

THE WATERMELON GOSPEL

by

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Approx. 53,500 words

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PREFACE

I was watching a late-night show when President Bill Clinton shared his new book in the summer of 2003. It was 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. I worked on it here and there, wanting nothing more than a give-away for my family. I jotted some experiences down, hoping I’d get to it one day. Then life happened, and I forgot about it, stashed away amidst a countless array of bits and bytes, all but forgotten in the mechanical caverns of my laptop.

I didn’t forget about the call to write it but never carved out the time to do so. Time passed. Later in life, after my daughters graduated from high school, I came across a verse in the Bible: “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.

So, what you’re holding here are those memories.

I took certain liberties. Some events I scaled back, others I scaled forward, and some I 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 Spirit who, despite our wrestling and constant rebellion, always gets his way. But at the end of the day, that turns out to be a very good thing indeed.

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

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; the breakdown lane reflecting sunshine that pierced my eyes like diamonds in the road. I prodded onward, cars flying passed me, honking at times, mocking me as I desperately tried to walk from one exit ramp to the next, arm out, skin burned in the scorching heat.

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, and my 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 formed on the end of my eyelashes, but I was too exhausted to wipe them off. My throat was parched. As the droplets grew heavier, they transformed my sight into prismatic rainbows, 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 played hide-and-go-seek while I dried up down here, and whenever I almost reached him, he would cheat and disappear again.

“I bet you don’t even exist!” I yelled into the blazing sky, even bending to grab a few rocks and throw 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 pulled my backpack tighter on my shoulders and sighed deeply. “Screw this. He’s not around.”

Then up ahead, through the clouded vision of the prismatic rainbows covering my eyes, I saw something out of place.

What is that?

I wasn’t sure if it was real or not, but when I reached it, I bent down as if it was and placed my hand on its frigid, dewy skin.

Did God just hear my prayer? Did he give me a sign?

He indeed did hear my prayer. In the middle of a desert, on one of the hottest days I can remember, on the blazing hot asphalt of the immeasurably long road ahead, I picked up an ice-cold watermelon.

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 at a Harrison, New York bank, and he walked in one day dressed in his Air Force blues. She placed her hand to her mouth and gasped. He was drop dead handsome. They married soon after; he was 22 and she was 19. They moved to California, bought a house, and before long there were two kids: me and my brother Henri. I came into this world on March 5, 1955. My brother arrived

two-and-a-half years later.

California gave me my first memory. On a typical sunny southern California day, I wandered off the concrete porch and waddled across the grass to the far corner of the back yard, plopping myself right 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 remember my first formulated idea. With my head drooping down on my chest as I screamed my brains out, the thought hit me: 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. I saw an interesting object above me on the stove, reached up, pulled on the handle, and spilled boiling water over 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 curiosity into my fourth year, and shortly after my birthday, Dad got a job as an engineer at Cape Canaveral, Florida. 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, a few miles south of Port Canaveral. Not much to remember there. My brother and I were just a couple of mischievous bare-foot boys who

hunted turtles, snakes, and fiddler crabs when we weren't eating or sleeping. A year later we moved a couple of streets south into a house that, like the last one, faced north. I spent the next ten years at 305 Harrison Avenue and got into Cub Scouts, and got to watch loads of Black and White television. Best of all, I had front row seats with NASA and witnessed hundreds of rockets over the course of my time there as they lifted off and headed into outer space.

Sometimes "the birds," as they were called by the locals, blew up before they even got off the ground, right there on the gantry pads. Other times they rose into the sky and "poofed" into tiny explosions before leaving the wild blue canvas and disappearing into orbit. Monkeys and men in space capsules smaller than an average bathroom took off just down the street. It was literally a blast for them and a blast for me.

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

"Henri, look!" I leaned over the bunk bed's side and down at my brother. "It's a missile!"

"A rocket!"

"Yeah!"

We would throw off our sheets and pull the curtains back to see a magnificent site: a great metallic monster thundering upwards into the night sky, its orange glow reflecting off our widening eyes.

It 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 the 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.

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 with a churning machine that sprayed 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 behind him. We giggled, breathed in deep, and magically 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, never mind the discoveries of modern science regarding the damage the mosquito man dealt us, but we didn't know, and we didn't care. The ecstatic bliss of zero gravity was what it was all about. I can safely say this was the first time I got high.

A lot of those kids were from church: St. David's By the Sea, an Episcopal church on a canal, down in Cocoa Beach. While Dad rarely went to church, Mom made sure we were there 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 I need to do that?

Mom went on: "You can sing in the choir..."

The choir? Yuck! That's for sissies.

"Or you can be an acolyte."

So, 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 happened after the service in the canal just behind the buildings. All the kids grabbed our paper cups of red Kool-Ade and headed for the lagoon. We loved to spot turtles, horseshoe crabs, and the occasional alligator lurking in the reeds before heading to our next Sunday afternoon activity. After church, we'd often go to the Wilson's house to play.

The Wilson's lived on Jefferson Avenue, where we had lived before. They had a large back yard with a really cool jungle gym about twenty feet from the back porch. Mr. Frank Wilson was the man of the house. He had unwelcoming, beady eyes and was as slim as the cigarette he never failed to have in hand. Frank gave me the creeps, though I would have been hard-pressed to say why. His family consisted of three girls: Abby, Justina, and Lilly; along with William, his mischievous son, and a wife who always

seemed deeply troubled and would sometimes be seen or heard running around their house screaming. I never knew exactly why. She may have been certifiably crazy. It was a family I was glad not to be a part of.

The joke was on me, though. After my parents' divorce, Frank Wilson became my step-dad. Crazy or not, I guess his first wife didn't cut it.

So it goes.

One breezy Sunday after church, my church friends, the Wilson kids, and I were hanging around on the jungle gym when one of the girls shot a hand to the sky and pointed to a puffy cloud.

"Look!" Becky Brown exclaimed. "Way up there! I see an elephant!" Becky Brown, another friend from church, was my age. I didn't like her. She used to try and convince me that raisins were dried flies. One day I believed her.

We all looked to where Becky pointed, 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!" Now Becky was pointing to the far side of the sky and yelling at the top of her lungs. "I see a dolphin!"

"Yes!" we cried out. "We see it! We see it!" The gang climbed to the top of the jungle gym to get a better look. "Wow! I see it! And 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.

Justina 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 the heart of 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?”

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

“I don't see him.” One kid confessed.

“I don't see him either, Billy,” another sighed in agreement. “And I think you're square.”

Now that was uncalled for.

“Yeah, Billy's square!” they all chimed in. “Let's go in.”

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!" Becky Brown exclaimed. "It's flapping over to that sunflower!"

"Yes! We see it! We see it!"

"But what about Jesus?" I asked quietly. 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, who still stood at the screen door. 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 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, with their schoolbooks tossed haphazardly into the sand, 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. Then 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?"

"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 cool."

So, off I went, towards the bad kids and the trajectory of the rest of my young life.

As school and summertime passed, that same voice would come and go, sometimes strong, sometimes weak, but often ignored. It was strongest when I was sad, the times I just wanted to be alone on the beach, when I needed to get away from that same miserable trajectory. The voice would be there at times, and so were 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.

Year after year I found myself there, sitting on the sand dunes and peering out to the edge of the world to find my peace and maybe hear that voice. The ocean's 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, the place where heaven met earth.

Sometimes I'd ride my bike down to Canaveral Pier a few miles down Ridgewood Avenue. 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, drop down on my baggies, hang my feet over its edge, and watch surfers as they endlessly roller-coastered up and down the glassy walls of water, slicing this way and that with rainbow mist flying off their boards, which cut through the sea like a knife through butter. I would day-dream for hours there. I fantasized about rocketing up a crest, or crashing and burning, or even getting barreled in the blue room. Sometimes during a particularly awesome ride, the muffled music from the Asylum night club behind me would rattle the pier with Mechanical World, On the Road Again, or better yet, Magic Carpet Ride, and I'd hop to my feet and jump up and down on the pier, clapping my hands and impulsively jerking this way, as if I, too, was riding those same magnificent waves.

Paddle harder, there! You got it!

Up from your knees, and swing the board around. That's it!

Drop back, squat deep, tight under the lip. Far out!

Ride it through, drop down, point the stick upwards, bank off the wall and fly into the air! Dude! Nice ride!

Bitchen!

I'd drop back to the boardwalk's wooden railings exhausted, as if it had been me. 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 heading towards shore, my 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. I left it on the surfboard racks on the car one night, and the next morning it was gone.

God dammit!

It was the first time anyone had ever stolen from me. I was devastated.

But I wasn't so easily swayed from surfing, and soon enough I saved up enough from my allowance and local newspaper route to buy my second and all-time favorite board: an eight-foot six-inch Jacobs nose-rider, white, with a double-balsam stringer running from top to bottom. It was the best board ever. The concave nose made it perfect for nose-riding. There is nothing smoother than that silent glide across a steepening swell, the spray streaming off the rails producing misty rainbows. You stand there almost effortlessly, toes curled around the nose, hanging ten with your baggies flapping in the breeze and the sun beaming on your face.

I could do this for the rest of my life, I used to think. Maybe this is what I'll be

when I grow up.

Surfing was hypnotic. The vibe was even greater than the actual sport. Volkswagen vans filled with hippies cruised up and down the beach route, A1A, checking the swell, monitoring tides, and searching for that perfect better break. 8-Tracks blasted tunes from the British Invasion. Ron Jon's had just opened, a head shop with love beads as you entered, straw mats on the floor, display cases with skateboard parts, sex wax, a few wet suits, and surfboards in the back. Music like Wild Thing by the Troggs 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, Mickey. 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. Almost every weekend we slept over at each other's house and got up at the crack of dawn, surfboards tucked under our arms to arrive on the beach as the first rays of sun began beaming over the horizon. We would paddle into the sunrise and surf the day away.

Even in the fourth grade I sensed how each wave was different than the last, as if each one had her own personality, temperament, strength, and mind. Waves couldn't be predicted or controlled. Mick once said, "Dude, you can't make these your own. Just gotta flow with it." He knew what he was talking about. I watched him time and time again, a scrawny little kid on a board twice his size, paddling with ease to catch the waves, dropping down and scaling their walls like a 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 her, and in a sense honored her, not for what you wanted her to be, but for who she was.

The beach was for more than just waves, though. There were those rare times when Mom, Dad, and Henri would wake up in the middle of the night, gather our 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, watching them rise into the sky like upside-down candles until they dimmed into just a star. Walking back to the house and plopping to my 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 fascinating, it was the astronauts' return that created profound memories for me. After all, by then I was riding waves, but they were riding stars. I got to gaze into the faces of these star-walkers: Scott Carpenter, Gordon Cooper, John Glenn, Gus Grissom, Wally Schirra, Alan Shepard, and Deke Slayton. They were the Magnificent Seven.

After each flight, these modern-day heroes sat atop Ford Galaxy convertibles and paraded their way down A1A South from the Cape. I'd often go and rush to get a glimpse of them as they headed down to the Quality Courts Hotel and Conference Center for their press interviews. I'll never forget the day when one of the "right stuffers" turned his head and looked directly at me from the passing Ford Galaxy. He looked deep into my soul and nodded, as if he knew all about me, with an all-knowing smile and wink of his eye. My knees grew weak; I was star struck. A gasp escaped me, like a

crazed Beatles fan on The Ed Sullivan Show, and I ran after their car, zig-zagging through the crowd, determined to get a better look at him. 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: 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. To me the Magnificent Seven were no less than gods, and I had entered their house of worship.

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.

Mom was working at an interior design place, often on Saturdays, and Mickey and I would walk around downtown Cocoa Beach, while we killed time and waited for her to get out. One Saturday, we were hanging out in front of a Cocoa Beach storefront, waiting for my mom to pick us up, when we eyed a public ash tray. Concrete and shaped like a pineapple, about two feet high, it drew me into its quicksand of used cigarettes and cigars, with their remnants sticking out of the sand.

“Want to?” I asked.

Mick considered the ashtray. “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 educational experience as we kicked around downtown with no place to go, waiting for my mom to get out of work. A dirty-looking, disheveled and unshaven old man appeared with a brown paper bag. He had bloodshot eyes, a skinny, pronounced nose, a pointed chin, and thin greasy hair. The man wore a long trench coat and everything. He was the real deal.

“Hey kids.” His voice gurgled with a bubble of phlegm. “Wanna see something?”

“Why not?” I drew near, even as Mick stayed back. “What is it, Mister?”

Mick furiously waved his hands at me, 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 he be?

Before long we were standing in the middle of the sidewalk, staring up at this creep. A busted beer bottle was shattered on the curb, and the smell of stale alcohol

made me 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 blush and draw back or take a closer look. He drew back even further. 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 photo 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. I 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 of Richard Harris’ MacArthur Park on our humungous console stereo, when Jenny stopped by to borrow something and stood just outside 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, turned down the radio, and headed for the screen door, only to be 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 that dress in the afternoon breeze.

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

“Billy,” asked Jenny, looking at me curiously. “Are you alright?”

I swallowed hard. I couldn’t be sure.

Mom came to the door just in time. I leaned against it, mesmerized by the specimen of femininity before me.

I still can’t recall what Jenny said. Something about borrowing sugar, I think. I wasn’t sure exactly what was happening with me, but my mental faculties were rendered completely incoherent.

My mother 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 one 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. “Billy Blomquist, you know you should not be doing things like that.”

My hands dropped just as Mom appeared and handed her 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.

And now I was standing in the middle of a sidewalk, talking to a stranger, and staring at breasts once again, though even Jenny 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.” Mickey's bloodshot eyes grew as wide as quarters. “Those are like... like watermelons!”

“Just like watermelons,” I concurred.

“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.

We had seen enough. Before we knew it, we were running backwards, almost 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. “Not 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, I promised myself: I’m going to find out exactly what that thing was, even if it takes me the rest of my life.

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

And then it happened. Dad moved out of the house six months later and got an apartment on Merritt Island. My brother and I weren't sure what had happened or why it happened. All we knew was that we got to visit him every other weekend. He had 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. Those were the best. You'd tell the attendant at the booth how many people there were, and then make your way up and down the rows of cars until you parked at the perfect place: leaning uphill in front of the 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 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, your 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?

"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 it. I hated him for that. We drove back 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 gotten in from Publix Super Market ("Where Shopping is a Pleasure!") on a 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!"

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

I meandered out to the mailbox and opened the rusty door with a squeak. The usual junk was there, but soon I stumbled across a random post card. It was a picture of

a man sitting in a little cart with big wheels and long rods sticking out the front. Another man with a funny straw hat on his head was pulling it down the street, all surrounded by sidewalks, markets, and a busy crowd.

“Did we get any mail?” Mom asked, as 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 in the sunlight. “What’s a Saigon?”

That was another moment where all was not what it seemed, another tear in the fabric of what I always thought would be but wasn’t. Amid all things good: my best friend, my dog, my bunny, my iguana, and a budding surfing career, a crust solidified over my heart. 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. I questioned everything and everyone, trusting nothing and no one. My foundations were crumbling. Nothing was real. Nothing would last. The proof was all around me.

At the annual Christmas bazaar, Santa was walking around saying Ho, Ho, Ho, giving out toys to all the kids. Later that afternoon I went to the bathroom and saw Santa getting undressed and into street clothes. His cap was on the sink, a beard was on the paper towel dispenser, and his thick black belt hung loosely from the stall door.

Santa?

Then there were the 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.

Then Curious George, my pet iguana, died. I stared into the terrarium through tears, hoping that God would resurrect the little fellow from the dead. As if by magic, Father Butler, from St. David's By the Sea, stuck his head into my room and asked, "What's wrong, Billy?"

I couldn't speak.

"Oh, he'll be okay," Mom assured him. "He just lost a lizard."

"I'm sorry, Billy." He patted my back and left the room. "You'll be okay."

I threw myself on the bed. Maybe my expectations for life were too high. I mean, didn't he even want to pray for me, my lizard, or anything? I wanted to cry 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, how to stuff my emotions.

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

When we were growing up, 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 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 a Blomquist’s unique place in life came from my Dad’s childhood of hard knocks. He and Walt, his twin brother, had been determined to make something of themselves, no matter the cost. Back in the early 1900s their Mom and Dad lived in New York City with six kids to feed. In fact, 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 water in a coffee pot and it overflowed, extinguishing the stove flame while the natural gas seeped 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 across New York State. Just like that.

Most of the Blomquists wound up in stable homes, but for one reason or another “the twins” were ping-ponged from one home to the next, until they arrived at their final home in Harrison, New York, where some sort of normal life included Boy Scouts and The Episcopal Church. As I learned, shortly before his death in 2002, my father had no memory of anywhere he ever lived before he and Uncle Walt landed there with the Lange family. They were 14 years old.

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

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

And that's why it was so important for him to be a Blomquist and to make sure we would be one, too.

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

I went surfing once 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 could hear the ambulances screaming up A1A-N, 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 my Mom's bedroom to wake her from a nap and break the news. I wanted to cry, just like she did, but I didn't.

I was a Blomquist.

When the kids at school laughed at me for wearing "girlie sandals," I hid my feet behind the legs of my 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, I 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 and beyond. I

wanted to take that stupid little tape machine and smash it against the wall into a thousand smithereens, because he never bothered to say Good-bye. But by the ripe old age of ten, I was getting used to stuffing it down. So, 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 got some information that sent me over the edge. I was finishing my bowl of Life cereal one morning and getting ready to head out the screen door for the bus when Mom turned from the stove with a cautious smile.

“You know, Bill,” she began. “I’ve been thinking. 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 reached for my fresh-squeezed orange juice, which was unusually bitter that morning. “He’s got that cool red convertible Cougar. What about him?”

“Well, last night he asked me to marry him, 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 used to spot cloud animals grazing 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 returned to my 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 entire life: my rabbit, my beach, my dog, and my dreams, indeed, my very existence, began to fade away. Just like that.

I swallowed hard, tightening my fist and stuffing every bit of emotion, channeling it into a cool stream to clarify the most important issue of my life.

“Do they have surf there?”

“Surf?” She laughed and flipped an egg on the stove. “Who knows? But they 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-nosed yellow and black Blue Bird diesel bus headed for Roosevelt Junior High School completely numbed, oblivious to everything around me. During second period, I was heading across the eighth-grade commons to band practice when I ran into Mickey. 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 about girls, looking at Playboy, growing out our hair. You know the deal.

“Hey, Mickey.”

“Yo.”

“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 looked down as he scuffed his slaps on the floor and wrapped a strand of his shoulder-length, bleach-blonde hair around his ear. “Far?”

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

He looked at me seriously. “Is there surf there?”

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

“Sure.” Mick dodged into a hallway to his locker. Looking backwards, he hollered above the students. “Come down anytime! Stay at my place if you want. My mom really loves you.”

I remembered those words, Come down anytime, as I stared out the window of

an Eastern Airlines 727 onto some hilly green terrain where I thought New York ought to be. I dreamt I was down there, anywhere but on a plane heading to Boston for the rest of my life, where there was probably no surf. Somewhere on those hills was a concert I had heard about called Woodstock. Wish I could have gone.

#

I entered 9th grade at Bedford High School a very angry and disenfranchised ex-Floridian-surfer-hippie-wannabe. My life had been uprooted, 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, where the teenagers all smoked cigarettes, rode mini-bikes, talked in thick Boston accents and thought that “pie” was a swear word.

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 for love, but in the years to come, Mom shared with us that she had married Mr. Wilson to get us away from the vast quantities of drugs and the growing hippie culture in the beach scene of the Space Coast. “To keep you boys safe,” she said.

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 (LSD) numerous times, while lacing my hallucinations with hefty swigs of Southern Comfort, Bacardi rum, blackberry brandy, pot, hash, and peyote. No beer, though.

“Beer is for sissies,” I told Sally Robinson one night, after dropping enough acid

to last me the weekend.

Sally was a friend who lived just off the high school's parking lot. We would either go to her house or Nancy Mumford's house just next door and party pretty much every weekend. For a burgeoning but small circle of friends we had a lot of relational drama, and the one thing our little group had in common was the music: Rod Stewart, the Almond Brothers, Steely Dan, Jeff Beck, Pink Floyd, and others like them.

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

No one could have said it better. "Freak" had become my new persona. I lived into it wholeheartedly. My drug of choice was acid, a near religious experience so very sacred that I considered it blasphemy to "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 to fully realize its mystical delights.

A typical weekend went like this: drop a "quarter hit" sometime mid-afternoon on a Friday and smoke some weed before doing it again until we "peaked" and all the rich hallucinations began showing up.

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

Twenty-four hours later I'd be coming down after copious amounts of pot and alcohol to help ease the way. For me, re-entry happened best in a tepid bath, clutching

the bathtub sides with trembling hands, crashing hard and listening to Pink Floyd's Meddle LP or, oddly enough, Bach's Brandenburg Concertos.

Despite all its downsides - chromosomal damage, physiologically crippling sweats, tremors, loss of time and identity, severe depression, psychosis, and the unexpected flashbacks that continued to happen years later - I believed it was worth the trouble. The lingering pain in my heart was easily overshadowed and comfortably numbed by the buzz of it all.

I loved sitting in a chair and watching everything outside my windows. The trees and their snow-laden branches would gently drift past, as if I was on a slow-moving train. One night I was in the bathroom staring into my own eyes in the mirror, astonished to see beautiful flowers blooming in the deepest parts of my irises. Another time, while watching Johnny Carson, his hand completely emerged from the television set, reached out, and turned the volume down. Later that same night, my friend Rick from Hawaii and I played chess on the black and white art deco bathroom tile floor. The only trouble was keeping the chess pieces from floating off the floor into the air.

The highest I've been was when Eddie Ferguson and I took four hits of acid each. We were in the 11th grade. For those of you who don't know, four hits are way too much. The acid came from a stranger on the Boston Commons, and I had forgotten that he told me I was buying the equivalent of eight hits, four per sheet.

"Remembah, kid," he told me with his thick Boston accent, "you got foo-ah hits, you he-ah? Foo-ah hits." He held up four fingers. "Look at me, kid. Get it? Foo-ah hits."

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

Within the first 20 minutes of dropping the "foo-ah" hits, the 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, which hung on the wall just above the three-foot Marantz stereo speaker, began to play in sync with the music. I looked at Eddie. His face was sagging on his head.

Did you see that?

A few minutes later it became clear we needed to get out of there. We floated into his phosphorescent-orange VW Bug and buzzed into Western Massachusetts. At one point, as we listened to Deep Purple's Space Truckin', I looked ahead to see the road lift completely off the ground, tie a yellow ribbon around an old oak tree at the bottom of the hill, and flatten back in place. I stared in a kind of numbed horror, thinking, "How in the world are we going to drive around that?"

Later we wound up fishing on a lake in Maine. I was soon passed out under the serious moonlight with vomit on my shirt, the results of me choking while I ate a chunk of cheddar cheese that I thought was an apple. Eddie was halfway through a fifth of whiskey after having polished off a case of beer, mumbling against the backdrop of Aphrodite's Child's psychedelic cassette, which was based on the Book of Revelation, 666, drifting from one speaker of the boom box to the other with the notes visibly rising into the air and chasing each other around the trees.

We ended up in jail that night, where we were charged with 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 so, a phone call or two later, and her dad came by to bail us out.

And so it went. That sums up High School.

#

Through all the parties, concerts, and mind-numbing behavior, Florida continued calling me home. I never did get the beach sand out of my sandals. Whenever I had four or more days of vacation, I headed back south to see Mick, who turned out to be a real stoner. No surprise there. By this time, he had grown his hair out straight, so that it fell down his back quite a way. We lit up, doped up, dropped in, and smoked up the whole visit, and I'd spend the rest of the drive back to Boston dreaming of the next time I could return.

In those days, my moral compass was constantly readjusting. For instance, I vowed at first to only do organic drugs: marijuana, opium, hash, and so on. But that soon changed when I tripped on Orange Sunshine, a type of LSD, and ditched organic. Later down the line, I learned cocaine came from the coca plant. That was organic enough. My standards shifted again.

Relationships were no different than drugs. At first I thought, Don't sleep with anyone unless you love them, but by the end, sex or no sex, my moral compass broke, and my philosophy was, Never tell anyone you love them. Drugs, sex, and other hedonistic pleasures created an undefined immoral blob of testosterone-driven male humanity. Somewhere along the line I turned a corner and didn't care about anything anymore. I even forgot I had a moral compass. It was broken, and I tossed it from my mind. In the end it was sex, drugs, and rock and roll. That was it. Nothing really mattered. At least, to quote Queen, 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. When the day came to pick her up, me, my brother, and a border friend of mine named Scott piled into the family's evergreen Mercury Marquis station wagon and headed to North Station, Boston. Halfway down Route 128, we were

listening to The Beatles' A Day in the Life when one of the tires blew out. While we fixed it on the roadside, I mentioned that since Nancy had never seen us before it would be cool to play some sort of trick on her.

"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 squeezed it out in the break down lane.

"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 in the back with the tools, hopped into the car, and headed to the train station.

Nancy was the last person off the train and was easy to recognize. She wore blue jeans with holes in them, a paisley blouse without a bra, a brown suede jacket covered with long skinny tassels, and red Keds. 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.

"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!”

We laughed, hugged, made our introductions and piled back in the car. Ever since then Nancy and I have had a special connection.

She was so cool I couldn't believe we were cousins. Nancy was a foxy California girl with a guitar in one hand and a Joni Mitchell song-book in the other. Even her vocabulary was other-worldly; words like groove, hip, vibe, shine-it-on, stoked, groovy, and bitchen flowed from her like starlight.

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 made babies. My Dad married Madelyn, of Cuban descent, and made babies. In both cases, the Swede-Mediterranean mix was going on, and there we were, the result. All in all, I was amazed by Nancy. She brought an outsider’s perspective to just about every part of my life.

One day we took a walk in the woods behind my house. Nancy went up to the trees and placed her hands on their trunks, as if to communicate with them by touch. She sighed deeply and while standing at one particularly large tree looked over her shoulder with her deep brown 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, 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 and didn’t sleep around, but she was completely hip. And a musician, too. One day I got home from school early and noticed her sitting underneath our weeping willow, chording around the neck of her Ovation with the Joni Mitchell song-book 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, staring 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, 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 her Ovation and stared at me. “Billy, look around. God is everywhere. Look at the trees.”

“So?”

“So? I mean, how can you not believe in him. You shouldn't be afraid to believe in Jesus, Billy.”

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

I had thought she was cool. Now, maybe not so much. I mean, sure, I went to church and was even an acolyte during high school, but to me church was just a man-made thing that prevented people from seeing the real God, if there was such a thing.

“Listen, Billy.” Her voice dropped low and passionate as she leaned across the body of her guitar with a twinkle in her almond eyes. “I want to tell you something. Are you listening to me?”

“Sure, Nan.” I made sure to meet her gaze.

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

Bowie? David Bowie?

“He does?” I replied in disbelief. “I never knew that!”

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

“Not really.”

“Let me tell you,” she voiced, emphatically. “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 total stoker!”

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

She returned to her instrument, chording up and down the neck without a further 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 see only now as I look back. At the time, I was blind to true intimacy or the real source of a nagging sense of emptiness.

I remember sitting in the back seat of the car when I was about ten years old. We

were crossing the railroad tracks on Dixie highway at the Belk Lindsey Plaza one night when 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. At that time in my life Mom and Dad had divorced, my world was tearing apart, dreams were vanishing, and I was lonely in my soul. I longed for intimacy. I remember thinking, I wish I had someone to go to the circus with.

Somehow that translated into having 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. I couldn't say why I became a flirt, especially by the fifth grade, but I couldn't escape it. 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 were a mess. Driftwood, pop cans, sea rope, and other debris were piled high, so much so we had to hop over some of the trash. 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 know what that is?"

Janice was a teenager with shoulder-length hair, a few freckles, long legs, and a

wide all-knowing smile. I didn't know what it was, but I had a feeling it had something to do with how to make a baby.

“Sure, I do. I mean, who doesn't?” I shrugged my shoulders, keeping the cool factor. “I see that all the time.”

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

I had no idea what she was talking about.

Try what?

“Well, um, no . . .” I stammered. “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-subtly. “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.

My first girlfriend was Rachel Elizabeth Huffington, who lived on the canal just down the street from Mickey. She swooned me. Rachel 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 Rachel and me. It more in my head than anything else. She was just “too high” 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 to just feel her arm touch mine while on my surfboard next to hers.

The move from Cape Canaveral to Bedford accentuated that inner loneliness, and the lie that girls would make it better snowballed into a secret life. Every time I had the chance, I'd make out with a girl. New England presented me some varied opportunities. 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 was invited to a party once where we ended up playing spin the bottle. Denise Brady was there. Everyone knew her as "lava lips." She was a flirtatious girl in my ninth-grade biology class and built like a blonde-bombshell, with a smile that ran from cheek to cheek. As luck would have it, on my first spin, the bottle swung around and around, stopping smack-dab pointing to her outstretched 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 hippies like me. After the initial uncertainty, the usual chanting began: "Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!" Well, one kiss led to the next and for the rest of the evening, Denise and I were lava-lip-locked, lying horizontal on the living room sofa, oblivious to everybody else.

Sure, I knew she was dating the first trumpet player in the band who hated hippies, but for the pain-numbing euphoria, I figured whatever his reaction was 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 at 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?”

“Right.” He maneuvered around me, accidentally shoving me into the table with the cash register. “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 the 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. Mike Armstrong had been waiting for me.

“That’s for kissing my girlfriend!”

“It was a game!” I yelled, rubbing my swelling lips and tasting blood. “Get it? A game!”

Tears began trickling down my face. Action and consequence were rare occurrences in my life. Truth be told, I knew it hadn’t really been a game. And I’d probably do it again if I could. I would endure anything for what I felt that night.

The hunt continued.

One of my favorite places was in the photography department dark room. It was dimly-lit and romantic with its red light and blurry atmosphere, and there was really nothing else to do while the chemicals were bringing out the image other than to kill

time. I thought I was getting away with it, until half-way through the school year when my 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 girl I really fell for was Reagan Richardson, my first true love. We would spend hours together, sometimes even skipping school just to be with each other. Much of our relationship was completely wholesome: snowball fights, walks in the autumn, going to parties. It 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 Mick back in the day. I realized that 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, but other times I would be moved in the other direction, as if I had a demon on one shoulder and an angel on the other, each vying for my attention.

One night Reagan was babysitting, and she invited me over. It was usual for us; we had this routine whenever she babysat. We would drink the vodka from the bar and compensate for what we drank with water. Halfway into the evening we were in that dreamy instrumental from Santana’s Europa, lying on the sofa in the living room with things going along as usual, when an almost tangible conviction gripped my heart. At my core, I knew I shouldn’t be doing the stuff I was doing but knew I wasn’t going to stop 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 each other.

I downed my drink to numb this new existential realization, but my frustration grew. There was no way some superstitious belief was going to talk me out of getting what I needed from Reagan. But I couldn't do it. 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 getting buzzed," I lied. "It's good booze."

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

Guilt bubbled up again from deep within me.

Why should I feel guilty? I love her, 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 in front of the stereo a mist or a shadow, something just beyond my ability to see. It wavered there in the atmosphere beneath a veil, and I could sense it staring at me. I explained it away and tried to ignore it, but the specter didn't go away. I felt this thing come closer, and the mounting pressure of anxiety grew, but I refused to look up again.

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 were filled with concern. "Sure, Bill. Whatever."

I sat up and faced the direction I sensed the anomaly was standing. First I

mumbled the words, but after a couple times decided to yell them at the top of my lungs:

“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. She was staring at me, petrified.

“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 frequent XXX drive-in theaters or cinemas in Boston's notorious combat zone. At one point, I thought I'd grow up to make porn for a living. In my late teens and early twenties, no encounter fulfilled the ache inside but only added to it, whether I was reading porn, having 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 tried to build a 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.

Then came the child I never knew.

Shortly after graduating college I was living with Judy. We were in a long-term relationship, as passionate as any other I had known, with the usual ups and downs over time. We decided to move in together when I was back in Florida. One night we were at a country bar on US1-S on the mainland in Cocoa. Lennard Skynnard's Free Bird was playing on the juke box, and the place was filled with people taking advantage of Friday night happy hour.

“You're 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.

“What are we going to do?”

I stared into her face. She looked down at her drink, her brown bangs hiding her eyes from me. 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 hard and distant. Judy peered into her ice cubes floating around the Jack Daniels in her hand. When she looked at me again, her sweet baby-blue eyes became, well, not so sweet.

“I don’t know,” she mouthed emphatically.

I shouted at her, above the sound of Whipping Post by the Allman Brothers. “It seems to me we should get married, don’t you think?”

“Married!” she exclaimed. “Are you nuts? Why would I want to marry you?” She slid her empty glass in the direction of the bartender, leaned in on her stool and stared at me intently. “I am not getting married. Why would I 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 again, her eyes as cold as the ice cubes at its base. “Fat chance,” she muttered. “You never loved me.”

I twirled the ice around my glass with a finger. “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.”

From behind us another rack of balls exploded on the pool table. The sound cut through the fog that that clouded my thinking and snapped me back to reality.

“You want to kill our kid?”

“Look, 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, so I agreed. “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.” Judy got up, gathered her purse, and walked towards the door in her rubber flip-flops. “Just give me the money,” she said, looking back one last time. She disappeared out the door, and 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 Frank, my stepdad, threw a party for me. A nice gesture, but I had Friday on my mind and Cocoa Beach; couldn't wait to get back to where I knew I belonged. Within a week of graduation, I was at Logan International Airport heading south to the Space Coast.

I remember going through what was, back then, the TSA. We all had to walk through a metal scanner to get to the gate, and that 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 go through the metal detector after our goodbyes. Much to my surprise, a loud beep stopped me in my tracks when I emerged on the other side.

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 will we have to do that for you?"

"Oh, no, sir. Not at all. Would be happy to." I slid my hand into my inner pocket, feeling around the bag of pot, and then I found it. With a sigh of relief, I pulled my hand out and exclaimed, "Look! 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. When I got back to my seat, everybody on the jet was staring at me.

Back in Florida, I stayed with some old family friends, the Robinsons. Richard Robinson worked at the Cape; 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 René and Alyssa, their two daughters, 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 and its amazing sunsets, a Tarzan swing flew through a grove of banana trees and would sent you flying into the water with a splash, and a pot plant grew on top of their 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, but Elizabeth was better than a Ouija Board. The only problem was that once we invited spirits into our lives it was hard to get rid of them. The Robinson household was not only a home for living humans. I had many haunting experiences. Nightmares would sometimes plague me, and I would wake up screaming or in a cold sweat. Other times I sensed something in the house watching me. But 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 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, but I was assured that this was harmless, white magic done for the sake of good. A black witch, I learned, practiced magic to harm others, so we would all be 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” is a person who is living the first of many, reincarnated lives.

And so it goes.

Every weekend was a party at the Robinsons. We had people in and out of the 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 back windows, with loud pulsating bass beats that vibrated across the driveway into the house, and clouds of smoke billowing out with 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 he 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.

The interesting thing about this guy is that he knew all the words to all the songs 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 came to life. When he sang, it was as if he was singing to me. 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 the night the stranger was there and he sang them. 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.

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

On another occasion, we were mellowed out on the couches and listening to Janis Joplin's *Summertime* when the stranger showed up again and started singing, his voice once again tugging at my heart.

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 the man 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. 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.

Just like that.

The Robinsons was generally a place where everything I learned in Sunday School was tossed to the wind. There were no morals among my friends, no set rules. 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, with the prophetic overtones of Life in the Fast Lane by the Eagles.

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

Behind the garage, Tom-Boy was down by the Tarzan swing, and after tossing

aside an empty quart of Shultz Malt Liquor, lunged for the rope that swung down through the banana grove. At the bottom of the run, just before swinging into the air, he reached down and swept up a can of Bud Light off the coral shore, drank as much as he could before releasing the rope some thirty feet above the water, and crashed through the surface with a hoot and a holler.

Outside the sliding glass doors to the backyard, Richard stood with a friend on the concrete porch. He had a loaded .22 rifle, and between alternative swigs of whiskey and hits of hash, he took potshots at small Cessna's and other private planes flying over the house. We heard the clink of a bullet hit the plane and watched Richard drop to his knees in hysteric laughter.

Inside the house, Gary and Jessica swayed in slow motion while snorting white-powdered lines from the crease of Diamond Dogs, the double-album jacket by David Bowie, 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. I would sit inside the backyard doghouse with my friend Sean, because we heard in a song by Donovan called Mellow Yellow that you could get high smoking dried banana leaves; all we got was a pounding headache.

Then there were the mushrooms; organic, hallucinatory, and you didn't have to ruin an entire weekend to do them. I was very creative and tried them in just about every recipe I could find, putting them in everything from tea, salads, Kool-Aid, and even smoking them with dope. There were always bigger and better ways to get them into

your system.

One day Mick suggested we drive out to the cow-fields in west Melbourne and pick some 'shrooms. They grew in cow dung. Lovely.

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 rim around the stem," 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!" The voice cut through the still farm air like a shotgun blast. The old man was holding a shotgun, too. "Stay off my property!"

A real shotgun blast froze us in place as we stared at one another.

"What was that?" I asked.

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

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 barbed-wire 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!” they all responded in unity.

“We need something fresh,” I suggested, waving my hands in the air. “Something new and creative. Some recipe we haven’t tried before.” I thought for a moment. “I know, we’ll make Lasagna!”

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

I went to work. Cottage cheese, mozzarella, ricotta, pasta, fresh tomatoes, garlic, a hint of parsley, some fresh basil from 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 Italian juices.

An hour later, after having just pulled the dish from the oven, we heard an automobile pull into the circular driveway below. We peered from the kitchen window and saw Richard and Elizabeth, unexpectedly home from work.

“It’s the Robinsons!” We shouted in unison. “What do we do?”

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

Richard and Elizabeth came 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. “Are those mushrooms?”

Perceptive. I glanced frantically to the troops, then back to the dish. “Yes, I believe they are.”

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

“Why not?” I shrugged my shoulders. “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 ‘round and ‘round the giant picnic table, time and time again, while just off the balcony and across from the Indian River the sun was sinking like a massive fireball into the darkness. The kids, the parents, all of us getting high together. Nothing too strange, here. Perfectly normal. Just another day at the Robinsons.

And so it went.

A psychedelic mushroom lasagna was the healthiest drug I ever experimented with. 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, or bump into furniture. My entire body felt numb at times, and my internal perception was going to mush. In large groups, I felt my personality become harder to distinguish from the personalities around me. What, exactly, is a Blomquist, and who was I? Where was Bill? I became afraid to go to parties, because I knew there was an expectation for me to be "Bill," but I was forgetting who "Bill" was supposed to be. I became a poster boy for the New York Dolls' Personality Crises.

As I 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. I turned to the spirit world again, riding on the spiritual coattails of Mrs. Robinson and her séances. She helped me get in touch with the spirit world's reality and at least an energy force out there, if not a god. Nancy assured me of his existence, but the god I chose wasn't like the god I heard about at Church. All the same, given all of this, I knew there was something out there, and I needed help.

I became, as The Tubes sang, a Space Baby, thoroughly diving into every paranormal topic I could get my hands on. I dove into studying various bizarre avenues of spirituality: 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: the more I delved into my search for “God,” the further away from becoming whole I felt. If there was a God, at the end of the day, I should be feeling better about life and even about who I was, not worse. But instead of God and enlightenment, I found only myself and an inability to be content with life as I knew it.

And so it went.

CHAPTER 7 – SWEET HITCHHIKER

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 years ago, hitchhiking was safe. 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 the radios or tape machines. Over the course of the thousands of miles, I’ve hitchhiked across the USA, Europe, Scandinavia, and the Middle East, and most trips went off without a hitch.

Others? Not so much.

Once Mick and I were heading up from Sebastian Inlet to Cocoa Beach and standing in excruciating heat as we waited for a ride, thumbs out, hair pulled back, all to no avail. We were there 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 first verse to The Loving Spoonful's, Summer in the City, but interrupted myself in a voice of despair.

“This so sucks,” said Micky. “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.

Doesn't he know a person who sits down while hitchhiking is forever doomed to remain ride-less until his body rots and the vultures prey on his 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 off the road, a construction crew worked about 100 feet away, 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?”

I bee-lined around endless piles of twisted metal, scrap wood, and empty Bud Light cans until I reached one of the guys in the construction crew, introduced myself, told them 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. “It’s a doozy out here.”

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

He shrugged and adjusted his tool belt. “Suit yourself.”

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

“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.

“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, positioned my arm under his, and stuck out my arm.

The next car pulled over to pick us up.

“What’d I tell you?” I exclaimed in triumph. “This rocks!”

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 on the radio and asked Mick where he and his girlfriend were headed.

“Just up the street.” He looked away and stared distantly out the window and mumbled, “Besides, she’s not my girlfriend.”

The man looked over his shoulder at me and did a double take that almost took us all off the road.

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

A few weeks later, my 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-E and made our way home, until after a couple fortuitous car rides 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 came screeching around the corner. At one point a rusted red pickup screeched around the corner blasting Creedence Clearwater 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!”

Well, I’m trying!

At the top of the fifth hour we had a breakthrough. A powder-puff blue convertible Cadillac with California plates whizzed past, loaded down with all sorts of lamps,

furniture, clothes, and other stuff in the back seat. I watched curiously as he made a U-turn, came back around, slower this time, turned in the median, and pulled over right next to us. Sitting inside was a well-groomed, middle-aged man. He had gold bling hanging around his exposed chest, rings on just about every finger, and a song by Mott the Hoople blasting on the cassette stereo.

“Hi, 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 was ecstatic. “That’s like an eight-hour ride. We’re heading for Canaveral!” He looked at me and dropped his voice. “This is perfect, dude.”

“I dunno,” I mumbled, “something smells fishy here.”

“Look, I’m going to be straight with you guys.” He reached out 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 foxy dudes and thought we could get it on or something.”

Get it on or something?

I swallowed hard. Somehow Orlando wasn’t sounding so good after all. I remembered a previous trip with a guy, who picked me up after a long night of work at a supper club, and who put the moves on me, a trip that confirmed that even though it “really wasn’t my thing,” it didn’t matter to certain men, who found it hard to take no for

an answer. I wasn't ready to try 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 cassette machine. But night fell, and time began to take its toll on lonely Donnie. Somewhere between ABC's The Look of Love and Bowie's Aladdin Sane, Donnie made his move. His right hand slithered off the steering wheel and onto my leg. I jerked and glanced at Tom-Boy, who was nodding off and oblivious to my predicament.

"Tom," 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.

Maybe if Donnie thinks that Tom-Boy and I are lovers . . .

"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 turned to look at me.

"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 out like a rabbit from a cage and traded places with my friend. We hit the road, and Donnie slid in Side A of Lou Reed's Transformer cassette and fast-forwarded to 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?

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 couldn't see. 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, longest four hours of my life. 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 somewhere on the outskirts of Orlando and watched him disappear into the orange sunrise.

"Well, at least we got a good ride!" I exclaimed, 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, with Mick this time.

It was six o'clock on Halloween night. He and I were sitting 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 but always bloodshot eyes, his shoulder-length, platinum-blond Gregg Allman hair resting on his shoulders. “Yeah?”

“We need to do something fun, something that kicks butt.”

His eyes widened. “Like?”

“A road trip.”

Outside the sliding glass door, a lightening flash lit up the sky, followed by a distant thunder.

“It’ll 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 needle got to the end of the track, slid to the center, and lifted completely up and out of the way, clearing the way for Frampton’s double album, Frampton Comes Alive to drop down on the black vinyl.

“I got it!” My eyes grew wide, like a kid at the circus having his first taste of cotton candy. I dropped my voice to an excited whisper. “Let’s hitchhike to... Massachusetts.”

“Massachusetts?” Mick looked grave. “You gotta be kidding.”

“No,” I insisted. “And my mom and stepdad would love to see us.”

“That’s like,” Mick struggled for the words, “near Boston, isn’t it?”

Thunder rattled the sliding glass doors. I pulled a fingernail, waiting with baited breath. As the rumbling faded, he 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-W, we danced around the darkened street and sang the lyrics to Born to be Wild by a band called Steppenwolf.

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-N 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 at the top of the ramp for I95-N and stuck out our thumbs. Forty-five minutes later, soaked to the bone and nearly blinded by oncoming headlights, a nice older hippie-type 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 through the windshield. "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 tried to sound polite, 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?” I asked.

“Just up here. 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, dudes. 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 to match 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. It was dawn on November 1, and the rain from the persecuting storm had turned to sleet. We were shivering, thumbs out 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 rednecks, 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. The door opened, and they struggled to make us some room.

I eased into the car, immediately scrunched in like a sardine in the back seat between He-man and a hobo. 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 again, 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 cassette machine and looked back at me through bloodshot eyes.

"Say what, sonny?"

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

"Oh, that." He giggled like a squealing pig, crushed an empty beer 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, and after they let us off were fortunate to find rides all the way up to Providence, Rhode Island. We arrived there twelve hours later and were standing in a full-fledged blizzard, just a couple of hippie snowmen, thumbs out once again and frozen before an unending exodus of rush-hour headlights. Our clothes were stiffened

with ice and stuck to our shivering flesh. Micky's lips were purple. He had snotcicles hanging down from his scraggly mustache, and that Gregg Allman hair would have been whipping around in the arctic wind 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, begging 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."

But 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 down, 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 cop."

"Who cares? It's a ride." I was too happy to think of anything other than some place warmer. "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 array of red and blue lights flashing overhead and the sound of police talking in high-pitched, broken-sentences across the police ban. 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 on the police radio down. “Where you guys 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. It 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 warm 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. No coffee for us. 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 do that?" 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 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 anotheah problem?”

“I was wondering if you had a phonebook.”

He rested the newspaper intentionally across his donut-filled belly and leaned forward in the squeaky chair. “Now why the hell do you need a phone book?” But he didn’t wait for an answer before opening a drawer, grabbing the book, and throwing it on the desk. “Heah ya go, kid. Now make it fast.” 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’re 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 is he 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 phonebook from my hands, pointing his sausage-like finger down the hallway. “To your cell!”

I thought it best at that point to comply. Once back on the stainless-steel bed, I buried my face in my shivering hands, wondering what had happened to our justice system.

An hour passed by and a pale-skinned officer, much younger and skinner than his partner, clicked down the hall-way and appeared at my cell. 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 and slide 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.”

“Sammie 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 both 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 dragged ourselves off our beds and dug through the huge pile of shoes and belts to find ours. As luck would have it, my shoes were nowhere to be seen.

I wanted to cry. This was so unfair. My voice was strained as I pointed to the pile. “Look, I was told to put on 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 wasn’t a fan of mine 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 to my cell slammed behind me.

Chi-chink.

An hour later, I was sitting on the bed again, head in my hands, actually considering using the toilet. Down the hall, a mad panic broke out. People were yelling. There was cussing, swearing, and ranting by someone who sounded possessed by the Devil himself. A skinny, pale-skinned young officer was dragging a brown-haired scrawny kid with a wild look in his eyes. He forced the officer to stop when he got to my cell and stared at me through the bars.

“You’re the little hippie-bastard who turned me in, aren’t you?” He glared at me from head to toe, then spit at my feet.

My blood began to boil. I rose to my feet. “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 lineup last night.” His voice was seething, as 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. When I get out of here, and I will get out of here, I’m gonna hunt you and your little girlfriend down. And when I find

you, I am going to beat every square inch of you until you regret the very day you were born.”

That’s when I got nervous. I believed him. A cold numbness washed through my body. I staggered backwards towards the aluminum toilet, heart pounding in my chest, and dropped to the seat as he was pulled away.

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

Within half an hour I was properly shoed, belted, and reunited with Mick, where we stood 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 punk.”

“Dude,” Mick mumbled, as the public defenders presented our case. “I got handcuffed to Fat Albert.”

“This place so sucks.”

The judge deemed that we had suffered enough for our offense and released us bail-free. Before we knew it, we were standing in the midmorning winter sun on the marble steps of the Court House looking like lost dogs. Forty eight hours of sleeplessness and hardly any food left us in a daze. A nice-looking, middle-aged man appeared and walked over to where we were standing. He was chewing gum, and wore dark glasses and a sports coat. A gun hung at his side, and he had on a police badge.

“Nice day, huh fellas?”

“Right.” I reached down, picked up my backpack and looked at Micky. “Let’s bolt, dude.”

“Listen, you two.” The cop looked down and scraped the steps with his shoe. “It

was all a big mistake. I mean, you should never have 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 wanted to 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.

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."

"Hey, boys." The officer's voice was louder, more forceful. We stopped and turned around again. "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 bought ourselves a bus ticket. As the world passed by, Mick and I sat in silence as we stared out the window, numbed by the past two days. What possessed us to take that trip in the first place?

It'll be fun, I said. Like, a real adventure.

I don't know about fun, but what a long, strange adventure 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, I got back into Brevard Community College. On the weekends, I spent hours walking the beaches and reassessing my life. Everywhere I looked, everything I did just got me more frustrated. I got the feeling life was throwing me ropes to reach the end of. I got a lot of ropes. Each one was an episode that seemed designed to make me look up. I didn't want to, afraid of what I'd find.

But I was growing weary. While I didn't want to admit it, I began to see evidence that something greater out there was once again trying to get my attention. Many of these signs came from well-intentioned "Jesus Freaks" who picked me up while hitchhiking. Some were sort of cool, actually. But they all had an agenda, and I didn't want anything to do with it.

I could always tell when a Christian was pulling over to pick me up. Happy-go-lucky, a cheesy smile plastered to their face, and a gospel-tract in hand, they would pounce on me with verses from the Bible or warn me of Hell-fire.

I was in a dilemma. I didn't want to be preached at, but I needed the ride. I got around that by learning their lingo and pretending to be one of them. When a car picked me up with signs of Christianity tipping me off (bumper stickers, bookmarks, tattered Bibles on the dash, Christian music blaring, any Jesus Junk whatsoever), I'd leverage the conversation away from God after a cursory blessing and change the conversation to the weather, the news, anything other than the eternal state of my soul.

When Jesus Freaks would offer me a ride, I took the reins by hopping in the car with an equally cheesy smile smeared across my face and saying something like, "Praise Jesus! What a beautiful morning!"

"What?" Smiles would break out across their simple, mostly startled faces. "Are you a Christian?"

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

"Sure is, brother!" Then they'd laugh and 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 Holy Spirit! He told me to pick you up!"

"And I'm 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? Jesus?" I'd pretend to be embarrassed and would sheepishly shrug my

shoulders.

"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-E on a beautiful Saturday afternoon to hook up with some friends at 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.

It was show time.

"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 the side.

Once I got seated, it was time to take control of the conversation. I stuck my elbow out the window, pushed my hair over one 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's that?”

"Praise Jesus!"

Silence.

I tried it again, this time with oomph. “Praise Jesus! I mean, look around. It's wonderful to be alive 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 began to feel like he could see right through the hollow words.

The lyrics of the song on the cassette player stood out in 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 she 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.

I listened to the second verse with a curious ear.

Gonorrhea on Valentines Day,
And you're still looking for the perfect lay,
You think rock and roll will set you free,
You'll be deaf before you're 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 Jesus freak 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 the 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!"

"A believer in Jesus? Jesus Christ?"

Nope. He wasn't buying it.

I gotta get out of this car, and fast!

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

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

"Far out! Totally hip! You don't say!"

We rode in silence, heading east towards the beaches in what must have been

the longest, most excruciating two minutes in the world; me, breaking out in sweats and clutching my knees, and him, wondering how he was going to witness to this phony sitting next to him.

“So, what’s your name, brother?”

“Bill.”

“Okay. Nice to meet you, Bill.” 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.

“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.” He had one eye on the road and one eye on me. That one eye was surprisingly omniscient. It bore a hole into my lying soul.

“Our heavenly Father?”

“Why not? 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. 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

turned the car off, the summertime breeze filled the trees above with a peaceful, rustling sound. The water lapped gently against the rocks, and at one of the wayside tables a family was having a picnic. It reminded me, ever so faintly, of the day with Cousin Nancy under the weeping willow tree, back home.

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

“Yes,” I said, honestly. “It is.”

Out in the water a pod of dolphins played in the river, sometimes racing or even jumping in the air. The unpredictable gasps of air from their blowholes drifted off in the gentle wind. 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 again. “I guess we can do that. I mean, if you still want to.”

“I do.” And then he said something that completely rocked my Zen: “Why don’t you start?”

“Me?”

“You know,” he prodded gently, “pray?”

“Okay . . . yeah, no problem.”

I folded my hands under my nose, scrunched my face up like a television preacher, and tried to resurrect all 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 all that. Totally awesome. You rock, Lord. Amen."

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

"Okay, I did it. Now you go."

He smiled. The breeze swelled and blew through the car, bringing in the sweet smell of the sand and surf. After a moment of reverential silence, he prayed, "Dear Jesus."

With those two words, the atmosphere burst into something like liquid love. It felt like the breath was knocked out of me, only to be replaced with a power that filled my spirit. And the guy had said only two words.

This dude is the real deal.

He reached over and gently placed his hand on my shoulder. I was filled with a tangible warmth that filled me all the way into my core.

"Thank you for my brother, Bill," he prayed. "I thank you, Lord, that you love him, that you care about him, that you have a plan for his life. Your love is so awesome, God, so great, and you know every hair on his head."

He does?

"You know every thought in his heart . . ."

Oh, that's not good.

"Every temptation he struggles with . . ."

Oh, crap.

"His fears, his hurts, and 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 about specific aspects of my life that no one in the world knew about, places in my heart filled with shame, regret, and bitterness.

How does he know these things?

He asked God to bless me, to grace me with his healing, forgiveness, and restoration. I just sat there 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.”

And so on.

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

“Amen?” The Jesus freak opened his eyes and gazed into mine, smiling, checking to see if there was still a sign of life in there.

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

I never saw him again, but his prayer stayed with me, and within a week came another sign from above as I stumbled out of a Fuddrucker's Bar at the end of the Minuteman Causeway in Cocoa Beach. I passed out on the sand after a night of eating Quaaludes and partying. As the first rays of sun peeked over the horizon, I felt my face warm in their glow, and I slowly began to wake up. I stretched out and took in my surroundings, hearing what could only be described as angelic voices: rich basses, perfect harmonies, and celestial sopranos. Either I was still high, or I had died and gone to Heaven, which was highly unlikely.

Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia!

Our triumphant holy day, Alleluia!

Who did once upon the cross, Alleluia!

Suffer to redeem our loss. Alleluia!

I couldn't take much more than that. 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!

Please, Jesus Christ Almighty, I beg you, make it stop!

I pushed the hair out of my face, brushed away the sand and sat up, only see a forest of legs surrounding me. Some wore shorts, others wore skirts; some had sneakers, others had sandals and flaps.

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 and squinted enough to get a general idea of what was going on. People stood 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.

I was at a sunrise service, surrounded by Jesus freaks.

Well, Happy Easter to me.

I slithered like a serpent through the sand around one set of legs and then another, until I reached the edge of the crowd, where I staggered to my feet, slapped the sand from my bare legs, and confirmed my worst fears. There were hundreds of people facing the ocean and the rising sun, with a young pastor dressed in baggies and wearing a stole, about to share the meaning of Easter. I high-tailed it up the ramp, got on A1A-S, 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 and was searching around for another school so I could finish up my undergrad work. If I could get a degree in drugs, sex, and rock and roll, I would have; but I couldn't. So, there I was. A college up in St. Augustine I had heard about, Flagler, was a ritzy private school with a cool name. Flagler. St. Augustine, too. How wonderful! A good name, and a good place.

One blazing hot day, I decided to hitchhike up I95-N from Melbourne and give it a look. I found fantastic rides, especially compared to the last time I was on I-95 when I was with Mick heading up to the nightmare in Providence. 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 Registrars 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, 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 that night, and I expected him to put the moves on me, but to my surprise, he never did. Gordon 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 clear to both of us: there was no way I could afford to finish school at Flagler. I was so disappointed.

The next morning, Gordon and I had coffee, exchanged numbers, and said goodbye as I got back on I95, heading south in my t-shirt, torn blue jeans, flip-flops, and backpack. The road was ruthless that day. Cars and semis flew past me, splattering my face in their wake of dust and pebbles. The sun glared down with a raw heat bathed in what must have been 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

must be completely irresponsible to let my life be so rotten. I even threw rocks at the sky.

Come on, you! Show yourself to me!

It was the heat, the cost of college, the fear of shattered dreams. It was loneliness. It was anger. It was walking down a road, this road, any road, all by myself with no one to help me. Mirages shimmered on the road ahead, rising above the smoldering asphalt. The closer I got to each one, the quicker it faded, and the angrier I became. Sweat poured off my eyebrows and down my face. My t-shirt was soaked. I was boiling in my own juices.

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

Then it happened. Just ahead I saw something green and red lying in the breakdown lane. My mind was mush, my temper was fuming, and the water droplets hanging at the end of my eyelashes stung like salty daggers in each eye and blurred my vision with prismatic rainbows.

What is that?

A semi-truck whizzed past, blasting its horn, nearly knocking me off my feet with its gust of engine-heated air.

I cautiously approached the anomaly and pushed it with my foot. It was hard. It rolled. It was real.

I can't believe this.

I wiped my eyes and was amazed to see the brilliant green sphere lying right there in the middle of the breakdown lane of I95-S, covered with dew and glistening in the sun.

A watermelon?

I looked around. I was in the middle of nowhere. I bent down and touched its wet, 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. From deep within came a resurrection of anger, arrogance, and an absolute abhorrence for anything remotely associated with God.

So, if this is really you, I thought, squinting defiantly into the blazing hot sky, there better be a stick around here or something I can eat this thing with!

Then I noticed the sharp stick, about six-inches long, just to one side.

It was too good to be true. I fell to my knees and examined it carefully.

What is this?

Something deep inside knew it was a sacred moment. 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. And when I finished one half, I

looked around for the other and like a ravenous beast tore into its heart. All that, right there, in the middle of the breakdown lane off I95-S, between St. Augustine and Daytona Beach, with traffic whizzing past and everything, thoroughly enjoying this gift from above.

When I rose from the ground, I was 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 stuck all over my arms, hands, and face.

“Whoo-hoo!” I yelled into the atmosphere. I couldn’t wait to hit the road again, get home, and tell everyone I knew there was a God, and he gave me a watermelon. Yet even in that state of mind, I had my doubts. I dared him one more time.

God, if this is really you, I pray you have the very next car pick me up.

The very next car pulled over.

My jaw dropped. The electric window lowered to reveal a friendly-looking, grandfather-type man dressed in a light gray suit and wearing a wedding ring on his hand. With deep lines in his face, he welcomed me with a twinkle in his eye.

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

“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: cold air conditioning, leather seats, and light-hearted baroque music playing on the radio. After I settled in and we reached a comfortable 65 mph on cruise control, 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. “I believe they are!”

“That’s what I thought.”

“I just ate it, back there where you picked me up.”

After a short pause, he asked, “And 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.”

The Melbourne exit came fast. I hopped out after saying good-bye and watched him merge into traffic and disappear. I lifted by hand and waved. “Have a nice day!”

It was my journey’s last leg. If I was lucky, I could get home 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 down, 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 break-light that was busted out, with the fender hanging halfway off the body, just above the dangling broken muffler. I cupped my hand over my face 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 and nursing an Orange Crush, and a bare-breasted toddler in the back seat wearing a Ninja Turtle saggy diaper. Junior had green snot hanging from one of his nostrils. He was standing on the floorboard amidst an impressive array of empty beer cans, Juicy Juice boxes, and salsa-stained taco wrappers from a local Mexican fast food restaurant.

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 car of 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. He was looking 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 popped open the 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-E towards the beaches, the bare-breasted toddler with the sagging Ninja Turtle diaper seemed to take a keen interest in me. He stood on the

backpack between my legs and seemed 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.

No telling what he was thinking, but I felt like I was somehow being robbed.

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 with something like, “So there is a God! 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 lightening and rumbling thunderstorms, barreling inland over the horizon and towards the beaches.

Mick and I were hanging at the Robinsons. We had just snorted a few lines of something white on a powdered-mirror and were dancing around the basement with broom guitars and hairbrush microphones, lip-syncing to 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 said, clutching my belly. “Fake boobs!”

We laughed so hard tears 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?”

“George’s,” I repeated, eyes widening. “Let’s go to George’s and go dancing!”

George’s was a glam-rock club in Canaveral where we would often dance all night and drink Singapore Slings. 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 his 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 un-tuned guitar. I rubbed my ears in disbelief. The sudden sound of the door hit me like a freight train.

Did I just hear that? That was just the door, right?

Ahead through the windshield and above the silhouetted pine trees and banana leaves, the low-hanging clouds flashed like intermittent bulbs in the night sky and bubbled like oil. I stared in disbelief. Faces, angry 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 from my sinuses into my mouth. “What was that stuff we just snorted?” I asked, pinching my nose.

“Who cares?” Mick replied, unconcerned. “It’s a rush.”

He fired up the van, which sounded as if someone put a cherry bomb in the muffler, and the noise unnerved me. I clasped the armrest as we backed out the steep driveway, turned northwards, and headed against the gusty wind down the 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-E Causeway and headed east to the beaches. By this time, the thunderstorm had escalated dramatically, pelting the van with hard gusts that rocked us and pushed us across the double lanes of the highway more than once. 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 nearly impossible to see ahead, especially with the burned-out headlight on my side. To make matters worse, the rubber windshield wiper blade on my side had fallen off, and its bare metal screeched back and forth across the windshield. On the eight-track player was Jefferson Airplane’s White

Rabbit.

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." I swallowed the blood still pooling in my throat. "This isn't a good vibe, man. Not at all."

A streak of lightning crawled sideways across the sky, breaking off into various veins that stretched across the expanse. 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. We passed the road-side park where the Jesus freak and I had prayed, with the evergreen trees and the bottle-nose dolphins and the picnic benches and the love I had felt so very powerfully. Now? Nothing at all.

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. It confirmed my fear. Smoke was filling the van.

"Dude, what's that smell?" I yelled above the exploding engine.

Mick stared dead ahead, both hands on the wheel, squinting his bloodshot eyes

and doing all he could to avoid oncoming traffic. “I may have been having some trouble with my engine recently.”

“What?” I shouted. “Pull over! Something’s wrong.”

Without warning we took a hard left into oncoming traffic, missing a car by inches, swerving around a concrete median, bouncing off the curb, and running over a sidewalk before finally rolling to a stop at an abandoned Gulf station.

Whoa.

We sat in silence. I loosened my grip on the seat. Outside the van, lightning flashed around us with its thundering gusts of wind and pounding rain.

After a few moments, I asked, “Do you smell it?”

“Yeah,” Mick replied, sounding rather calm. “We need to open the hood.”

“Right. I’ll get this side.” I reached around the rim of the interior hood to the engine and fiddled with the latches. In those days vans had engines between the two front seats. “There should be one more latch to get this open,” I said, reaching around the front of the hood. “Right about . . . here.”

The hood burst open with a bang, and an orange fireball burst up from the engine. It rose to the ceiling and crawled its way to the back of the van like a dragon freed from its mountain lair. Heat. Lightning. Thunder. Smoke. Fire.

“Blow it out! Blow it out!” I screamed, covering my face from the heat.

Mick frantically tried to huff and puff at the flames shooting up from the carburetor. His locks caught fire and filled the cabin with the acrid stench of burning hair. I struggled to get my silver Swedish clogs off so I could get to my socks and help put the fire out.

We were a drugged-up mess.

In that slow-motion haze of chaos, I'll never forget looking through the flames and seeing my best friend, face sunken, hair burned, blood-shot eyes filled with fear, pitifully blowing into the flames, trying to save his van from blowing up.

A flash of lightning cracked the sky. I looked up just in time to see the shadow of a solitary figure emerge from the storm in the distance. A second flash brought him closer and, as if caught in a strobe light, he appeared closer and closer with each strike, walking through the rain towards our inferno on wheels. As the figure drew near, I noticed 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 to Micky's door.

"Micky!" I yelled. "We got company!"

"Company?" He turned from the flames to face the figure behind the glass.

"What?"

Micky rolled the window down about halfway, revealing the face of a man who had me mesmerized. There was something in his eyes, a tranquility about him that, even in the madness around me, drew me in. Our eyes locked through the flames, and my entire being was filled with a deep and profound peace. Everything around me: the fire, the thunderstorm, even the drugs seemed to disappear.

The man 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, Jesus Christ died so you wouldn't have to spend an eternity in Hell."

I was spellbound. What did he just say?

I struggled to get another look 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 burned hair and, of course, the bladeless 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 the stranger the 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! What he said!”

But the stranger had gone.

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?

“Screw this,” I said, 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 a moment after. I stayed in the car, and we re-latched the hood. Miraculously, after a few turns of the flywheel, the pale-green GMC van with a burned-out headlight and a screeching windshield wiper fired up and edged us away from the abandoned Gulf station. So, with smoke-infused clothing and singed hair we went to George’s and mindlessly danced the night away to live music and Singapore Slings.

It’s been said somewhere that “some dance to remember and some dance to forget.” That night we were dancing to forget. In other words, it didn't take.

A few of days later 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 held the same job soldering transistors and resistors into solid state-printed circuit boards for a computer company a few years back, and she kept things interesting because of her obsession with the supernatural: ESP, dreams, visions, auras, psychics, the works. She was fascinating, and I longed to have the gifts she had so freely. We had a pretty good relationship going until one day, about a year before, she did an about face and announced that she had given her life to Jesus.

"It's all a lie," she wrote me. "All of it: ESP, auras, visions, dreams, everything. 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, I thought.

I had crumpled up that letter and tossed it in the trash. That was a year ago, and I hadn't heard from her since. Now, standing outside my P.O. Box in Merritt Island, Florida, I eagerly opened the card to see what she was up to. Donna's card had a vase of water-colored flowers on the front. I opened the card, and 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.

Love ya,

Donna

I dropped the card to the floor.

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 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 Jeeeeesus."

"Yeah, Bonnie-Jean, whatever," I'd reply. "Praise the Lawd, right back atcha." I would open a book and proceed to ignore her.

She meant well, and I knew she was sincere, but her style 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.”

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 had my head buried in my arms 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? Where it really counts?”

“No, Bonnie-Jean, I haven’t truly done it right here 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 how he works, Bill: through others. It goes like this; you hear the word, you confess your sins, he forgives you of your sins, you receive him into your heart and take him as your Savior and Lord, and you become a Christian, just like me.”

I sat back in the chair and sighed hard. “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. Why do I need to say something? I mean, if there’s a God, wouldn’t he already know what I’m thinking anyway?”

“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, 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 thick neck broke out in growing 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 hang on a cross and die 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 eternal destination in Heaven or Hell in a . . ." She moved her hands around in the air and looked for the words, "in a watermelon?"

I never looked at it that way before.

"Make no mistake. Jesus Christ died for you so you wouldn't have to spend an eternity in Hell. Receive Jesus as your Lawd and Savior, he'll forgive all 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 are?” She seemed surprised. “You're going to say the Sinner's Prayer?”

“Right here. Let's do it.” I folded my hands on the desk. “Can I say it to myself with no one listening?”

“Why, you sure can, Bill.” Her face softened. She reached for a tissue to wipe a tear from her eye. “Jesus looks at the heart. Go ahead. Say it to yourself.”

“Okay, here goes.” I closed my eyes and right there in the classroom scrunched up my face and 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.”

And with that she gave a huff, turned around in her chair, and scribbled something on a pad of paper. It was probably a reminder to put me on the prayer list at church.

I was twenty-one years old at the time and then living in a cheap apartment with Tom-Boy, my friend and fellow hitchhiker from years before. I hadn't spent much time with him since getting picked up by Donnie on the way back from Mardi Gras. It was a two bedroom, slightly furnished place, 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 grapefruit stolen from a local citrus grove. Once a month checks from our dads came in, and we splurged on Chef Salads, binged on Schultz Malt Liquor, and bought sour cream for our potatoes. We had no friends, no life, and I 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, the Bible began seeping into my brain with a newfound obsession, particularly when it came to End-time prophecies about Armageddon and 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. Then somewhere along the line someone got me onto Salem Kirban's End of the World Study Bible, as I called it. It was a paperback book and had 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, 666, the Mark of the Beast, you name it. I was all over 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. 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 after a long day at school, 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 sincere. “Are you serious?”

“I just got the settlement check from an accident I was in a few years ago.”

“Far out!”

“This is too cool.”

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 girls hanging around. They showed up with smiles on their faces, dope in their purses, and friends on their arms.

One day I walked into the room and Tom-Boy had purchased a top of the line Bang & Olufsen Quadrophonic stereo sound system. Just dropping the diamond stylus on the vinyl made the pictures on the walls, dishes in the kitchen, everything, jolt in place with an earthquake’s intensity.

This time my rediscovered glory days scared me. 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. Now I sank back into the mire, the same things I knew I couldn't resist. The battle would kill me if I stepped back into the fray, and yet the music pounded like canons.

This is the last thing in the world I need. Doesn't God know that I'm trying to be good?

One 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 with a pair of jeans in hand, and a single-edged razor blade to un-hem them, as was the style then, and Salem Kirban's End of the World Study Bible open to Matthew 25 on my left knee. I would un-hem a few stitches here, scoop up some Lipton's French Onion Dip with a potato chip there, read something about the end of the world, and after a moment's reflection, return to un-hem a few more stitches.

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. He carefully unwound the red twine that fastened the weed to the stick, placed a small pile of buds in a clay dish, and on the armrest packed the dark wooden bowl. The match lit, he brought his lips to the bong, and soon the pipe's bubbling sound filled the room, along with the 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 busy enough without the weed. I had my jeans, my dip, my *End of the World Study Bible*, and was listening some really hip tunes on perhaps the most really hip sound system in the world. All was well with the world.

Then Tom-Boy lifted the bong in my direction.

“Dude, want some?”

“Nope, trying to be a Christian.” I half-smiled, because I was 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.”

“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* when the smoke and smell of Thai-buds crept across the room, their hazy tendrils beckoning me out of my seat and towards the bong. 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 record rotated at a cool 331/3 RPM, the blue and red lights flashed on the Bang & Olufsen Quadrophonic sound system, the marijuana incense filled the room, and the warm bubbling sounds tickled my ears. It all seemed so good.

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.”

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. As he reached across the smoke-filled room our eyes met, and I noticed something on his face: disappointment.

“I mean, God’s doesn’t care,” I stammered. “Really.”

“Sure, man.” He leaned back and closed his eyes. “Whatever’s right.”

I took the bong in my 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 pierced my lungs like a dagger. Even as I inhaled the room went fluid. Curtains became waterfalls, pictures elongated like Dali paintings and swayed erratically to the Best of My Love. I looked up and the ceiling itself went multi-dimensional, ebbing and flowing like waves in an ocean above my throbbing head. I was deeply afraid. But I thought maybe a little more would help, so I took a second hit.

The bong fell to the floor. Its ranked water spilled out across the 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 gold and brown shag carpet.

"You okay, dude?"

"Awesome, thanks." I remained cool. "A little lit but good."

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?

I picked the Bible off the floor and returned it to its place. The words floated off the cover and towards me. Suddenly I was Alice in Wonderland. That's when I noticed the half-eaten bowl of Lipton's French Onion Dip on the coffee table with the bag of Lay's Original Potato Chips lying at its side. I took a giant scoop of onion dip, brought it to my lips, and chomped down, but something was wrong. My mouth wouldn't work. It was numb. I tried a second time and brought the chip to my mouth and tried to bite down but it 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 swallow it whole. As I lifted it to my

mouth something shiny caught my eye and made me pull it back out again.

Between my fingers and half-covered in Lipton's French Onion Dip was a shiny metal object. I stared in horror as its stainless-steel edge came into focus. On the coffee table the bag of chips lay untouched. I looked back at my trembling hand and realized I had scooped the razor blade in the dip and was trying to swallow it down.

The blade slid from my fingers to my lap. A surge of panic raced up my backbone to the base of my brain, and 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 and perfectly timed with the music. It was playing on Tom-Boy's Bang & Olufsen Quadrophonic sound system just as clear as day.

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.

I mean, isn’t this just fire insurance, because I got scared?

I felt as screwed up as ever and stared at the bumps on the mundane popcorn ceiling overhead. Nothing in my world had changed. Nothing really changed at all.

CHAPTER 13 – A TYPICAL 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 graduated from Brevard Community College and 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 now a girl named Reanna. Reanna was a transplant from Montauk, New York and had met John 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 up at the place a lot." She covered her mouth and laughed shyly. "He's good people. As long as I get the rent, you guys can have as many people in there as you want."

"Cool." John pursed his lips and nodded. "We'll move in this weekend."

And so we did.

Reanna was great. She had 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, Reanna took on a maternal role with us. We used to call her Mom.

Life with Tom-Boy and Reanna 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. Personally, I was getting fried on drugs not to mention fried on relationships and just fried on life in general. But the burn would ease when I sat on the beach like I used to when I was a kid and stared at the horizon. Other times the gentle ocean breezes would pass through the sea oak groves, 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 surrender. My life 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 pick-up 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.

"You think he means it?" I asked Manson, as we 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-N in front of a passing motorist. "I mean, I'm broke! I really need the cash."

"Nah." Manson streaked his long, oily hair with boney fingers and spit on the rooftop through his thin lips and missing front teeth. "He don't mean nothin'. He tells us that all the time."

Fast Frank came over from the other side of the roof, plopped his tar bucket down, and joined the conversation. He leaned on the top of his mop, squinting 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. "You ever wonder why he's all hunched over and everything like the way he is?"

"No telling." I shrugged my shoulders. "I guess I just thought he was born that

way.”

“No, dude.” His 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?” I asked.

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,” Fast Frank continued, “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 are pulling my leg,” 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.”

I was blown away, mostly by the realization of what kind of people I was surrounding myself with at this stage of my life.

“Then,” Frank went on, “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,” Manson chimed in again.

Fast Frank picked up his mop and tar bucket. He 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. “You better believe it.” He grinned 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, Lynnyrd Skynnyrd

Late one Friday afternoon I was alone in the front room of my apartment, 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. They told me I was stupid. They told me I should have listened to God with the watermelon, in the van, at the razor blade. But I didn't, and now it was

too late. There would have been a plan for my life, but I had blown it. And there was nothing I could do to get it back. It was just too late.

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 allow it. All the cool things he planned for me to do when I was born would be tossed aside or, worse yet, given to someone else, someone better, someone more together, because I couldn't handle it. The self-condemnation was ruthless. Through my rebellion and a slew of bad decisions, I had painted myself completely out of the picture, and now I saw myself as 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 took a hit off my cigarette and squashed it out in the ashtray. Spiritual paranoia took root and consumed me. There was nothing left to do but wait for the time-bomb of God's wrath to drop, maybe get hit by a car on the road, or get shot, or crack my head open on a rock while surfing. Drowning, maybe? Or maybe a shark. I didn't know how or when, but I knew he was going to kill me.

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!

Yeah right.

I threw a pillow at the record machine, and the needle slid across the disc like fingernails on a blackboard. I was looking around for a book of matches when the screen door slammed with a hollow smack. I looked up and saw Manson holding a bag of pot in one hand and a quart of Budweiser in the other and yelling at the top of his lungs.

“Party!”

My head fell to my hands.

This can't be happening.

Jackie followed, followed by Tom-Boy. “It's Friday night! Woo-hoo!”

I swallowed hard, shamed and distraught before anything even began. 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.

Over the next hour people poured into our living room. Beer, booze, and weed moved around the room 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 lot of out-of-owners that I had never seen before.

Around 2AM things turned mellow as usual. Everyone passed the time in different ways. Some laid lifeless on the sofa, staring up at the Wandering Jew in the

macramé plant holder Reanna 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, an ominous, greenish-blue tentacle of smoke.

“Quick! Get it now!” Fast Frank stuck his face in the cloud and inhaled as deeply as he could. He 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 cracked and popped on the stove. The smoke with its green hue reminded me of the Wicked Witch of the West in The Wizard of Oz.

“Jump on it, dude!” someone yelled.

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, and I clutched the counter as I watched the kitchen cabinets, appliances, and even the surfing calendar crystalize, chip off the walls, and land in shards at my feet.

“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?” The same out-of-towner reached into the baggie for another pinch. “This is what it’s all about!”

I pushed away from the counter and staggered out of the kitchen, 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 I found a path on the other side that led through the bluff of sea oats and out to the shore.

The beach. I need to get to the beach.

Making my way through the spider-like branches towards the ocean turned into a nightmare. The brush’s flapping leaves, silhouetted against the rising moon, along with the roar of wind and waves added to my dreamy fog. But the real edge was in my thoughts. I realized there was a God, of course, but now I thought he was completely disappointed with me. I had blown an otherwise wonderful life again and again and had missed the boat for what He wanted to do in my life, for the rest of my life.

On the other hand, I struggled with thoughts and feelings that pushed me towards him, that cried out for him to be real despite the disappointment I knew he felt for me. By me not giving in to God and procrastinating my decision, I felt I was in some way holding him up from whatever plans he may have left in my life. I was afraid he was sick and tired of waiting on me to get it together. As I staggered down the moon-lit trail

to the crashing waves and my salvation, the thought of holding him up was 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 beach was stormy that night; its chop pounded from every direction, echoing in my head and growing louder with each thunderous break. My heart pounded just as loudly. My spirit was crashing down with the waves, drowning and dying as I went under. Devils were laughing. I looked up to the stars and fell to my knees, desperate to breathe. Between gasps, 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 in to receive eternal life, whatever that means. So here goes. Lord Jesus, I invite you into my heart. I can’t do this anymore! I . . . I surrender!”

I closed my eyes. 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 I had never felt in all my life.

It finally took.

CHAPTER 15: THE UGLIEST PART OF YOUR BODY

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 on the beach, 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 could live there with ease. Sometimes I sat with them, passing the joint from the person on one side of

me to the person on the other side. Other times, I just removed myself and took a walk on the beach and talk to God. It was all good.

My roommate, Reanna, seemed the most fascinated with me and openly embraced my conversion. A year beforehand, we had run into each other at a bar and we wound up talking about God, of all things. We were both searching for something and made a pact that she would search for God in her way, and I would search for God in mine. After a year or so, we would rendezvous somewhere and share what we came up with.

One year after that pact, we were sitting together on the couch in our living room listening to Bob Marley's Redemption Song and sharing what we came up with.

“It’s Jesus, Reanna.” I laughed, like I could hardly believe it myself. “It really is.”

“Jesus?” Her blue-green eyes stared at me as if trying to asses my mental state. “You mean, like the Doobie Brothers' Jesus is 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. "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 idea, and often find it interesting that the first person to recognize my future call and vocation was a non-believer at the time. Over the course of the next few months, however, I radicalized my new-found relationship with Jesus, burning most of my records, porn, and any items that in any way connected me with the old Bill. I devoured the Bible for hours a day and talked to everybody 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 remained friends, 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 convince them he is real.

Once I was surfing with the gang when a rogue wave appeared on the horizon. I was in the sweet spot for a perfect left. I swung my board around towards the shore, paddled twice, hopped to my feet and cut deeply into the six-foot wall of glass. It was magical.

As the lip curled above my head, I intuitively centered myself two-thirds up the wall, scrunched my knees, and got in the dream zone, completely engulfed in the tube. I pressed the palm of my hand gently into the wall's side, 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. It's the sweet spot of surfdom, a moment when time stops and everything transforms into a mystical blue paradise engulfed in translucent light and the white noise of liquid thunder. 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, and flew completely off the lip into the air.

I fell out of the sky with a splash.

"Whoa!" One of my surf pals exclaimed. They had seen the whole thing and paddled over. "Dude, you shredded that swell! You owned it!"

"I know!" I shouted. "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.

Around this time, the Summer of '77, I began to get restless. There was stuff to do for God, and I felt 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.

I asked God to let me know.

A few days later I began to see, of all things, owls. Owls showed up everywhere: in pictures, in gift shops, on kitchen towels, hanging from rearview mirrors in cars that picked me up, 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 couldn't understand it. I had been on that same beach surfing, sunning, skim-boarding, and girl-watching hundreds of times but never saw that before.

Later that day, I was thumbing through the most recent issue of Surfing Magazine in my living room 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 hitchhiked down to Boca Raton to check it out.

I made it down to Vero Beach in record time and was standing at the intersection of Route 60 and the entrance ramp of I95-N, thumb out, backpack at my feet, when 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 older fat man, who reminded me exactly of Jabba the Hutt, leaning up 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 on the floor, slid into the seat, shut the door, and at once was assaulted by his eyes, which scanned every square inch of my body. I tried to ignore that.

As we pulled onto I95-N, 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," I took 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. "I have a few studios here and there."

"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?"

"Pornography." A wad of phlegm bubbled deep in his throat, all of which he coughed up and swallowed in a single motion.

"Pornography?" I searched around for something to say. Even though we were cruising along at a cool 55mph, 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, young fella. In the business, that is. Someone like you could make a pretty penny.”

“Really?”

“The contracts vary, of course.” He looked over at me and tried studying my face while staying on the road. It was my first real look at him. He looked ugly, lonely, and his eyes had a familiar emptiness to them. He was definitely not a great poster child for the porn industry. “How old are you, kid?”

“Twenty-two.”

“Perfect.” He smiled, 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 be 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, may I ask a question?” I studied the deep lines in his face, his fat belly shimmied up under the steering wheel, the food stains across his coat, and his tiny, wrinkled 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.

“Are you married?”

He nodded, looking far down the road. “Got two daughters.”

“A wife, too?”

“Yup, that, too.” His hand tightened on the steering wheel, but he looked straight ahead at the road.

“Do they know what you do?”

“Hell, no.” He moved around in his seat uncomfortably, and stared more intently at the road. “No, they don’t know nothing.”

“So,” I 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 several 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. Shouldn't this be the other way around?"

"Maybe one day it will be for some other young guy who needs 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. It's 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 mom remarried, and we moved to Bedford, Massachusetts; how I got into drugs, moved back to Merritt Island, and got into the glam-rock scene; and how God started knocking on the door of my heart through showing me signs.

“Signs?” he interrupted. “What do you mean, signs?”

I told him about the watermelon.

“It happened right back there, actually.” I pointed over my shoulder. “A couple of hundred miles behind us on this very road.”

I shared with him the stranger in the thunderstorm who appeared in a lightening flash and told us about Jesus while our van was in flames, and about how God saved me from eating a razor blade. “When I looked at the blade, it all made sense. He was saving me from killing myself. And he spoke to me from the stereo, of all things.”

“The stereo? What did he say?”

My eyes filled with tears, and I looked out the window and to the clouds. “He said, ‘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?”

“No matter what or who you’ve been,” I assured him.

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.”

“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 as you say, 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 said goodbye. There was my pornographic film producer, made in the image of God, driving away. As he did, I prayed that someday, somehow, he’d get that sign from Heaven.

I thought I’d never see him again, but two years later I would. I wish I could tell you it

was a happy ending.

I was back on that same stretch of highway heading towards school again, with my thumb out as I'd done for thousands of miles before. I found some great rides the whole way down through Satellite Beach, Melbourne Beach, and then Sebastian Inlet, after which I got on the intersection of Route 60 and I95-N and had walked the quarter of a mile up to a curb when a smoky-gray Buick Electra 225 with tinted windows pulled up just shy of where I stood. There was something familiar about that car.

The window slid halfway down to reveal the driver, an old fat man piled high 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.

"I'm heading for Boca," I said again. "Are you going that far?"

"Sure." His voice was wheezy, just like I remembered. He motioned with his hand. "Get in."

I was sure of it now.

My God, you are amazing!

I opened the door, hopped into the seat, put my arm on the back of the seat to face him and said with a brilliant smile, "So how's the ol' pornography business?"

"The what?" He coughed and wiped his purple lips with a monogrammed handkerchief.

"You know, the porn business? How's that working out for you?"

The man nervously stuffed his cigarette butt in the ashtray and sped faster. 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.

"You don't know me," he wheezed.

"Actually, I know all about you." 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. I believe you tell her and your two daughters that you sell insurance or something like that."

His thinly-knuckled hand tightened around the worn burgundy steering wheel. "You don't know anything about her, or my family," he said, fixing his gaze straight ahead. "I don't know you, and I never met you, so what the Hell are you talking about?" He was growing more visibly agitated.

The lyrics of Jimi Hendrix's Electric Ladyland came to the forefront of my mind.

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 him. "Jesus died for you so you wouldn't have to spend eternity in Hell. He loves you but hates what you do. And you told me once that if you ever had a sign Jesus was real, you'd believe in him; well, I'm here to tell you, mister, I am your sign!"

The man looked over 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. Only God knows why he chose to pick me up, or why of all the cars in Florida, I had to get in that one. But after a long car-ride without another word, I stood at the Glades Road exit and watched the car creep away and merge into the passing traffic, never to be seen again.

I guess it didn't take, I thought, as I walked slowly up the exit ramp towards Boca.

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 Boca Raton, the first time I hitched a ride with Mr. Porn, I found a new Paradise for me and loved everything about the city and its school. I returned home with a plan: I would register for Florida Atlantic University in the Winter Quarter, about four months away, which would leave me some time to work for Mr. Lee.

But life back on 35th Street was difficult. I soon lost the initial momentum of my conversion, and as they say, the honeymoon was over. If I could discern the Devil in all this, he was doing his best to convince me my conversion was fake. I was essentially a lone ranger in my faith, and because I lacked fellowship and teaching from older, wiser followers of Jesus, 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, but all the same, I felt like a hypocrite. "Show me your power," I pleaded to God one Friday afternoon on the beach, not far from my conversion site. "I'm getting hammered down here and slimed all the time. You promised power to overcome the evil one. So, where is it?"

On my way home through the path of sea oats, I noticed a phone booth nearby. I stopped and thought, I haven't heard from Mick in a while. I wonder what he's up to? All I knew was that he was up in Canaveral with some friends.

I dialed his number on the big black rotary dial and waited.

"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 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?

The last time Mick and I partied, someone passed out in a corner with Freon blowing up his nose, while someone else was snorting lines of coke off a white Frisbee under a black light. 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 when you get there."

"Hey, I gotta tell you. I don't really do that anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"Yeah . . ." I swallowed hard, closed my eyes, 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 Christian."

I crinkled up my face, waiting for the bomb to hit.

"A what?"

"A Christian." I repeated. "Someone who follows Jesus, you know, like God?"

"You're a believer now? 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!"

“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 party, with a worship band and everything! It's going to rock!”

I couldn't believe my ears. My very best friend in the whole wide world, Mick Lunsford, was just like me. My eyes filled with tears. After saying goodbye, I hung up the phone, ran home to take a shower, threw on some clean clothes and flip-flops, and jumped on the road with my thumb out - way out - heading north on A1A. I was so excited!

I went to the address he gave me, a hotel where I got a strange sense of Déjà Vu, like I'd been there before. I wavered between feeling that and sensing something 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 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. After I walked in, I had to sit down under the moment's intensity. There was a stage up front loaded 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 was 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 began to drum with the first strike of a chord on guitar. The sound turned on a faucet within me that filled me with an emotional high threatening 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 . . .

But it actually sounded pretty cool, and the music was hypnotizing, an angelic chorus surrounded by heavenly worshippers, hands lifted up into the air. Looking around, I saw people radiating 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, as I sat in my seat and talked to God. "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 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 now I had to make a choice.

"Yes, Lord," I cried out above the music rising up around me, pounding me with waves. "I do! I want more!"

The wooden door burst open in a torrent of light, which pierced my soul and seared me to my core. In one glorious moment, my heart was set free from the darkness that had claimed me. All the sorrow and despair, all the years of stuffing it down, burst out in sobs, and I fell to my knees, wailing 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 whatever he was doing in me.

"Hey, did you see what happened to Bill tonight?" I heard someone say, as we

walked out of that hall, unaware that I could hear them. I leaned in the direction of the conversation. “He was baptized in the Holy Spirit!”

What’s that?

It didn’t matter that I didn’t really know. Whatever happened, it was great. 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 knew I was different on the inside.

When I got home, I ran through the living room and down the hallway to the bathroom. I turned on the light and carefully studied my face in the mirror. It was the same face. And yet, it really was different. The eyes shone brighter. There was a solid confidence around my eyes, too. My face looked less burdened somehow, less confused and burdened with life, maybe even a little younger. I knew the change would be with me for the rest of my life.

I leaned into the glass and pointed a finger to my face.

“Don’t you ever lose this, you hear?”

The image nodded.

We both smiled.

#

A few weeks later, I was hitchhiking north to visit Cape Canaveral. At one point during a ride, I sat up in the passenger seat and the same feeling of Déjà vu came over me again. We were passing the hotel where God had met me, where I was baptized in the Holy Spirit, as they said. I studied the building intently.

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 tried to peer through the lobby doors as we passed by. Then clouds parted, and I remembered them, the heroes of my childhood: Walter Cronkite, John Glenn, and the whole mess of TV cameras, cables, and important people all wearing white shirts with pen pouches, black rimmed Ray Bans, and important plastic badges hanging from their necks. They materialized from the fog of my very distant past.

And when I remembered, a tear of gratitude rolled down my face. This was the place heroes were made, the place where I knew one day I would be famous, too, just like them. It was 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 soaring pelicans 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, so 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 their signs. I landed a job with a couple, Rocco and Delphine, who lived just across the street from my parents' new 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 husband, 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 and stuck his head around the corner where I was painting.

"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.

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 grew more intentional. “So 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 chuckled, 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 out. “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 to 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. The 12-square foot patch of grass was bordered on all sides by a

stone wall. In one corner of the patch, lodged where two walls met, were the remnants of a dead tree about four feet high with branches jutting upwards into the air like wooden spears.

I was cutting in from the gutter while on the highest rung and spotted an area that needed paint right under my ladder. It was 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 off the house and had just enough time to dab the paint on the bare wood.

Awesome, just one more tug.

The second time wasn't so gentle. For a brief moment, the ladder stood perpendicular to the ground, 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. It wobbled under the strain and was also pulling away. Everything began to slide from the house in slow motion; the ladders, scaffolding, paint buckets and scrapers, and most unfortunately, me, all pulled away from the building's side and fell to the ground.

God, help me!

A picture of a hand flashed before my eyes, 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 landed right in the center of the patch of grass, rolled over twice before rising to my feet, and all in a single, grace-filled motion. I jumped onto the stone wall and

watched in disbelief as the ladders, scaffolding, and buckets of paint finished their fall in a cacophony of scraping metal and what seemed like the destruction of weeks of work.

When the dust settled, I studied the gnarled skeleton of what remained. To my right was the ladder I had been on. It lay up against the corner of the stone fence and beside it stood 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 awe at all their equipment spread out across the ground but looked equally relieved to see me standing above it all, arms crossed.

"Look at this!" I exclaimed, pointing to the tree. "I was nearly shish-kabob-bed just now!"

The two of them came closer. Delphine covered her mouth and gasped. Rocco studied the scenario silently before coming over to ease 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. Often, they'd be coming home from the disco as Doug and I were heading to church.

Most of the time they were cool. One of them, named Mel, 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.”

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 Bible. “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 one of my hitchhiking escapes to visit Aunt Martha up in Melbourne. I usually tried to get up there once a month, but as I was planning this trip my skin broke out in a bad case of itching. I thought it might be lice or some other contagion, so I cancelled my escape and planned it for the next weekend. Within hours of making that decision the itching disappeared.

Well, that’s weird. I wonder what that’s all about?

A few days later at the campus Baptist Bible Fellowship, a student named Terri asked me if I went to Melbourne.

I explained what happened and told her I was leaving Thursday.

Terri was a skinny southern girl with straight dirty-brown hair, a Pentecostal passion for Jesus, and a sweet, drawn-out Alabama accent. “You know, Bill, I think God

wants me to give you my car for this weekend.”

“Really?” I leaned against the wall to think this 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 Walter, do some skateboarding, watch The Muppets with my cousin Mary Ann, and watch 60 Minutes on Sunday nights with Aunt Martha. She was a woman raised in Illinois who 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 Christianese when he spoke. He had a common-sense faith that never failed to speak to me. In a distant way, he reminded me of my dad.

During this 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 with them, milking their cows, and farming their cotton, among other things. I listened carefully at his presentation, overjoyed at the possibility of joining up but scared at the same time. 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, the Place of the Grapes.

We would eat together, work hard together, have weekly Bible studies, sing 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. Darwin and I were hand chosen to work the cotton fields, which was the hardest job on the kibbutz.

Each morning we were up at 3:30AM and piled into the van with eight other Israelis and a chef to drive 45 minutes to the fields. Coffee was served in a metal shack where we received our instructions for the day. We usually 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 10:30AM they served a fabulously rich meal of meat, potatoes, humus, salad, and turkish coffee, and after lunch we returned to the fields, sometimes working until 8:00PM. It was a grueling job, especially in the Israeli sun, but it was better than roofing.

One 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 and trying to wake up when I noticed the gas mask on the table.

“Beel,” said Abu, a middle-aged Palestinian worker who spoke in a thick accent. “Today, take the mask. Put eet on tight.” He produced two phosphorescent orange flags and threw them on the table. “You take these, raise them in the field, and wait there.”

“What am I waiting for?”

“No worry!” He waved a hand to shush me up. “I will pick you up at 10:00. You come here, and we eat.”

Within a half-hour, I was standing alone in middle of head-high cotton, orange phosphorescent flags in one hand, gas mask in the other, and 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. The bright yellow biplane appeared suddenly and dropped from 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 at me as he flew the plane not more than 20 feet over my head. He gave me the 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 quickly 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 that row, I was supposed to raise up my flags into the air. When I did, the plane swerved to align its wingtip with the flags before skimming the cotton.

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 to the next. Venomous snake or not, it didn't faze me. I felt like I was going to die anyway.

Somehow, I mustered up enough strength to sit up and when I did, things finally

stabilized. I stumbled 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 was horrified at the yellow eyeballs looking back at me.

Two days later blood tests confirmed it: Hepatitis, a dangerous and contagious disease that put me in quarantine almost immediately. 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, and 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. The doctor 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. After dragging his feet across the room to the nearest chair, he would plop down next to me with a sigh. “How are you feeling today?”

“Rotten.”

And so it went.

The reactions of others to my illness were interesting. All were Christians, but we came from very different theological traditions. Some thought I got hepatitis because I

got hepatitis, plain and simple. Some thought I contracted the disease because I had unconfessed sin in my life that let the Devil make me sick as punishment. Others thought it was spiritual warfare and that I needed to fight it off.

But it was my friend, Amos Anderson, a beautiful 80-year-old Pentecostal Texan brother from Bethlehem, who did the most to convince 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 walked in 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!” Amos smiled brightly. “Just claim your healing in Jesus’ Name, and don’t let the Devil get a foothold.”

“Ok!” 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 from the bed. “Now, let’s go for a walk up that hill behind the hotel. We need to show the Devil who has the victory here!”

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 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 the time I reached the top, despite the beautiful and timeless landscape around us, I could only notice the excruciating pain in my body, which began to shake. 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 until a letter came from my dad that interrupted the monotony. In the years since the divorce, Dad had spent time living and working in several countries, many of them Muslim. Now he was in Saudi Arabia. In the letter, he suggested we rendezvous at the Amman Hilton Hotel in Jordan for a little vacation, 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 opposed to seeing him, but there was no way my body was going to let me go to Jordan.

I soon drifted off into sleep. A few hours later, a faint glow woke me, and I turned

to see a faint, glowing image standing in the corner of my room. I sat up in bed. In those early morning hours, the shimmering light seemed alive, as if it was observing me from across the room. It moved slowly across the room towards my bed. I was transfixed. I reached for the lamp and turned on the light.

In the man-made light, I could still see the glowing presence, though it was fainter now, hovering at the foot of my bed. I watched as it floated above me. For a moment, it studied me from above, before dropping down into my body. A tingling sensation like crackling electricity moved through me. My limbs began to shake so violently that the mattress springs beneath me were squeaking. I covered my face with my hands in fear and begged the thing to go away. My arms, legs, and skin surged with an almost painful electric current.

“Lord, make it stop!” I cried. “Make it go away!”

It did. The tingling gradually subsided, along with body’s violent shaking. I was limp and barely able to move. The glowing presence moved back across the room and faded into the atmosphere.

I stared in complete awe, before my mind caught up with my body. I fell asleep again.

The next morning, I rose to my feet and noticed a slight improvement, though I was still half-asleep. I tucked my toiletry bag under my arm and headed down the outside walkway to the bathroom. I squeezed toothpaste onto my toothbrush and was about to start brushing when I noticed something in the mirror. My eyes were bright white. I peered closer.

How did that happen?

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 IS 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 and Garfunkel

A week later I was on my way to Jordan. As I buckled in for the first leg of the journey, I found myself sitting next to a Canadian evangelist and his wife, Enzo and Sylvia. They were making the exact same trip 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 in his smiling mouth. "You're staying with us! We

have a room not far from the airport. What brings you to Jordan?”

I shared my experience in Israel and my father's desire to meet me there. As the airplane approached Cyprus, I was explaining my relationship with my father, from my childhood on.

“Dad's quite a piece of work,” I said, chuckling, “but I think it'll be fun 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, waiting until I finished before speaking up. As the wheels hit the Cyprian tarmac, he said, “I think there are issues in your heart with your father that maybe God wants to work at.”

“What kind of issues?” I asked.

“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.”

His words dove deep and resonated. “I can't deny that.”

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.”

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 mentioned the trip I took to the American Embassy for a new passport, one that

did not have an Israeli stamp.

“Why did you do that?” asked Enzo. Both looked surprised. “We didn’t do that.”

“Well, you won’t be able to get into Jordan with an Israeli stamp on your passport.”

They looked at each other wide-eyed and immediately sat down to pray. I went to the bathroom to give them some privacy, and when I came out, they were 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 smiles ever. “We told you the Lord wanted us in Jordan!”

In a short amount of time, they taught me a lot. I was sad to see them go, but we

parted ways as friends, and I was grateful. By the time I reached the hotel to meet my Dad, he hadn't arrived, so I checked in and got a room.

The hotel was no joke. My room was opulent. 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 bourbon. 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 in the tub, put bubbles in the water, and lie there breathing in steam.

Some time passed before I heard the door to the room open and Dad's voice call out, "Bill? Are you here?"

"In here!" I jumped up 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 traveler dressed in a cotton button down shirt, khakis, and sandals. He studied my wet body for a moment. I must have looked like a skinny water rat. A smile broke out on his face, and he dropped his bag and gave me a gentle hug. That moment was both wonderful and awkward for me: wonderful because I was happy to see him after so many years; awkward because, for a moment I felt just like the kid I used to be, with feelings of not measuring up, not being that perfect little Blomquist.

"So good to see you, Dad!" When he let go of me, I tightened my towel around my waist and brushed my shoulder-length hair off my shoulders, trying to look as put together as possible.

"Hey, what do you say we go downstairs and get a drink?" His voice was

measured, but I sensed some enthusiasm behind it. I knew he was happy to see me, too.

“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 a steady murmur to the music. Drinks were 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 at a moment that 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. I had to hold back tears.

After I finished, Dad took off his glasses, placed them carefully next to his glass of scotch, and apologized. 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 in the basement bar of the Ammon Hilton, Dad did something I had never seen him do before. He cried.

Something broke 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 others' 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 -- THE 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 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?

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 my Dad, a woman named René, whom Dad used to correspond with through me. She would put 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 a 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."

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 Geneva, on the property of what was once the L'Abri fellowship, a group of intellectual evangelicals who followed the teachings of Dr. Francis Schaeffer and his wife, Edith. When I returned to Rene's house, I got to see Uncle Walt, 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 my hitchhiking proved it. I was a floater without a shred of responsibility, who lived off the means of others.

It didn't help when I asked him for money to visit my friend Lena in Sweden.

"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 angrily dialed my father. A few moments later Dad 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 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 to Malmö, Sweden. A bus trip took me to Lindsberg, 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 roots in Southern Sweden. At the time, many of them lived in a farming community just a little way north of Lena’s place.

“Yah!” exclaimed Lena, happy to be invited along. “Ve can do dat!”

The two of us 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 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!" exclaimed Lena.

Forty-five minutes went by and the silver Mercedes Benz was taking the last turn down a long dirt road. We drove into a small rural community with five houses settled around a cul-de-sac with a clump of trees in the middle. One home 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, we were greeted warmly with hugs, though a few gave me suspicious looks. Thirty people were standing around, drinking alcohol, and eating kräftor, or crayfish. Much to our astonishment, we had walked into a Blomquist family reunion. They all had assumed I heard about the reunion but were shocked to know my arrival 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 stayed with Swedish Christians, 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 new-found friends from my world tour. I hitchhiked up to Toronto and stayed with Enzo and Sylvia. I told them how things turned out with my Dad. I went to Knoxville, Tennessee, to visit Mick after my long absence from his life. We spent time sitting 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, Mick 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,” 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, remembering that night we had together.

"So, what about now, Mick? Where are you with all that?"

He was silent for a minute. "I think I'll be okay, Bill," he said. "I'll be okay."

I was back on the road the next day, thumb out and heading for Melbourne, Florida, to meet Aunt Martha and my cousins Walter and Mary Ann again. 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 icy-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 now."

Of course, I wanted to see him. I said my goodbyes to Aunt Martha and her 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 I ate like a king those few days. The experience of our relationship was new to me; we had literally started all over again.

"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 flaming Pentecostal, who talked about being "born again" all the time. His three sisters, Doris, May, and Lilly, were

serious Roman Catholics. Then I came along. He was surrounded. He and his twin, Uncle Walt, had been preached out, taught out, rebuked out, fire-and-brimstoned out, and given way too many Bibles by just about every well-meaning holy-roller in the family.

“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 and 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 Jamie 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 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. The man then approached the podium along with Jamie, 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, who 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 to my right leaned completely across my lap and tapped my dad on his knee.

"Excuse me, sir?" the man said, softly.

"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 with them. I had gotten caught up in talking with some old friends and lost sight of Dad. I happened to look up towards the front of the sanctuary, and there they were, the two of them together: Dad's head bowed in prayer, and Jamie Buckingham standing by his side.

CHAPTER 21 – GRADUATING 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

Seventeen years after my Dad's conversion, I was serving as a pastor and living in Switzerland, Florida, with my wife and two daughters. I had been invited to lead worship for a few days at a large church, and on the final night of the conference I was dead tired. After packing up my guitar and grabbing a snack, I went to my room, slid under the covers, turned off the light, and fell asleep.

A vivid dream accosted me that night. I was with a couple of old high school friends and fellow party-goers. We were sitting in a pub, huddled around a thick wooden table under a low hanging light, pencil and paper in hand, discussing the idea of a reunion, where all the guys we used to hang with could catch up on life together. I was the one designated to jot down names.

“What about Eddie?” I asked.

“No.” A voice from the shadows said. “Eddie OD’ed on heroin.”

“Okay, then what about Sally?”

“She’s in prison,” another voice replied.

“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.”

“Well, what about Reagan?”

“Nope.”

“Lloyd?”

“MIA.”

And so it went.

By the end of the dream every name I wrote down was crossed out. Then I woke up.

The next day 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 you know, 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 haven’t heard that name in ages. What’s up with her?”

“Well, apparently, your 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 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. Among other things, 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.

On the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, my Mom and the rest of the family greeted me at her house in Epping. Henri, my brother, and his wife Ruth asked me to baptize their son, Dean, so that Friday afternoon, 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?”

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 away.

“But 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 dizzy, and then we’re all going to yell his name from every direction. Okay?”

“Dean, we are all going to be calling your name, and your job is to listen oh-so-carefully through all the voices for 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 when I said go, the room exploded with voices, all of them loudly calling his name.

Dean stood waiting in the middle of the circle, head tilted, listening with all his might for the voice of his father.

Then my brother spoke amid all the other voices, a soft, almost imperceptible sound in the crowd. “Dean, over here.”

Dean’s face lit up, and he turned 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 a bit speechless at their little reunion, and it made Dean’s baptism even more meaningful that day.

Later in the evening, I was sitting alone in the Westward Regency Hotel and Conference Room, at the Class of 1973 25th Bedford High School Reunion, wondering why in the world I was there, surrounded by the voices of my past.

It was ridiculous. Cheesy music like the Monster Mash, Muskrat Love, and Funky Worm played over the speakers while 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.

God, why did you bring me here? Is this some sort of punishment?

I had just finished my last bite of pineapple upside-down cake, when our class song, Color My World by Chicago, sent a sigh of sentimentality sweeping across the room.

I could’ve gagged.

Scores of people rose to their feet, grabbed their partners, and raced to fill 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 pushed my plate away and reached for my keys when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“Excuse me.” A tall, thin woman stood behind me, her frizzy shoulder-length hair silhouetted by the lights bouncing off the disco ball. “Are you Bill Blomquist?”

“Yes, I’m Bill Blomquist,” I confessed with some apprehension.

“Good.” She seemed relieved. “Would you mind joining us over there for a minute?” She gestured towards a corner of the room. A group of former students were huddled around one another in the shadows. “We’d like to talk to you about something you wrote in your bio.”

Excitement rose within me. This was it. I felt compelled to follow her until she disappeared into the shadowed semicircle.

“See,” I heard her voice speak to someone else, “I told you he’d be here.”

No one else in the group said a word. They all simply stared at me, examining me from head to toe, as if I were 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.

As my eyes adjusted to the low light, I noticed one of the women holding a cocktail and wearing a silly smirk. She stepped forward. Her face and voice were filled with warmth, which helped give me some peace in the growing tension.

“Bill, first let me say that we are so very glad to see you.”

“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 and took a few steps closer. “Bill, we couldn’t believe our eyes when we read your blurb, so we just had to come and see you for ourselves.”

“See me?” I asked, genuinely confused. “What are you talking about?”

“We have something to tell you.” A short woman with a kind face and large hairdo stepped out of the tiny crowd. She was very animated as she pointed around the circle. “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. “You mean there were Christians at Bedford High School?”

“Oh, yes,” she assured me, “and at the beginning of each year, we’d get together and make a list of names of people in our class who we felt needed Jesus the most.”

I knew what was coming. Emotions began rising in my chest.

Another member stepped forward. “You, Bill, were right up there in the top ten of our list for three years.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. Tears of gratitude filled my eyes and began spilling over, warming my cheeks. “You’ve got to be kidding! You guys prayed for me for three years?”

“Yes, us guys. You need to know that all through high school we prayed for you to meet Jesus, so when we read what you wrote in your biography, we just had to come here and tell you.”

Everything leading up to my life in Jesus Christ flashed through my mind almost at once, as if combined to form a single, unified event: astronaut heroes, mushroom

lasagna, shotguns, vans on fire, razorblades, George's club, prison in Providence, Jesus-freak Bonnie-Jean, greenish-blue smoke, surrender on the beach, the Quality Quartz Hotel and Conference Center, and above all, watermelons. I knew that in some way all those things had everything to do with these very people standing before me who, after some twenty-five years, 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, huddled in a dark corner.

“Oh, my God,” I said aloud, as I wiped my face. “You have no idea. Thank you.” I couldn't get the words out to express the depth of what I felt at that moment, the deep debt of gratitude I knew would never be enough. “Thank you so much. Really. Just . . . thank you.”

CHAPTER 22 -- STILL ROLLS THE STONE

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

All that happened a long time ago. Much more has happened since. It's incredibly difficult to write a memoir from merely a few years of life, because so many significant other things also happened and have happened since then. Raising my two beautiful daughters was a huge part of that.

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 by the outcome of many endeavors and the disappointing end of many dreams, and I've been sorrowful over many things I've said and done. 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 to me, and he continues to be faithful.

I've learned God always gets his way, even if he's been tugging at your heart since you were that bratty kid smoking a joint in the basement of your parent's house, listening to The Moody Blues and trying to stay lit. I should have just thrown in the towel way back when and went with it. I didn't have to hem and haw and procrastinate. Bottom line: When God starts knocking, I've learned it's best to just open the door. It's that simple.

Opening the door, whenever you open it, puts you in touch with what really matters in life, about that one goal everybody's trying to achieve: peace. Nowadays there's a lot of talk on the street about new ways to get to Heaven, and the old way, the old religion, is completely disregarded. But I have learned that the old way is the well-worn path for a reason, and it's wise to follow the Voice down the path walked for centuries, narrow as it seems. The path, of course, is the Gospel, the "good news" that Jesus Christ loves you, that he died for you, and that he was raised up to live for you, so that you can live for him. It's the good news of a new way. You probably wouldn't still be reading this if you didn't have a sense that it was true. He loves you; always has and always will.

I've shared my peace. And now I leave it up to you.

EPILOGUE

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 asking you in
And I am so sure I could never doubt your gentle touch again

It's like the power of the wind . . .

Your Life Broke Through, Keith Green

The Winter of 2010, was a horrific season in my life. After all that I'd been taught, all that I believed, all who I influenced for God and His Kingdom, everything was in question, because of something I did.

Up to that point, I had been blessed with a marriage of 25 years, two amazing daughters, and many memories of Christmas mornings with hot chocolate, road trips, a vacation cabin in Colorado, and the ups and downs of cheerleading, sleepovers, and dating. 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 church, and the positive emotional strokes we received from people in our church 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 both falling apart and wallowing in bitterness and dissatisfaction. Rather than take the opportunity to see her pain and reach out after some poor choices that she made, I let bitterness and resentment overwhelm me.

In my pride, I no longer cared. A woman at church, who was close to me and had been kind and supportive throughout my ministry, provided the comfort I had refused to seek from God or my wife.

That decision cost me almost everything.

We were divorced within 18 months. We lost the family we worked so very hard to build, most of our friends, and our good reputations. 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 my 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 found myself spiritually desolate, blaming God for my sins and all its outcome, and throwing rocks into the sky, wondering if he was there after all.

My distress drove me to the beach one day when I got in my car and headed out on I10-E and onto 59-S from Houston to Galveston Beach. Beaches were often places of encounter between me and God, and that's what I needed then more than anything.

Tears filled my eyes so that it was hard to focus on the road. The shame bore down on me that day, and while I knew in my head the condemnation I was hearing wasn't true, in my heart I felt unforgivable.

The beach, at least, was a forgiving friend, someone who was with me through thick and thin over the years. Sun, sand, and water always received me with nothing more than the peaceful roar of the ocean surf. With every step towards the water, I felt the cleansing power of the wind and waves tug at my soul. As I walked across the sand, I talked aloud like a lunatic and saw the waves whipped violently about, beaten by a merciless howling wind. Even the beach was unforgiving that day. I howled along with it.

“Jesus!”

I groaned like a newborn baby into my hands. I yelled into the sky. I beat my chest, punishing myself, taking giant gasps as I sobbed violently for what I had done, for the end of an era and the pain it would cause my family for the rest of their lives.

“Oh, Jesus!” I cried. “Jesus, I am so very sorry!”

I fell to my knees and gripped the sand with my fingers.

“Jesus, where are you?” I shouted, until my voice was hoarse. “Show me something, anything, just so I know you're still there.”

The wind blew harder, its violent howl the only voice I heard in response. I felt deeply and unequivocally alone.

After all these years, I've finally blown it. He's through with me.

I sighed deeply, too tired to cry anymore, resigning myself to spending the rest of my life alone. 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 the boiling gray waters. It bobbed up and down, 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. One final wave rolled it into the foam, and I saw that it was green.

You've got to be kidding.

I waded knee-deep into the pounding surf, where the object met me at my feet, its green rind sparkling in the brilliant sun. 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. But it was real.

What the . . .

I lifted the object out of the water and brought it safely to the beach, where I laid it in the sand like a precious child saved from drowning. I stepped back about ten feet and fell to my knees again, staring at the bright green sphere, 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 myself, but my heart received what my mind could not: a glimpse of hope through God's provision when I was wandering in a dry and weary land. I wasn't as thirsty as I was all those years ago on that hot and desolate road, but the news it

brought was no less needed.

It was a watermelon.

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