday.

“ You know, Bill." She paused dramatically. "I think God wants me to give you my car for this weekend.”

“Really?” I leaned against the wall to think it through. “Why?”

“Beats me,” she replied, shrugging her skinny shoulders. “But I think God has something special for this weekend. You won’t want to miss it.”

Three days later, I was cruising in style in an eight-cylinder Ford *Gran Torino*, complete with air conditioning, electric seats, a cassette deck with auto return and everything. I pulled into Aunt Martha’s driveway (with my regular house-gift of an ice-cold watermelon) eager to listen to Kansas with Cousin Walter, skateboard, watch *The Muppets* with Cousin Mary Ann and, *60 Minutes* on their color TV. Aunt Martha, a woman raised in Illinois, had an earthy presence and a certain wisdom about her, along with a warm smile. I loved being with her.

No visit to Melbourne was complete without a visit to my favorite church in the whole world: *The Tabernacle*, a mildly charismatic community with a pastor I really loved named Jamie Buckingham. He was down-to-earth and didn’t use *Christianeese* when he spoke. He had a common-sense faith that never failed to speak to me. In a distant way, he reminded me of Dad.

* * *

During this particular visit, after the opening music set at Sunday worship, Jamie invited a guest speaker by the name of Art Carlson to take the podium. He was the founder of a mission initiative called *Project Kibbutz*, a low-key way to bless the Israeli Jews by living among them, milking their cows, working in their hotels, and farming their cotton. As soon as Art took the stage my body tingled with excitement.

Maybe today is why I'm here this weekend and not last weekend.

I listened carefully at his presentation, overjoyed at the possibility of joining up. There were six groups living on six kibbutzim scattered across Israel, all the way from Dan in the North to Beersheba in the South. The opportunity afforded Hebrew classes (yeshiva), monthly tours (teúls) - many of them off the beaten path and away from the mainstream “touristy” places - and a week-long camping trip in the Sinai where we’d climb Mt. St. Katrina, one of a couple places Moses is said to have received the Ten Commandments. It was a one year commitment with a whopping \$28 per month salary. By the end of the presentation, I was in.

Five months later I had earned enough money pumping gas to purchase a one-way ticket, from Boston to Tel-Aviv, and meet up with 13 other kids, who also sensed God leading them to live, work, and enjoy community together on an agricultural farm northeast of Jerusalem at a place called *Kiryat Anavim*, Place of the Grapes.

We ate together, worked hard together, had weekly Bible studies, sang lots of worship choruses and Israeli music, and drink lots of coffee with the kibbutzniks. It was a hard six-day work week. Some of us worked in the 3-Star hotel on the hill, while others worked in the peach, cherry, or mango orchards. One guy, Andy, worked in the sheet metal factory. My roommate, Bob, milked cows. (He often boasted it was the only job where he was intimate with 200 women a day.) Darwin, a blue-eyes blond-haired kid from Iowa, and I were hand picked to work in the *falchim*, the cotton fields, which was the hardest job on the kibbutz.

Each morning awoke at 3:30, piled into the van with eight other Israelis to drive 45 minutes to the fields. Coffee was served in a metal shack where we received our instructions for the day. We rode around on *John Deere* tractors or old Israeli commando jeeps, farming, plowing, lifting, and connecting 12’ to 16’ long irrigation pipes to water cotton from dawn to dusk. At 10:30 they served a fabulously rich meal of meat, potatoes, humus, salad, and Turkish

coffee. After lunch we returned to the fields, sometimes working until 8:00 PM. It was a grueling job, especially in the Israeli sun (but it was better than roofing).

One particular morning we were in the metal shack as usual, getting our instructions for the day. I was staring at the coffee grounds at the bottom of my cup when I noticed a gas mask on the table.

“Beel.” Abu, a middle-aged Palestinian worker who spoke in a thick accent. “Today, take ze mask. Put eet on tight.”

"Okay."

He produced two phosphorescent orange flags and threw them on the table. “You take these, raise them in ze field, and wait.”

“What am I waiting for?”

“No worry!” He waved a hand to shush me up. “I pick you up at 10:00. You come here, and we eat.”

A half-hour later, I was standing alone in middle of head-high cotton, orange phosphorescent flags in one hand, gas mask in the other, wondering what would happen next. According to Abu, I was supposed to hold them and run at a given signal through the cotton fields, but I wasn't sure what the signal was. Far in the distance, an airplane's muffled sound grew louder. A bright yellow biplane appeared suddenly and dropped out of the sky, skimming the cotton's surface as it sought to stabilize and align itself with the first row.

That's funny. I wonder what that's doing here?

The plane made a beeline towards me. It was so low that it tipped the cotton buds with its rubber wheels. The pilot looked back as he flew the plane not more than 20 feet over my head. He gave me the thumbs up.

Thumbs up?

I watched the yellow biplane lift high in the sky and turn back in my direction. This time, however, it was trailing a thin white spray from both wings that floated down onto the landscape like morning mist. The mosquito trucks back on Cape Canaveral came to mind. It didn't take much to make the connection.

Poison!

I haphazardly put the mask on and took off like a mad man, slipping and sliding in the mud as I raced down the row of cotton.

One, two, three rows...

The closer I got to the sixteenth row, the louder the engine grew. The plane was low again and aiming right for me. Once I reached the row I was told to raise up the flags into the air. I did. The plane swerved to align its wingtip with the flags before skimming the cotton and spraying the plants with poison.

I hit the ground as it roared overhead. The plane climbed into the sky, made a u-turn, and the process started again after another mad dash down 16 rows with my mask in place. This exhausting process went on for days.

A week later, I was working the Egyptian Cotton fields, their most lucrative crop, connecting a twelve foot irrigation pipe to a well head. As I grasped the pipe in my hands to steady it, I began to feel strange. I was standing still, but the landscape began to spin. I was light-headed and staggered back, trying to grab a hold of something stable to keep me from falling, but I hit the ground. Propped up against a pile of rocks and enduring the harsh Israeli sun, my body went numb, as if all the energy in my muscles was drained. The drugs from my past came to

mind; the feeling of heavy immobile limbs was similar. I couldn't think straight, and my world kept spinning.

At one point I looked over to see a large snake slithering from the shade of one rock into the next. Venomous snake or not, it didn't phase me. I felt like I was going to die.

Well, if I'm going to die, it may as well be in Israel.

Somehow I mustered up enough strength to sit up and when I did, things finally stabilized around me. I got to the nearest vehicle and got a ride back to the metal shack. That night, as our group was heading to the kibbutz, I took my friend Darwin aside.

"Dude, I'm not feeling very good."

"You don't look very good," he said, evidently concerned.

As I brushed my teeth that night, I happened to glance in the mirror and grew horrified at the eyeballs looking back at me.

They were yellow.

Two days later blood tests confirmed it. Hepatitis, a dangerous and contagious disease that put me in quarantine. The rules were clear: No one could visit unless they wore a mask.

My temporary cell was a small room with a single dresser, night table, bed, sink, and one table lamp. Food was delivered each meal. I could only leave the room to use the bathroom, and I barely had enough energy for that. I loved the outdoors. This confinement felt like a slow death. I was doomed to stay there for at least six weeks.

Every couple of days or so the kibbutz doctor came to draw blood.

"Good morning, Bill," he would say without emotion as he walked in. He was a middle-aged man, who looked much older than he was, with deep lines in his face, graying hair, and

black-rimmed bifocals. He always seemed tired. Dragging his feet across the room he'd always plop down in the chair next to me with a sigh.

“How are you feeling today?”

“Rotten.”

And so it went.

* * *

The reactions of others in the small community to my illness were interesting to say the least. We were all Christians, but came from very different theological traditions. Some thought I got hepatitis because I got hepatitis, plain and simple. Life happens. Others thought I contracted the disease because I had unconfessed sin in my life which allowed the devil make me sick as God's punishment. Still others thought it was spiritual warfare and that I needed it fight it off. But it was my friend, Amos Anderson, a beautiful 80-year-old Pentecostal Texan brother from Bethlehem, who convinced me that, whatever the cause, God wanted to heal me. According to Amos, well meaning as he was, my lack of faith kept me from being healed.

One day he knocked on my door and stepped into the room without a mask. He pulled the chair up to my bed, obviously on a mission, determined to see me healed and refusing to let the “Devil get this victory.” He prayed in tongues over me for a good ten minutes and with a twinkle in his eyes pronounced me healed.

I just laid there.

“Bill, get up, you’re healed.”

“Oh, okay,” I said, less than convinced. “I am?”

“Well, of course you are - *hallelujah!*” He smiled brightly. “Just claim your healing in Jesus’ Name, and don’t let the devil get a foothold.”

“Sweet!” With renewed vigor, I sat up and clapped my hands with a loud slap. “I claim my healing in Jesus’ Name!”

“Hallelujah!” Amos hopped from the seat, clapped his hands, and twirled around in the center of the room.

“Thank you, Amos!” I was actually starting to feel better. “And praise the Lord!”

“Yes! Praise Jesus!” He pulled the chair away from the bed, took my hands, and pulled me out of the bed. “Now, let’s go for a walk.”

“A walk?”

“Sure! Up that hill behind the hotel. We need to show the devil who has the victory here!”

I was so desperate to escape my prison. I lifted up my arms and yelled, “I’m in! Let’s do this!”

Within moments, I was dressed. We snuck out the door like thieves in the night and got on the hill’s mountain-goat trail that zigzagged steeply upwards just behind the kibbutz hotel. Ten feet up the hill, I was short-winded. Another twenty feet, and I began to feel the strain in my calves, along with a creeping dizziness. By time I reached the top, despite the beautiful and timeless landscape of the Judean hillside, I was overcome with the excruciating pain in my body, which began now shaking. The fever sent hard chills all over me. The world began to spin again like a top and I collapsed over a boulder.

“Amos,” I said weakly. “This isn’t cool. Something’s wrong. I mean, I appreciate it and all, but I think I better go home now.”

Even with Amos taking most of my weight, we barely made it down the hill. My prison never looked so good. My friend left the room dejected.

So much for my healing.

After that, nothing changed, and I lived in my cell immersed in an unrelenting medical fog for a few more days.

One day a letter arrived. It was from Dad. In the years since the divorce, he had spent time living and working in a number of countries, many of them Muslim. Now he was in Saudi Arabia. In the letter he suggested we rendezvous at the *Amman Hilton* in Jordan for a little vacation, to reconnect.

Dad? Why does he think we need to reconnect?

And the weekend he was looking at was just a couple weeks away.

“Fat chance,” I mumbled, dropping the letter to the floor and burrowing back under the covers. I wasn’t exactly opposed to seeing him, but there was no way my body was going to let me go to Jordan.

* * *

That night I fell into a deep slumber. In those days a train could roll by me in the night I's I wouldn't wake up. This night, however, about 2:00 AM I was stirred from the depths. I squinted my eyes and saw a faint sparkling of an cloudy image appearing in the far corner of the room.

What the?

I rubbed my eyes and sat up in bed. I watched the shimmering presence make its way across the room and stop at the foot of the bed. I was transfixed. Was I really seeing something or was it my imagination. I reached for the lamp and turned on the light.

Fainter now, it lifted from the floor and overshadowed me like a cloud. I instinctively drew back, my back against the wall and my eyes as wide as saucers. For a brief moment it seemed it was studying me. It rose over the bed and descended onto my body.

A tingling sensation, something like crackling electricity, at once began in the innermost places in my body. First my bones, then my muscles, and finally my epidermis. My body began to shake violently, so much so that the mattress springs beneath me were squeaking. I was petrified. I covered my head with my sheet, hid my face in my hands, and cried out with all my might. I was unable to cope with such a strong presence of holiness.

“Lord, make it stop,” I prayed. “Make it go away!”

And it did.

The hard tingling in my body began to wane. The presence was outside of me now, its glowing sparkle backing into the far corner of the room until it completely disappeared.

* * *

The next morning I rose to my feet, tucked my toiletry bag under my arm and headed down the outside walkway to the bathroom. It was as I squeezed the toothpaste onto my toothbrush when I noticed something in the mirror. Something had changed. My eyes were clear white.

I peered closer.

What's going on here? They're suppose to be yellow.

Then I remembered the night before.

It wasn't a dream?

I moved my head around in circles. There was no headache. My body felt stronger. I wasn't dizzy. The fever was gone. My strength was returning by the minute, and so was my clarity of mind.

Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!

I had been healed.

CHAPTER 19

ALL I WANT I YOU

*Sail on, silver girl, sail on by
Your time has come to shine
All your dreams are on their way
See how they shine!*

Bridge Over Troubled Water; Simon & Garfunkel

A week later I was strong enough to go Jordan. I took a bus to Tel Aviv and got on a plane. As I buckled myself in on the first leg of the journey, I found myself sitting next to a Canadian evangelist and his wife, Enzo and Sylvia who were making the exact same trip as I was, first to Cyprus, spending the night in Nicosia and flying to Jordan the next day.

Enzo was Italian, fit to be a pizzeria's mascot, with round rosy cheeks, a robust belly, and a well-groomed handle bar mustache. His wife, Sylvia, was thin, quiet, and seemed to disappear in the presence of her larger-than-life husband.

“Where are you staying tonight?” he asked me, as we taxied from the terminal.

“Not sure,” I replied, shrugging my shoulders. “I was thinking I’d crash on a beach.”

“Forget that!” His teeth gleamed from his smiling mouth. “You’re staying with us! We have a room not far from the airport.

God provides!

"What brings you to Jordan?"

I shared my experience with Project Kibbutz, my healing from hepatitis, and my father's desire to meet up in Jordan. As the airplane approached Cyprus, I found myself quite transparent while explaining my relationship with my father, from my childhood on. I shared heartache, disappointment, and pain.

"But all that's gone now, now that I'm a new creation in Christ."

Enzo remained thoughtful. "Tell me more."

“Dad’s quite a piece of work,” I said, chuckling. “I think it’ll be fine to see him. We’re staying at the Ammon *Hilton*. I haven’t had a bath, I mean a real bath, in almost six months. I think we’re going to ride horses at Petra, too.”

Enzo listened deeply with unusual empathy. He later shared with sincerity as the wheels hit the Cyprian tarmac. “May I speak freely, Bill?”

"Of course."

"I believe there are issues in your heart with your father that maybe God wants to work at during your visit," he said gently.

“What kind of issues?”

“Well, first, I can tell you have not respected him in your life. You haven’t honored him. You are still angry at him for what he did to you, for abandoning you as a child.”

His words dove deep within me and resonated. "I can't deny that," I confessed.

As we stood up to disembark, Enzo put a hand on my shoulder.

"My brother, God has healed you, yes, but for much more than just getting the chance for a warm bath in a nice hotel. You need to forgive your father for how he treated you. You need to ask his forgiveness for not living up to his expectations and even mocking them. And you need to honor him, as the scriptures command. Then it will go well with you."

His words rang true. I thought about them as we walked from the airport and hailed a cab. Enzo and Sylvia were very intuitive and lived a supernatural life, comfortable in the reality that God still speaks to us today.

* * *

In the hotel room later that night, I was in the bathroom brushing my teeth when I popped my head out and mentioned the hassle it took me at *American Embassy* in Jerusalem for a new passport.

"One that didn't have an Israeli stamp." I spit into the sink.

"Why did you have to do that?" asked Enzo. "We didn't do that."

"Well," I assured. "You won't be able to get into Jordan with an Israeli stamp on your passport. They hate Israel."

Enzo and Sylvia looked at each other wide-eyed and immediately sat down to pray. I returned to the bathroom to dry off and when emerged, they were looking at me, smiling.

"The Lord told us we are going," said Enzo. "And he will bring the thing to pass. We have prayed that he will blind the eyes of the customs people."

I need to see this.

The next day we arrived at the *Queen Alia International Airport* in Jordan and got in line to show our passports and get them stamped. I slid mine to the Jordanian man behind the glass. He opened it, looked at the picture, looked at me, and thumbed through every page. He looked at me again, stamped it hard twice, and slid it through the glass.

I walked into the lobby and positioned myself where I could get a good look at what was going on with Enzo and Sylvia. They presented their passports to the same man behind the counter. He opened them, looked at the pictures, looked at them, and thumbed through every page of their passports. He looked at them again, stamped both books twice, and slid them through the glass.

“Have a nice day,” I heard him say.

They walked over to me wearing the biggest, joy-filled smiles ever. “We told you the Lord wanted us in Jordan!”

I stepped from the cap and entered the lobby of the hotel. Dad hadn’t arrived, so I checked in and got a room.

The hotel was no joke. My room was opulent. From the moment the door opened I stared in disbelief at the dark mahogany wood, lavish carpet, double beds with turned down sheets, and mints on the pillows. I curiously peered into the refrigerator, my eyes widening at everything from *M&M’s* to *Jim Beam*. It was heaven.

A far cry from the kibbutz, that’s for sure.

The first thing I did after taking in my surroundings was make a hot bath. I sprinkled bubbles in the water, and lie there breathing in scented steam.

I heard the door to the room open and Dad’s voice called out from the other room. “Bill? Are you here?”

“Dad? In here!” I jumped from the bubbles, wrapped a towel around me, and came out to see him. I turned the corner and saw a short, blonde-haired seasoned traveller dressed in a cotton button down shirt, kakis, and sandals. He studied my wet, towel-covered body carefully, looking very much like a water rat and with a sigh gave the trace of a smile, dropped his bag to the bed and hugged me gently. That moment was both wonderful and awkward for me. Wonderful because it was great to see him in such a faraway land and after so many years. Awkward because, as he stared at me, I again felt those same feelings I had felt as a kid. Feelings of not measuring up, judgement, and not growing up to be that perfect little *Blomquist*.

“Hi Dad. So good to see you.” I tightened my towel and pushed my shoulder-length hair off my shoulders.

“Hey, what do you say we go downstairs and get a drink.” His voice was measured, but there was a lot of enthusiasm behind it, and I knew he was happy to see me. I felt the same way.

“Sure!”

We wound up at a remote table immersed in loud, thumping, Arabic music playing at the bar. People milled about and their chatter added to the music a steady murmur. Drinks were being liberally poured, and the atmosphere was thick with smoke. Hookahs, pipes, cigarettes, and cigars all burned steadily in patrons’ hands.

Dad and I sat under a glaring red neon light eating hummus and lamb kabob and catching up on our lives. The chat was light-hearted at first. I thought it was going well, when a heavy silence descended on us suddenly. The moment seemed right for a change of pace. It was time to get real. My gut was churning. But I knew it was something I had to do.

“Hey, Dad.” I leaned across the table and asked, “May I talk to you about some stuff?”

"Of course, Bill. What is it?"

Then I laid it out there. I asked his forgiveness for completely blowing off his expectations, and for not honoring him as the father God had given me. I forgave him for many hurts, hurts he knew nothing about or even intended. Sharing was good for me, but above all, he listened well. That alone made me love him all over again. He wanted to know me. It was wonderful. I had to hold back tears.

After I had finished, Dad took off his glasses, placed them carefully next to his glass of scotch, and he apologized, too. He asked me to forgive him for judging me, for placing his own unmet expectations on me, and for not honoring me as my own unique person. And right there, with the muffled thumping of Arabic music pounding in the basement bar of the Ammon *Hilton*, Dad did something I had never seen him do before.

He cried.

Something snapped in the atmosphere between us, something deep inside our hearts had shifted. With tears rolling down both our faces, we reached out and held each other's hands. Like my body only a week before, our relationship was healed. One healing had led to another. Enzo was right. Thanks to the miracle on the kibbutz, a father and son were reunited.

CHAPTER 20
HOMECOMING

*You see it's all clear
You were meant to be here
From the beginning*

From the Beginning, Emerson, Lake, & Palmer

When my contract with *Project Kibbutz* ended, I wasn't ready to head home just yet. I moved off the kibbutz and in with some friends to a place with a rooftop perfect for sleep during those warm Jerusalem nights. Each morning I woke to the sun reflecting off the *Dome of the Rock*, the smell of curries cooking in the market places, and the sounds of stubborn donkeys, church bells, and shuffling pedestrians.

One day I was in the Old City with no particular place to go when I found myself in front of a bulletin board advertisement that read:

Wanted. Extras for movie. Interviews in Tel Aviv.

Why not?

So I hopped on the bus to Tel Aviv, tried out for a BBC film called *The New Media Bible*, got the bit part, and made a whopping \$30 a day, which was substantially more than the \$28 dollars a month I made on the kibbutz.

The movie wasn't exactly Spielberg, but it was enough to help me acquire enough money to fly to Athens, tour the Greek Islands for a few weeks, and take a train to Switzerland to visit a close friend of Dad, a woman named René, whom Dad used to correspond with through me. She would put his letters in another envelope with Swiss postage before mailing them to me, so the Arab or Israeli stamps wouldn't be seen by either country.

I met her at a train station in Lausanne. She was a thin, middle-aged woman with deep "life lines" in her face and long boney fingers. Her short curly hair accentuated her golden tan and hazel eyes. Her face grew brilliant when she saw me. After a warm embrace she informed me that my Uncle Walt would be visiting in three weeks.

"If you're still here," she said, "you should see him."

"Sure!"

The next couple weeks were spent sleeping under a tree on the shores of Lake Geneva and traveling into the mountains. An additional week was spent sleeping in a barn in Huemoz, just outside Lausanne, on the property of what once was called the *L'Abri* fellowship, a group of intellectual evangelicals who followed the teachings of Dr. Francis Schaefer and his wife Edith.

When I returned I got to see Uncle Walt when he arrived, but he wasn't so enthusiastic to see me. My sun-tanned skin, loose shirt and sandals, long hair, untrimmed beard, and skinny body upset him. I was a bum, according to him, and the hitchhiking I did proved it. I was a floater without a shred of responsibility who lived solely off the means of others.

It didn't help when I asked him for money to visit my friend Lena in Sweden. He hit the roof.

"I'm going to call your dad right now and tell him you're in Switzerland bumming around and doing nothing with your life," he said angrily.

“Fine,” I replied, casually. “Call him. He won’t care.”

Uncle Walt took me up on the challenge. We got to his hotel room and he hastily picked up the receiver and dialed Dad. A few moments later he was on the phone, and sure enough, Walt’s complaints fell on deaf ears. I could tell by his look of disappointment when he hung up.

“Well?” I asked with a smirk.

Uncle Walt sighed deeply, defeated by his own twin brother. “He thinks you’re doing a great thing, seeing the world and all that. He wants you to take as much time as you can and said you’re only young once. I’ll take you to a bank.”

That trip to the bank got me from Switzerland to the German shores of the North Sea and onto a ferry up to Malmo, Sweden. A bus trip took me to Lindesburg, where I was reunited with Lena, one of my friends from the kibbutz, a Swedish chef who had cooked for us in that metal shack by the cotton fields. I got to meet her brother, Ulf, who I ended up connecting well with. We spent a lot of time talking, eating food, and skateboarding in their driveway.

“ We should go visit my family,” I suggested to them one night. The Blomquist family has its roots in Sweden and lived in a farming community near the center of southern Sweden.

“Yah! Ve can do dat!” exclaimed Lena, happy to be invited along. We hitchhiked north the next day until we found ourselves in my family’s general vicinity. I thought I recalled the name of the town they were in, and we stopped in a country store to ask for directions.

The friendly old man at the counter seemed to know exactly who we were talking about and where we needed to go. He pointed a feeble finger in one direction and then in another, trying his best to explain what seemed to me like very detailed and complicated directions. It was all very confusing. Even Lena was getting frustrated.

Behind us was a well-dressed woman standing in line. After a few minutes of frustrating conversation with the old man, the woman leaned forward and tapped Lena on the shoulder. She said something which made Lena's eyes grow wide.

“She says she wants to take us there herself!” She exclaimed.

Forty-five minutes later the silver *Mercedes Benz* took the last turn down a long dirt road. We entered a small rural community with five houses settled around a cul-de-sac that had a clump of trees in the middle. One house had a farmhouse next to it, and we could hear a crowd of people talking, so we hopped out of the car and entered the kitchen door. When I told them who I was, all three of us were greeted warmly with hugs, though a few eyed me with suspicious looks. Thirty people were standing around, drinking alcohol, and eating *kräftor*, or crayfish. Much to our astonishment, we had walked in to a Blomquist family reunion. They all had assumed I heard about the reunion but were shocked to know my appearance was coincidental. I knew it was a God thing, though. It was no coincidence. I was meant to be there.

After all, I was a *Blomquist*.

* * *

I stepped off the Iran Air jet on a cold blustery day in New York, just before Thanksgiving 1981. I'll never forget the American flag furiously waving in the wind, welcoming me home.

I spent two years experiencing the world, traveling around Europe, and joining the Blomquist family reunion, staying for much longer than I expected. I even found a Christian community called *Jutatorpe*, where I visited a community Swedish Christians, saved on the shirrtails of the Jesus Revolution, one of whom ended up encouraging me to play guitar. I was a changed man in many ways on my return home, though I was still a *Blomquist*.

I caught a taxi to the interstate, positioned myself on the side of the road with my thumb out once again, and eventually rolled back into Epping, New Hampshire, completely unannounced after a two-year absence.

My mother nearly had a heart attack.

Over the next few months, I was able to visit some newfound friends from my world tour. I hitchhiked up to Toronto and stayed with Enzo and Sylvia. I was able to tell them how things turned out with my Dad. I went to Knoxville, Tennessee to visit Mick after my long absence from his life. We sat on an elementary school jungle-gym one night and talked for hours.

“Where will you go now?” he asked, swinging upside-down from a rung on the monkey-bars and landing on his feet. “You could stay here if you want.”

“No, thanks.” My feet landed next to him with a thud. “I’m heading back to Boca. I think I’ll finish college now.”

He was happy for me, but our parting proved bittersweet. During our time on the monkey-bars, Micky confessed that he was back in the drug scene and was "all about crystal meth." But he knew it was wrong and was honest about being hooked.

“It's ironic, Micky,” I said, after hearing his confession while dangling from the bars, “I mean, you’re the guy who got me into the power of the Holy Spirit in the first place - remember at the hotel?”

Mick stared into the distance, as if remembering that night we had together.

"So what about now, Mick? Where are you with all that?"

He remained silent for a few more moments. “I’ll be okay, Bill. Don't worry about me.”

The next day, I was back on the road, thumb out, and heading for Melbourne, Florida, to meet Aunt Martha again, and my cousins Walter and Mary Ann. I brought a watermelon, of course. We spent hours talking about all the experiences I had since we last saw each other. They asked a lot of questions, especially about the more incredible parts of my adventures, and we laughed a lot that day.

After I finished, Aunt Martha grew silent and looked at me with her blue eyes. "Billy, did you know that your father is in town? I know he'd like to see you again. He's living at a place called *The Pines*."

Of course, I wanted to see him! I said my goodbyes to the family the next morning and headed to *The Pines* at Indian Harbor Beach. It was the first time we had seen each other since the Ammon *Hilton* two years before. I got to tell him everything that had happened, and we shared some laughs, especially at Uncle Walt's expense.

He took me to high-end restaurants and we ate kings. The experience of our new relationship was new to me; we had literally started all over again.

* * *

One night Dad invited me to "wine and dine" at a fancy restaurant on the beach, the *Melbourne Steak House*. I got on my Sunday best and hopped in the car with he and Maria, a beautifully warm woman he was dating at the time.

We were seated at the table by the *Maitre d'* and served wine, appetizers, a main dish, desert and espresso. It was fine dining at its best, complete with silver utensils, cloth table clothes, flowers on the table, and the dimly lit tinkling of glasses and conversations of the tables around us.

Halfway through my *Surf 'n Turf* I spotted a couple of beautiful people dining, highlighted in the middle of the room. Something about them struck me.

Do I know them?

I was mesmerized. There was just something about them that drew me in. He wore a silk suit with a monogrammed handkerchief, sported a gold watch, had a great tan with dark eyes and a smile that lit up the room. His gaze towards his woman was revealing. Across the table she sat, fully engaged, wearing a brilliant red dress, thin black belt, shiny high-heeled shoes, and a gold cross around her neck. Her long brown hair draped across her shoulders provided a certain sense of elegance, her wedding ring dazzled under the light of the candle.

Who are these guys?

They shared stories, laughter, and even times of silence they raised glasses, sipped, ate, and gazed into each others' faces pretty much the rest of the evening. It was evident they were very much in love, and happy.

As I was squeezing the lemon into my espresso, the couple gathered their things to leave, rose, and walked past us, heading for the coat closet.

"Wait my love." Even her voice seemed familiar. "I left my purse."

"Shall I get it?"

"No, no I'll be back in a minute."

She flipped on a heel and headed back to their table. As she passed she politely glanced in our direction and smiled, spreading an old familiar scent of patchouli oil.

Could it be?

It looked like her, but then again, not so much. Her countenance was brilliant, blue eyes sparkling with a tender, soft face.

Mandy.

I dropped to the back of the chair in shock. If not for the dimly-lit room, she may have recognized me. But she didn't. She collected her purse, took a quick sip of water, and walked past us to her husband, then to the door, and into a *Porch 911* before heading up A1A North.

For the remainder of of meal I sat stunned, burdened and blessed. Burdened because we ended so harshly, but blessed and grateful to God that she, like me, had found grace.

She had been redeemed, as I had.

Lord, thank you for your goodness.

I prayed, and silently asked his continued favor on their lives.

* * *

“Hey, Dad,” I asked one night as we got back from the Melbourne Steak House, “would you like to come to church with me tomorrow?”

Despite Dad’s aversion to church, everyone else in his family had connections. His oldest brother, Gus, was a Presbyterian minister. Another brother, Felix, had a WWII conversion experience on a battleship and came back a strong believer who talked about being “born again” all the time. His three sisters, Doris, Margaret, May, and Lilly each had ties to the Catholic church. Then I came along. He was surrounded. That being said, he and his twin, Uncle Walt, had been preached out, taught out, rebuked out, and fire-and-brimstoned out.

“No, Bill. You go on ahead,” he said, gently. “You can take the car if you want. Perhaps another time.”

“Okay, but if you change your mind, it’s a great place to worship. It’s up in Melbourne called The Tabernacle, with a really cool pastor named Jamie Buckingham, who sort of reminds me of you.”

Dad nodded in appreciation. “Sure, all right.”

The smell of bacon and the sound of classical music coming from the clock radio in the kitchen conspired to prod me awake the next morning. I wrapped the sheet around my body dragged myself into the kitchen, wondering what the occasion was for bacon.

“Well, I was thinking,” Dad said, standing at the stove. I haven’t been to church in a while, so I thought I’d join you. Rye bread or wheat?”

I dropped into the nearest chair and stared at the table as he poured me a cup of coffee. “Um, rye please,” I said, quietly. “That’s awesome, Dad. Cool.” But I wasn’t sure what to think exactly, or what to expect. A part of me never imagined him saying yes, especially not after saying no. But despite what I could have ever hoped or imagined, two Blomquists walked into Jamie Buckingham’s Tabernacle that day.

We took our seat with about 300 hundred other worshippers. The sanctuary was ablaze with laughter and that tangible feeling of mutual love and respect I would often sense in church. As usual, Jamie preached the sermon and shared the love of Christ in an amazingly natural way, with humor and poignancy. I could tell my dad took a liking to him from the moment he approached the podium. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him leaning forward during the teaching, as if trying to absorb every word that was being said.

As the message ended, Jamie prepared to close with prayer, when a man appeared off-stage and motioned for the pastor to come over, after which he whispered something in Jamie’s

ear. Within a moment the man was up at the podium along with the pastor, who let him take the mic.

“Good morning, saints. For those of you who don’t know, I am an elder here in the church and have been given a prophetic word. I believe the Lord would like to address someone in particular this morning.”

Someone in particular?

A holy hush fell on the room.

“I believe there is a man here today, perhaps visiting for the first time, whom the Lord is speaking to. This is a man who has either lived in or spent significant time in the Middle East, and Muslim countries in particular.”

Is this really happening? Could it be Dad?

My heart began pounding in my chest. I closed my eyes and prayed. I knew it. God was calling out my dad!

“Wherever you are, sir,” the elder continued, “I see you sitting in a rocking chair, gazing into a fireplace, and asking yourself, ‘What is truth? What is truth?’” The elder paused and looked around the audience. “Well, I’m here to tell you today, sir, that Jesus Christ is the truth. He has always been the truth, and he will always be the truth.”

A tear rolled down my father’s cheek. Then to my amazement, the neighbor on my right side leaned completely across my lap and tapped my dad on his knee.

“Excuse me, sir?” said the man, gently.

“ Yes?”

“You know, as the elder was speaking that word, I got the distinct impression that the man he was talking about was you.”

Dad nodded politely at him, then looked forward again and pursed his lips. “That may very well be true,” he murmured. “That may very well be true.”

After the service, Jamie Buckingham invited anyone who wanted to talk or needed prayer to come down to the stage, where he would meet them. I had gotten caught up in talking with some old friends and lost sight of Dad. Not long thereafter, I happened to look up towards the front of the sanctuary, and there they were. The two of them were together: Dad’s head bowed in prayer, and Jamie Buckingham standing right beside him.

CHAPTER 22

PORN AGAIN

*Yesterday a morning came, a smile upon your face
Caesar's palace, morning glory,
silly human, silly human race,
On a sailing ship to nowhere, leaving any place,
If the summer change to winter, yours is no,
Yours is no disgrace
Yours is no disgrace
Yours is no disgrace*

Yours Is No Disgrace, Yes

The next day we were eating a scrumptious breakfast. I was reaching over to pour milk in my cereal.

"Hey dad."

"Yes, son."

He took the pitcher and poured it for himself. "I'm thinking about heading down to Boca to see some old friends for a couple of days, maybe even registering for a couple of classes."

Dad thought for a moment. "Are you hitchhiking?"

"I believe so. I love it."

He smiled across the table and nodded in affirmation. "I'll take you to the ramp of I95. From there it's all yours."

"Nah, I think I'll take the beach route. It's longer, and the rides aren't as good. But it's so pretty along the beaches."

"Sure, Bill. Whatever you want to do."

Wonderful.

* * *

Later that morning I was heading south with my thumb out as I'd done for thousands of miles before. Oddly enough, I got great rides the whole way down, through Satellite Beach, Melbourne Beach, then Sebastian Inlet. I crossed over to the mainland and was standing at the intersection of Route 60 and I95 North when a smoky-gray Buick *Electra 225* with tinted windows pulled up just shy of where I stood.

Something's familiar here.

The window slid halfway down to reveal the driver, an old fat man piled high against the far door in the driver's seat.

This can't be. How is this possible?

"Heading south, sir?" I asked, still unsure if I had pinpointed that unforgettable face. He stared at me for a good minute, as if deciding whether to let me in or not. "Are you going that far?"

"Sure." His voice was wheezy, just like I remembered. He motioned with his hand. "Get in. Get in."

My God, you are amazing!

I was elated. With the excitement of reuniting with a long time friend I opened the door, threw my backpack to the floor, hopped into the seat, turned in my seat and with a bright-eyed smile asked, “So how’s the ol’ pornography business coming along?”

“The *what?*” He coughed and wiped his wet lips with a monogrammed handkerchief.

“You know, the *porn* business? How’s that working out for you?”

He nervously stuffed his cigarette butt in the ashtray and sped into the traffic. His pudding-like belly pushed against the steering wheel as he reached into his pocket with shaky yellow fingers, pulled out another cigarette, and lit it with the car’s electric lighter.

“How do you know that. He wheezed. “You don’t know me.”

“Actually, I know all about you. “Let me lay it out.” I hit him with both barrels. “You have three studios where you produce pornography, right? One of your studios is in Tampa, another is in Orlando, and the other’s down here in Miami, where you’re probably headed now. Oh, and you have a wife and a couple of daughters, and you tell them you sell insurance to cover up the lie of what you really do, or something like that.”

His thinly-knuckled hands tightened around the steering wheel.

“You don’t know anything about them, or my family,” fixing his gaze straight ahead. “I don’t know you, I never met you, so what the hell are you talking to me like we’re old neighbors and thinking you can read me like a fricken’ psychic? He was growing more visibly agitated.

Jimi Hendrix’s *Electric Ladyland* came to the forefront of my mind. complete with sound effects and special kazoo.

I'm not the only soul who's accused of hit and run

Tire tracks all across your back, uh-huh

I can see you had your fun

But a darling, can't you see my signals

Turn from green to red

And with you I can see a traffic jam

Straight up ahead

“This is no accident,” I said, leaning back against my door and facing straight on, sporting a mixture of judgement and compassion. “I am here to tell you that Jesus died for you so you wouldn’t have to spend eternity in hell. He loves you, mister, but hates what you do.”

“Go fuck yourself. I'm not donging anything bad.”

“And you told me.” I repeated clearly. “And you told me that if you ever got a sign that Jesus was real, you’d believe in him. Remember that? Well, I’m here to tell you, mister, I am your sign!”

He glared at me through his coke-bottle thick bifocals, his eyes were narrow slits of contempt. “Go to hell.”

* * *

Only God knows what he was thinking for the next hour inside the red-velvet interior of his smoky-gray Buick *Electra 225*, chain-smoking all the way. But after the two-hour without speaking another word, I stood at the Glades Road exit in Boca and watched the car creep away and merge into the passing traffic, never to be seen again. Turning away to walk the exit ramp into town I shook my head in disbelief.

I guess it didn't take.

CHAPTER 22

HEY POP, I GRADUATED AT THE TOP OF MY CLASS!

*And in the end
The love you take
Is equal to the love
You make*

The End, The Beatles

A whopping seventeen years after my Dad's conversion, a lot of things had changed.

I got married, went to seminary in Pasadena, California, had a couple of kids, got ordained as an Episcopal Priest, and had literally travelled the world leading music and teaching about the experiential ministry of the Holy Spirit.

While serving in Denver, Colorado, I received an invitation to take a church in Switzerland, Florida.

"What do you think?" My wife asked. "Do you think we should go?"

It was a difficult decision. We had been at Christ Church for ten years. But I began to think about it. Switzerland was a southern suburb of Jacksonville. Jacksonville was just up the street from where Dad was living in Melbourne. His health was declining and I missed him.

"Yes, let's do it. My dad would like that. I really love that guy."

A year after the move I was invited lead music for a weekend retreat in a church in Bradenton, Florida. It was a powerful time of music, teaching and ministry, or (as I like to say) "watching God doing the stuff." The final night of the conference couldn't come soon enough. I was dead tired. I packed up my guitar and nabbed a snack and headed to my room, turned off the light, slid under the covers, and fell asleep.

A vivid dream accosted me that night. In the dream I was with a couple of old high school friends. We were sitting in a pub, huddled around a thick wooden table under a low hanging light and discussing the idea of having a reunion, a time when all the guys we used to hang with could catch up on life together. In my hand was a pencil and paper. I was designated to jot down names.

"What about Eddie?" I asked. "He used to be a lot of fun."

"No." A voice from the shadows said. "Eddie OD'ed on heroin."

I drew a line through his name. "Okay, then what about Sally?"

"She's in prison," another voice replied.

Another line across her name. "Oh." So much for her. "What about Peter?"

"Peter was busted in L.A. in the mid-80's for grand theft. He won't be free for years."

Another line.

"What about Reagan?"

"Nope."

Another line.

"Lloyd?"

You know the routine.

"MIA."

And so it went.

By the end of the dream all the names on the sheet were crossed out.

Then I woke up.

The next day, Sunday, was *Mother's Day*, and as every good first-born child should do, I called my mother to wish her well and thank her for having me.

"You're welcome!" she replied, happily. "Oh, and I forgot to tell you, Patty Whittaker from Bedford High School called here just the other day. She's been trying to get a hold of you."

Patty Whittaker? I hadn't heard that name in ages. "What's up with her?"

"Apparently, your old high school is having their *25th Anniversary Reunion* and she wanted to make sure you knew about it. Time sure does fly, doesn't it?"

"I guess so." The dream reappeared at the forefront of my mind. I could take a hint.

"Well, I'm in. When is it?"

"Thanksgiving weekend."

"Okay, give me her phone number, and I'll see you in a few months. Happy Mother's Day, Mom. I love you."

"Love you more, honey."

I was mystified. There had to be a connection between the dream and the upcoming reunion, but why would God want me there?

High school is the last place I want to be.

* * *

I soon received the application for the 25th Anniversary *Bedford High School Reunion*. They wanted, among other things, a brief bio of “who you had become and a little about where life had taken you since high school.” I took the opportunity to write about Jesus.

This is what I wrote:

Four years after graduation, my life bottomed out completely due to some real unhealthy stuff. I was just as surprised as anyone else when I began to feel the tug of God on my life. Since then and up through today I've been working in church and para-church organizations.

I signed the application, wrote the check, and put it all in the mailbox.

A few months later, I flew up to New England for the reunion, completely unaware of why God was prompting me to go.

* * *

Shortly after arriving in Epping Henri, my brother, and his wife Ruth asked me to baptize their son, Dean.

"Sure."

So the Friday afternoon following Thanksgiving about eight of us gathered around Henri's kitchen and formed a circle with a make-shift altar at one end. I had been wondering how to make it "real" for little Dean, when an idea came to me. After reading a few scriptures, I invited the five-year-old, blonde-haired, grinning little boy to stand in the middle of the circle, where I said we were going to play a game. He jumped into the middle and gazed at me with a happy, expectant face.

“Do you like games?”

He nodded, grinning from ear to ear.

“Great. I do, too! And this one is called, *Who’s Your Daddy?* You want to play?”

Again, big grin, nodding happily. A number of us chuckled endearingly. I squatted down to his level.

“You see, Dean, as we grow up, we begin to hear lots and lots of other voices call our name. Some of those voices want us to do things that, well, aren't so good. You know, bad things that only get us in trouble. Do you know what I mean?”

Dean sheepishly looked to his mom.

“But, at the end of the day, there’s only one voice that we need to listen to: God’s voice. He’s the only voice that really matters. And that’s what this game is all about.”

I stood up and faced the grown-ups. “So this is what we’re going to do. I’m going to blindfold Dean with my stole and spin him around until he gets really dizzy, and then we’re all going to yell his name from every direction. Okay?”

All agreed.

“So Dean, we are all going to be calling and shouting your name and your job is to listen oh-so-carefully through all the voices for one voice, the voice of your father. When you hear your daddy’s voice, I want you to walk over to him and give him a big hug. That’s your job. Got it?”

“Ok.” He nodded, looking slightly confused but still excited. “I’m ready, Uncle Bill!”

I wrapped my stole around his little blonde head, twirled him around until he got dizzy and giggled.

"Three... Two.. One... Now!"

The room exploded with chaotic voices, all of them loudly calling his name.

"Dean, Dean. Hey Dean. Come over here. I am your father!"

"No, I am your father."

High voices, low voices, creepy voices, friendly voices, all vying for Dean's attention.

Dean stood like a toy soldier, waiting in the middle of the circle, head tilting this way and that way, straining with all his might to hear the voice of his father through the all the rest of the discoing voices.

Then Henri spoke, softly, almost imperceptible. "Dean, over here."

Dean's face lit up and he turned immediately towards the voice. Like a little robot, his arms sprang forward and he walked straight towards his Dad, who lifted him into his arms.

"Daddy!" he cried, taking off the blindfold. "It's me!"

We were all left speechless and made all the more thoughtful that day.

* * *

Later that evening, I was sitting alone in the *Westward Regency Hotel and Conference Room* at the Class of 1973's *25th Bedford High School Reunion*, wondering why in the world I was there, surrounded by the voices of my past.

Dear God, have I done something wrong to deserve this?

It was ridiculous. Cheesy music like the *Monster Mash*, *Muskrat Love*, and *Funky Worm* played over the distorted speakers and people danced on a linoleum floor under a misbalanced disco ball. The whole evening was killing me softly, and I felt like a fish out of water.

Is this some sort of punishment?

The evening was almost over. I had just finished my last bite of pineapple upside-down cake when our class song, *Color My World* by Chicago, sent a sweeping sigh of sentimentality across the room.

Gag me with a spoon.

Scores of people rose to their feet, grabbed their partners, and raced to the dance floor. That was my cue to get out. I didn't know how or why I needed to be there, but as far as I was concerned, the job was done and it was time to split. I stood up from the table and was reaching for my keys when I felt a gentle tapping on my shoulder.

"Excuse me." A tall skinny woman stood was standing there, her frizzy shoulder-length hair silhouetted by the prismatic lights bouncing off the disco ball. "Are you Bill Blomquist?"

"Yes." I confessed with some apprehension. "I'm Bill Blomquist,"

"Good." She seemed relieved. "Would you mind joining us over there for a minute?" She gestured towards a corner of the room where a small circle of former students huddled in the shadows. "We'd like to talk to you about something."

I froze.

A past girlfriend I ditched while tripping on acid? The time I pee'd in a a bong and handed it to Jimmy Smith? Was about the time I sucked face with lava lips after the spin the bottle game? Is someone still trying to get revenge?

"It's bout something you wrote in your bio."

"My bio?"

"You know, the one on the application?"

"Oh yeah."

Whew!

A certain excitement rose within me. This was it. This was the reason for the dream I had, the reason why God wanted me to come.

"Come, follow me," she motioned with a grin. "I think you're going to like this."

I felt compelled to follow her into the shadowed semicircle.

"See," I heard her voice speak to someone else, "I told you he'd be here."

No one said a word. They simply stared at me, examining me from head to toe, as if I was a sideshow freak or an alien from another world. After thirty seconds, things got awkward.

I cleared my throat. "Nice to see the old gang, isn't it?"

But they just stared.

What the frick?

As my eyes adjusted to the low light, I noticed one of the women holding a cocktail and wearing a silly smirk on their face. She stepped forward. Her face was radiant and her voice was filled with warmth, which eased my growing awkwardness.

"Bill, first let me say that we are so *very* glad to see you. We weren't sure we ever would."

"Well," I sighed with relief. "It's good to be here, I guess. I still don't know why, though."

"Oh, but we do."

They all chuckled. She drew closer.

"Bill, we couldn't believe our eyes when we read your blurb in the bio. We just had to come and see it for ourselves."

"See me?" I asked, genuinely confused. "What are you talking about?"

A short woman with a kind face, freckles, bling-bling on her wrists, and big hair stepped forward. She pointed around the circle to the small group of friends.

“You see, these people, Bill? When we were all in high school, most of us were involved in a prayer group that met once a week.”

“A prayer group?” I interrupted jokingly. “You mean there were Christians in high school?”

“Oh, yes,” she assured me.

Crazy.

“And at the beginning of each year, we all got together to make a list of names of people in our class - ”

" - The Class of '73 - "Another woman interrupted.

"Right. 'The Class of '73'. Anyway, at the beginning of each year we'd make a list of the people in our class who we felt needed Jesus the most.”

I knew what was coming. Emotions began rising in my chest.

Someone else stepped forward. “And you, Bill, were right up there in the top of our list for three years.”

"What? Are you kidding me?"

I lost it. Tears of gratitude filled my eyes and began spilling over, warming my cheeks.

“You mean, you guys were praying for me all the way back in high school?”

"Three years straight. We know you were hurting."

At that moment everything at the *Bedford High School 25th Reunion of the Class of '73* faded into a memory of mountains and valleys.

A man appeared in the shadows, dressed in a fine suit and a cross dangling across his tie. "We bless the Lord for you, brother. All through high school we prayed for you to meet Jesus, and here you are. When we read what you wrote in your bio, we just had to come here and tell you."

"And see it for ourselves."

I grew gloriously numb. Everything leading up to my surrender to Jesus Christ: my astronaut heroes, consuming 'shrooms at the Robinsons, the old man with the shotgun, Micky's vans on fire, the razor blade, *George's*, getting arrested in Providence, Bonnie-Jean, greenish-blue smoke on the electric stove, my surrender on a beach, the Holy Spirit's door of invitation at the *Quality Quartz Hotel and Conference Center*, and above all, the watermelon on I95 South, all flashed across my mind almost at once, as if they had combined to form a single, unified event. Somehow, somehow, all those events had something (perhaps everything) to do with these very people huddling around me who, just now and after some twenty-five years of waiting, were only just now seeing the fruit of their prayers.

With tears streaming down my face, I hugged everyone in that circle, brothers and sisters who moments ago had been nothing but strangers to me, laughing, crying, and giving thanks to God in darkest corner of the room.

CHAPTER 23

DEJA VU ALL OVER AGAIN

*You came along from far away, and found me here
I was playing around, feeling down, and hitting the beer
You picked me up from off the floor, and gave me a smile
You said, "You're much too young,
your life ain't begun, let's walk for a while"*

I Love You, Climax Blues Band

Fast forward to the Winter of 2010, twelve years later.

After all that I'd been taught, all that I believed, all I had taught for God and His Kingdom, everything was in question, because of something stupid I did.

Up to that point I had been blessed with a marriage of 25 years, two fun-loving and crazy daughters, with homespun memories of Christmas mornings with hot chocolate, road trips half-way across the country, a vacation cabin in Colorado, and the ups and downs of cheerleading, sleepovers, and dating. It was the perfect life.

Somewhere in the business of raising a family, however, my wife and I had lost the emotional depth that marriages need to have if they are going to survive. Our marriage looked good on the outside, but the ice we were skating on was thinner than any of us could have imagined.

The stress of work, a growing Houston church, and the positive emotional strokes received from friends made us both oblivious to the growing danger, and more unwilling as time

went by to look within ourselves and get real help. The marriage went on as planned, but on the inside we were falling apart, wallowing in bitterness, frustration, and dissatisfaction.

Rather than take the opportunity to see my wife's pain and sincerely reach out after some poor choices she made, I let bitterness and resentment overwhelm me. In my pride, I no longer cared.

She got hers. Now I'm going to get mine.

A woman who was kind and supportive throughout my ministry provided the comfort I had refused to seek from God, or my wife.

That decision cost me everything.

Within a 18 months we were divorced, loosing the beautiful family we worked so very hard to build. We also lost many friends, and our good reputations. As one might imagine, I also bore an almost insurmountable weight of self-condemnation and personal remorse.

Could all those years with Jesus really be lost by a single decision in my life?

I beat myself up repeatedly, and with each onslaught of anguish my thoughts grew darker. The time between the affair and the signing of our divorce papers was by far the most painful time in my life, more debilitating than anything written in this book. No amount of counseling, prayer, confession, pleading for forgiveness, or reading of books could get me out of my despair. Once again, I was spiritually desolate, blaming God for my sins and all their outcome, throwing rocks into the sky, wondering if he was really there after all.

* * *

In my distress I drove to the beach. There would be no judgement there.

I got in the car and headed out on I10 East and merged onto 59 South from Houston to Galveston Beach. Beaches had often been places of encounter between me and God, and that's what I needed then more than anything.

It was a rough day, cloudy, cold, with swells cresting and breaking out to the horizon. No one was on the beach, so it was finally safe. Tears flooded my eyes. I walked endlessly, leaning into the howling wind. Shame bore down on me like weights in my heart. While I knew the tapes of self-condemnation playing in my mind wasn't true, in my heart I felt unforgivable.

I walked deeper across the shoreline, yelling and wailing with loud cries like a lunatic. Rain pelted my face like stinging needles, but I didn't care. I deserved it. The ocean's waves whipped violently, the wind was howling. I howled along with it.

Jesus. I am so very sorry.

I beat my chest, taking giant gasps as I sobbed violently for my misstep (for I had been warned), and for the pain it would cause my family which has lasted to this day. I fell to my knees and gripped the sand with my fingers.

Where are you?

My voice now hushed, my face in the sand.

Show me something, anything, a sign - just so I know you're still there.

A sudden gust of wind shook me, bringing me back to reality. I rose to my feet and stared blankly at the horizon for a long time.

* * *

It was a shadow at first, a mere dark spot on bobbing in the brown murky sea, half-submerged in the surf, about twenty five yards out. Waves pounded against it, tossed it to and fro

like a beach ball until it dipped beneath the surface, only to pop up closer to the shore. My eyes grew curious. A final submerged it when it emerged in the foam.

You've got to be kidding.

Knee-deep into the pounding surf, the object bopped me in my chins, its green rind sparkling in the brilliant sun.

Is this you God?

I slowly reached down to touch it with my hands, making sure it wasn't some strange illusion brought on by too much grief and wishful thinking. Sure enough it was real. I lifted it out of the water and carried it to a dry dune, where I nestled it in the sand like a precious child saved from drowning. I stepped back and fell to my knees again, awestruck and speechless for a very long time.

There was nobody around. No family picnicked on the beach around me, and no boat sailed near shore. A smile formed across my lips.

Who would believe this?

It was a monument to a distant past, almost forgotten in the shadows of my pain and isolation. I could hardly believe it, but grace flooded my heart to receive what my mind could not. It was a good news, very good news.

It was a watermelon.

EPILOGUE

*Well, I've had dreams enough for one
And I've got love enough for three
I have my hopes to comfort me
I've got my new horizons out to sea*

*But I'm never gonna lose your precious gift
It will always be that way
'Cause I know I'm gonna find my peace of mind
Someday*

*Where is this place that we have found?
Nobody knows where we are bound
I long to hear, I need to see
'Cause I've shed tears too many for me*

*On the wind, soaring free
Spread your wings, I'm beginning to see
Out of mind, far from view
Beyond the reach of the nightmare come true*

New Horizons, The Moody Blues

All this happened a long time ago. Much more has happened since. It's a real challenge to write a memoir from merely a slice of life, because so many significant other things happened, and continue to happen to this day.

Some parts of my life, of course, haven't been so great. I've been deeply hurt by others over the years, and have hurt others deeply as well. I've been confused and disillusioned by the outcome of many endeavors, and disappointed with of dead-end dreams. I've been known

sorrow. There have been times I have deliberately and intentionally walked away from the Lord, deceived in my heart and mind, only to return.

I would be the first to tell you I am not perfect, but through the highs and lows, Jesus Christ remained faithful, and he continues to be faithful. In the words of late great Larry Norman in *Shot Down*:

*I've been knocked down,
Kicked around
But like a moth drawn to the flame
Here I am
Talkin' 'bout Jesus just the same*

Nowadays there's a lot of talk on the street about new ways to get to heaven, and the old way, that "old-time religion," is completely disregarded. But I have learned that "old time religion" is that "old time religion" for a reason. Those Ancient Pathways never grow old.

The Pathway, of course, is what we call the Gospel, the "good news" that Jesus is still around, he loves us, he died for us, so we can spend the rest of our eternity with him.

Free for the asking.

The bottom line is he loves you, no matter what or who you've been, always has, and always will.

Wherever you are, whatever you're doing, when you hear him knocking in the depths of your heart, just open the door.

It's that simple.

*If you think it's a joke
That's all right, do what you want to do
I've said my peace
And I'll leave it all up to you*

Out and In, The Moody Blues

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*All my life I've been searching
For that crazy missing part
And with one touch
You just rolled away the stone that held my heart
And now I see
That the answer was as easy
As just to ask you in
And I am so so sure
I could never doubt your gentle touch again
It's like the power of the wind*

Your Love Broke Through, Keith Green



1977

2024

Bill Blomquist serves as an Anglican priest, Spiritual Director, singer/songwriter, Holy Land tour leader, and Gospel storyteller. When he's not teaching on the continuing coolness of the Spirit, you can find him listening to jazz with his wife Cinnamon, or sailing on Webster Lake, New Hampshire.

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