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about 49000 Words

Growing Up White in the Sixties

a fictional memoir

by

Peter Stekel

For my mother

May Stekel

with all my heart and all my love

Prologue

Did you know? University of California ornithologists recently reported that homing pigeons don't navigate by taking their bearings from the sun as previously believed. The University scientists have spent years studying the birds, aided by global positioning satellite technology. If they're not flying a great distance, or along a route for the first time, the birds appear to follow freeways, roads and streets. Some were even discovered to fly following the curve of a traffic circle, as if driving in cars. This was true even if it added unnecessary miles that could have been avoided by cutting cross-country. "They were simply making their journey as easy as possible," said Arthur MacArthur, lead investigator of the study.

A MIGRATION MYSTERY: Thousands of migratory birds have fallen from the sky over Mexico’s Yucatan coast during the past week. For some unknown reason, representatives of over 20 species have fallen to earth and have died upon impact around Campeche. A farmer on the outskirts of the city reported that he collected more than 1200 birds that dropped onto his fields. Evidently, the birds were flying from Canada and the northern United States en route to winter feeding grounds in Central and South America. Scientists

from the Mexico City Natural History Museum examined the birds and said most of them appeared to have died of head injuries from the fall. They ruled out such possible causes as air pollution, an upper level disturbance, ice storms or feather deterioration. Said Chief of Avian Ecology for the Museum, Ernesto Padilla, "This is truly a mystery."

EarthWatch Journal, by Jimmy Newberry, October, 1972.

Chapter 1

1957 - Hoppy, Gene and Roy

The Little Rock School Board votes to integrate but Federal paratroopers are needed to escort nine black students to class at Central High School. The response of Arkansas Governor Faubus is to close schools for 1958-59 school year.

Senator John F. Kennedy is awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Profiles in Courage.

On the street where I grew up, all the daddies came straight home from work. The cars knew the way so well, they drove themselves home. The mommies always waited at the door, so when the daddies came home, they could get a kiss on the cheek. Dinner was always prepared when the daddies came home so they could fall right into it.

The rent was always paid on time - the first Friday of every month. Even though life was a struggle, everybody knew that we were living in the best of times and that, one day, the struggle would be over. And that made everything all right. Like we learned at Disneyland, "There's a big bright beautiful tomorrow shining at the end of every day. And it's just a dream away."

We were poor and our neighbors were poor. We all struggled together and that made it easier to imagine what it would be like to have something and to pretend your baseball cap was a cowboy

hat and the stick stuck into your pocket was actually the super deluxe cap gun, Roy Rogers model, in a real leather holster.

I was in love with all things cowboy. At that time the closest I'd ever been to a horse was the pony ride at the little amusement park sitting on the corner of La Cienega and Olympic Boulevards where the mall now stands. I'd never seen a real cow.

Early memories are a lot like doors you open for the first time. When you look into the room you see furniture and pictures on the wall; things arranged in order. But you don't know the story of how they came to be there; what love or loss was involved. When I think back to the first things I remember I don't recall the how or why. I only remember what was.

Here's what I remember about my love of cowboys. Cowboys sang, always kissed their horse at the end of the movie and never drew their guns in anger.

They lived by the "Code of the West." Always treat women well. Never lie. Respect everyone, no matter who they are. Live a good, clean life.

Television opened my view of the world inside The Code and Roy Rogers became more than, "King of the Cowboys." He became king of a world full of images, ideas and stories. He sang, rode an orange horse and always did the right thing. Roy was The Code personified. Next came Hopalong Cassidy. Hoppy was older, wiser and always had a younger guy who looked up to him. I could

picture myself being that younger guy. I loved that all their adventures took place outside where the spaces were wide open and the views went on forever.

Finally came Gene Autry. Gene sang and played guitar but he never struck me as being a real cowboy. He was only an actor.

My world beyond the television was an expanse of lawn in front of our apartment building in the Venice section of west Los Angeles. Three, two-story buildings formed a horseshoe which entered onto a long street that curved out of sight. It was quiet there, like the opening scene of a movie when the hero first rides into town. During the hot and dry Los Angeles summer, or when the seasonal Santa Ana winds blew, I pictured our neighborhood as a ghost town with tumbleweeds rolling through.

I loved playing cowboy. Whoever I could talk into the game and I would act out scenes from one of Hoppy, Gene or Roy's latest shows. We'd gallop across the lawn, in a kind of half skip, slapping our butts with one hand and sticking out the other one like we held onto a horse's reins. We weren't the only kids who did that. There would be lots of gun battles. Getting shot so you could die creatively was how all our games ended.

There was a boy, one of my playmates, who was from New York. He talked like it. When his bottom teeth came in, two of them were so long they stuck out of his mouth like upside-down fangs. He had to have them pulled out so he could eat. We used to play

together and when I got a cowboy hat for my birthday I let him wear it until his mother made him wear his own hat. His hat reminded me of the ones I saw in the photographs of all the little immigrant children. He had the same eyes too. Dondi eyes.

The summer of 1958 was the summer before I started school. It is the first I remember of time having continuity and when meeting somebody was not always like meeting them for the first time.

I knew an old man named Marco. He would deliver the advertising circulars. They came rolled up and tied with a rubber band. You read them, or not, and then threw them away. That's why my parents called them the "throwaway." On Saturday mornings, when all us kids were watching cartoons and our parents were still drinking coffee or sleeping, Marco would walk up and down the streets of the neighborhood, tossing the throwaways on every porch.

Marco had lived in real cowboy country: Wyoming, Montana, Texas, Arizona, New Mexico. He *looked* like a cowboy. He stooped when he walked and waddled like Cheeta. You could have passed a hoola-hoop, widthways, through his bowed legs. His face had deep lines. The lines extended into his skin like a fractured glass marble cracked in the oven. His brown skin was rubbery and grey, I suppose, by years of wind and sun. When he smiled the line of hair above his lip would twitch like a caterpillar arching its

back on hot pavement. His eyes had some kind of sparkle to them as if Marco was always laughing at something I didn't know. They made me think of sunlight on water droplets.

Marco talked like a cowboy too. He didn't have the hick accents of movie actors but the genuine inflection of a Man of the West. The Spanish words rolled off his tongue like water. *Lariat. Chapadores. Señor, Señora, Señorita. Remuda. Arroyo. Amigo.*

When he saw my mother, Marco would always bow deeply and sweep the ground with his J.B. Stetson hat. It had a double crease in the crown with a wrapping of rawhide that ended in two tiny bells. It gave Marco a jingle when he walked. He called my mother, *Señora*, and my father, *Patron*. My parents always spoke politely to Marco. It was important to them that Mexicans, Negroes and orientals be treated with respect.

"*We* treat people like *we* want to be treated," my mother told me. She always spoke in italics, even sometimes underscoring the word with her finger. "*Not* like in Europe. *You* must do the same *if* you want to be *respected*."

I knew about respect. I knew about The Code.

I would get up early in the morning on Saturdays, sit on the stoop and wait for Marco. Then we would walk the rest of his route together, talking about cowboys.

Marco had different words for the most common things in the world. He taught me the true meaning of phrases like "store-bought." It was more an attitude or feeling than anything else. When you lived far away from manufactured items, where everything was rough and home-made, often by clumsy fingers, items bought in stores held special fascination.

While all the movie cowboys wore pearl handled revolvers, Marco told me of his plain .44 pistol. "A gun, *mi amigo*, is a tool. A deadly tool. There is no need for tools to be pretty." He also taught me that good riders were tough enough to "ride anything with hair on it." To make real, "cowboy coffee" you poured the grounds directly into the pot minus the formality of a percolator. Coffee was only properly brewed if it would "float a horseshoe."

Blankets were "sougans;" a ground cloth was a "henskin;" unowned or untamed horses were "the wild bunch;" and "ornery" referred to anything or anybody who was hard to handle, difficult to control or "just won't cooperate no-way, no-how."

Nobody ever kissed their horse in Marco's stories of the Old West. You wouldn't expect someone today to kiss his car would you? Most horses were called "Dan," except for the ones called "*Old* Dan."

The animals were large, powerful and stupid. Marco would say, "There's nothing more stupid than Dan, unless of course it's

a cow." Here he would smile, his caterpillar twitching, before adding, "Of course, *Amigo*, the only thing dumber than a cow is a sheep. They are just looking for an excuse to die."

"Really? Why would they want to do that?"

"Because, *Amigo*, they do not have the brains God intended for them. When the wind blows they will take shelter in a stand of timber and then forget to come out when the winds die. So they will starve. In the winter I have seen with these eyes," and he used both index fingers to point into his cracked and rubbery mask, "Sheep piled on top of each other trying to get away from the snow." They reminded him of snow itself, he told me.

During the big die-off in Wyoming the winter of 1892, when snow fell for three weeks without stop, there were so many cattle and sheep piled one atop the other trying to make whatever shelter possible that they suffocated each other. In the spring it was impossible to separate the carcasses to salvage the hides. That year was the beginning of the end for Marco and his way of life. He couldn't have been more than 16 at the time.

To me, Marco represented a holdover from another world. His stories served as time machines, transporting me to an era when the contrast between living and surviving wasn't all that bold. People today, encouraged by television, talk about being carried away on spaceships by otherworldly beings. Marco was something like that for me.

When I think of Marco these days it seems to me that he was always waiting for something. He surely had the patience born of long nights watching the herd, or of days spent on the back of a horse riding to town for one night in a saloon. When he tossed the throwaways, the sweep of his arm encompassed the northern desert where he was born, the high plains where he spent so much of his life and the urban setting he had come to.

Marco gave me my first lesson about guns. I asked Marco if he'd ever shot anyone. You know how children can be. They don't really know much about life or death except for what they see in the movies. The good guy shoots and the bad guy falls. Everything ugly about death is kept hidden in hospitals where people go to die. Or in "rest homes" where old people wait for the same thing.

For just a moment he lost the twinkle in his eyes and they became grey. He looked away into the sky. "Well," he said slowly, accentuating his western drawl, "It is not right for one man to ask another if he has done a killing. Killing is not right, *Amigo*. And neither is asking."

It was easy to let the matter drop and I didn't think about it except once or twice when I saw Roy, Gene and Hoppy take care of a bad guy or two. It didn't seem wrong to me that some people got shot. In fact, the way they portrayed the villains it was necessary that they die. If nothing else, the gunfight at the end of the movie signaled the end of the story.

On the Saturday mornings when I would meet Marco outside the horseshoe of lawn we would walk up one side of the street to the corner and then back on the other side. His route was almost over by that time and we would walk slowly, talking, or sometimes not sharing a word. He would ask me what I'd done that week and if my parents were healthy.

A very old man and a very young boy. We must have made for quite a tableau the many times we sat on the bus stop bench to rest. We sat there to wait as well. I don't know what we were waiting for but Marco would point out things to me while we sat there. Things like the male pigeons puffing up their breasts and strutting around, "to please the *señoritas*," Marco said. Marco also said the pigeons reminded him of sage grouse in Wyoming.

I told him my mother didn't like the pigeons because they would sit on the clothesline and poop on the laundry.

Mostly, Marco talked about his life in the old days on one ranch or another. He would roll a cigarette, lean back on the bench and begin his stories with a long drawl, "Well, it was like this, *Amigo*." Then off he'd go.

The last time I ever saw Marco he told me about why he left the cowboy life for something else.

He grew up at the century's turn along the border between New and Old Mexico. His grandfather had come up during Maximilian's reign. His father had fought with Diaz. They were

pure, "*Pura*, like water," Marco said. "Always it had been this way. All the way from *España*."

From the family ranch they could see the flat-topped summits of mountains far away. The lodgepole pine forests in the mountains supplied the ranchers in the sagebrush and pinyon flatlands with lumber for houses. In the fall they would hunt elk in those mountains.

The ranch had miles and miles of fences. Trunks from the younger pinyon pines near the ranch provided poles almost long enough, or straight enough to support three strands of barbed wire running between them.

The territory had been occupied by Indians before the coming of Europeans. They too had lived on the sage plains and traveled into the mountains for the pines to make tepee poles as well as to hunt. Marco and his family were repeating behaviors started long before they ever entered the country.

Marco's family were cattle ranchers. When the first settlers came to the pinyon and sagebrush country they saw mile after mile of land that stretched to the sky in every direction. When they looked closer they could see ragged bunches of grass growing between the sagebrush. Everywhere were birds, rabbits and other animals.

The land was too cold and water too scarce to farm so these early settlers took their hints from the land. Deer, elk and

pronghorn had roamed here; large herbivorous mammals that spent most of their lives with noses on the ground, moving from plant to plant, breakfast to dinner and back again. For that reason, settlers brought in cattle and turned them loose to roam like the animals the whites eventually drove from the range.

As a teenager, Marco drifted away from his parent's ranch and wandered all over the West. He ended up in Wyoming. A cowboy could still make a good living in those days as long as he didn't mind hard work and not saving any money. "I was young and strong," said Marco, "and didn't think like an old man."

The roundups were the most enjoyable days during the year. Marco taught me that all of the little outfits would get together and go after the mavericks that were born on the range the previous season. According to the law, any unmarked calf was the property of anybody that could lasso and brand it himself. For a few weeks every year people would be helping out with the rounding up and branding because without everyone helping each other, only the big outfits with the hired hands would get any of the dogies.

The big outfits didn't like when the little guys did that because the big outfits considered all the unbranded to be their property. They said that since most of the cows running wild had their brand, so naturally all the newborns had to belong to them. Marco and his friends didn't see it that way at all and pretty

soon one thing led to another and words were said and then no one was listening, although everybody was talking. Yelling and screaming mostly.

"The *patrons* that ran the big outfits started to call us rustlers. They had some stronger words too. Some people on both sides got beat up. One or two were dry-gulched. Ugly times, and I'm not afraid to admit it. People always wore guns those days, but all of a sudden no one felt safe and secure unless they had one on the hip, another in the pocket and a rifle or scatter gun within arm's reach.

"We all had our own interests to protect. Nobody gave a thought to anybody except themselves. Selfish is what we were and so we lost it all. You can't fight an organization unless you're organized." Marco spit in the street. "We were nothing."

You see, most of the bigger outfits had stockholders back east or in London. A bunch of the places were owned by cattle cooperatives or syndicates with no one man in charge. They wanted the best return on their investment, same as the little guy. Same as Marco. The only difference was that the little guy lived on the land and the big guy lived back east. "We all wanted the same thing," Marco insisted.

It was a big country but it got smaller and smaller in the two years following the winter of the big die-off. The world in Wyoming got so small that season, in fact, that a range war

began. Ranches were burned, people beaten, and a few were shot up. The big outfits banded together and revitalized the Stockman's Association that had driven out a lot of small outfits many years before. They had enough political influence that they were able to create an extralegal "law enforcement agency" to deal with what the considered the "rustler problem."

"There was not any real problem. The only problem was some people getting a bit too greedy for their own good. And the good of everyone else."

That was when I asked him if he'd ever killed anyone with his pistol.

Marco didn't say any more about his part in the range war. All I was sure of concerning his part, was that before it was over he was forced to leave.

"On account of some hard feelings, it is not a good idea for me to go back there even now. If you hurt a person, they have a long memory."

After leaving Wyoming, Marco hired out as a hand. He fished in California, cut trees in Maine, swabbed decks and did lots of dirty jobs for lots of dirty people. Even if he hadn't been a cowboy for years, that is still what he was to me; and his leather boots, silver inlaid belt and J.B. Stetson hat proved it.

He didn't say much more about his family except that his parents had passed away when he was overseas and that he'd lost

track of his brothers. Talking about his family always took the shine out of Marco's eyes.

On that last day with Marco, summer was just about gone. The days were shorter and autumn was definitely moving in.

Most people who lived in Los Angeles when I was growing up had moved there from someplace else. Someplace "with seasons," they liked to say.

Los Angeles has seasons. The difference is that they don't beat you over the head like the seasons in the Rockies or back east. Autumn is subtle here and if you aren't accustomed to observing life around you, then you miss the seasons in southern California.

Marco could tell. "The air feels changed," he said. "You can feel it when the sun sets. Almost like it is sorry to go. Things cool off much quicker and it takes longer and longer for the mornings to warm up." He would know.

There were other differences too. No matter how much they watered the lawn it was turning brown. The wind was changing directions so the smog didn't stick to my lungs. That meant the sky was blue for hours at a time and we could see the low profile of the Santa Monica Mountains to our north. The sparrows didn't sing as much. I could count to nearly a hundred already so if I had known about such things I could have counted down the days before school began.

So there we sat on the bus bench, with summer leaving and autumn coming on, each of us deep in our thoughts. You should also know that autumn in Los Angeles is a feeling. You may not experience it yourself but you will see everyone else experiencing it. It's kind of like the disappointment you feel when a love affair doesn't work out. There was so much potential. There's always so much potential.

A big leaf fallen from some sycamore far up the street tumbled by, rolling and rolling along its edge. Suddenly Marco spoke. "Life does not get much better than this, does it *Amigo*?" His smile stretched from one horizon of his face to the other and the caterpillar did flips and flops.

From our perch Marco tossed a throwaway into the street, just for practice. To me, Marco wasn't throwing papers. He was throwing a lasso at the wild bunch. The bench that held us was Old Dan. Marco's right arm and hand went up as one, arcing from the lower right to in front of his face. Then it went past his left shoulder to behind his ear, then head, and with a snap of his wrist he'd let the lasso fly on straight ahead.

A police car drove up our street, circled back around and parked in front of us, blocking any traffic from coming or going. The man inside rolled down his window and I heard the snap-crackle-pop of his radio. An odor from inside the car came outside and caused my nostrils to flare. The policeman stuck his

face out from the car's interior, looked at me and demanded, "Whaz your name?"

When I told him, he said, "Your mother's worried about you. Thinks you run off, maybe. Might be with an old guy named Marco." He looked to my friend and arched his eyebrows with a silent question.

"*Bueños días, Senor*. My name is Marco."

"Get in," the cop said to me, ignoring Marco. "I'll take you home."

I looked to Marco. "Go on, *Amigo*. He is not much but he is no stranger. He is The Law. I expect you will be safe unless you have a doughnut in your pocket."

"Beaner thinks he's funny." The cop spoke directly to Marco. "I'll see about you later."

My parents didn't let me use that word: Beaner.

Marco nudged me from the bench. I got into the car. The interior smelled of the man. He spoke into his radio. "Dispatch? Yeah. I got the kid. Piece of cake. Ten-four."

We drove the half block to the apartment building with the horseshoe-shaped lawn. The policeman took me up to our front door and knocked. I opened the door and walked into the kitchen. My parents walked in from the rear of the apartment. I could hear the television. My mother's face was angry; my father looked concerned. His brows were knit.

"Here he is," said the cop from outside the kitchen.

"*Where have you been*?" demanded my mother.

I looked at my father and saw the same concern that crossed his face whenever I did something wrong.

"I was walking with Marco. Like I always do."

"It is almost *noon*!" said my mother.

"What could have been on your mind to be gone for so long?" my father asked.

I didn't have an answer to that because I hadn't been thinking anything at all. I was out for a walk. But you can't ever admit to your parents that you weren't thinking. Plus, when you're young, there aren't the words or phrases in your memory to explain much of anything you do. I started to cry. It seemed like the thing to do; I was frightened. My parents were mad at me and I didn't know why. Fear made me cry. I didn't want to be punished.

Then my parents smiled. A shocked sort of smile. They both bent down and embraced me. "We were so worried. We thought you might be lost," my mother explained.

"And needed us," my father said. "Your sister..." My mother slapped his hand and we both recoiled from the action and sound.

"You're not mad at me?" I blubbered.

My mother beckoned me with her arms. "No! We were *concerned*. So late and we did not know where you went. You were gone when we woke up."

Then my mother was crying and my father was crying. They were hugging me, hugging each other and everything was all right again. But I never saw Marco again.

Chapter 2

1961 - Charmed

Thirteen "Freedom Riders" leave Washington DC for New Orleans. Testing public facility desegregation as they go, and increasing to two busloads of people, they are firebombed, beaten with lead pipes and attacked by a mob of over 1000 in Montgomery, Alabama as police look on. A police commissioner notes, "We have no intention of standing guard for a bunch of troublemakers coming into our city." President Kennedy dispatches 350 Federal marshals to protect the Riders. In December the first US combat soldiers arrive in South Vietnam.

My mother and I are on the City of Santa Monica's Big Blue Bus. My mother is still youthful, slim and pretty. We're coming home from somewhere near the VA Hospital in west Los Angeles. We sit in the front of the bus but when we stop at the cemetery to pick up a load of passengers, I scoot to the rear. I've calculated the move to take advantage of the new arrivals. I am not allowed here. Little boys sit with their mothers.

Of the new people, a Negro man sits next to me and the bus lurches forward into traffic. The man smells. He smells like sour grapes and rotten apples and the vinegar we use for washing the toilet. When he smiles at me he has only one front tooth. It pokes out of his bottom gum like a crooked "For Sale" sign.

We ride. He pulls a small bottle from his jacket pocket, unscrews the cap and takes a drink, smacking his lips when the bottle is empty. "Yeah!" he says in a long, exaggerated way.

Again his hand goes to the pocket but this time he pulls out a roll of square candies. He peels back the wrapper and pops a purple candy into his mouth. I watch. His cheeks pinch in as he rolls the candy around in his mouth. I hear it clicking against his back teeth.

Our eyes meet and he smiles his one tooth smile. His tongue is purple. "You like?" he says, offering the roll of candies to me.

When I reach for the candy a sharp voice cries, "*Don't*!" My mother is standing in the aisle, one hand holding onto the metal bar at the top of the forward seat, her other hand extending to hold mine back.

My new friend smiles at her. "It's just a Charm, Ma'am," he says. "Didn't mean no harm."

My hand frozen in action, my mother's hand frozen in action, only the Negro moving. "Here, Ma'am," he says kindly, standing. "*You* sit with the boy."

The bus stops and the Negro walks the aisle slowly and with dignity, turns briefly at the door to look at me, winks, and is gone.

Chapter 3

ND - My Parents

"History provides neither compensation for suffering nor penalties for wrong." Lord Acton [in a letter to Mandell Creighton, April 5, 1887]

Before they died, my parents retreated into their own worlds. They never allowed me in.

By the time I entered high school we had lived in our house on our own quiet little cul-de-sac in west L.A. for over ten years. Both my parents were so old. At first, kids on our street made fun of me for having parents so much older than their own. But I had a lot more independence than they did which made all the kids jealous when we got older. As long as I told my parents what I wanted to do they had no objections. It taught me responsibility at an early age and it taught me how to make decisions.

After they retired, I think my parents finally took the time to indulge themselves in things they had only dreamed of. The dream became more important than what came before. Time and events eased them into their own worlds over the years while I grew up but they waited until I left home for college to really close the door on reality.

Old photographs of my mother showed a slender girl with big eyes, a long nose and beautiful, long and shining hair. All I ever really knew was a big woman who bulged out of her clothes. In old age it came as no surprise to me when my mother became dotty over food. She hid chocolate bars everywhere around the house. There were tins of sardines under the sofa cushions. Cans of peaches under the chairs. She wrapped everything in wax paper, plastic wrap and then stuffed them inside plastic bags or Tupperware.

She also went through food fads. In particular I remember an unreasonable fondness for chocolate eclairs, the kind with yellow custard on the inside - a staple of Jewish bakeries in the New York neighborhood where she and my father lived when they first came to this country. During her eclair period she actually had them shipped to her, special delivery. My mother began life as Twiggy and ended up as Mama Cass.

My mother would shout at me, "Do *not* leave that *there*! It will bring *ants*."

"That" could have been anything from a lollipop, to cake, a sandwich or crumbs on a plate.

I grew up in mortal fear that ants would infest any room where food was left. When I was really young I had a dream where I was like Gulliver and ants were like Lilliputians. They had me

tied down in the schoolyard while they feasted on all the delicacies of my lunch box.

We had no family except for ourselves but I should stop here to explain how my young mind envisioned ants. My parents had lots of friends whom I was instructed to call Uncle This or Aunt That. My Aunts tended towards the soft and squishy side of life. They reminded me mostly of pillows. To me, ants were two legged, not six, and didn't have anything else approaching insect-like characteristics. They gave you slobbery kisses on the cheek when they saw you and had big bosoms.

Can you imagine my little boy fright of being tied down by thousands of aunts? Considering the amount of kisses I stood in for between their raids on my lunch, the "Yeech Factor" could be exponentially expressed. I probably woke up in a cold sweat though I don't remember that part of the dream.

Looking back on it, I don't see why my mother was so worried about ants. Our house was immaculate and no self-respecting crawling insect would have been seen in it. They would have needed their own supply of food because they wouldn't have found anything in the house. Today I can picture long lines of ants walking through the kitchen carrying their little carpetbags full of crumbs.

The most fun I ever had with ants was in the backyard by the garbage cans. There must have been some wonderful food treasures

back there because, like Roman highways, all ant roads led to our trash. My two favorite games were playing "God" and "Engineer."

Playing God was the easiest. It involved two parts. Like a fighter pilot from the war movies I would swoop down with a spray bottle of Raid and envelope the ant infantry columns in a toxic cloud. The poor and wretched survivors, struggling to escape the haze, were bombed with dirt clods or the bottom of my shoe.

War is hell.

The second game, Engineer, involved more creativity because I needed special skills and had to experiment with behavior and psychology.

When you're a child, nothing beats toying with the minds of lowly invertebrates.

If I had recently played a round of God, it was necessary to wait for the ant army to reestablish their lines of communication before attempting Engineer. Once there was a particularly long and thick line of ants the stage was set.

For the first step I had to construct some outlandish course of obstacles: water and sand hazards, mountain peaks and bridges.

Next, I needed to be like a railroad switchman and offer some inducement for the army to change its route.

Finally, after the ants were walking the path I set for them the real fun could begin.

I would remove essential elements of the course, interrupting the flow of ants, and see what they did or how long it took to reestablish the column. I would take pieces of stick or leaf, with many soldiers, and turn it around 180 degrees.

Oh! How confusion reigned!

Around Fourth of July there were even firecrackers to add to the equation.

After much experimenting on my part I was able to hypothesize what my little engineering changes in the ant's environment would produce.

With this sort of background I should have graduated to working for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Then I could have learned how to build bridges one day and blow them up the next. Think of the fun in destroying your proudest creations.

But I didn't become an engineer because of something I saw the ants doing.

I'll always remember when I realized why ants touch antenna. They're communicating.

After that epiphany I lived with pangs of guilt for having played with their minds. What sort of garbled message was being passed up the line? Did the ants at one end get angry with their friends for doling out false information? Did they know? Did they care?

As much as I enjoyed building new highways for the ants to traverse, it wasn't as much fun as watching them or trying to understand why they did what they did.

I'm willing to bet that my parents used to feel that way about me.

I began to look down on engineers as being people without creativity or imagination. Books about insects, plants, animals and birds populated the bookshelf my father built for me in my bedroom. Any thing, any story, any study covering life and living occupied me all the time. I grew to see engineers as despoilers of nature, just as I had worked to demoralize ants.

Engineers work with numbers. There isn't any of the mystery you find in studying life. Numbers, by virtue of what they are, are predictable. Plug them into one end of the formula and spit them out the other end. Once the bridge, or dam, or skyscraper, or road or thing is made, what is there left to wonder about?

It occurred to my young mind that to maintain the world of the built environment it becomes necessary to plunder and destroy the depths of the natural world.

It's as if trees, rivers, rocks and minerals, animals; the earth itself, is a platter of food left lying around after some massive picnic and we humans have come to feast.

One day, someone else playing God will reach a hand down and move us around like I did the ants. We'll run about in confusion,

garbling messages and eventually settle down to another equilibrium.

I wish my mother was still alive today because with this knowledge I now have about God and life and living, I could tell her that leaving food around the house doesn't attract ants. All it does is concentrate them.

Our neighbors loved to dwell on my father's eccentricities. Not that my father had anything particularly strange about him, as far as I could see. Had he been a scientist or an artist, no one would have ever noticed anything odd about him. But he had been a tailor and now, he didn't even do that.

I remember that my father had good listening skills, especially when my mother happened to be around. But he always liked to talk so if no one was around, he talked to himself.

The talking to himself became worse as he got older because it evolved into conversations with imaginary friends. My mother and I knew when he spoke to us and we knew when he spoke to the others. He would often begin with, "What are your plans for today?"

His imaginary friend would answer.

"Perhaps you can pick up my medication at the pharmacy when you go?"

The friend would say something, perhaps that he couldn't do this errand for my father.

"No? Not today? Perhaps tomorrow?"

Maybe the friend would mention something about sports.

"Yes; I understand the Dodgers have a good team this year but I am not a sports fan. I would rather attend the opera."

Did the friend like opera? Probably not.

"Ah! Opera is an acquired taste. One must first start with the more accessible works before attempting Wagner."

And so forth.

My father also began to collect things. Not useful things like salt and pepper shakers or dry flies or electrical insulators but broken bits of rubber bands, flakes of scotch tape or specific letters from a brand of alphabet cereal he became fond of. He collected other things too. He turned a habit of snipping little bits of loose thread off of people's shirts and suits into a collecting mania. For several years he saved stacks of newspapers, storing them in our garage. To my extreme embarrassment, he made the circuit of our neighbors on garbage day, rooting around their cans or asking for contributions. He finally quit when the garage burned down.

During the post-war era wives didn't work "outside the home" but my mother came from a different background. In addition to working with my father at the shop, at home she worked as hard as any factory worker and a lot harder than any of the other parents I saw. I can't remember ever seeing her idle for a moment all

during the time I grew up. Between meals came housecleaning, laundry and grocery shopping or hours of reading. I suppose she helped my sister with her high school math homework as she helped me with my Lincoln Logs.

What my mother did best though, where her real talent lay, was in making clothes. She came by the skill honestly, or maybe even genetically. According to stories my parents told me, both of my mother's parents were garment workers in the old country. My grandfather owned a tailor shop where they made fine clothes for the rich people of Berlin. A speciality of my grandmother's was to crochet the lace bodice on women's nightgowns. They met and were married in the shop in 1916; my mother arrived nine months later.

My grandfather inherited the shop from his own father. Being the youngest son, this wouldn't have happened except that all his brothers had been drafted into the German army throughout the years of the Great War and none of them ever came back. The last was blasted from the face of this earth during the first wave of American Expeditionary forces to arrive in Europe. Had the Americans not arrived I suppose my grandfather would have also helped fertilize the soil of France and Belgium.

My father's father had also been a tailor. My father's mother died in childbirth in 1915. My father grew up with a thimble on his finger, as he loved to say.

In 1935, my mother inherited the shop from her parents. That's how my parents met. She needed someone who could sew so she could concentrate on running the business. My father answered the ad. They married and my sister arrived nine months later.

Racism drove my parents out of their home. After becoming Chancellor of Germany, Adolf Hitler began persecuting Germany's Jews. He proclaimed a one-day boycott against Jewish shops in 1933 and in 1935 the Nuremberg Laws had stripped Jews of their German citizenship. By 1936, "Jews Not Welcome" signs were common throughout the country. Laws were passed that restricted Jewish economic activity and required Jews to carry identification cards. For two nights in November, 1938, the Nazis roamed through Jewish neighborhoods breaking the windows of Jewish homes, destroying and looting Jewish businesses and burning synagogues.

My parents could see that Hitler didn't like people like them. When they saw a chance to get out of Germany they took it. At Ellis Island their name became "Abrams," a good Anglo-Saxon name, because it almost sounded like "Abramovich."

In New York they opened a tailor shop. What else would you expect them to do? They learned to speak English and felt welcome in their adopted country. My sister went to school and grew up to be as beautiful as her mother. I came along in 1953, much to everyone's surprise. My mother was far to old to be having children. But I'm getting ahead of the story here.

My father could make clothes better than what you bought off the shelf in the best department stores. But it was my mother who had the eye for design and style. She and my father would look at the clothes that other people were wearing, either out on the street or in the movies, come home and draw up a pattern and reproduce it. This made them very popular with people in their neighborhood and their business thrived. This ability or knowledge or talent - whatever you want to call it - was not unlike Mozart hearing a symphony one time and going home and writing it all down from memory.

According to what I heard while growing up, my sister inherited our parent's skills but they didn't serve her very well. During her first job at a big clothing manufacturer, she got her boss mad by calling the cops on him after he attacked her in his office. What she was doing in there is anybody's guess. My sister called it attempted rape. Her boss called it imagination. The cops called it a misunderstanding. My sister called them crazy and threatened to tell her boss's wife. Her boss said not to do that and to make his point, took out his service revolver and killed my sister. The cops, of course, had no choice. They drilled the boss.

A few years ago I read the newspaper story written about it. Only a few paragraphs buried at the bottom of a page between lingerie ads. The *New York Times* morgue is wonderful. They don't

throw anything away. In the story, they quote one of the cops saying, "He didn't have to shoot her. She was only a Jew. Who believes a Jew?"

My parents, deciding they had worn out their welcome in New York, sold their little shop to some immigrants, bade goodbye to all their old customers and what few friends they had, bought a station wagon with wood side panels, loaded it up with their stuff and relocated in the land of perpetual sunshine, oranges and no seasons.

After we arrived in California my mother never mentioned my sister again. But my father did, all the time, although only to me. "The best skill of your sister?" he would ask. "She could get people to forget who they were, or what they were, and make them imagine who they could be. That, and make them believe they could do it." Living with my stories of my sister became like living with ghosts.

We found the apartment building with the horseshoe lawn. My father opened another tailor shop and my parents worked there together. They never allowed me into the store and never taught me how to sew. My mother began to eat, and eat and eat.

After a couple of years we moved to our house in the cul-de-sac and my father began to putter around the neighborhood, here and there, fixing things because he seemed to develop that skill with lawnmowers and toasters, with broken radios or television

sets. He went to his tailor shop less and less until he stopped going altogether.

Both my parents gave the impression they were waiting for something. When the phone would ring, or if a salesman came to the front door and rang the bell or one of our neighbors approached my father when the garage door was open and he was working on some thing or other, either of them would lift their heads the way you see a dog do when the can opener comes out of the drawer with the dog food just before dinner. If you were attentive, if you knew what to look for, then you would see something register in their eyes and then quickly evaporate like fruit juice on asphalt. Some sort of thought would flash across their faces and they would turn to each other. It was like experiencing a short circuit jump across two poles.

For elementary school graduation my father sewed me a complete suit. It was so beautiful! Beautiful like a waterfall; a tree that tapers perfectly from earth to sky; a man and horse galloping across Wyoming; a line of stitches unwavering and flawlessly straight. It was so beautiful that I wanted him to teach me how to do it. He looked to my mother. I looked at my mother. She shook her head. I looked to my father. He gave a little shrug. “Your sister...”

Towards the ends of their lives, when disease aged them beyond their years, my parents became my children. I’m not

complaining, and better people than me have pointed this out - that older people revert to childhood. That's the weakness of living too long when the mind breaks but the body continues. In each of us lives this dichotomy of the tortoise and the hare.

Chapter 4

1962 - Spicks and Wops

First the governor, then the lieutenant governor and finally state troopers physically block James Meredith from registering for classes at the University of Mississippi. On his fifth attempt, a crowd of 2500 tries to stop him, provoking a riot where two people are killed and 375 injured, including 166 marshals. It takes 3000 Federal troops and the National Guard to help Meredith register for class and become the first black student at Ole Miss.

There are two teachers keeping their eyes on us, the "After School Bunch," on the schoolyard. For the most part, we're the kids with lots of time but nowhere to go after the final school bell at 3 PM. A lot of the kids have working parents, or only one parent, and can't get into their apartments until that parent comes home. My parents are at home but I like staying after school with my nature books from the library.

The older teacher is Mr. Jamison. His skin is browned by sun. What little hair on his head is wispy and grey like a light fog. To us kids in the fifth grade, Mr. Jamison is older than Moses. To me, in particular, Mr. Jamison is as old as my parents - which certainly makes him at least a brother to Moses in my

eyes. Mr. Jamison is the most popular teacher at our school because he's unique. All the other teachers are women.

Standing with Mr. Jamison is Miss Welch. In contrast to Mr. Jamison, Miss Welch is really young. This is her first year as a teacher. She has a habit of running her hands through her long hair, gathering it into a pony tail and then throwing it up in the air behind her. She ought to tie it back when she does that but never does. The color in her hair catches the sun and sparkles like light dancing on moving water. She's not my teacher, she has third grade, but I love watching her play with her hair. I wish I was in third grade this year.

Mr. Jamison and Miss Welch have after school yard duty today. I'm reading my book about salamanders and frogs and sitting on a lunch bench about twenty feet away. If they know I'm here, they don't show it. I can hear everything they say.

Miss Welch plays with her hair again, throwing back the pony tail, takes a deep breath and lets it out quickly in a yawn. "I hate yard duty enough without having to spend more time on it after school."

"Shhh. Pay attention and don't talk," Mr. Jamison says sharply. "That kid with the black hair is going to shove the fat Mexican one in the blue shirt." Mr. Jamison removes a pocket watch and consults it. "Thirty seconds. Tops."

The kid with the black hair is new to our school this year. His name is Gino. He speaks with the same New York accent that a lot of my parent's friends, my uncles and aunts, have. Gino's clothes are worn and out of style as if other people, other brothers, have worn them.

The other kid is Juan. He always wears the same dirty jeans and blue t-shirt every day. His stomach hangs over his belt like he's got a balloon under his shirt. His father works for the city on the garbage truck. Juan has a lot of brothers and sisters. I think his family must make up about a third of all the Mexicans at our school.

I know the two kids because they're in my class with Mr. Jamison. Gino and Juan hate each other. I think they hate each other because they have so much in common. They come from the poorest families at our school and everyone, especially Gino and Juan, knows it. No one else on the playground will play with them, including me. I'd rather read my book and watch the sunlight on Miss Welch's hair.

Miss Welch stops playing with her hair and shifts her attention towards Gino and Juan. They're shooting baskets on the asphalt playground. They make, maybe, one basket for every ten throws. The ball goes rolling behind the court and someone has to shag it.

Neither of the kids likes running after the ball. They spend more time arguing than playing. Each one accuses the other of missing on purpose. Juan holds the ball now and every time Gino reaches for it, Juan yanks it away. Every time that happens, Gino shouts, "Fuck you!" Teachers don't care if the poor kids swear at each other. I remember hearing Mrs. Josephey say, "Poor kids don't know any better because they don't know nothin.'" I remember thinking that "nothin'" isn't any more a word than "ain't" is a word and that made Mrs. Josephy the one who didn't know anything.

Gino plants his feet firmly on the pavement, places both his hands against Juan's shoulders and pushes. "Fuck you!"

Juan staggers back a few steps and drops the ball.

The basketball rolls towards me and comes to rest against my feet. Like a peacock, Gino struts over and retrieves it. He snickers at me like we share some secret and then reaches out, trying to flick my glasses off my face. I'm on to him and move my face away. Gino holds the ball to his chest and returns to the basketball court. When Juan approaches, Gino bounces the ball and shoots it to him. The ball jumps from one boy to the next. They go back to shooting baskets as if nothing happened.

In the meantime, Mr. Jamison has consulted his watch and announces, "Twenty-eight seconds," with a self-congratulatory chuckle.

"I'm not impressed," Miss Welch replies.

"Well, you should be," says Mr. Jamison with a touch of hurt in his voice.

"I suppose you're going to do something about them?" Miss Welch throws her arm out at Juan and Gino. She could have something hideous on her finger or hand that she wants to get rid of.

"You amaze me, Miss Welch. If you don't like children, why did you become a teacher?"

"I like children." Miss Welch is almost whining. "I just don't like *those* kinds of kids, and I don't like wasting my time after school unless the school district is going to pay me better."

"Such a mercenary," Mr. Jamison says, clucking his tongue. "It usually takes five years for a teacher to develop that attitude and you've succeeded in less than six months."

"I didn't go to college to be a baby sitter. For that I could have stayed home and helped my mother raise my baby brothers."

Mr. Jamison starts to speak and thinks better of it.

Gino and Juan are shooting baskets again, missing as often as before, and running after the basketball just as before. They soon develop a new game. Whoever gets the ball hordes it, bouncing it once or twice, faking like they're going to go for

the hoop, and then bouncing the ball some more. It's frustrating, and boring for the other kid but when he gets the ball, he does the same thing. Torture isn't learned. It's ingrained in every fifth grader - somehow written into their DNA.

When they aren't keeping the ball from one another, Juan and Gino are arguing about one thing or another. The score. Who should chase after the ball. The score. Who's a better player. The score.

"I've got them both," Mr. Jamison says. "The Mexican boy is Juan. The other one is Gino. Delgado works with Juan sometimes." Mr. Jamison consults his watch again and examines Juan and Gino like laboratory animals. Maybe he's calculating when Juan and Gino are going to do something.

"Oh," says Miss Welch, with a knowing tone.

"What do you mean, 'Oh?'" he imitates.

Miss Welch shrugs her shoulders. It's an evasive action all teachers use when they don't want to tell you something or if they don't know the answer to your question. My teacher last year, Mrs. Bringhurst, used it all the time when I asked her questions about science. "Nothing," Miss Welch says. "Doesn't Delgado get all the, you know, challenged kids?"

"What's Delgado got to do with anything?"

Mr. Delgado is a special class teacher. His students are pulled from fourth, fifth and sixth grade every day for two hours

after lunch. “Slow learners,” the school calls them. Mostly farmworker children or kids with Spanish names. Not many of them are the same kids in June who started in September.

“Well, look at them,” says Miss Welch. I know that tone of voice. Like the evidence is plain and the conclusion is obvious. “Delgado get both or just the fat one?”

Mr. Jamison looks at the basketball players and I can see him pretending to think hard about what Miss Welch has said. He frowns like all adults do when they want you to know you’ve said something they think is important. But they don’t act that way with each other so if Mr. Jamison is doing it now, it’s because he’s pretending. He’s playing with Miss Welch but she doesn’t realize it.

Mr. Jamison finally decides to say something. “Let’s see. One of them is white; he must be the smart one. The other one is, Mexican. He must be stupid. As if you could bottle somebody’s ethnic heritage like vanilla.”

“That’s not what I meant, Mr. Jamison,” Miss Welch says. I can’t tell if she’s angry or not but there’s a new edginess to her voice. “You’re such a bleeding heart,” she accuses.

“So? What’s wrong with being a bleeding heart?” Mr. Jamison’s voice has changed too. To being defensive. “Is there something wrong about caring for people as people?”

Miss Welch doesn't reply and Mr. Jamison is quiet. The basketball bounces. The swearing waxes and wanes. The two teachers stand side by side in their silence because they are unhappy with each other. They're thinking. "*I* smell wood burning," is what my mother says when I tell her I'm thinking.

"Let me tell you a story," Mr. Jamison says.

"I'm all ears."

Mr. Jamison's face breaks into a wide grin and he regards Miss Welch with a trace of wonder. I see him reach out and touch the young woman on the side of the head and he whistles, "You call those ears? An elephant has ears. Those things on you are small time."

Miss Welch slaps at Mr. Jamison's hand like she was trying to scare off a fly. They're back on comfortable footing again and Miss Welch smiles. I bet she doesn't like arguing with Mr. Jamison.

I'm curious about what story Mr. Jamison wants to tell but neither Miss Welch nor I get to hear it. The shouting match between Gino and Juan has finally escalated into a fight. Juan has a bloody nose.

"Stay here," Mr. Jamison says to Miss Welch. "If any of them try to run away I'll need you to chase them."

"Chase them? Me? In this?" She picks at her skirt but Mr. Jamison is gone.

Just as Mr. Jamison reaches Gino and Juan, Gino takes the basketball and throws it at Juan. It bounces off Juan's head.

"Ho, ho!" Mr. Jamison cries, entering the fight. "Stop it. Stop it. What's going on here?" He gets a firm grip on Gino's and Juan's shoulders and holds them apart like a boxing referee. Gino is fuming, dancing and lifting his feet, his black street shoes scuffed, ratty and torn. The right shoe lacks a heel and his big toe sticks out the end. His left shoe, where the sole belongs, yawns like a big-mouthed bass.

"...stupid Spick..." I hear Gino say.

The insult makes Juan bawl like a lost calf.

"What was that comment, young man?"

Gino doesn't speak, not quite sure what he's said and what he can get away with and what Mr. Jamison teacher might do to him.

Mr. Jamison turns his attention to Juan without letting go his grip. Juan is staring at the blood on his hand that has come from his nose. If he's aware that Mr. Jamison is holding him, he doesn't show it. "Are you all right, Juan?" Mr. Jamison asks kindly.

Juan nods, still amazed at the blood on his hand.

"Your nose going to be all right?"

"Uh-huh," he mumbles.

"There's a lot of blood," Mr. Jamison says, trying to be helpful.

"Uh-huh. I'll be all right."

"That's good. That's good." He lets go of his grip on both boys. He does it slowly, as if unsure the boys will stay there or if they will bolt like deer.

Maybe he's afraid they'll fly away. I held a sparrow in my hand once, the heart beating slightly in my palm as light as mist. I held it tightly. The bird lay still, looking at me with those little black bird eyes, its beak slightly open. I could see a bright pink tongue inside the sparrow's mouth. I relaxed my grip slowly until my hand was fully open and the bird still lay there. It didn't move. Each wisp of feather quivered when the body quivered. When the sparrow no longer felt the pressure from my grip, it quickly darted away into the sky.

"So? What's the story?" he asks softly. I can barely hear him. When he gets no answer, Mr. Jamison puts a sharpness into his voice that makes Gino and Juan jump. It's amazing how quickly he's gone from being nice Mr. Jamison to Mr. Hard As Nails. His eyes bore into one, and then the other. Gino and Juan wilt under the pressure. Gino starts to bluster but fails at it with one look into Mr. Jamison's face. Juan begins crying again, mumbling something under his breath.

"What's that, Juan?"

"He called me a Spick."

"A what?"

"You heard me," Juan mumbles into his chest.

Mr. Jamison settles into himself, drawing his big right hand up to his face, stroking his chin. "Spick, eh?"

Gino has found interesting things in the sky to study.

"Why did you call him a Spick?" Mr. Jamison asks Gino.

"'Cause he is." Gino's reply is as matter of fact as you can imagine. The same tone I heard from Miss Welch a few minutes ago.

Juan whimpers some more. "I ain't no Spick," he says to no one.

"Where are you from, Gino?" Mr. Jamison asks.

"New York." It sounded like Nuu-Yawk. "We just came here this s'mester."

"Yeah?" Mr. Jamison asks.

"Dad got a job in the new auto plant in the Valley."

The San Fernando Valley. In not many years the Valley has gone from orange groves, avocado orchards and truck farms to "California-style" ranch houses, automobile manufacturing and aircraft assembly plants.

Mr. Jamison turns a stern eye to Juan and says, "You do know it's against the school rules to fight?"

The weeping from Juan begins again.

"Yes, sir."

"If you know the rules, why were you fighting?"

"He called me a Spick." His voice has that quality that says, "Don't you know anything?"

"Is that true?" Mr. Jamison turns to Gino, who nods. His head bobs up and down like one of those baseball-player dolls all the cars have on the dashboard. "Why?"

"Cause he is."

"Says who?" Mr. Jamison asks.

"My father."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Your fadda?" Mr. Jamison mimics.

Gino cocks his head to one side, not sure he heard right. "Yeah. My father." He struggles to pronounce the work correctly as a non-English speaker would who didn't want to call attention to himself.

"He ever meet Juan?"

"No," Gino scoffs. This teacher is real dumb.

"Then how does he know?"

"That the Spick's a Spick? Just look at him."

Juan butts in with, "I ain't no Spick."

"Yes, you are." Gino says with a patient tone, almost kindly. The voice parents learn to use with babies.

"Do you know what a Spick is?" Mr. Jamison asks Gino.

Gino looks at him like Mr. Jamison has three big bug eyes. Or wings. "Who don't?"

"I don't."

"You stupid or something?"

You don't talk like that to teachers. But it doesn't seem to bother Mr. Jamison at all. He's got other things on his mind. "Me? Stupid? Just because I don't know something? Does that make me stupid?" He pretends to consider the question. "No. I'm not stupid," he says with finality. "But there's lots I don't know. Like, what a Spick is. How about you tell me, Gino?" Mr. Jamison has put an edge in his voice, like I heard him use with Miss Welch. And something else too. The accent. Like he's imitating Gino.

"Geeze. You know," and then Gino clams up.

Mr. Jamison turns from Gino and says to Juan, "Do you know what a Spick is?"

Juan nods his head. "It's somebody from Mexico."

"A Spick is somebody from Mexico?" Mr. Jamison says in feigned astonishment. "Is there something wrong with that? Is being from Mexico bad?"

Juan bursts into tears again and cries, "I ain't no Spick. I was born in this country."

A strange expression crosses Mr. Jamison's face. His eyes enlarge and his mouth opens, then shuts. He has to think for a

moment and then says, "Gino, how would you feel if someone called you a Wop?"

"What's a Wop?"

"You're from New York and you never heard people talk about Wops?"

Gino consults the ground and shakes his head.

"It's a name people give to people like you. People who have Italian heritage."

"Like bein' called Dago?" asks a small voice.

"Yeah. About the same. So what would you do?"

"I'd hit 'em," he says defiantly. "Like I hit the Spick."

"You can't hit everyone," Mr. Jamison says, kindly.

Sullenness falls across Gino's face like a curtain.

Mr. Jamison isn't through yet. "How would you feel if all the students here at school started calling you Gino the Wop?"

Mr. Jamison puts on his bad accent again, mimicking Gino. "Everywhere you went, people would say, 'Here comes the Wop; Gino the Wop. You know how you can tell? He goes wop, wop, wop with his shoes when he walks.'"

Gino's eyes drop to his feet. Tongue-toes poke out of the smile on his left. The heelless flat right shoe scuffs the pavement. He begins to whimper.

"I didn't know Spick was something bad. My Dad says it all the time, that's all."

"I bet your dad says a lot of things you don't know the meaning of." A loud sigh escapes from Mr. Jamison. "Maybe it's time you figured out a better way to solve your problems than by using words you don't know the meaning of."

"Yes, sir," Gino says. And I think he really meant it.

"OK, boys," Mr. Jamison says. He takes the basketball from Juan and rolls it across the ground to Miss Welch. She has to hustle a bit to stop it but she does. "I think you've both had enough basketball for today." He leaves them there, standing in the school yard with nothing to do. Gino and Juan slowly drift away.

Mr. Jamison retrieves the ball from Miss Welch and holds it uncomfortably in his hands. "What happened?" Miss Welch asks him.

"You heard," he says.

"But what happened?"

Mr. Jamison sighs. "This is a school, Miss Welch, and sometimes our students learn something."

Chapter 5

1963 - Assassination

Pledging, "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow and segregation forever," George Wallace is sworn in as governor of Alabama."

John F. Kennedy, 35th President of the United States, is shot and killed in Dallas, Texas.

The day before Christmas break we gathered in a courtyard at Sharnock Avenue Elementary School. We were the 30 students of the graduating sixth grade class. The purpose of the gathering was to plant and dedicate a tree to the memory of President Kennedy.

The tree, an ornamental *Ficus*, stood off to one corner, its root ball covered with wet burlap bags.

A man in brown pants, shirt and skin from the maintenance department had dug the hole and stood by as our teacher guided us though the ceremony. His fingers kept going up to his lips as if to hold a cigarette. He pulled on his lip, rubbed his eyes, ran his fingers through long black hair. The boys of our class who were boy scouts were in their boy scout uniforms and the girls who had them were in their girl scout uniforms. The rest of us were dressed like for church. Clean and neat. Showered and clean.

The kids with no uniforms had to stand behind those who did have them.

Gail, a willowy girl scout with fine brown hair gave the main speech. She read from 3X5 cards.

Some of the boys made speeches too. All about what a great man President Kennedy had been and how hard it would be for all Americans to carry on without him.

I could have made a speech. I wanted to but didn't dare ask. Based on the last assembly we sixth graders had performed in, I thought it best to keep my mouth shut.

We had rehearsed for weeks. I think the occasion was for Columbus Day. We were arranged in a crescent, standing on the floor of the auditorium below the stage, facing the audience. In the seats were the rest of the older kids - third, fourth and fifth graders - and behind them were our parents. Sitting on the floor on carpets were the little kids, Kindergarten through second graders.

Teachers stood along the back wall talking with each other and drinking coffee.

The sixth graders sang patriotic songs - *America the Beautiful, This Land is Your Land* and others. Between the songs we each had our carefully memorized lines to deliver.

The middle section was about all the different kinds of people you find in America and why they were so much better than any of the people in other countries.

I was supposed to say, “People who are serene,” when my cue came up.

Our teacher had arranged it so that the lines were delivered by someone on the left, and then someone on the right, and then someone on the left. Like a ping pong ball our lines beat back and forth.

And like spectators at a ping pong match the heads of the little kids on the floor went from left to right to right to left to right. All in unison. Like a wave at a football game. Or a flock of gulls riding the beach winds.

Funniest thing I’d ever seen. In no time at all I was struggling to keep from laughing.

Picture it.

Then it was my turn. To say, “People who are serene.”

I got the words out. Along with a gush of giggles that turned into the outright braying of a jackass.

Teacher was not amused. After the assembly, and back in class, she ridiculed me in front of everyone and then grabbed me savagely by the arm and dragged me out into the courtyard. “People who are serene,” she nearly shouted at me. “Serene! Do you know what that means?”

I kept my mouth glued shut.

Once, in third grade, another teacher had been angry with me for saying something she didn’t like. Mrs. Karp told me to step

to the back of the class. “And not another peep out of you,” she said to end the matter.

“Peep,” I said when her back was turned. What a smart ass I could be.

Mrs. Karp turned around like a snapped whip and I spent the next few hours sitting on the hard wooden bench outside the principal’s office.

I didn’t know what serene meant, and I didn’t know what a rhetorical question was either, but I did have the sense this time to not answer back.

Until teacher regained her serenity enough to allow me back in, I stood out there in the same courtyard where we would later do our ceremony to the dead president.

For the president’s ceremony we barely fit into the narrow courtyard space. The boys stood in line on one side and the girls on the other. Each speaker took one step forward, read from their cards like Gail had done, and then stepped back.

They talked about how wonderful a president Kennedy had been. He’d done this for the poor people and that for the Negroes, and had been a war hero, and how good looking he had been and his wife sure was nice and so were both his kids. What a shame someone had to shoot him.

We were all sad without knowing what sad meant. Some of us were sadder than others. A few pretended to be sad. Some of us

didn't really understand the words about what President Kennedy had accomplished and they yawned with downcast eyes and sorrowful faces.

The new president, Lyndon Johnson, wasn't anything like Kennedy. He was so disappointing for being a Texan. Lyndon Johnson didn't have any hair. He had a nose like your old uncle who everybody made fun of for drinking too much at parties. And he had big ears. He spoke like a hick. Like the man in the cowboy movies who got his ranch stolen away by the bad guys. People always made fun of people who spoke like President Johnson. For us, who had barely grown up, but had grown up with John Kennedy, good ole JFK, the new president turned out to be a big disappointment.

After the ceremony we went back inside and had an arithmetic lesson.

Numbers always numbed my brain. Instead of concentrating on figures, my mind went over and over the home movie that television kept showing again and again. The President and his wife. The Texas Governor in his big white hat just like all my heros wore. I loved Governor Connally even after he became a Republican. And his wife, so pretty and so polite. The people standing loosely along the street. The greenness of the grass. The blackness of the car. And then, the shots and President Kennedy leaning forward with his hands at his throat, Mrs.

Kennedy trying to climb out of the car. Someone pulling her back in.

A couple of days after the president died, Raymond Richards asked our teacher if the president was in the ground yet. Raymond wanted to know all about decomposition.

The girls went, "Oooo," and made icky faces.

Teacher tried to ignore him but Ray insisted.

She finally told him to shut up.

After we had finished the ceremony and left the courtyard for our arithmetic lesson, the maintenance man stuck the tree in the ground and buried the roots. I saw him do it from my desk at the back of our classroom. The room windows were almost floor-to-ceiling and on bright spring days we didn't need to turn on the overhead banks of fluorescent lights. The maintenance man was standing by the tree and he was crying.

Chapter 6

1965 - Uncle George

Malcolm X is shot and killed.

Two hundred Alabama State police, using tear gas, nightsticks and whips, attack black marchers attempting to register to vote.

There are 20,000 US marines occupying the Dominican Republic to, "...help prevent another communist state in this hemisphere."

A 500-square-block area in the Watts section of Los Angeles is burned and looted by at least 10,000 rioters. Over 15,000 police and national guardsmen quell the riot. Thirty-four people are killed, 3000 injured and 200 businesses completely destroyed.

The semester following the Watts riots my parents sent me away to Eureka in northern California. The TV scenes of looters, police waving batons and shooting into crowds of people reminded them too much of the Europe they had fled from in the 1930s. In school, our teacher had a poster of the Seal of California - a gladiator seated on a throne, beside a grizzly bear, holding a spear. Above him, the word, "Eureka." I wanted that spear. I wanted to see a grizzly bear. My thought was that I would find both in Eureka.

That is how I went to stay with my Uncle George. Like all my parent's friends, my mother instructed me to call him "Uncle." My father, when he chose to mention him at all, always said Uncle

George's name more like as a growl than anything else. Maybe even a groan.

"Now, *Nathan*," my mother began. "George was *very* kind to us when we first came to America. He has been *so sweet* to stay in touch all these years."

Growl.

Uncle George, I got to drop the "Uncle" part once I got to Eureka, picked me up at the bus station in his beat up white Ford pickup truck.

"She's a junkyard special," said George, stroking his chin and keenly feeling my disappointment in his steed. "Not much to look at, is she?" He thought about that for a moment before adding, "She's a working rig so she doesn't *have* to *look* pretty." He paused, again stroking his roughly bearded chin with a forefinger - a pose I got to know real well. "She *could* use a name, though. You got a name in mind for this old girl?"

Nellybelle came right out of my mouth and George thought it an excellent name. "Pat Brady's got a truck name Nellybelle, doesn't he?" he marveled.

I nodded. He knew. George *knew*.

"Well, then. Just set your buns on the seat and we'll be off."

Buns.

I climbed into the cab, sat on Nellybelle's smooth brown leather seats and decided I would like it here in Eureka even if I never got the spear or saw the grizzly bear. After two days in the reclining seats of the Greyhound, Nellybelle's seats felt no different than the bench outside the school principal's office but I didn't mind. Nellybelle's insides smelled wonderfully of leather, tobacco, chain saw oil, wood shavings and stale beer. As we drove off, the steering wheel wandered back and forth between nine and three o'clock though the vehicle's front end stayed straight and true.

Nellybelle's radio blared loud country music so George had to shout in order to explain to me, "We've got *two* kinds of music around here, Pup." He'd taken to calling me "Pup" by the time we pulled away from the bus station. "We've got country *and* western. None of that rock and *roll* shit they listen to down south where you're from." He glanced quickly at me after letting the "S" word escape. "Your *mother* all right with that word?" When I said, "Huh-huh," George began to pepper his talk with the word like people in L.A. punctuated their sentences with, "You know," and, "...like..." Pretty soon I had picked up the habit and talked shit all the time.

George worked the woods as a tree feller. When there were no trees to cut, he fished for salmon. When there were no salmon to catch, commercially, he worked for a guy who took tourists out

hook-and-line fishing in the ocean. When there were no tourists to take, he hung out on our front porch doing important stuff like watching the rain come down and drinking beer. I took to drinking grape soda with him on those days. While George drank his beer and kept an eye on things, I drank my soda and plowed through his collection of Western novels.

Before a week had gone by the mailman brought me a big heavy box from L.A. My mother had sent a care package. "Let's see what kind of loot you got!" George exclaimed.

George helped me cut the tape on the box and I began pulling things out. Toilet paper. Canned peaches. Some underwear. Dried milk. Toothpaste. Things like that. "Doesn't your mother *know* we've got *stores* up here?" he asked me.

I shrugged. On the bottom of the box I found two letters. One for me. One for George. He took his letter and laid it reverentially on the table. "I guess I'll read *this* on the front porch," he told me.

Our house squatted in a workingman's section of Eureka just off Second Street - "Two Street," we called it - north of downtown. Downtown Eureka in 1965 occupied a few streets less than it does now and consisted of bars, cheap hotels and boarded up storefronts. Our neighborhood put us within convenient walking distance of the Vista del Mar Club - the "V.D." - on Eureka's waterfront.

Above the front door to the V.D. someone had hung a hand-lettered sign that read, "If you want to get away with murder, then come to Eureka."

I asked George about that the first time he took me there for dinner. He mumbled and stroked his chin a bit before telling me, "Just wait and see."

George had a funny way with rules. He would follow the rules only when it suited him. He believed that most laws that weren't designed to control and master men were made to protect those too stupid to save themselves from a sinking ship. "We have got to *test* these laws from time to time," he was fond of saying during his most egregious infractions of the motor vehicle code, "to make *sure* this *shit* is still valid."

When George cut trees, he'd get up pretty early in the morning and be gone all day, coming home way after the evening darkness and we'd head off to the V.D. for dinner. With George gone, I'd hang out around the house, reading Westerns or take walks around town. On days without rain I could sit on the rocks along the waterfront and talk to the fishermen or watch the cormorants drying their wings on the pier pilings. The fishing boats came and went, the few pleasure craft following them at a safe distance so they could make it through the muddy channels of Humboldt Bay and safely over the bar.

I liked the food at the V.D. but I also liked the people. There would be pretty women in there - pretty but looking a little tired, not like the women who showed up later who came in fresh and left many hours later like crumpled paper. The tired women would have their kids with them. We'd play or talk while the parents drank beer and yakked and yakked. We'd all eat fish and chips and drink sodas. I liked it. It was lots of fun.

As it got later all the families would disappear and the other women would show up. Early in the evening they would be friendly to me but as the hours passed I knew not to bother them. The men would change too. The ones who stayed would switch from beer to whiskey and sometimes there would be fights.

Nick, the bartender, always treated me well but George said you wouldn't want to get on his bad side. One night, while I sat in my corner in the pale bar light, watching everything and reading, this fisherman at the bar started to give Nick all sorts of shit. "You gonna keep putting water in this glass or you gonna put whiskey in it?" he kept saying over and over. Even I got tired of listening to him complain.

Nick didn't say much. You knew what he thought and felt by the way he would lean in to the bar to listen to you. Or how he asked you to pay for your food and drink. When he did say something, he spoke out of the side of his mouth, like the gangsters in the late night movies. Actually, he mumbled more

than spoke and, until you got used to it, you had to be real clever to figure out exactly what he said.

I couldn't hear what Nick said to the fisherman but I didn't need to. I could *see* it.

The fisherman kept complaining about his drinks and Nick would say something out of the corner of his mouth, or make some kind of movement with his hands or his shoulders or even lift an eyebrow. He would walk away from the fisherman, wipe a glass clean or use his towel to clean up some water on the bar. Except, after a while, there *wasn't* any water on the bar. But Nick would be there, wiping the bar anyway. *Polishing* the bar.

Anyone who knew Nick, or knew about him would have known not to say, or do anything that would piss him off. The shit would fly for sure.

That fisherman was really drunk. There couldn't be any other reason for the way he acted. I'd seen lots of drunk fishermen in the V.D. I'd seen the mean drunks who wanted an excuse to fight. I'd seen the quiet drunks who drank and drank all night long without a word to anyone. Even their friends, if they came in with people. And I saw the happy drunks and the sad drunks and the drunks who cried and the drunks who wanted an excuse to hit their wives or girlfriends if they were crazy enough to come in with them. I heard the drunks who didn't think anybody should be in America unless they knew the Pope. I witnessed the drunks who

talked about Jesus while they drank. In the end it didn't matter what kind of drunk they were, or what they drank to get there. Drunk was drunk as far as I could tell.

That fisherman said something to Nick. Something so low that only the drunk and Nick could have heard what the fisherman said. Something very low as the noise level grew and grew with the sweeping second hand of the clock. Nick had his towel out and he had a glass in his hand. The towel went around the inside of the glass, around the outside. The towel slipped to the bar and wiped up some drops of moisture. Nick leaned in to the drunk, as if to make sure he heard what he had heard.

That drunk fisherman said something else. Suddenly, Nick grabbed the fisherman by his hair and slammed the drunk's head into the bar. Just like Kareem Abdul Jabber did at UCLA when he dunked a basketball.

The drunk slid to the floor and lay there like a pile of laundry.

No one moved or bothered to acknowledge what had happened. I stood in my corner, stupefied.

Several minutes passed. Nick went back to dispensing drinks. The drunk remained on the floor. A new man took the drunk's barstool, adroitly stepping over the man's body where it lay, leaning against the bar with its legs sprawled out onto the

floor. He could have been a sleeping dog that no one wanted to disturb lest it begin to bark in a loud or obnoxious manner.

After what I judged to be half an hour the fisherman had still not moved. I crept along the floor, between the unsteady legs of unsteady men, to check on the drunk. A stream of blood had thickened where the fisherman's forehead had smacked against the bar. His eyes were closed, his mouth open, his tongue sticking out. I checked on his breathing. Yes, he was alive. My eyes wandered to the sign above the front door, "If you want to get away with murder..." and I wondered who had put it there.

George used the phone in our house exclusively for out-going calls. It could usually be found at the bottom of a pile of something - clothes, fishing gear, dirty dishes. When it rang one evening during dinner, well, that was a special event. George and I had to wait for each ring so we could triangulate on the instrument in order to find it. We got to it just as it shut up.

Less than a minute later the phone began to ring again. George glanced at it like it would bite him but he picked up the receiver on the tenth ring. He spoke some words into it but mostly listened, all the while looking me up and down. I had a feeling the call had something to do with me so I buried my nose in my latest Western, *Bar X Boys Shoot it Out*, by Westly Hardin, and pretended indifference.

"All right, then," George finally said. "*I'll* see to it tomorrow."

The next day, Saturday, George and I are on the tourist fishing boat. He's helping the clients throw their bait into the water and I'm helping out by making tuna fish sandwiches in the galley. The ocean is pretty choppy and sloppy so the people topside aren't interested in eating much. Later, when we're over the bar and coming back into Humboldt Bay, George turns to me and says, "*Shit*. It's *October*. Shouldn't you be in *school* by now?"

Already I'd been getting away with murder.

George took the following Monday morning off from work to register me at Zane Junior High. After that I would trudge to school in the rain and skip on home. Going to school cut in on our good times like doing important things on the porch, or fishing, but there was still plenty of fun to have and we still went out to the V.D. for fish and chips, soda and beer, nearly every night.

A few weeks after the phone call from the school district the phone rang again. It hadn't had much chance to be covered with the flotsam of our living so we could easily stare at it until it shut up. I stuck my nose back in to *Thundering Hoofs*, another Westly Hardin classic. George had a sip of beer and mused, "Hmm," while stroking his chin. "I wonder who that could have been?"

I didn't know who so I kept my tongue. Nothing had been going on in school. I hadn't pissed off anyone since the first day in class when I learned there were places in the world not pleased by 13 year old boys whose every other word happened to be, "Shit."

The phone rang again. "*I'll* get that," said George with a decisiveness about telephones that surprised me. He spoke a little, listened a lot, stammered and blushed, then handed the phone to me. "It's your *mother*. *Long distance*."

Then I remembered. I was supposed to be writing home. Regularly. Oops. I had been getting away with murder - had completely forgotten my parents or that I had ever lived anywhere else but Eureka.

After that, George made sure I wrote home every Sunday, like going to church. It didn't matter *what* I wrote as long as I said *something* and that something involved *long* hours of study. I also worked in occasional references to George, for my mother's sake. I could almost hear my father's groan or growl. *Whatever* it was.

One of those Sundays, while staring at the wall of calender pictures and framed photographs around the fireplace, I noticed a photo of what could only have been my sister. I pointed it out and asked George about why would he have a photo of my sister?

George looked over my shoulder at the framed photograph. Respectfully, he pulled it from the wall. "Hmm," he said, stroking his chin.

"And who's that skinny guy in the sailor suit standing next to her?" I asked.

"*That's* not your sister, Pup. *That's* your mother. And that sailor next to her is *me*."

Now, this was *something*. I saw George in a whole new light and waited for an explanation. He hemmed and he hmm'ed a bit, stroking his chin - partly embarrassed by the photo and also, in a strange way, partly proud of it. He even blushed. "She's a pretty thing, *isn't* she?" he asked.

A pretty thing! My *mother*? What a funny thing to say. I didn't say anything but waited for my explanation.

"That's *just* before the war," George said by way of warming up to the matter at hand. "Around the time your *parents* came over from Germany." He stopped. I waited. "I met them at Coney Island." He put the photo back on the wall, making sure it hung straight - making minor adjustments I couldn't see. "She's *still* pretty, isn't she?" he asked, eyes caressing the old photograph.

I thought about my mother. Bloated like a balloon, her thin hair stringy, walking around the living room in her house dress or feeding the sparrows bread crumbs on the concrete driveway. Hard to believe this thin, almost *too* thin, girl was her. I was

about to tell him when I glanced away from the photo and saw George staring at me, his eyes with that queer look people get when they're here but aren't really. "Shit!" I said. "She's drop dead gorgeous, still!"

George beamed and I knew I'd said the right thing.

On Saturday, our last day together, George and I got up real early to go fishing. Rain pelted our faces as we left the house. "Fish bite, rain or shine," George said happily as we clambered into Nellybelle. I poured a thermosfull of coffee and put it on the dash in a special holder George had built for that exact purpose.

We drove south, towards Fortuna, over the Eel River Bridge, past Ferndale and into the Mattole Valley. George knew of some trout he wanted to catch and introduce to me. The windshield wipers worked extra hard, keeping the water off so George could see to drive.

It had been raining like this all week and neither of us thought anything special of it. In Eureka it rained all the time. I went to school and George went to work.

We crossed the Eel River in the dark with Nellybelle's headlights shining on puddles running like little rivers in the pavement. Generations of wheels and tires had worn two grooves in each lane between the solid yellow lines. The water poured over the side of the bridge like a sheet of waterfalls.

We fished the Mattole River and George introduced me to some fine trout and I did the same to him. We happily ate our peanut butter and apple sandwiches ["Jelly is for sissies," so said George] with tomato and lettuce ["Vitamin C and roughage are good for you." George, again] in Nellybelle's cab, George sipping hot coffee and me drinking hot chocolate. "Shit! *This* is living!" I exclaimed and George nodded his head.

Afterwards we headed back home. The rain had lessened some, not much, but it was easier to see out the front, at least. We were soaked but happy. Our new trout friends riding in the back in George's wicker creel had invited us to dinner and I could hardly wait.

As George drove onto the bridge he let out a whistle and stopped the truck. "Would you *look* at *that*, Pup!" he said.

I let my eyes drift over the bridge and felt them grow a size or two. The Eel River had risen until its waters were but an inch or two below the road bed.

George gunned the engine and remarked, "We better get *over* this sucker before the river takes the *whole* bridge out to *sea*." He put Nellybelle into gear and started across.

Mid-span Nellybelle began to crab to the side. The river had begun cresting the bridge and flooding the roadway. We were suddenly driving through water as deep as the wheel hubs. George handled her but the poor old truck couldn't get enough traction

on the concrete. Only the sidewalk curb kept the river from pushing us against the rail and over the side. Nellybelle shuddered and her engine quit. George tried his best, leaning on the key to squeeze out every bit of electricity from the battery. The engine would crank but not turn over. "*Shit*!" he declared. "Something must be wet." He settled in his seat and stroked his chin.

With the water surely rising, George didn't think for very long about what needed doing. "It looks *bad* for us, Stevie," he said. That was the first time he had ever used my name. I had come to believe he never would - that he had never learned it. "Pup" it had been from the first and "Pup" it had been for months. "We're going to have to *abandon* Nellybelle."

"OK," I said. I didn't know what else to say. Poor Nellybelle.

"The water is *rising* and we *might* make it across if we do it on foot," George told me. "If we stay with the truck, we're goners. If that happens, those trout in the back might be introducing *us* to *their* friends!" He smiled sheepishly at his joke. "Are you game to try it?" He didn't wait for my answer but went on. "Good boy. Now, *hold on* to my hand when we first get outside. To keep from falling into the water, *lift* your feet up high. I'll hold on to the rail with *both* hands. You hold on to my

belt and we'll do it. Got that? Piece of cake, isn't it? OK. Let's *do* it."

The Eel River Bridge is nearly a mile wide and the flood plain is wider than that. We had crossed, maybe, a little more than three quarters of the bridge. With a river delta as wide as that, the main force of the water wasn't too bad but it was bad enough. I felt the Eel trying to push me out to sea but we fought back. George and I worked as a team and made the other side, happy and congratulating each other.

We had company.

Cameras from the two television stations in Eureka filmed us as Fortuna police arrested George. "We got child endangerment laws around here!" one copped shouted into George's face. Behind the bright lights from the TV cameras I heard a voice say, "Good! Good! Again. But with more feeling this time."

A cursing cop had to pry my fingers from George's rain jacket. The scene was either dramatic or pathetic, depending on your point of view.

A small crowd of police worked on trying to contain a large crowd of on-lookers. The people had come from all over the county to see the flooding Eel River crest the bridge. The rescue of the old man and the boy had been icing on the cake. The cops had a time of it. If they had one group under control, another group would squeeze out like toothpaste from a hole in the tube. A tow

truck driver shouted out instructions to a man wearing an aqualung who carried a hook and cable out to Nellybelle. A Coast Guard launch, with it's nose turned upstream, nudged closer and closer to the bridge.

I don't remember much after the cops nabbed me and took George away. Me, they bundled up in an old dog-smelly wool blanket and drove off to the police station. I sat on a hard wooden bench for a long time. They ignored me mostly, except for a guy who asked me my name and where I lived. "With George," I said. "On Two Street in Eureka."

The cop, a man who would have died if he ever cracked a smiled said, "No. Not when you're with that old reprobate. He doesn't have any family that we know of."

I didn't know what "reprobate" meant but the cop's tone said it all. I clammed up. I should have told the shithead to shut up but I didn't think of that until later. They let me sit on the bench a little longer and then a woman, overweight and with her hair cut short like a man's, told me that my parents had seen me live on TV and had called.

So, they knew my name and where I lived. The next morning they put me on the Greyhound in the same clothes I'd worn all night, a bit drier than they'd been. "Good riddance," I heard one of them say. I'd overheard a lot, sitting on that bench - much more than I should have and would have wanted.

They said a lot of bad things about George - worse than whatever "reprobate" meant. I guess they knew him pretty well. Their only mystery had to do with why they hadn't seen him in almost four months.

Well, I knew the answer to that. For however bad they thought of George, he'd been a pretty good "father" since his Pup arrived. I don't think I've ever had such a positive affect on anyone ever since.

My parents weren't *awfully* upset when they picked me up two days later at the downtown L.A. bus station. They were just happy to see me. My father said only one thing and that was, "The old fool should know when a river is flooding."

"Shhh," said my mother. "He was doing what he thought best."

"Shit, yeah!" I exclaimed, coming to the defense of my friend.

My father's face turned to me with baleful eyes and his lips formed the word he didn't dare say with my mother so close by. But I swear I could hear the growl.

Chapter 7

Spring, 1967 - Dreamworld

There are 380,000 US troops in Vietnam. In April, 400,000 people protest against The War. Martin Luther King calls the government of the United States, "The greatest purveyor of violence in the world." At the beginning of the year, 5008 American soldiers have died in Vietnam. By December, another 9419 will join them.
This is the "Summer of Love." There are riots in Newark and Detroit and 125 other American cities.

The basketball sailed through the air brushing off the tips of Leroy Hinton's fingers and hit me square in the face. My glasses exploded and went flying, landing on the asphalt yard in dozens of pieces. If I could have seen that far, I would have seen that the lenses were scratched and pitted and the plastic frames bent completely out of shape. Destroyed. For now, all I knew was that my eyesight was ruined, the world a fuzzy blur of color and shape.

It took a moment for me to realize I had fallen. The skin on the palms of my hands, where they had broken my fall was raw, ragged, with bits of stone stuck to the flesh. A crowd of players gathered but I ignored them. I never paid attention to them: A Greek chorus, they would only want to taunt me about my weird parents or about being slow or clumsy or whatever you are teased

about in junior high school because you're different. It would begin soon; the noise, the insults. For now, my mind was on Camilla at the long jump pit with the rest of the tenth grade girls.

Nobody ever threw the ball to me. Normally, they threw it at me. Usually, I stood on the sidelines since I didn't get picked for any teams. Today had been an exception. I got the ball a few times and tried to throw it into the basket but kept forgetting you had to bounce the stupid thing when you moved.

Someone picked up the pieces of my glasses and gave them to me. I held them absently, cupped in my hands. An earpiece clung desperately to the main section of frame, grew tired, released its grip, and fell to the ground. *Plink*, it hit the asphalt, bounced, bounced again, then was still. No one noticed. The other boys were pointing at me, making comments, laughing.

Through the filter of growing awareness I heard the voices but disregarded the words. They would be the familiar insults: Retard. Lame-O. And other offensive words from the thoughtless. Being ignored made the other boys uncomfortable and the fact that I did it all the time made them hate me. They never got used to it. You see, the greatest joy in tormenting another person comes in having them lash out at you. Then it's so easy to hit them, and hit them hard. Triumph is never sweeter than when the weak have been vanquished.

A hand on my shoulder, strong and firm with authority kept shaking me. “Are you alright?” it repeated over and over.

I looked into the watery eyes of Coach Bogan, “Boach Cogan” everybody called him behind his back, and nodded slightly, my whole body rocking with the motion. I took a deep breath and felt a pinch in the middle of my face. “I’m OK,” I said, more to myself than the Coach. Suddenly aware of myself, I commented, “My nose hurts.” I touched it and my fingers came away red. The front of my white t-shirt, with “ABRAMS” crookedly stenciled across the front, was splattered like I’d been shot.

“Dumb-shit probably broke his nose,” one of the boys contributed.

“Big enough,” someone else added.

Bogan’s mulish head rose sharply and his gaze latched on one of the boys in the group. “Mortensen!” he called sharply.

“Yes, Coach?” a voice returned meekly.

“That’s enough of that.”

“Yes, Coach,” said Mortensen.

“Gimme Fifty.”

To the guffaws of his fellows, Mortensen fell to the ground on his hands and toes and began 50 push-ups. He dipped deeply to the ground and pushed straight up. After three of these, when he was sure Boach Cogan wasn’t watching, Mortensen began to cheat.

He dipped quickly until ten were completed and then, counting in tens, finished his punishment.

"You boys know how this happened?" Coach asked, though to no one in particular. He could have been talking to the pigeons pecking under the benches where the jocks liked to eat lunch.

The crowd of predominately black kids didn't like the way Bogan said, "boys."

One of the white kids volunteered, "Leroy tossed the ball to Abrams but he missed it." The boy pronounced the name, Lee Roy, in the best imitation of ghetto-talk he could summon.

All the other white guys nodded their heads slightly in agreement. All the blacks looked off into the sky, across the field, wherever. They had attitude to protect themselves. The white kids reverted to grade school where they had been taught to be helpful.

"Yeah?" enquired Bogan, squeezing my shoulder until it hurt.

I shrugged to escape his grip.

Coach growled at the boys to resume the game and he guided me off the outdoor court and towards the P.E. office. I kept my head down while passing the long jump pit, aware of the excitement my bloody shirt gave the girls.

In the office, Coach called my parents. My mother must have answered the phone. Like all men of his generation raised on the sanctity of family, the saintly power of motherhood and the heavy

hand of his father, Boach Cogan had an inbred respect for women that he resented. Away from school and at a ball game, or the bar after the game, he would join his buddies and make deprecating remarks about "babes." On the phone right now, try as he might to eliminate any tone of deference, the cuffed ears and slapped mouths of his own childhood rose into Bogan's throat and the respect for my mother rang true. We are what we are, but we are also how we were raised to be. All Bogan could manage of his assured superiority was an affectation of too many beers. "Thiziz John Bogan at the high school," he spoke into the phone. "Steve'z had him an accident... Nah; he'z alright... Bloodynoszizall... Yeah, and hiz glazzez are broke, too... No, I'll tell the office... Uh-huh. He'll be waiting for you here."

During the brief conversation, I examined the fuzzy walls of the office. They were covered with posters and pictures of football players throwing and catching; basketball players leaping; baseball players sliding or hitting; runner's chests straining to meet the finish line ahead of their bodies. The entire room felt like arrested motion.

Bogan's manner changed the moment he hung up the phone. Unconsciously, I filed the attitude away. "Geeze you're a bloody mess," Bogan exclaimed like some woozy drunk. Coach pointed to the locker room and commanded, "Clean yourself up, Kid. We don't want your mama thinking we tried to kill you."

"She doesn't drive."

"Huh?"

If you didn't walk or bike to school, you could take the bus or be driven. The black kids rode the bus because they had to after the school board had gerrymandered the district to incorporate the legally mandated 10% minority. Crenshaw to West L.A. is a long way to walk and it wasn't considered cool to bike. Most white kids were chauffeured by their mothers or by suited dads on the way to work. My mother didn't drive and my dad wouldn't leave the house until after lunch. Someone had stolen my bike so I walked to school.

"She doesn't drive," I repeated. "She'll have to talk my father in to it. It'll be a while. He doesn't leave the house this early."

Boach Cogan's head waved slowly back and forth. "Then, we don't want your father," and he emphasized the word as if speaking to a three year old, "getting the idea we don't take care of you." He hooked his thumb to the locker room and said, "Shower." After I turned my back, Coach said, "Come back here when you're through." Cogan put his feet up on the desk and did whatever it is he did when the boys were out on the field.

In the empty locker room I stripped and padded with bare feet across the cold concrete floor to the showers. A bank of nozzles, most with shower heads, stuck out of the tiled wall. It

always made me think of photos I'd seen of the Nazi gas chambers. After a long journey in the cattle cars, how would you like a nice hot shower? Then the Jews would take off all their clothes and crowd into the cold building to get clean. Except water wouldn't come out of the pipes.

I stood under the cold water, waiting for it to get hot. Water cascaded over me and ran down my narrow shoulders in anastomosing rivulets. I could feel a bruise where Bogan had squeezed me. The water warmed. The drain began to back up. I didn't care. It always backed up.

Steam began to fill the shower and I thought of it not as water vapor but poison gas. I tested how long I could hold my breath. I pretended the room was filled with people and that one by one they quietly sank, dead, to the floor. In English class last week we had read in a poem, "It is good to die for one's country." I tried imagining to die for my country. Nothing happened.

When I'd had enough of hot water and poison gas I turned off the faucet and stood in the shower room until the returning coolness made me shiver. There was no Aide to hand out one of the starched white shower towels so I shivered until I was dry. I combed damp hair with my fingers, dressed and returned to the P.E. office. My parents were both there, my father and Coach

Bogan talking. I suppose my father did all the talking and Coach pretended to listen.

Blood and bandages, even Band-Aids, caused my mother to faint from worry. She made a big deal out of every injury, inversely proportional to the hurt. As expected, my mother got one look at the rime of blood around my nostrils and her face drained of color. Her hands went to her throat and she gave a little strangled cry.

I rolled my eyes and said softly, no doubt with a trace of exasperation, "Mom."

My father held the broken eyeglasses in both hands and attempted a chuckle. "Mashed 'em up pretty good!" They would cost a lot to replace. Ever since my father had stopped going to the shop my parents argued about money and gave the impression that the only thing keeping the family off the streets was luck.

We walked out of the office together, my father still holding the broken glasses and my mother clucking like the California Quail that used our backyard as a brothel. My father drove us to Dr. Bernicelli, the fleshy optometrist who made glasses for the family, so I could be fitted with a new pair just like the old ones. I didn't like the ugly black plastic frames but that's what we wore in those days.

Dr. Bernicelli fiddled through boxes for a loaner pair of glasses. He held up old, beat up frames with one, two or no

lenses, guessing at the prescription until be found something he liked. I pictured him collecting castaway eyewear from bodies in the shower. “The boy is going to need something to tide him over until new lenses can be manufactured,” he said to my parents with his fat voice.

I wandered around the office, my hands behind my back like the Camp Commandant, looking at all the out-of-focus photographs of the Doctor shaking hands with famous people. The people stood in unnatural poses, not facing each other but looking straight out at the camera. There was a picture of Dr. Bernicelli shaking hands with President Kennedy, a picture of Dr. Bernicelli shaking hands with Clark Gable, a picture of Dr. Bernicelli shaking hands with Babe Ruth and pictures of him shaking hands with lots of other dead people. It didn’t pay to know Dr. Bernicelli. There was also a picture of Dr. Bernicelli getting a peck on the cheek from Marilyn Monroe. Light reflected oddly from a line of sweat across Dr. Bernicelli’s forehead.

I knew my parents didn’t know who any of the people were in the photos but that didn’t stop me from asking them who all the people were and what made them famous. I liked playing this game. I knew the answers but they didn’t.

My father smiled and played along but he got bored with knowing less than me and changed the subject with, “How did you manage to smash your glasses, anyway?”

"Got hit with a basketball, I guess."

"You guess?" my father asked politely.

"They never throw the ball to me," I added by way of explanation. "I was thinking about something else." I stopped. "They think it's funny to throw the ball to people when they're not looking." I stopped again and thought a moment. "Didn't they do that when you were a kid?"

My father ignored the question, probably thinking I was playing the I-know-more-than-you game again. Of course I knew my father hadn't played basketball when he went to school. My father worked with a thimble on his finger instead of attending school. He must have known other kids though.

"You're always thinking about something," my father said. "What was it this time?"

"Oh, noth..."

"And don't say, 'nothing,'" my father warned.

I considered what to say. Outside the guidance counselor's office was a bulletin board with "Summer Opportunities" written in bold letters across the top. Most listings were for jobs as bus boy or internships where you traded work experience for a salary.

But stuck right in the middle of all the announcements was a full color poster from American Outdoor Adventures: AOA. With startling photographs of majestic scenery, they advertised

backpacking and climbing trips for teens in the mountains of the Sierra Nevada. “Food and equipment, plus one high adventure guide for every six students on one, two, and three month courses,” it proclaimed. “All you need to do is show up!”

I had seen Camilla in front of the listings, discussing the merits of this job or that with her friends when I heard her say, “This trip with AOA sounds like fun. I’m gonna do it.”

Maggie, her best friend, didn’t sound enthusiastic about the idea. The two of them were a study in contrasts. Maggie was tall with long, straight black hair, and as skinny as me - like a flagpole. She could be friendly, but garrulousness was not in her and her first reaction to almost anything was to find all the faults. Maggie had a tough time finding the energy to do anything physical and preferred to watch people do things rather than participate.

Camilla was shorter, with light-colored hair that bleached during the summer to an almost hay-blond hue. Her brother was in my grade but Camilla was one year ahead of us. All the guys liked her. She hung back, not sure of what drew them to her.

Maggie was saying how it looked like a lot of hard work and that, “I don’t want to be like a horse and carry those heavy packs.” Camilla just laughed and said she would talk to her parents about letting her go on the two- or three-month course. That’s when I decided I had to go too.

"There's this summer trip..." I started to say but Dr. Bernicelli waltzed in at that moment and spoiled my chance.

Like my father, Dr. Bernicelli loved cigars. He'd smoke them or chew them, it made no difference. Sometimes he'd do both. For a man as big as he was, the optometrist was surprisingly nimble on his feet. He moved through the office and waiting room like a dancer across the stage. There is a grace, somewhat akin to cats, that big people can attain when they are in familiar surroundings. Because of their whiskers, cats always know how wide the world is. That accounts for their ability to poke their heads, and bodies, through what we would consider too small an opening. And, being mostly fur, they have lots of room for squeezing. Dr. Bernicelli behaved like a cat. Everything in his office was designed to allow him to pass, just barely, as if he had gone through it with his own design of cat whiskers in setting it up.

My replacement glasses looked lost in the doctor's pudgy maw. With a puff and a huff the optometrist sat down on a chair mounted on rollers and slid towards me. Talking out the side of his mouth opposite the cigar, Dr. Bernicelli said, "Here. Try these," and thrust them onto my face. To my parents, and with great joviality, he said, "Good thing I found these or your boy would be walking around blind for a week!" Also to my parents, he

said, "The kid that ordered these never picked them up so I'll let you have them for half price."

My parents murmured their gratitude.

For anyone who has never worn prescription glasses, it's difficult to describe the pleasure of new lenses. No matter how hard you try to keep them clean, glasses get gritty and scratched. Normally, the viewer doesn't see these imperfections because they lie before the focus of view. It's only when the near-sighted person looks closely at an object that the little nicks and dings become apparent because they bend light differently than the lens. Little prisms appear on the surface of the glass from the minute gouges and larger marks make for areas where the image is out of focus. New eyeglasses are free from these problems and, for as long as it lasts, you get a clear and clean, fresh view of the universe.

With some amount of pleasure I looked out upon my world, sharp and in focus for the first time in several hours. Without glasses, colors are muted and scenes blurred like a Monet painting. With them, you feel whole again and a functioning member of the human race. Ignoring the same ugly, thick black frames I always had, I smiled.

Dr. Bernicelli grunted and said, "All right. Another satisfied customer." He pushed back his stool, chewed an inch or so off the end of his cigar and grunted again. He crossed his

arms, rested them on his protruding stomach and grunted a third time. "Watch yourself next time, Stevie," he said to me. "I'll send the bill," he said to my father.

"Thank you, Doctor," said my father. In unison, on cue, the three of us Abrams' rose and walked out of the office. I played with my new frames, looking over the rims and back down again to remind myself of the difference in focus. I took them off a few times and polished them, fogging the lenses gently or harshly, depending on my momentary mood, with a breath of air from my mouth and then rubbed them vigorously with the treated cloth the doctor had given me.

When we got into the car, before my father pulled away from the curb, he brought up the matter of thinking again. Sometimes my father would forget something almost as fast as it happened. Other times he wouldn't let go of a thought until he had chewed on it like a dog chews a bone. "What did you say was on your mind when you got smacked?"

I looked up quickly to my father smiling at me. He knew I wanted something. He knew. "There's this summer program. You spend a couple of months in the mountains, hiking and stuff. I was thinking it might be OK to do that."

My father turned away from me and started the car. We pulled away from the curb.

I quickly went on with, "That is, if we can afford it."

My mother turned in her seat and spoke for the first time since Coach Bogan's office. "What makes you want to go *camping* all of a sudden?"

I thought about Camilla and I thought about the pictures on the posters. The sky was an incredible shade of blue. There were shots of kids, like me, hiking up bright white rocks onto pointed mountain summits. There was a photo of a couple of guys sprawled on a carpet of wildflowers. Photos of lakes and rushing streams. I remembered the description of rock climbing, "Dangling by a lifeline of rope with nothing above you but sky and nothing below but air." I thought about Camilla again, too.

I could see that my father was smiling, even though he was concentrating on driving the car. The skin around his cheeks was puffed up.

My mother looked around again and repeated her question.

"It sounds exciting," I said. "They don't play basketball, either," I added.

I was surprised at her reaction. She looked quickly at my father, almost as if he'd slapped her. She also smiled and raised her eyebrows a bit. She looked back at me. "*Exciting*?" she said, swallowing another smile. "Exciting?" she repeated.

"Your mother and I will think about it," I heard my father say. The car stopped at a traffic signal and my parents turned in their seats.

I felt uncomfortable. My parents were staring at me, both smiling, as if they shared a secret and weren't going to tell me what it was. My face flushed and I lowered my eyes.

Thoughts of Camilla popped into my mind and a wash of good feeling fell over me. Soon, I began to grin like my parents. They had never let me do something like this before. Maybe I was in on a secret; I just didn't know what it was.

The light turned green and we began to move again.

Chapter 8

What I Learned About Myself This Summer

What I Learned About Myself This Summer

by

Steven A. Abrams

September 14, 1967

English 2, Essay Assignment

Mr. Broyles, 5th Period

This is the first thing Bill Bridges said when he had us all together at the beginning of our trip. “What you do when you’re young carries over to the rest of your life.” The reason I can put this in quotation marks is that Bill said it at least once a day. He introduced every new activity to us during our three months in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, John Muir’s “Range of Light,” by saying, “What you do when you’re young carries over to the rest of your life.” Bill said the Sierra were, “The best mountains in the world.”

The trip I went on was organized by AOA - American Outdoor Adventures and I heard about it by reading a poster outside the guidance office last May. “For ninth and

tenth grade students," the poster said. I would be entering tenth grade in the fall so I qualified.

At first I was pretty scared - uncertain, really - about camping for such a long period of time. I'd never gone camping before. I've gone fishing and hiking and stuff like that but camping would be completely new. I didn't know if there would be anything to do at night, especially if you couldn't watch TV. I was pretty surprised to find out that just the act of camping itself takes a lot of time.

It's not as if you can wake up in the morning and jump into the shower like you can at home. First you have to light the stove and that means filling the tank with fuel, priming the stove and listening to it fizzle and sputter until the thing is hot enough to burn regularly. While that's happening, you go down to the creek, or lake and collect water in the big pot. Once it's on the stove, it takes about five minutes to heat two quarts of water if you want to wash up.

That's right, you can't even take a shower if you want to! And the water isn't all that hot either! It was pretty groady at first but we got used to it. Like Bill would say, "You can get used to anything if there aren't any alternatives." After the first couple of days we wouldn't wash except to throw some cold water on our faces in the morning. If there was a nice place to swim, we'd do that in the middle of the day. I guess you can say that I learned what Bill said about getting used to something. Thinking about it now, I know why it's important to take showers but, if for some reason I couldn't, it's not like I'd die.

Besides, in the mountains you learn there's all different sorts of definitions for what we take for granted here in the city. What is "clean" is one thing that changes from place to place and it's what I like to tell people about when they ask me about living in the mountains. But there's other things too. Like, what is "beauty." And, what is "friendship." And, how do you get along with people you don't like, even when you have no other alternative but to do it? And when you have to rely on them, and them rely on you?

Bill always said that people come to the mountains for lots of different reasons. Some come to find themselves and some come to find others. I don't really understand what he meant by that, but he used to say stuff like that all the time. I figure, one day, it will all come together and make sense. That's what my parents keep telling me about a lot of things I don't understand. "Just wait," they say. Anyway, that's what Bill said would happen too. He was right about a lot of things, so I bet he'll be right about that too.

I don't know for sure why I came to the mountains but I can tell you what I got out of being there: confidence in myself. I didn't know what I knew until towards the end of the summer when the accident happened and Bill was killed. It was really horrible and I don't think I'll ever forget it.

We had been camping in Rattlesnake Valley for a week. Rattlesnake Valley is a tributary that dumps into the Kern River Canyon. Bill said it was a perfect place to do our solo and the granite up there was a great place to practice our technical rock

climbing skills. Up to then we'd done some mountaineering and climbing but nothing too hard.

Mountaineering is when you climb mountains but you don't need any special gear like ropes, helmets, carabineers or "protection." Rock climbing means you need this special gear to protect you in case you fall. It uses the skills you learn in mountaineering but it's much harder to do because the dangers are greater.

There were seven of us, including Bill, our instructor. AOA always makes sure there is one teacher for no more than six students. That way everyone gets personal tutoring if they need it. I think it works out good that way and I wish we could have smaller classes here at school. Teachers could get to know kids a lot better and vice versa. I think I learn better when there are less kids in class.

We were climbing on this route that Bill called, "Meet on the Ledge," because it reminded him of a favorite song of his with that title and because at the top of the pitch there's this great ledge you can stand on and look all the way to the east to see Mt. Whitney. Mt. Whitney is the tallest mountain in the lower 48 states.

Bill went up first and set the "protection," putting hex nuts in cracks in the rock, hooking a carabineer into them, and then pulling the climbing rope though the "beaner." The hex nut is a chunk of stainless steel, like the nut you use to tighten a bolt, that you jam into the rock. They come in a bunch of different sizes and depending on what size the crack is, you use a different hex.

After Bill set the route, each of us climbed up and we were able to "Meet on the Ledge." The view was great! It was like being on the top of the world except that there

was more to climb above you. So, if you wanted to climb higher, you could be on the top of one world and then climb to the top of another. Living in L.A., I never knew such places like the Sierra Nevada existed until I got there.

The sky there is so blue! And when there are clouds, they're like marshmallow chariots being pulled across the sky. The high country meadows are full of these amazing little wildflowers called gentians. They only grow about an inch high and they're the deepest blue color you've ever seen. Sometimes the mosquitos can get bad but you get used to them after a while and they don't bother you anymore.

After we ate lunch on the ledge, we got to rappel down to the bottom. It's so fun! And easy too - "A piece of cake," Bill said. Your belayer, the person who is tied in to the other end of the climbing rope, lets you down and you get to walk backwards down the rock. If you're really good, you can do like they do on the Matterhorn at Disneyland where they leap way out and let the rope out real fast so that you're falling but you're not really falling because you're tied into the rope. That's what Bill was showing us when the accident happened.

Of everybody on the trip: Me, Rob, Paul, Camilla, Todd and Jeremy, Camilla climbed the best so she got to rappel down first. Every climber wears a harness, like a diaper made of nylon webbing, and the belayer is tied into an "anchor" in the rock by means of this harness. That way, if the climber falls, the belayer can catch him without falling too. The belayer is supposed to let out as much rope as the climber wants and controls this by passing it though a special beaner called a "figure eight" on his harness.

Bill belayed Camilla from the top and when she got down she set up to belay all of us down. I guess Bill thought that would be good practice for her. Camilla hadn't been too happy the last couple of days so maybe Bill thought that giving her some extra responsibility would make her feel better. He did that kind of thing a lot.

After Camilla set up her belay anchors, the rest of us rappeled down leaving Bill to go last. I guess Bill decided to do this fancy Disneyland Matterhorn rappel since he trusted Camilla so much. He was rappeling down, jumping further and further out each time. It sure looked like fun! Camilla kept yelling to him, "I can't hold you," or something like that. Bill took one more jump out from the rock and kept going. The tail end of the rope passed through Camilla's figure eight and followed after Bill like he was a balloon on a string. But instead of falling up, he fell down.

Afterwards is when we learned how much we knew about being out in the wilderness. The five of us guys really pulled together, especially in taking care of Camilla. She kind of fell all to pieces. One minute she would be angry, saying things like, "Bill shouldn't have done it. I told him not to but he wouldn't stop." And the next minute she would be crying. It got really bad there for a while.

Four of us stayed behind with Bill. I hiked out to the nearest ranger station, 20 miles away, with Rob, one of the other guys on the trip. We had to tell the ranger where the accident happened and the ranger arranged for a helicopter to carry Bill out. In the excitement they forgot about us and Rob and I hiked back to Rattlesnake the next day. The rest of the group was waiting there for us and we got organized and hiked out by ourselves. Boy were our parents mad when they heard about that!

What I learned the most about myself on the trip is this. No matter how hard a problem might seem to be, there is always a way to solve it. Thinking about everything that Bill taught us, and how we were able to put it to work after the accident, I think that I will always be able to handle anything bad that life deals to me. All I'll have to do is remember that time in Rattlesnake Valley and then, whatever it is that is making me feel bad won't seem so bad after all.

The End

Chapter 9

early Spring, 1968 - Crossing Lines

In the village of My Lai, in South Vietnam, 300 - 500 people are murdered by US soldiers. They join about one million other Vietnamese civilians killed by US ground fire or bombing in "free fire zones."

In tenth grade I hung out a lot with Michael Barker. He was Camilla's brother. I called him Mikey but he had a weight problem so everybody else called him Fatty. Mikey didn't walk, he rolled. He wore yellow t-shirts with back stripes that went around him like a barbershop pole. He resembled a banana with stripes. A brother and sister were never so dissimilar.

All the guys in school knew that Camilla was a sexpot. She was one year ahead of us. Mikey hated that all the guys hung around his sister like a pack of hounds. Mikey and Camilla didn't get on too well either. She called him worse names than Fatty. But Mikey felt protective of Camilla. Whenever the guys would call her or come to the door looking for her, Mikey always told them she wasn't home. He told them to go away.

We had an assignment in creative writing class to write about a true, personal, experience but to make it into fiction. I planned to write about the funeral we had on our street when Joe Jeven's dog got run over but fictionalize it to New Orleans and

the Mardi Gras with jazz players walking slowly down the street playing, "The Bard of Beale Street," because I'd seen a movie with that in it. Mikey knew he would write about Camilla but he didn't know what about.

We were sitting in Mikey's bedroom, at his desk, working on our stories when Camilla came home. She slammed the front door, ran upstairs to her room and slammed that door too. In a few minutes she went to the bathroom, slammed that door, returned to her bedroom, slammed that door. You get the idea.

I ignored it. Every time the door would slam, Mikey would raise his head from the paper he worked on and sigh. At the rate Camilla slammed doors, he wouldn't get anything done on his story. Mikey was being protective of his sister though he didn't leave the room and even though he didn't know what he was protecting her from.

I got up to use the bathroom. I had to walk past Camilla's room. When I did, she opened her door, soft and sneaky, and said something to me. I didn't hear her so I said, "What?"

"C'meer," she said. She opened the door a little more and I could see she wore nothing but her underwear. She looked really good in her underwear. So I came there. She reached out with one hand and pulled me into her bedroom. I didn't need to fight her so I didn't.

All the time we did it she kept calling me, "Tom. Tom. Oh, Tom." I knew Tom, one of the jocks who played football. I didn't know what to do, about her calling me by his name, but I didn't really mind. If she wanted to do that, it didn't seem like such a bad idea to me.

What I really didn't know about was what to do about It. Well, I knew, but I didn't know when and where. When and where had always been a mystery. One of those big mysteries where you knew it existed but didn't believe it. I mean, I knew about It in the abstract but not about It in the reality. The mystery came, not from the unknown, but a funny kind of known that came about from all the talk you heard. Not the talk itself. And not even the subject. But the way the talk was talked. As if you got to belong to some kind of club. The talk was the same way like when you're a little kid and they're choosing sides for a baseball game and all the bigger kids say, "You're too young."

Finally, at last, she said, "You gonna stick it in me, or what?" It was me she was talking to now. Not Tom.

So, I made a point of sticking it in her but she ended up having to help me along. I knew something about everything down there but only in the most general of ways.

I wouldn't say it was great sex. Not even good sex. But it was sex and a tenth grade boy isn't interested in great, good or even indifferent sex. He's only interested in sex.

Ten minutes later I was back in Mikey's room but had to leave pretty soon again because I'd never gone to the bathroom.

The next day in creative writing class we had to read our stories out loud. Mikey stood up first, not embarrassed or shy like the rest of us. His face buried in the paper, he read, beginning by telling us how important Camilla had always been to him. "Everyone needs an older sister," he read. And he read about how the friends of their father always treated her differently. Fawning. Touching. Gloating. Leering. How it had always been that way. How she changed after last summer and didn't mind all the attention any more. How she went out with guys from school. Not coming home until late. Or not at all. Nothing new to me until I heard my name. "C'meer, Steve," he read.

Mikey kept reading. Didn't he know my heart had stopped? That everyone in class stared at me? The teacher should have stopped him. That's the teacher's job, isn't it? To educate and protect kids from being cruel?

I don't know why but we all thought Mr. Andrews was right on! Boss! Heavy. He listened to jazz. He'd play it for us in class - Coltrane, Miles Davis - a little smile, a smirk, maybe, lifting the corners of his thick lips. Mr. Andrews wore one of those little Jomo Kenyetta hats and kept his Afro clipped short and neat. He had posters of Huey Newton and Malcolm X on the

wall. He called us “Honky” and “Whitey.” We loved it. He was so *heavy*.

When he finished, Mikey sat down. I felt everybody’s eyes on me. People turned around in their seats, staring at me. The eyes in wonder at what I’d done. They had all seen Camilla. Jealous eyes. Mr. Andrews didn’t say anything more than, “Next!”

Nobody moved.

I didn’t want to speak to that fat pig, Michael, ever again.

Chapter 10

late Spring, 1968 - Brothers

Richard Milhaus Nixon is elected 37th president of the United States.

In April, Martin Luther King was assassinated.

I've always wondered why "assassinated," when "murdered," or "killed," or "shot to death" served as well for everyone else.

People on television reported the news with the same severity as I remembered from when President Kennedy had been shot five years before. I was old enough this time to understand the significance and that made a difference to me.

They also broadcast a speech by Senator Robert Kennedy made that same evening. Senator Kennedy had "thrown his hat in the ring," as the news commentators said that year, to run for President. On the "Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour" they made lots of jokes about all the challengers to Lyndon Johnson. In case you don't remember, Richard Nixon won that year.

In response to King's killing, I remember Senator Kennedy saying, "It is perhaps well to ask what kind of a nation we are." Addressing his black audience the night of King's assassination he said, "You can be filled with bitterness, with hatred and a desire for revenge. What we need in the United States is not division. What we need in the United States is not hatred. What

we need in the United States is not violence or lawlessness but love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or they be black. And in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."

Kennedy made sense to me. I wished I could vote so I could vote for him. With all the protests and demonstrations going on all over the place, Robert Kennedy made sense to me.

Louis [Loo-iz] White and I worked as lab partners in biology that year. Before King's murder, Louis had been a happy guy. He loved to tease me about how much better black people were at sports than white people. I would tease him how much better white people were at science. He promised to make me a better basketball player and I promised to make him a better biologist.

After King, all Louis could talk about was revenge. A typical comment: "The brothers are going to rise up and wipe the menace of the white man from the face of the earth."

Louis started talking about, "*We*." How, "*We*," were going to do this or that and how, "*We* have been oppressed long enough," and how, "*We* are going to strike back at Whitey." His was a far cry from the, "We shall overcome," I heard preached in other places. Overnight, Louis went from being, if not my friend, at least someone who I could talk to and work with and became one of

the black guys who terrorized you if you went into certain bathrooms alone.

The funniest thing of it all was that Louis was only half black. The other half was white. Louis was Jewish on his mother's side. That made him a hundred percent Jewish in the eyes of the Pope. Louis had even been Bar Mitzvahed. He wore the heavy gold ring with his initials, LEW [Louis Eugene White], that all the other Bar Mitzvah guys wore.

My parents hated gold. My mother said, "Gold is bad for the Jews." When the Nazis came for her relatives they came for their gold teeth.

Why Louis started identifying with being a hundred percent black made no sense to me.

In June, after dinner on election night for the California primary, Rob [my buddy from the AOA trip] and I hitched a ride from his parents to the Ambassador Hotel. We joined several hundred other people on the sidewalk, welcoming Senator Kennedy and waiting for the election results. We had a great time on the sidewalk. Everybody laughed and joked and told stories. We hung out with some other guys from University High School who had brought over some Thai stick.

The day was done and tomorrow here when everything went wrong.

The ambulance came with hoards of motorcycle cops. Then, the SWAT Team arrived. Rob and I and the Uni High guys freaked. But the cops ignored us. All the action centered on the Ambassador Hotel. The whole crowd of us gathered around the front doors but the cops pushed us back. I had a sick feeling that something bad had happened. "Let's get out of here," I said to Rob. But he wanted to stay and see what caused all the excitement.

A rumor circulated that the Senator had been shot. Somebody had a transistor radio and had heard a news interruption. I didn't believe it. Couldn't believe it. Couldn't.

The next day, Mr. Schwartz, the school principal announced the Senator's death over the school P.A. system. I felt as if someone had stepped on my past and stolen my future. I turned to Louis after the announcement and asked, "Is that what you meant? Is that what you meant about revenge?" He just looked at me like I had landed from Mars.

Chapter 11

1969 - The Funeral

The Chicago Seven [Rennie Davis, David Bellinger, John Froines, Tom Hayden, Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin and Lee Weiner] are convicted of a conspiracy to cross State lines in order to instigate a riot during the 1968 Democratic Party convention. Ohio National Guardsmen kill four students at Kent State College. The students were protesting against the US invasion of Cambodia. President Nixon calls the antiwar college students, "Bums."

It's hard to think of someone you know being dead. Even now, thinking about it makes my heart race. Makes it so I can't breathe.

There were five of us in Tom's car. Seniors and juniors. A nearly summer night. The top down. Cruisin.'

In those days everybody went to the San Fernando Valley to cruise.

Stop in at The Shack and get a burger. Say hello to people. Ask them, "What's the happs?" Drive down one side of the Boulevard and back up the other. Showing off.

Maybe smoke a joint.

Everybody cruised. Cruising on Van Nuys Boulevard in the Valley was the only place you could meet Blacks or Chicanos,

where we could all show off without getting into fights. Cruising was the only place people felt equal.

On those hot summer nights, maybe somebody would sneak a couple of bottles of beer out of their parent's fridge. Sometimes something a little bit harder. Put it in a jar, a little every week, until you have enough. Parents think they're hitting it a little hard lately, if they pay attention to the bottle at all.

Mostly they don't notice. That's what the store is for. Get another.

Anyway. There we are in Tom's convertible with the top down. We must have been really high, the stars overhead passing by like meteors. All of a sudden, Tom says, "Let's go to Sepulveda."

He's talking about Sepulveda Dam. A funny place for a dam. Never any water behind it unless it's really dumped. It was built for flood control a sign says. To keep mud and rock from wiping out the homes downstream. Can you see that? Not even for water. They built it for mud and rock.

Everything has changed now but back then you could drive out onto the fields behind the dam. In the day time there were hot rod courses and dirt bike tracks there. At night, they had a chain link gate they locked up. Anybody could break in. We did it all the time. The city was always saying they were going to do something about it but, deep inside, what they meant was that,

"Boys will be boys," and boys needed a place to go to stay out of trouble.

"Better they go there than take drugs," the city hall people said.

"Better they go there than drink," said our teachers.

"Better they go there than mess around with our daughters," said the parents of the daughters.

The girls went there too. The really bold ones knew about the soft spot under the Eucalyptus trees. You always knew about those girls because the next day you could smell it on them. I knew one of the girls who always went there. The smell of Eucalyptus still reminds me of those nights and those girls.

That's where Tom wanted to go. Not the trees but the field where all the guys with hot cars would drive around.

Sepulveda was the best place to take drugs and drink and have sex because the cops never went there; were told not to. It's the place where boys could be boys and boys can't be boys if they have to worry about getting busted.

What the hell. If the gate was locked everybody knew how to get in. You take a hammer; a ball peen hammer is best. Hold the padlock loosely in your hand, flat side up. Smack it with the ball of the hammer, right in the middle. There's a spring holding the lock together inside. If you hit it just right, the lock pops open. When you're done, close the lock.

If the City ever knew how many of us went there, to be boys, they would have done something a long time before.

We got in the usual way, then Tom tore up the hill beyond the fence. At the top he stood up in the driver's seat and hopped onto the seat back. John Miller crawled down onto the floorboard and put his hand on the gas paddle and we drove like that, around and around. Tom steering with his feet. We're all laughing it up. What a night.

Geeze, we must have been high.

We did that all the time. Everybody did. It was fun.

Anyway. The car went too fast. John Miller couldn't see from down there with his hand on the gas. Tom missed the turn. Everybody went flying, bouncing on the cold, hard ground. John Miller lost his leg. Paul and I, in the back seat, got banged up. Broken bones. Enough bangs on the head to knock some sense into a rock.

Tom died. Blood everywhere.

Man, oh man. Just like that. Like snapping your fingers. Closing a door. A light turned off. He's here and now he's gone. How do you believe there's a Heaven after you've seen something like that happen to a guy you know?

At the funeral he's lying there in an open casket just like his parents wanted. Not a mark on him.

He's wearing a suit. And a tie. Shoes and socks too. Black shoes and black socks. His hair is cut and it's all combed.

His eyes are closed but he doesn't look asleep. I don't know what dead is supposed to look like but I can't help laughing when I see Tom.

Everybody's parents give me dirty looks but all the other guys know what I'm laughing at because they're laughing too. They're laughing inside but they're still laughing.

Alive, Tom Murtagh never looked like this. Not when we knew him. It was always holey sneakers without socks. A pair of faded Levi 501s. A t-shirt with something written on it. Long stringy blond hair hanging loose in front of his face.

"I don't know who this creep is but he isn't Tom," Rob whispers to me.

"Get a look at the suit!" says Bill Lantana.

Everybody says the same thing. It can't be Tom Murtagh.

You want to believe what they tell you about God and Heaven. But you're seventeen and nothing about life and death makes any sense. Nothing is like they tell you it is.

Camilla is in the front row of the chapel, crying. She's like that.

Chapter 12

Summer, 1969 St. Elmo's Fire

Senator Edward Kennedy drives his car off the Chappaquiddick Island bridge, killing his companion, Mary Jo Kopechne.

The summer after the accident, I got a job at a summer camp in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. I never had a clue about how much fun a person could have working at a job. Sure, it was hard work. But we got the responsibility that teens crave and the chance to show our leadership skills in the best light. The summer days were long with plenty of free time to investigate the world around me and enjoy the company of friends.

Spending summers in the Sierra spoiled my adult life. How can anyone have a "real" job all year when there are mountains to explore?

When I got off the bus at Camp Wolveron for the first time it felt like coming home. I met the rest of the staff. They weren't any different from me. Wilderness camping, hiking and climbing were all that mattered in life.

I learned early that what made the place so special to me was not the physical setting of the camp but the special type of person who drifted there to work. More than anything else it was like a family.

During the two summer seasons I lived there I became part of a small group of staff who specialized in the natural history of the Sierra. Every free moment was devoted to learning about the plants, animals, insects, birds, geography, people and weather of our mountain home. Every conversation centered on these themes. To the young campers, and the rest of the staff, we were "The Professors."

The facility dated back to the 1930s during the Civilian Conservation Corps days. We called the only building there, The Lodge. It housed the kitchen, pantry, office, first aid room, trading post and gear room. I don't count the outhouses, and we had a lot of them, as buildings.

The Lodge had been built with a steeply pitched roof to shed the heavy Sierran snows. The design also worked to hold the building together because there was no way for the roof to shed all of the over four hundred inches of winter snow we got every winter. Over 30 rafters floated above the main beam by about an inch. Steel truss rods were installed to keep the walls from bowing out. The idea was that the snow load would push the roof downward and the floating rafters would absorb some of that weight. Once the load was on the main beam, the truss rods would do their bit by using the downward force of the snow to pull the walls inward.

We didn't have electricity at Camp except a gasoline generator that ran the dishwashing machine and the Edgemar Farms refrigerator truck that served as our "walk-in" refrigerator. That meant no electronic entertainment for the staff unless it ran on batteries so we had to create our own amusements. A bunch of the guys played guitar so we all sang songs from sixties folk groups like the Weavers, Peter, Paul, and Mary and the Kingston Trio. Perfect for campfire sing-a-longs. Also, we snuck in a Bob Dylan song whenever possible. I even learned how to pick out a few chords on the guitar and tried my hand at playing tunes by the Band, the staff's rock-n-roll favorite, but never figured out how to make me sound as good as them.

For figuring out chords and words we had a Ghetto Blaster - a portable radio and tape player. We took turns in buying batteries for the thing so we could listen to tapes in the morning and evening. To improve radio reception we had rigged up a thin copper wire antenna that was looped onto the steel truss rods in the kitchen. No one in the Sierra got better reception than us because the whole building served as an aerial. At night, when the airwaves were clear, the AM dial could pull in broadcasts from England and even Japan.

California summers are pretty dry in the lowlands but the high mountains make their own weather. July in particular is thunderstorm month. The clouds blossom instantly, it turns cool

and dark, the sky cracks open with sound and sometimes it even rains. More likely though, the moisture is re-evaporated before it reaches the ground.

That first summer I was standing on the back porch after lunch watching the flashing of light from a thunder and lightening storm moving in on us. The Camp Director, a few other adults and the rest of The Professors were inside the kitchen drinking coffee, having a snack and hypothesizing about what made lightning light.

Outside, the strikes were coming a bit too quickly and a bit too closely for comfort so I started to move inside. All of a sudden one bolt hit a tree about 50 feet in front of me. The top of the tree exploded and a large chunk of red fir came sailing down and hit the spot where I had just been standing. It was something to see!

I ran inside, my heart beating hard enough to burst my eardrums. Everybody looked at me like I was crazy or weird. The storm had arrived and lightning was tearing through the black sky. It was raining like being inside a waterfall.

It rained and rained.

We were all pretty excited. Thunder rolled and echoed through the forest. Flash went the light. Boom went the sound! Flash: Boom! Flash-boom. As it came closer and closer the

intervals got tighter and tighter. Flashboom! When it passed, the rain sounds took over.

Then, it happened: Saint Elmo's Fire. We heard it first, or, rather, felt it; a humming in the ears and a tingling in the bones. The room took on a bluish tint like Captain Kirk was about to beam aboard. Suddenly, all the truss roads in the building began to glow. The humming grew louder. With a snap, the blue pulse of electricity passed through the rods, racing back and forth and chasing itself through the building. It cracked and the bolt disappeared into the ground via the radio. That radio never worked again.

Of course we all shouted and laughed. Such a strange sensation to be part of something larger than ourselves. I'd read about cavers finding little creeks flowing through the earth. I contemplated what it could be like to be part of the water table. Now I had the distinct feeling of being part of the atmosphere for the first time in my life.

Instead of moving through the atmosphere, the electricity had, just for a moment, moved through me. Like two living things come together and then teased apart. Then it had touched everyone else in the room and we were tied together in a web of energy. It's an odd feeling to be part of something larger than yourself.

Chapter 13

Summer, 1969 - Be Prepared

Neil Armstrong is the first person to walk upon the moon. "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind."

Camp Wolveron had junior and senior staff. We all did the same amount of work and the only difference between the juniors and the seniors was age. Juniors were 14-16. Seniors were everybody else.

One week we had trouble with our electric dishwashing machine. Only, we didn't know about the trouble until too late. The rinse cycle - where the soap is supposed to be washed off from plates, cups, bowls and silverware - had broken. Not until mid-week did the importance of this exhibit itself with campers and staff.

But I'm getting ahead of the story.

At thirteen and a half, Kenji Furikama was the juniorest of the junior staff. Like many of us, Kenji's first time away from home had been to attend Camp and his first extended time away was to work on Camp staff.

Summer camps are a lot like the military. The youngest, those with the least amount of power or control over their lives, always get the jobs no one else wants. Or will do. Sometimes these jobs are important and should have older, wiser and more

experienced people doing them. Like being in charge of the dishwashing machine.

As low man on the totem pole, Kenji got to be dishwasher. Load the racks, slide them in, close the door and push the "wash cycle" button. Nothing could be simpler. Fifteen minutes later, remove the clean dinnerware and repeat with another load. And repeat and repeat until done - about 10 PM.

Kenji didn't complain. Like the rest of us he loved being in the mountains and working at Wolveron. He also knew that next year he'd be older and some other junior staffer would have the shit work. It had been that way for all the junior staff.

Summer camps are usually located in remote areas and Wolveron was no exception. Campers and fresh supplies arrived every week, late on Saturday, from Sacramento. From the little town of London's Bar [named after a sandbar, not a place where you could get a drink - the town boasted a boarded up post office and a few dozen summer homes], they had nearly fifty miles of winding, narrow country road to negotiate, followed by ten miles of rough dirt road that ended at a fjord-like lake. We were on the other side of the lake which meant campers and supplies had to be loaded on a boat and then motored to the other side. All of us had a good lesson on how to conserve and make things do until the next shipment of homemade cookies and letters from girlfriends and mothers.

When Kenji packed for the summer his mother decided that he hadn't included enough of certain vital products. Not only was this Kenji's first long-term experience away from home, it was also his mother's first long-term separation from her eldest son. She wanted to make sure he had plenty of everything he might need.

That's why Kenji arrived at Camp Wolveron with his own case of toilet paper. He took a lot of teasing for this. The junior staff were less subtle with the jokes than us older staff but we all gave Kenji a lot of shit. That first week of Camp, the T.P. found its way into storage under Kenji's bunk and was quickly forgotten until August and the dishwasher incident.

Diarrhea from the broken dishwasher had spread to all 300 campers and staff. The outhouses were in constant use. The Camp doctor that week, a pathologist by training, was at a loss to explain the epidemic of "Montezuma's Revenge." Kaopectate, a.k.a. "liquid plug" was prescribed but the epidemic of liquid bowel movements far outpaced the amount of plug. Then, with the Kao supply gone by Wednesday evening, the doctor turned to The Professors for natural remedies. We had a lot of motivation to find a cure and we scoured our textbooks and natural history field guides for herbal solutions from plants growing in our area.

Before we could find a remedy, a greater, uglier problem raised its head. We ran out of toilet paper.

Campers began to use any form of paper they could lay hands on. Any paper they arrived with went first. Books. Magazines. Candy wrappers. Letters from home.

The staff were not immune either.

By Thursday, with two long days until resupply, all forms and varieties of paper in Camp had been exhausted. We were all very unhappy.

Except for Kenji.

Kenji had taken to walking round Camp with coins jingling in his pockets. He had remembered that case of T.P. his mother had sent up with him and was selling it, one sheet at a time, for twenty-five cents a sheet.

Capitalism had arrived at Camp Wolveron in a major way. As the first Camp entrepreneur, Kenji had made a big splash. By Friday night he was a rich man and reminding us all about the hazing we had given him. Each of us, in turn, was commanded to issue an apology for our thoughtless talk and admit to being narrowminded when the issue of being prepared, a motto of our Camp, was involved. We had to make these admissions during flag ceremony, at campfire and before meals. We gladly complied as our reward for each admission was ten sheets of toilet paper - a small price to pay.

When the cause for the Camp trots was discovered Saturday morning after breakfast, there were some who saw a suspicious connection between the entrepreneur and the dishwasher. A few hotheads, mostly from the adult leaders who came to Camp with their kids, suggested some sort of punishment. As with any subject in Camp that involved science, reason or logic, The Professors were called upon to study, analyze and arbitrate.

We did our best. A piece of cake, we thought.

About all we could ascertain was that the suspicious coincidence did exist but no evidence existed that Kenji had sabotaged the machine.

Kenji kept coming back to work summers, or partial summers, at Wolveron all the way through college and graduate school. He eventually worked himself up to the job of Camp Business Director - the best we ever had, they say. And whenever people asked about the incident with the dishwasher, the diarrhea and the toilet paper, and whether or not a connection existed between the operator and the, shall we say, “operator,” Kenji would sit back and let a smile be his answer.

By the way, the following summer Camp moved to using paper plates and plastic utensils.

Chapter 14

1970 - Sky Pilot

Chile elects a socialist, Salvador Allende as president. Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, authorizes funds for the CIA to "destabilize" the democratically-elected government of Chile. Kissinger says, "I don't see why we need to stand by and watch a country go communist due to the irresponsibility of its own people."

The number of blacks and Chicanos at my junior high school could be counted on one hand. That racial mix changed when I entered Alexander High School. But they kept to themselves and we kept to ourselves and the only time we mixed was during gym class.

They, the blacks, were good at basketball. We, the whites, were good at baseball. They excelled in football. We, at tennis. The Chicanos didn't play any sports but spent a lot of time in front of the mirrors in the bathrooms combing their hair.

I didn't play any sports either. But I loved gymnastics because it helped me train for climbing. That's where I met Paul and Rob every afternoon to work on our strength training.

One Friday we decided to cut class and drive north to Piedras Blanca to get loaded and watch the hang gliders. We took Rob's old Ford station wagon because of the 8-track but it turned

out all he had packed was Jimi Hendrix. That was fine; we listened to it for two hours over and over. "S'cuse me while I kiss the sky."

We parked the Ford in a recently harvested field where all the gliders landed. Big, heavy clods of dark dirt and stalks of corn everywhere. Away from the parking area we sank up to our ankles in soft soil and manure.

There were bunches of other people. Family and friends and a lot of spectators. The kind of people who come to car races hoping someone will crash. "What are they thinking way up there?" I overheard someone ask. "Don't know," was the reply.

The gliders lifted off from the cliffs above the town. Piedras Blanca had a gas station, a store, post office, lots of boarded up storefronts and a handful of old frame houses with wide verandas and tall valley oaks for shade. The weekly influx of hang gilders was good for the town's economy though the residents tended to ignore the spectacle and occupy themselves with other matters.

We opened the Ford's doors and turned on Jimi real loud. "S'cuse me while I kiss the sky." The three of us loved that line. Paul brought out some hash and a pipe. The day went slowly and magically.

Hang gliders would appear high in the blue, making lazy circles in the sky. Maybe a dozen of them, bright nylon canvas

contrasting the blueness behind them and the sun glinting off polished aluminum frames.

One of the gliders began to falter, like a bird shot in the wing. It fluttered. The nylon sheeting peeled back and the glider began to spiral downward in tightening circles. Even from the distance we could see the pilot trying to gain some kind of control.

"He doesn't have a chance," I thought to myself.

When the glider was close to the ground, Rob grabbed his first aid kid from the Ford and shouted at Paul and me, "Come on!"

We ran past the family and friends and the other spectators. All were transfixed, beguiled by the drama, unable to move.

I chased Rob and Paul across the field, tripping over the clods and cursing the farmer for not having flattened the ground. Panting, we got to the fallen glider way ahead of anyone else. The pilot was lying on his back, the crushed and broken frame of the glider pulled around him like angel wings.

We leaned over the pilot, not knowing what to do. In first aid training you learn how to treat life-threatening, gaping, bleeding wounds or massive fractures to arms and legs. We couldn't see anything familiar to work on.

Suddenly the pilot sat up, rising like Dracula from his coffin. His eyes popped open and stared into our faces. “Wow!” he said, voice deadpan. “Some trip.” He fell back and was still.

Because we helped at the accident we didn’t get in trouble for playing hooky when the sheriff and county ambulance arrived. I didn’t care. It didn’t matter.

Chapter 15

1971 - Dope

The Pentagon Papers are published. Members of Vietnam Veterans Against the War throw their medals on the Capitol steps. The 26th Amendment is passed by Congress: 18 year olds may now vote.

By the time I entered high school, my parents let me do just about whatever I wanted. As long as I would let them in on what I was up to, both my mother and my father were happy. They had pretty much checked out by then though I didn't realize the depth of their uninvolvement in life around them until my junior year at the Big U - UCLA. The big "Multiversity" as we said back then.

That's why I was so surprised during my senior year at Alexander when my father called a family conference at dinner one night.

In my early teens my parents had found it necessary to have family conferences at least once a week. At these conferences my father would smoke his cigar, ask me about school, and my mother would chain smoke cigarettes and ask me if I had a girlfriend and then I would tell them, without stooping to an out-and-out lie, what they wanted to hear. My father also used this time to tell me about what he had to do at my age and remind me how lucky people were to live in America. Like a good son I would nod my head and agree.

I remember reading somewhere that it's not what you learn in school, it's the people you meet. Like my friends, Camilla, Rob and Paul, I met quite a few people who supplied me with everything I thought I needed and needed to know.

Our main connection at Alexander High School was this black guy we called Miles because when you looked in his eyes he was miles away. I think his real name must have been something like Clarence or Arvis or Thaddeus or William - not Bill; never Bill. All the black kids had names like that. Just like all the white kids had names like Bob or Larry or Jim. Just like all the black girls had names like LaShonda or Georgette or Arlisha or Latisha or names ending in "-lyn." Like all the Jewish kids had last names ending in "-berg," or "-stein." Different cultures have different names for the same thing, I guess. What's in a name, anyway? As if knowing the name of someone meant you knew something about them.

Thinking back on it, looking at the photos in my yearbook; all the black kids tried so hard to be middle class. Except the ones who were trying so hard to be penitentiary bound.

I remember one of my uncles making fun of a black kid whose last name was Buck.

Geeze. The Afros the black guys wore! And the "falls" the white girls wore that competed with what us hippy dudes had. Who had the longest hair? I remember pulling up to get gas and the

pump jockey thought I was a girl. Well; maybe not. Maybe he wanted to make a political statement. I don't know. I bet he saw long curly hair on a slender body and thought: Girl. The same thing happened to me my freshman year in college but from the other way around. I walked into the bathroom and saw someone combing their hair in front of the mirror and swore I'd walked through the wrong door. If it hadn't been for the urinals...

So, Miles. You could buy your weed from a bunch of different people but Miles always had the best stuff and at the best price.

The most significant thing about Miles was that if you didn't have enough money to buy a lid you could always buy individual joints. Lids in those days were ten bucks and you could buy a Miles joint for fifty cents. Miles loved Franklin half dollars. None of the Kennedy halfs would do for Miles. I think the reason he sold his joints for fifty cents had something to do with his fascination for Benjamin Franklin. He identified with Franklin in a serious way.

Miles also rolled the best joints in school. A lot of people never learned how to roll their own because Miles spoiled them. A joint rolled by Miles was a real joint. He rolled joints as fat as your fingers. Not any of those pin joints that the rich kids from Cheviot Hills rolled that were more paper than dope. I couldn't understand those kids with money. They were the

stingiest people I knew. “Squeeze a nickle, pinch a dime,” as Rob used to say.

A joint rolled by Miles turned out to be the reason behind the family conference from left field.

Being short on cash one week I had given Miles my Franklin half and he had given me my joint - a big fat one. Rob and Paul and I had plans to climb at Stoney Point on the weekend. A little dope would go a long way towards making whatever we did a lot more memorable.

Trouble was, I lost the joint.

Bummer.

Super bummer.

I met my buddies and didn’t say anything about it. Paul had scored some weed from somewhere else so the weekend wasn’t a total loss. It bugged me, though. What had happened to that joint?

I found out after dinner on Sunday, at our long-quiescent family conference. My father opened an envelope and emptied its contents onto the table. My joint!

“You know what this is?” he asked.

I thought of George Washington and the cherry tree.

“Don’t you know smoking these things will lead to harder drugs?”

Again, I thought about the Father of our Country and waited for what my father would do.

My father looked to my mother and then shifted his gaze to the ceiling of our house and, I suppose, beyond the ceiling to the firmament, through the ether and all the way to God. "What have I done to deserve this?" he asked. He puffed his cigar and waited.

No one answered.

Time passed and no one answered some more.

It seemed to me that I could say something but whatever I said would only dig me a deeper hole. My relationship with my parents by this time was predicated on them not knowing anything about me except for what I wished for them to know. And I wished for them to know that I was the child I thought they wanted me to be.

"Well?" my father finally said. "Do you know where it came from?"

A moment of truth, beyond the truth of George Washington, presented itself. I continued to be silent, hoping to preserve the myth I had created between myself and my parents without resorting to lying.

"Well?" my father repeated. "I found this in the garage, under the washing machine," he prompted.

I remembered! On Friday, the day I scored the joint, I had washed my climbing clothes. Paul said that Camilla might be joining us and I didn't want to smell like a climber who hadn't done his laundry in a week. The joint must have fallen out of my pocket. Or something like that.

"You know something about this?" my father probed. His resolve to discover the source of this evil weed had faded with my reluctance to speak. My mother held her tongue tighter than mine. Who knew what thoughts raced through *her* mind?

Silence is sometimes as heavy as rock or suffocates you like water. I loved my parents even if I didn't understand them. My father's wretched face showed pain. He actually believed what the CBS evening news said about marijuana. An answer was needed. I thought of what I could say that would not hurt any feelings and, at the same time, preserve what I had taken so much time to create between us.

"I'm holding it for a friend of mine," I lied.

"Such friends?" my father asked and he sighed. But he didn't ask who the friend could be. He held the joint in his two hands and broke it apart in an ash tray that never sat further than arm's length from either my father or my mother. "Such friends," he repeated, more to himself than to either my mother or me. "Such friends."

Chapter 16

1971 - It Could Happen to You

Police randomly arrest 12,000 people at an anti-war demonstration held in Washington DC.

Spring break of our senior year, Paul and I decided to hitchhike from L.A. to Zion National Park in southern Utah. We wanted to hike the Virgin River narrows, a slot canyon where the Virgin had cut through red sandstone.

His parents were cool with the idea. They were adventurers too, members of the American Alpine Club and climbers in their own right. Paul's first outdoor experiences had been trekking in Nepal.

I mentioned my plans to my father in the garage where he had some neighbor boy's bicycle in pieces. He glanced up from his work and blinked. "Ask your mother," he said.

My mother said, "Ask your *father*."

I said, "He said it's OK."

"Well. Then I *suppose* it is."

Paul's parents picked me up and took us to the Venice Boulevard on-ramp to the Santa Monica Freeway. We shouldered our backpacks and carried them from the car to the curb. We sat and waited. People in L.A. didn't even look twice at the peace signs on our packs or our long hair, scraggly facial hair, rose-colored

sunglasses with heart-shaped lenses and other hippy garb. It seemed like, these days, all the kids dressed like us.

Paul's parents parked a discreet distance away and waited for our first ride.

"They always do this whenever I hitch," Paul complained. "Like they don't trust me."

"At least they care," I said.

"Sorry, Steve. I didn't mean it like that."

I waved my hand dismissively. All my friends knew about my parents. I knew they cared about me. I just wished they would show it sometimes.

We had a ride in ten minutes from an older guy who sold things to farmers. He had long hair tied into a pony tail and wore a low-top leather cowboy hat and pointy cowboy boots. In those days you didn't have to be a kid to dress like one. He took us all the way to San Berdoo. He wanted to drop us off at the vineyard were he was going to sell some mechanical grape pickers but Paul convinced him to take us in to town. All it took was a few tokes from Paul's hash pipe.

In San Bernardino, with the temperature heating up, we got some cold drinks and some burgers for an early lunch and walked back to the freeway on-ramp. Our second ride got us to Needles, midway between Los Angeles and Las Vegas - "Lost Wages" as Paul called it. Pretty good traveling time so far. We had a second

lunch in Needles with a lot of ice in our sodas and sat on the edge of town.

Not much happened for a few hours as we shifted from one small piece of shade to another and reflected on how aptly named some places can be. Few cars passed east-to-west through town. Most that did come in did so from the north or south to get some gas or a burger. Then, they turned around and went back from wherever they came from; pickups mostly, with dusty men dressed in dirty Levis, wearing sweaty rags around their necks and beat-up cowboy hats on their heads. Locals.

Late in the afternoon an old station wagon with wood panel sides limped off the highway and wheezed up to the gas station where we had retreated for the dozenth time for shade and sodas. The license plate said "Oregon" but it sure looked like the Joad family when they all poured out. Dad and Mom dragged a gaggle of angels with dirty faces into the bathrooms and to the soda machine. When that brought no satisfaction they all trooped in to the diner next door for milk shakes.

While this went on, Paul and I kept an eye on things. The attendant stuck a gas hose into the Woody's tank. He scraped a couple of layers of smashed insects from the windshield. He lifted the hood and checked the oil. He stopped and gawked when the last passenger of the car got out and slunk over to the diner and plopped down on a bench just outside the door.

Hot pants were the new rage. She filled her's nicely.

She sat on the bench, one leg straight out, the other drawn up tight beside her, chin on knee, puffing a cigarette. Her lips were painted like fire engines. They were almost as red as her shorts but they may have seemed that way in contrast to her pale skin. On close examination, and Paul and I examined her as closely as the attendant, she could have been about our age.

When she caught us looking, she brought her other leg up, grabbing her ankles, to make a "V" with her legs under her chin. In boredom, or from the heat, she let her head fall through those legs. With great effort she raised her head again to remove the cigarette and quickly gulp some air. Then her head dropped again, like a guillotine. The cigarette remained in her mouth. Her legs remained spread but tied at the ankles.

Some of the children, escaping the diner, clustered around her and began pestering her. She ignored them like a cow ignores flies and peered at us from her lowered head. The kids left and clustered around the car.

Paul mumbled something under his breath.

I said, "What?"

He said, "Obviously there's some message we're supposed to get."

"I think I missed it," I said, catching the sarcasm in my friend's voice.

Paul pretended to muse. “What could it be? Something the boys at school would kill or die for?” He sighed. “But it’s too fucking hot and I bet it isn’t worth thinking about.”

I didn’t know about that. “She’s worth thinking about in my book,” I said.

Paul could afford to be cavalier. He had a girlfriend who took pretty good care of his animal needs. “Sure,” he said. “You can think about her but what else?” He waved dispassionately at the kids.

To no one in particular the girl moaned, “When ar’ we gonna leave this place?”

From inside the diner a woman’s voice twanged, “When yew finish yer cig-a-reet.”

“At least there’s some discipline in the family,” Paul murmured.

The screen door of the diner slammed five times as the remainder of the girl’s family made their way to the Woody. When they had all made it there, the girl slid off the bench like cooling honey and slowly, attempting languor, walked to the car. She stubbed her cigarette out on the windshield and waited for everyone to get in. She bent over to get in, lifting a leg and tossing long hair over her shoulder. I finally noticed the faded brown color of it. She entered the car. The door slammed shut with the sound of a can opener digging into a tin of beans.

The starter whinnied. The engine coughed and died. On the second try it caught and the motor ran and raced long enough to jet them away in a just married racket of cans mixed with blue smoke.

Close to dark we got our next ride.

A big Buick pulls over and a voice grunts from inside, "Get in."

Paul clambers into the back seat with our backpacks while I take the front. The Buick's driver is a dark man. Under a cowboy hat is long black hair tied in a pony tail and wrapped around a chunk of turquoise and silver. He has a Genghis Kahn beard of wispy hairs, not whiskers. "How far you boys going?" he asks with a slurred voice. Empty beer cans rattle around on the floor of the front seat.

"Saint George," Paul volunteers. It never pays to tell a ride your ultimate destination. You always want the option of getting out early - no hard feelings meant, no hard feelings taken - if the ride doesn't pan out.

"No problem."

"I'm Steve," I say. "This is Paul." Pure hitchhiking courtesy.

A few minutes of darkening Mojave desert pass before our ride says, "Paul. That's my name too." He smiles. "That makes us brothers." He reaches between his legs on the floor and pulls out

a beer and hands it back to Paul. "Here, *Kemosabe*" he says. Then he pulls out another one for me and a third for himself. Escaping carbon dioxide makes three simultaneous sounds.

The desert speeds by. "My friends call me Crazy, though."

"Cheers!" Paul calls from the back seat. Ten seconds later he belches.

"Hey, Brother!" Crazy says and belches louder.

I sip my beer and debate taking out my stash and sharing a pipe with our ride. A man who calls himself Crazy. I have my doubts but what the hell? I pull it out, fill the pipe, light it. Inhale the smoke. Pass to the left.

"Good weed," our ride says. He takes a toke longer than my arm and passes the pipe to the left. Paul grabs it before the pipe ends up out the window.

Puff. Pass. Puff. Pass. We're on a wheel and Paul, our ride and I are spokes.

Desert. More desert. Immutable desert. The dope heightens the feeling that we are sitting still and the desert is rushing past us like a cyclorama. I read once, somewhere, that people in the 19th century who had never left their home towns, never thought of leaving, would sit in a theater while a painted cyclorama was continually passed before their eyes. It feels something like that.

Crazy plays with the radio but only gets station after station of static. “Needles is fucked for hitching a ride,” he says. “I don’t usually pick up riders but I couldn’t let you boys sit there all night.” He shivers. “That desert is hot for sure in the day and it’ll freeze your ass off at night.”

From the back seat, Paul says something that sounds like agreement. I glance at the odometer and see that we are crossing the desert at 85 miles per hour. Crazy sees me looking and smiles. “This Buick goes, don’t it?”

“You have it long?” Paul asks. “Paul?” he adds, just to be brotherly and polite.

Crazy frowns. I can’t see it because the car is dark but I hear it, a low animal growl people make in the back of their throat. “Injuns don’t like people calling them by their names.”

“He didn’t mean anything by it,” I say. “We didn’t know.”

Crazy takes a long pull on his beer. “Don’t worry,” he says. “I don’t take offense from hitchhikers. You’re a couple of good boys. I can tell.” He drives on and in a few minutes says, “Picked her up this morning. She’s a honey.”

“She sure is,” I agree, hoping to smooth over any hard feelings our ride might have, or think he has.

“Where you heading?” Paul volunteers.

“Anywhere out of California, for sure.”

Desert speeds by. The Buick's headlights show us the road, a broken white line and narrow shoulder and the shadows of creosote bushes. "You don't like it here?" Paul asks.

"Oh, California is fine," says Crazy. "It's a nice place. I've lived here all my life."

"So, why do you want to leave?"

"It's time."

Oh.

"The Buick's owner isn't going to be happy when he finds out he doesn't own it any more."

"You stole this car?" Paul asks incredulously. "We're riding in a stolen car?"

"Yup."

"Wow!" Paul says. "Far out!"

I'm thinking the same thing. Crazy's a real outlaw. Like the guys we read about. Stealing horses, cows or cars. Whatever.

"You really steal it?" Paul asks. He grabs the seat cushion behind me and pulls himself forward from the back seat.

"Yeah. She's a nice car, right?"

"You bet!" Paul enthuses. "How'd you do it?"

"Simple," says Crazy. "I got out of Bear Valley yesterday. They take me to the bus station, give me a ticket to Oregon and tell me to never come back. They'll make it hard on me if I ever come back they tell me."

"What's Bear Valley?" Paul asks.

"You know. The penitentiary in Bear Valley, by Riverside."

"Whoa!" Paul exclaims. "You've been to prison?"

Crazy sits back in his seat and kind of swells out a size or two in response to the wonder and amazement in Paul's voice. "Yeah," he finally admits after a few minutes. "You want another beer?"

"Sure!" says Paul.

I decline by showing Crazy I'm still working on the first.

"You sure?" Crazy asks me. "It's gotta be flat by now. Can't be drinking no flat beer."

I wave my arm like it's no big deal and finally think of something to say. "What were you in for?" I ask. Crazy is someone who tested the laws and lost. And now he's done it again.

"Held up a liquor store."

I'm disappointed but try not to show it.

"And shot the clerk."

"You're a murderer?" Paul stammers.

"Nah. He didn't die. Bled a lot, though."

Night has settled completely over the desert, taking control of time and making it unimportant. There isn't light anywhere but from our headlights, the stars overhead and a dome of illumination dead ahead. It turns out to be a truck stop on the state border. Still cruising at 85, we blow by the truck stop and

cross over a bridge that must cover the waters of the Colorado River. The tires rattle and shimmy a bit across the expansion joints. The Buick climbs a hill and begins to labor. I check out the instrument panel and see the gas gauge is doing fine but the temperature gauge is red-lined. Paul has settled into the back seat, guzzling beer.

"I cashed in the bus ticket," Crazy is saying. "Outside is this beautiful car. Engine going. Nobody inside. I thought someone has left it here for me so I get in and drive off." He chuckles. "I know no one left it there for me but I like to think they did."

"So you took it." Paul says. "Wow. That takes guts." He whistles in admiration.

"Not so hard. The car is running." But I can tell Crazy digs that he has a couple of kids in the car who think he must be something else. "You open the door and get in. You drive off. Easy." He snaps his fingers. "Piece of cake."

Steam is rising from under the hood. We've slowed down to a fast walk and have still not reached the top of the incline. There is a loud "Pop!" and the Buick quits altogether. We coast to the side of the road and sit there for a few minutes, wondering what to do. I drag out the pipe again to help us decide.

Crazy formulates a plan first. “Wait here,” he says. “Be right back.” He’s out of the car and hoofing it back down the road to the truck stop before either Paul or I can say anything.

While he’s gone, Paul and I discuss Crazy and his story. We can’t believe our luck. We agree this is the most exciting thing to have ever happened to us. “You don’t think he’s dangerous, do you?” I ask.

Paul thinks about it. He has a good feel for people and who is safe and who isn’t. Who is full of shit and who is telling the truth. People like to talk to Paul. Paul likes to listen. “No. He hasn’t threatened us. He didn’t say anything about our hair or our backpacks. So what if he shot some guy in a liquor store? Besides. We’re in the middle of west Buttfuck, Nevada. What are we going to do? Start walking? I think we’re safe.”

Twenty, thirty, forty minutes pass. Being stuck in the desert is losing its appeal. We’ve been out to piss away the beer a few times. Not one car has driven past in either direction since we pulled over. I bring out the pipe and we smoke a bit more. Time slows down and being stuck doesn’t feel so bad anymore. “Do you think he ditched us?” I ask.

“Where would he go?”

From a long way away a loud claxon sounds. Headlights on the highway in our rear bear down on the Buick. It’s a semi-truck, a tractor-trailer combination. An eighteen-wheeler. And it’s

heading straight at us, horn blaring. Out of control, weaving from side to side, lane to lane. Petrified, Paul and I sit and watch it happening.

At the very last minute the semi pulls over and stops in the middle of the on-coming lane. Out pops Crazy. "OK, *Kemosabes*," he says. "Let's get the hell out of here before someone back there finds out they've lost a truck and a load of hay." The air smells of fresh lawn clippings.

I look at Paul. Paul looks at me. "It's a long way to anywhere," he reminds me. I shrug and grin, then start laughing. Paul is laughing now too. Crazy cocks his head to the side, not understanding, but he starts to laugh. We're howling like a bunch of chimps at the zoo. No. Like coyotes in the desert. We're in the cab now, sitting high above the asphalt, the white line whizzing by. Out comes the pipe and all three of us smoke. Crazy pulls a fat doobie out of his shirt pocket and lights up. The thing smokes like a stogie and fills the cab with a purple haze. Miles fly.

In St. George, Utah, Crazy drops us off at one of those chain diners where the tables are Formica and the seats are genuine, one hundred percent not-a-hide. We're hungry, got the serious "munchies" and need something to eat right now. We invite Crazy in with us.

Crazy gives the diner the eye and declines, insisting he still has miles to go. "I want to have lots more miles between me and California in the morning."

"You're not still worried about the car?" Paul asks. "My uncle had his car stolen and the cops told him to call them if it ever showed up."

Crazy smiles politely. In the lights from the parking lot I see he has bad teeth but the upper front two are of solid gold. "No. Not that," he says sadly. "Not even this truck."

"Then what?"

"The other thing," he says ominously. We stare at him a minute. Then, Crazy brightens and guns the semi's engine, working the stick through the gears. "You boys have fun, whatever it is you're doing out here," he says. He slowly pulls the big rig away from the parking lot and enters the stream of traffic - another red blood cell in the circulatory system of life.

I'm feeling - thinking - profound thoughts.

Paul and I shouldered our packs and entered the restaurant. A hand-lettered sign on the cash register said, "Please, seat your selfs." We carried our backpacks to a booth, passing a couple of state policemen drinking coffee, and sat our "selfs" down.

"What do you think he meant?" I asked Paul.

"About the 'other thing?'" He broke out into a grin. "I don't want to know!"

There were menus on the table, stuck between the salt and pepper and the ketchup and mustard so we planned our order of attack. Burgers and fries, for sure, followed by pie and ice cream. Then we waited.

The place wasn't very busy. The waitresses stood around the counter, talking and drinking sodas. I tried to catch the eye of one of them but they wouldn't interrupt themselves to see us. Other people came in to the restaurant and the waitresses would come over, give them a big "Howdy, Jake!" or, "Merle, haven't seen you in a while," and bring them their food. I pointed that out to Paul, deep in the "stares" which meant he was finally coming down from all the dope we had smoked.

"Yeah!" he said. "That's weird."

I tried one more time after that to flag down a waitress. Finally, I got up and approached one of them. "We'd like to make our order now," I said.

The woman stopped talking to her friends and let her eyes rake over me from top to bottom. "We don't serve your kind here," she said and turned away.

"My kind?" I asked but she refused to hear me. I staggered back to the booth and told Paul, "Let's get out of here."

"Huh? What did she say?"

"Let's go," I insisted.

"But we haven't had anything to eat. We got here hours ago and I'm starved."

"Paul," I said. "Look around you. Look at the people in this place."

Paul craned his neck to survey the restaurant. His head swivelled around like an owl's. He shrugged. He still didn't get it.

"See that guy over there?" I rudely pointed to a man with close-cropped hair and a plaid western shirt, the kind with mother-of-pearl snaps instead of buttons. "And his wife?" Her bouffant had to be a decade late. "Now look at us," I demanded.

It sank in and Paul said, "They don't like long hairs in here. The guys in here could join the marines and never need a hair cut."

I had a funny feeling in my stomach. Like I could throw up. "Let's get out of here," I pronounced.

We walked down the block and found a grocery store and bought bread, cheese and lunchmeat. Another block away we found a city park so we sat down on a bench to eat. The warm evening felt good.

A police car cruised around the perimeter of the park and circled around again.

"Oh-oh," I said. "I bet we're going to get hassled."

"No!" Paul replied in disbelief. "We're not doing anything wrong."

I pointed to the police car. It had stopped in the middle of the street and the two cops inside were looking at us. We looked back.

We kept eating our dinner. The cops kept staring at us.

Five minutes passed.

A station wagon full of blond guys and their girlfriends pulled in behind the police car and the driver gave his horn a light tap. The two cops, startled, looked behind them at the station wagon. Slowly, the police car began to roll, the station wagon close on its bumper. At the corner of the park the cops sped up and roared away.

"Weird," Paul said.

I shook my head slowly from side to side, thinking about the black kids at school. "So, that's what it's like."

I got back from Zion on the Sunday before classes started up again and walked into a little dinner party. My parents had invited Uncle Irving over for what he loved to call "Kosher ham." Culturally, Uncle Irving was very Jewish but religiously I think he was a pagan. My parents liked Uncle Irving and Uncle Irving liked my parents and me.

Like my Uncle George, Uncle Irving wasn't really anybody's uncle. Irving Saltzman was what my parents referred to as "a

friend of the family." I must have had a ten or twelve "uncles" while growing up. My father met Uncle Irving somewhere and brought him home to dinner one night. Irving was somewhere between 50 and 80 years old, as far as I could tell. I'm sure he was older than my parents but that's about it. When I look at pictures of them today, my parents look younger than me and Uncle Irving doesn't look as old as I remember him.

He had led an interesting life. Like many European Jews, most of his family had been wiped out in the concentration camps. Irving's camp was liberated by the Russians, which trapped him in a political system he saw as not much better than fascism. He tried to escape to the West and failed. He tried again and failed again.

Knowing the earth was round, and that West would eventually meet East, he next tried to escape by traveling in a direction no one would suspect. It took him two years to get from Poland to Moscow to Siberia to Mongolia to Kamchatka to northern Japan and then to the United States by way of Alaska and the Yukon. Without a passport too. How he did it was a story always promised but never told.

"You shouldn't know such things," he would say, patting me on the head if we were standing or on the knee if we were sitting. Soft, little pats from his pudgy hands. Like the way you pat a puppy you hope won't hop up and crawl all over you. "But

when you are older, and know something of the world, I will tell you then." Pat-pat.

I stumbled into the house, dragging my backpack behind me, and smelling like I'd just spent a week hiking in the desert when it had only been four days.

"*Take a shower*," my mother said, waving her cigarette at me. "Dinner will be ready in thirty minutes. And say *hello* to Uncle Irving; he's in the living room talking to *your* father."

I did as instructed, emerged from the cocoon of steam in the bathroom, dressed in clean clothes [how good they feel when you've been dirty!] and took my place at the dinner table. Uncle Irving was telling a story. He told good stories.

"...were just leaving from the delicatessen on Melrose with Meyer Rosenblum," he was saying. "Meyer Rosenblum had bought a huge salami." He stopped his story long enough to admit me into the conversation with a nod and a smile, then said, "Hebrew National," putting the back of his right hand to the left side of his mouth to wipe away some spittle. Uncle Irving's bushy eyebrows worked up and down. He held his hands two feet apart at belt level and said, "This salami? Like a horse!" Uncle Irving and my father laughed. My mother averted her eyes. I smiled politely.

"All of a sudden, *Oy!* Such a thing I should wish you never see. This big. Black. Beauty. He comes from out the alley. You

know the alley by the delicatessen? Right there in front of God and everybody. And he has a screwdriver in his hand. The poor *mashuga* is too poor for a knife I suppose." Uncle Irving stopped to catch his breath and indignantly, he went on. "He demands that Meyer and I hand over our wallets."

Uncle Irving stopped to take another breath and roll his eyes to Heaven. "I didn't escape the Nazis to come to America and have this black beauty take my money." He raised his eyes to Heaven again and this time both his hands. He intoned, "Why, God? Why you do this to me?"

I started to ask a question but my father shushed me. "What then?" my father asked. "What happened then?"

"Nothing," Uncle Irving replied.

"Nothing?" my father asked. He leaned back in his chair and twirled his cigar between his lips. "I don't believe you," he said with finality.

Uncle Irving smiled. "Of course nothing. Look at me!" With this, he struggled to lift his bulk forward a bit from the dining room chair, parting his suit jacket first on the left and then on the right like a watch salesman or a magician demonstrating he has nothing to hide. "No holes from this black beauty's screwdriver do you see." He relaxed into the chair. "Nothing happened."

"But how did you get away?" my father asked impatiently.

"You remember what I said about the salami?" Uncle Irving laughed at the thought picture in his mind and shook his head. "Such a thing, I should wish you never have to see!"

My father, my mother and I leaned forward in our chairs to get closer to the story. Uncle Irving reached a fat arm out to pat my knee but I was too far away. He had to content himself with an affectionate pat on the table. "Meyer worked the docks in Odessa, did you know this?" Uncle Irving straightened majestically in his seat and gestured with a finger. "He may be a short man but Meyer Rosenblum is not little!"

"What did Meyer Rosenblum do?" My father's impatience had grown nearly unmanageable so that he squirmed in his seat. Uncle Irving liked to do that to him, drawing out the logical conclusion of a story until my father could stand it no longer, then dropping the ending in a few short words. Like slowly rising to the top of a roller coaster and dropping down to the bottom in one tenth the time.

"Meyer Rosenblum takes his salami and, *Whack!* on the head of this black beauty, and knocks him out: Dead on the sidewalk."

Uncle Irving and my father had a good laugh over that, both seeing the would-be thief stretched out on the sidewalk. My mother sighed quietly and pursed her lips.

Though Uncle Irving's term "black beauty" was not a typical racial slur, I knew what he meant by it. Nigger.

Chapter 17

1972 - Money

Governor George Wallace is shot in Maryland while campaigning for president.

Thieves break in to the Watergate Hotel in Washington DC.

Henry Kissinger says, "Peace is at hand," in Vietnam and President Nixon orders the bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong in North Vietnam.

Freshman year in college I joined the Mountaineer's Club on campus as a way to meet other backpackers and climbers. That autumn the university chapter of the NAACP asked our Club to put on a demonstration during a fund raising event. No one at the Club knew why the NAACP cared about rock climbing but we all decided that the demo would be a good idea. People did that a lot during the 70s.

It took us a few weeks to figure out how to show non-climbers what climbing was all about. We had to rig up a portable climbing wall that we could build at someone's house and then take to the university student union where the event would be held. One of the members got his father to contribute the money to buy a bunch of 3/4" plywood and some 4X4 fence posts to build an artificial wall. Another guy had a girlfriend in the art department who had the idea of how to make some ceramic pieces we

could bolt on to the plywood that would simulate handholds and footholds.

We wanted to show how much fun climbing could be but also educate our audience so they would know that climbers weren't a bunch of idiots or thrill-seekers. Showing what climbing actually involved turned out to be the biggest challenge. We finally decided to ignore the sexy stuff and simply show the basics. How you set protection. Why you did one move versus another. How some climbs required a rope and others didn't. That climbing involved teamwork and problem solving. A few of the guys saw the importance of addressing Mallory's classic answer to the classic question of why people climbed in the first place. "Because it's there."

We did our best where it came to demonstrating what people already knew about climbing. We realized that people would want to see rappeling since that's what the public always thinks of when they think about climbing. We even set it up so that anyone interested could actually do some rappeling on the climbing wall we created.

The week leading up to the fund raiser took up more time than I thought it would and two weeks later I felt the effects when all my mid-terms proved to be disappointing. But I felt exhilarated. I could finally show what excited me and drove me

outside into the wilderness and at the same time I could help a worthy cause. Other guys in our Club felt the same way.

Our part of the fund raiser consumed about half an hour. We came on between dinner and dessert. I think we did a good job in accomplishing our goals. Of course, you can always do better but we didn't think about that until a week later when we all got together at the local pizza parlor to discuss our impact on the event.

Two things struck me about the NAACP fund raiser. The first was that all the people representing the organization were black and all the people sitting at the tables, writing checks, eating the dinner, listening to the speakers, watching our demonstration and demonstrations by other university groups and clubs were white.

The second thing that hit me actually happened in the bathroom. The organizers served a lot of beer and I had made sure to drink my fair share. You know what they say about beer. You don't buy it. You only rent it.

I had to return my rental in the worst way. There I am at the urinal, a couple of older guys -old enough to be my father - and with three-piece suits and white hair are standing on either side of me, and I say, "It must make you feel good to know you've contributed to helping blacks get ahead in our society." The beer made me feel at one with the brotherhood of man.

Both men ignored me, like I hadn't said anything. As if I wasn't even there. They finished their business, flushed, washed and dried their hands and left. I didn't understand what I had said wrong. We had so much in common, I thought. In reality we had nothing in common.

Chapter 18

1973 - No Difference

North Vietnam and the United States sign a peace treaty.
A military junta seizes control of Chile and President Salvador Allende is assassinated.
Vice-President Spiro T. Agnew pleads no-contest to charges of accepting bribes while Governor of Maryland and resigns. Gerald Ford is appointed his replacement, saying, "I'm a Ford, not a Lincoln." In response to the developing Watergate scandal, President Nixon says, "I am not a crook."

Mr. Yee taught Biology 1A, introductory biology, at UCLA. The lecture hall held 400 seats. If you sat in the back you needed binoculars and a hearing aid in order to see or hear anything. To increase the challenge, Mr. Yee used fine-tipped colored markers on an overhead projector to project his scrawl onto a large movie screen.

Bio 1A, along with a few other introductory science courses, had a reputation for weeding out students. Since everyone who wanted to get in to medical school needed to take a year of introductory biology, and there were far fewer med school slots open than people who wanted in, the most wise and wonderful university regents had hit upon a great idea.

On the first day of class, Mr. Yee shocked and disgusted everyone in the lecture hall. He entered the hall with a shoe box, a long-stemmed rose, a pair of garden shears and a gavel. He stood at the podium and banged the gavel to get us to be quiet. "Hello," he finally said, his accent thick and nearly unintelligible. "I am Mister Yee."

Mr. Yee held up the rose and cut the stem. The bloom dropped to the floor. Someone from the back of the hall coughed. Papers were rustled. Mr. Yee looked pleased with himself.

From the shoe box, Mr. Yee pulled a large, white laboratory rat and deftly held it by the tail between his thumb and forefinger. The rat twisted and turned, trying to get loose. The rat arched its back and tried to bite Mr. Yee but Mr. Yee was smarter than the rat. Mr. Yee had three years of graduate school under his belt and only one more year, and a dissertation, before graduation.

With his other hand, Mr. Yee held the garden shears. As he moved the shears closer and closer to the rat, waves of awareness swept through the hall.

Students called out, "Don't do it!"

"Stop!"

"Is he really going to do it?"

"He won't," someone confidently predicted.

And then he did it. The shears opened, engulfed the rat, and closed. The head portion dropped into the shoe box and Mr. Yee held half a rat by the tail.

Someone in the front row of the lecture hall screamed. A chorus of voices rose in anger. Pandemonium. Curses. Crying. People bolted from the room. People crying and wailing. "Why did he do it?" A few students rushed the podium but Mr. Yee pushed them back by waving the bloody rat corpse in their faces.

Mr. Yee exchanged his garden shears for the gavel and rapped it sharply against the podium until the room became silent. When he knew he had everybody's attention, Mr. Yee held up the rat and said, "A rat." He held up the rose stem and said, "A rose." And then he said something that amazed us all. He said, "No difference. Welcome to Biology One-A."

Chapter 19

1974 - When I Grow Old it Won't Matter What Color I Wear For I Shall Be Old and *Nothing* Will Matter

Richard Milhaus Nixon, 37th President of the United States resigns rather than face impeachment.

During the last two weeks of my parent's lives they were able to share a hospital room. They slept side-by-side in two beds. Each kept an ash tray beside them though they weren't allowed to smoke. For the first time in my life I didn't see a cigarette in my mother's left hand or a cigar sticking out of my father's face.

One day, when my father had gone off to "the lab" for some tests ["I hope you pass more of your tests than I pass of mine!"] my mother confided to me, "I don't care about *anybody* or *anything* - *anymore*." She said this from within an oxygen tent and through a breathing tube. She had, I think, maybe two days left to her at that point. Dying of emphysema is like drowning in air. I remember watching fish, flat on the dock, breathe like her. You easily see the struggle in their eyes.

My mother. It is hard to see your mother die. Your mother never stops being your mother.

I remember.

After I had left home I would stop in and stay a few nights with my parents every few months. That gave me a chance to run errands for them, do a little yard word, cook some meals for the freezer. At night I'd go out with some friends and my mother would wait up for me. I had keys to the house but not to the screen door. My mother would lock the screen door so I would have to wake her up in order to get into the house. She would be sleeping on the couch with the televison on.

Like a game.

I knew why she did it.

It annoyed me.

It made me angry.

Mothers!

My parent's doctor, a young, blond fellow from Yale, would shake his head when he talked about my parents. "This is what comes from a lifetime of smoking," he would say to me. "You can't abuse your body your whole life and expect to be healthy when you're old." Anti-smoking campaigns were just getting to be popular about this time. The Surgeon General had released his report several years back, all about how smoking was bad for you and reduced your lifespan, and the message had finally percolated into society's consciousness. Back in high school health class I remember spending more time on discovering the evils of tobacco than on the dangers of reproduction.

I couldn't disagree with the doctor but I didn't like him telling me my parents were stupid or implying they had some choice. More than we like to admit, people never grow out of the times into which they were born. I can also remember sitting in our doctor's office. I must have been ten or eleven years old. Our doctor smoked like a fiend. On his desk he had a sign that said, "Seven out of ten doctors smoke Chesterfields! Shouldn't you?"

My mother needed oxygen a hundred percent of the day. Emphysema and lung cancer had robbed her lungs of their ability to do anything except take up space in her collapsed chest. She wheezed a lot and every effort, sitting up or eating or talking or going to the bathroom was terrible for her. I think she didn't care about anybody or anything anymore because she couldn't fight anymore. Her fingertips and toes were blue from lack of oxygen.

It hurt for me to be with her. It hurt her and it hurt me. I could do nothing to help or give her comfort. I wanted to ask her if she had thought about what would happen once she was gone, once she had died, but I lacked the courage.

My father had a bad heart but a bad heart was the least of his worries. In the last ten months, cancer had claimed my father's throat and his esophagus. It would soon take his life. He received the initial news from his doctor with humor. "I shall die like Sigmund Freud except my septum will be whole," he

announced at dinner that evening. He had read that Freud ruined his septum from years of abusing cocaine only to die from mouth cancer. My father laughed and laughed over that. "Think of it!" he exclaimed. "Two German Jews, so different in nature, with so much in common! And so far apart!"

The doctors and nurses in the hospital loved my parents. "So full of life!" they exclaimed. "Despite their problems!" they added. "So witty!" they said. "You're a lucky young man to have parents like this!" I was told. To me they were two old people with a murdered daughter who had, themselves, been slain.

On the second day in their shared room at the hospital, my parents asked me to move them closer together so they could hold hands. For the past five years, in my presence, they hadn't spoken one pleasant word to each other. Why did they want to be together now?

My father complained, all my mother did was watch televison and complain how lousy she felt. "You would think no one else in the world has ever had a joint hurt or a stomach that did not like food," he would say to me.

My mother complained that all my father did was bury his nose in some project in the garage, talk to the neighbors [I never saw him talk to anyone except himself] and ignore her. "Stevie. I am his *wife*. Why does he *do* this to me?"

"Do what?" I asked. What *was* she talking about?

"Do not *pretend* you do not know."

Nothing I said convinced her I had no idea what she meant.

During the day they would glare at each other. For neither of them, nothing was good enough. "For *how* long have the knives been in the drawer *before* the forks and spoons?" my mother would ask.

My father wouldn't answer.

"Why do you always leave the seat down?" my father would yell at her.

"Why to *you* always leave it up?"

Any little thing would bring on an argument. My father's heart condition made his feet and legs swell and he couldn't bend his legs enough to put on his pants so he took to padding around the house in his bathrobe and slippers. "*Nathan*, when are you going to get *dressed*?" my mother would ask.

"When I feel better."

"When will *that* be?"

"When I get a new heart." Then my father would start yelling at my mother for sitting on the sofa all day and watching television. "You're going to get fat!" he would yell. Of course, by that time, my mother had been fat for a good many years. This did not appear to register with either of them.

Getting my parents to eat dinner challenged me every night. If I didn't cook something they wouldn't eat at all. Given my

mother's bulk I didn't understand how she kept gaining weight when I never saw her eat.

I would come home from school, study for a while, drink a beer and then start cooking. They would look at my dinners and pretend to gag. It made me wonder when our roles in life had changed; when I had become the responsible adult and they had become the annoying teenagers.

My dinner choices were to either give up or get creative.

I bought cook books.

I asked all the girls in class if their mothers had given them any favorite recipes.

I studied the significance of spices in Middle Eastern foods when I should have been studying the significance of Pleistocene Sitka spruce distribution along lowered western Pacific Ocean sea floor.

I even tried joking with my parents when they turned up their noses at my culinary creations. "Eat! Eat!" I would chide them. "I make ten thousand pounds of your favorite food and you tell me you won't eat? What's the matter? You don't love me?"

"Of course we love you," my father would answer. "Such a silly question."

"You are a *lovely* boy," my mother would say.

My parents would exchange glances before my mother would add, "We just do not like this *food* you cook. Why can you not make something more... *traditional*?"

I spent all day with my parents at the hospital and most of the night. I studied while they watched TV. "Nathan, keep the volume down so Stevie can read," my mother said.

During their final days my mother kept her eyes focused on the window where she had asked me to hang a bird feeder. The window didn't open. One night I brought my climbing rope to the hospital. I bribed the janitor with a jug of Ripple to let me on to the roof and then rappeled down to my parents room with the bird feeder and some wire to tie it on to the eaves. She loved watching those house sparrows.

I left their room one afternoon to get some fresh air. Across the street was a new-looking pick-up truck with two old people in it. They were talking about something, both looking forward through the windshield. When they had finished they got out of the truck stiffly. First the woman, then the man. It was a long step down from the cab for both of them. He stood by the door a moment longer than her, gaining his sea legs.

The woman wobbled a little bit, moving in increments from the door. She walked like glass about to shatter and held onto the car door for balance, stopped and swung the door to shut it. The motion put her off-balance and she began to topple.

I've seen an avalanche begin to fall. It moved just like the old woman. At first all you see is a rill of ice skitter downslope until it spreads out, dissipated by the effort. Then another rill falls, and then another until they're like children holding hands together in an icy game of Red Rover, Red Rover. They're sticking together so well when they collapse in fear or fun. They're rolling about on the snow and ice and sliding down the hill, hoping to find rest in the gentle flat lands.

It happened so fast that the man, her husband, couldn't even see it all. First she was teetering and then she was falling as on a magic carpet floating to the ground. "Miguel!" she called feebly. "Miguel!"

Her head hit the pavement with a "smack" I could hear from across the street. Except for her hands, fluttering feebly like little birds on the pavement beside her, she lay still.

I saw a puddle of blood quickly spread from behind the old woman's head, covering the sidewalk and soaking into her clothes. Her husband looked around for someone to call to but didn't see me. He held on to the truck, frozen by age and afraid of what he'd find. In the time it took for me to reach his wife he had only been able to walk a few steps.

The woman's face was ghastly white - the face of a corpse. Her mouth was slightly open. Her eyes moved back and forth

rapidly, as if two candles burning in her head were buffeted by strong winds.

Her breath came in short gasps.

Blood.

Everywhere.

I couldn't *believe* how much blood.

The fluttering birds beside her.

Miguel finally reached me. I had taken off my jacket, rolled it into a pillow and placed it under the woman's head. "Stay here," I instructed, holding my hand up as if the old man was a dog. "Stay here. I'll get some help."

I knew these two people. I had seen them nearly every day since my parents entered the hospital. Miguel always brought his wife here at lunchtime because there were more open parking spaces close to the hospital's front door. We didn't know each other's names but I had joked about things with the old man when we road the elevator together. The weather. The news. The Dodgers. Why things were as they were. His wife stood close to him, holding on.

The gurney arrived and orderlies lifted the woman up. They whisked her away, leaving Miguel behind. He was slightly confused at the breath and speed of the events.

Maybe three minutes had passed.

I took him by the arm and guided him to a bench by the hospital entrance. He let me lead him like a puppy. I sat him down and returned to close and lock the truck's doors. I placed the keys in his hand and asked him, "Will you be all right?"

He looked at me, blinked and turned his head. "We're all only temporarily abled," he said to the street. "I do not understand why they call us disabled. I used to run like the wind and swim with dolphins." He paused, raised his hands in despair and said, "Now look at me."

The hospital staff were bringing a patient out in a wheelchair and I went to open the door for them. When they were through I returned to the old man.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Your wife fell and hit her head."

"*Ay*!" he softly exclaimed. "Will she be all right?" I'm sure he hesitated in asking because he didn't know for sure if his wife was alive or dead.

"Yes," I said, not knowing either.

"Will she be all right?" he repeated and I had to say, "Yes," again but a little louder this time and closer to his ear.

He sighed deeply, from the first breath of life to the end of the universe and settled into himself, staring stiffly straight ahead. "Sixty-two years," he said.

"You've been married sixty-two years?" I asked.

"Sixty-two years," he said again. "I love her but it can be so frustrating. She won't do anything to take care of herself. And now. This." He turned to me with tears in his eyes. "What can I do?"

"I don't know," I said, embarrassed and swallowing my words.

"You come to a point in life where nothing matters. Nothing. Not who you are or what you've done. Every day is a fight." He turned to me with those moist eyes and the hint of a smile. "Life is a wonderful thing, no? When you are young? But such a joke on us when we are old."

There was another patient inside the lobby. The nurses were pushing a teenaged kid out the door in a wheelchair. He had grabbed on to the door so they couldn't push him through. The kid kept howling that he could walk and the nurses were shouting at him to sit. "It's the hospital policy!" one of them angrily lashed out at the kid.

I began to wish the hospital wasn't so old and that the lobby had automatic doors. Geeze. They had them on *Star Trek*. I jumped up to pull open the door and help the nurses push-pull the complaining kid out.

I returned to Miguel. The old man was unchanged. I sat with him for, maybe, thirty minutes. Until he stood up. "Thank you," he said. "You are very kind. You are visiting someone here?"

"My parents."

"Are they well?"

I shook my head. "They are very old. And sick."

He patted me kindly on the head. He could have been patting a good dog. "You are a good boy. They must be very proud of you."

I shrugged.

I didn't see Miguel or his wife after that.

My parents died within two hours of each other.

I could not believe the number of people who attended their funeral. Every person whoever lived in our neighborhood must have been there.

All the kids with broken bicycles.

All the housewives with broken toasters.

All the husbands always in need of a hammer, a screwdriver or a drill.

All.

Everyone.

I don't think I ever knew my parents.

At their funeral, when someone asked me to speak, I said, "We spend our whole lives seeking approval from our fathers and acceptance from our mothers." Over a hundred heads nodded in approval.

"It's never easy losing your parents, no matter how much you expect it to happen," I said. "It hurts because you love them and they love you. I don't believe a son can ever love in return as

unconditionally as his mother or as deeply as his father. But I tried and I will always remember that."

I wish I had known my mother better than I did.

I wish I had known my father.

But sons have always wished for that too late.

Chapter 20

1975 - Growing Up White in the Sixties

Citing the first and eighth amendments to the Constitution, the US District Court in Washington DC awards $12 million to 1200 anti-war protesters who were arrested and jailed during the 1971 May Day anti-war demonstration.

H.R. Haldeman, John D. Ehrlichman, Attorney General John Mitchell and assistant Attorney General Robert C. Mardian are convicted in a Washington DC courtroom of covering up the Watergate Hotel break-in.

I didn't go to school the fall quarter of my senior year at UCLA. Instead I used the time to climb, making for one long summer vacation. With Stoney Point, in Chatsworth, less than 30 minutes from my house I could always get out for the day. Joshua Tree National Monument worked for overnights and the climbing was still good at Yosemite even though the Valley temperatures had begun to drop.

Out of the blue one day I got a call from Camilla. The last time we'd seen each other had been, what? My freshman year at the Big U? Two years. She didn't even ask what had happened in my life since then.

"Still climbing?"

"Yeah."

"Done anything hard?"

As an example, I gave her a quick rundown on my comings and goings since June.

"I've got an itch to do some sandstone in Utah. My regular climbing partner split. Want to go?"

Split. That could have meant anything. They probably broke up, her and her "climbing partner," when he discovered you couldn't get Camilla to settle down with one guy. She didn't believe in commitment and sex for her was on the animal level. She got it, or took it, from whomever and whenever she wanted. That bugged guys a lot. They could be like that but could never deal with a woman who lived the same way.

"Sure," I said. "When?"

"Right now. I'm at the corner store on the pay phone. I was at my parents house in Cheviot Hills and leaving town and remembered you still lived around here so I gave it a chance."

It took me ten minutes to get my gear together. Camilla came in, used the bathroom, and then we piled into her VW van and were off.

The van made slow time through the desert and we didn't talk much. The monotony of the Mojave does that to you, sapping out any energy or thoughts lurking about your brain. We took three days to get to the rocks she wanted to climb and then she wrecked

her ankle right away, twisting it when getting up to pee in the middle of the night.

I taped up her ankle to keep the swelling down and in the morning we discussed our options.

"It's too soon to go back to L.A." she said. "How about a canoe trip on the Green River?"

"I've never been in a canoe," I told her.

"Don't worry. I've spent the last couple of seasons as a raft guide on the Grand Canyon. It'll be a piece of cake."

"I hate water," I said.

She ignored me. "You'll have a good time." Her eyes twinkled. "I promise."

That's how I got sucked in to doing Desolation and Grey Canyon on the Green River. To be frank, before that trip I had never been so continuously scared of anything in my whole life.

Camilla called a friend, collect - and male - naturally, in Vernal, Utah and arranged to borrow a Grumman aluminum canoe and some paddles. He also promised to supply us with dry bags to keep our gear from getting soaked. We planned to meet at the put-in at Sand Wash the next day.

The same guy in Vernal also promised to shuttle Camilla's van downstream to the town of Green River for us to pick up after seven days.

We drove all night. In early morning light we turned off the two lane blacktop onto the most heinous dirt road in all God's creation, herding cattle the whole 60 miles to the put-in.

Camilla's friend met us there with another guy. They had unloaded the boat and stacked the gear in a big mound on the shore.

I stood by the river in disbelief. "Do we really need *all* this stuff?" I asked, surveying the porta-potty, two-burner white gas stove, lantern, ice chests and other gear.

Camilla smiled. "Come on," she said. "There's more."

We helped the friend and the friend's friend carry dry bags, life vests, paddles and extra paddles, a throw rope and float bags to the canoe. I began having serious doubts when the wetsuits came out. "This is a desert river, right? No rapids?"

Camilla smiled.

Her friend smiled.

His friend smiled.

"You never know," Camilla said, sharing another smile with the other two. "We could always flip."

"*What?*" I almost choked, feeling the way I do when I'm about to fall and I don't know if the rope is going to hold me.

She laughed. "Don't worry. We won't. Think of it as protection. Like when we climb. Besides. The worst that can happen is that we swamp." She laughed at my fear, which didn't

make me feel any better. "OK. We'll leave the wetsuits behind. It's going to be hot this week anyway. Feel better?"

We loaded up all our stuff in a low pile in the center of the canoe, tied it in with nylon cord, and prepared to shove off. Camilla let her friend give her a long, slow, wet kiss. His friend stood in line for his but walked away disappointed.

Our first two days were a lazy float on the Green River's perfectly flat water. The days were hot and sunny; the nights comfortably cool.

All that changed on the third day when the whitewater began. "I thought you said there were no rapids," I shouted to Camilla as we entered the first drop.

"Piece of cake!" she replied.

We splashed through some waves and I felt Camilla turning the boat from the stern to avoid rocks. They looked awfully big and sharp and I wished they still clung to the cliffs above us. In less than half a minute we were through.

"I thought you said there were no rapids!" I repeated angrily once we reached the calm water.

"Hey! You're the one who said no rapids," she said.

"You didn't correct me," I accused.

"Watch that rock!" she shouted sharply at me and then we were into the next rapid.

I kept my mouth shut after that and concentrated on my bow paddling. It was too late to turn back now. But not too late to realize we had the wrong boat for the kind of water we were on. Our flatwater aluminum lake canoe was no match for the Green. Those knowing smiles at the put-in haunted me the rest of the trip. What else did they know that they chose not to tell me?

The Green River's rapids consisted of big trains of waves with submerged and emergent rocks that had to be avoided. Each time we punched through a wave our canoe took on water. At the bottom of every rapid we had to use a bail bucket to empty the boat.

That night, after braving my first set of rapids, I lay awake in my sleeping bag so keyed up that sleep never came. In the morning I got up with the sun, boiled water for Camilla's daily blast of java and cooked the breakfast.

For the remainder of the trip we'd make camp in late afternoon, throwing our sleeping bags onto the sandy ground, go for a short hike to limber up our legs, smoke a bowl and have dinner. Camilla and I would sit quietly as the sun disappeared, listening to the Green flow by. After crawling into our sleeping bags for the night, I would lay awake beside Camilla until morning. Sometimes my whole body shook with fear as I relived the day's whitewater and extrapolated bigger and bigger waves for the days to come.

Over those next few days we averaged a rapid every 30 to 45 minutes and at each one I wanted to close my eyes and just go through blind. But at the last moment I had to open them in order the shout out directions and questions to Camilla.

"Left! Left!" I'd yell and she would go right.

"Are we on route? This isn't the route," I'd panic as we headed towards, and narrowly avoid, boulders.

"Is that a wave or a hole?"

"Faster! Faster! Slow down!"

More than anything else I kept shouting, "Watch out!"

Camilla laughed at me.

Ignored me.

Shouted over the sound of rushing water, "Paddle, Stevie! Paddle!"

And laughed some more.

So, I paddled.

At Chandler Creek we stopped at a nasty rapid called, "Big Falls." The name did a good job of scaring me. Big waves in the middle of the river and bigger rocks on both sides of the channel had me wondering where we would go. Thankfully, we got out to scout rather than blunder through like we had been doing. On the Green's left bank we stumbled onto a rough road.

According to our map, the road began several dozen miles away in the Ute Indian Reservation. It came out of the canyon

where Chandler Creek met the river and headed south to a resort the Ute Indians had built on the site of an old pioneer homestead. Stuck in the road, as incongruous as its occupant, sat a brand new Cadillac El Dorado with a broken rear axle. Inside the Caddy was a black man as big as I'd ever seen a human being. The car's engine was running. In the back seat were about a hundred rolls of toilet paper.

I tapped on the window glass and the man almost jumped out of his skin. He had been sleeping. He lowered the window and a blast of cold air hit my face.

"What's the happs?" I asked.

In response to my flippant question he gave me "The Look." I'd seen it lots of times in high school when the black kids wanted you to know exactly what they thought of you. I smiled and asked him if he needed any help. Not that we were in the position to do anything. No way he would fit in our canoe.

I felt Camilla's sharp finger poking me in the side. "What?" I wanted to shout. I enjoyed seeing someone, anyone, other than my whitewater crazed partner. And I liked feeling the cool breeze from the Caddy's air conditioner on my stubbled unshaven face. What did *she* want?

"Let's go."

I straightened up and heard the Caddy's window close softly on electrically-driven gears. "Let's go? And leave this guy abandoned all alone in the desert?"

Camilla grinned. Kind of a lop-sided grin as if she wanted to humor me. "He's hardly abandoned."

I did a three-sixty, raised my arms in wonder and pronounced, "Where's his friends?"

"The Utes will take care of him."

"They will? How do you know that?"

Camilla pointed to the shade of a cottonwood tree where I could see some Jerry cans of gasoline. Also, an ice chest and some boxes which probably held canned food. A desert bag hung from the tree. Moisture imperceptibly dripped from the bag and kept water inside it cool via evaporation. I ignored Camilla and tapped on the window glass again. Maybe someone had brought him supplies but that still didn't explain why he had driven a new Cadillac on a rough and rutted dirt road all the way down to the Green River.

Down came the window again. "What are you doing out here?" I asked the man.

In return, he challenged me with, "That your business?"

"Well; yeah," I replied nonplused.

"Why?" he challenged again.

"Because, your axel is broken," I replied with no small degree of amazement. "If you need help we can tell someone you're here."

I got "The Look" again. "You got wings or something?"

"No. A canoe."

His laugh dripped with sarcasm. "My red brothers are taking care of me," he said.

Camilla tugged on my shirt. "Come on, Stevie. He doesn't need your help."

Frustrated, I said, "I'm just interested in why he's here. What's wrong with that?"

"He doesn't need your interest either."

To which our friend in the Cadillac added, "When the red man and the black man get together, the brown man gonna join us and the white man's gonna be toast."

"Come on," Camilla said, tugging on my shirt again. "Let's get back to the river and have lunch before we run Big Falls. I'm starving." She led me back to the Green and we found a comfortable spot along the river under a large, old, beat-up Cottonwood tree. From the canoe, I dragged out the dry bag with our lunch food and joined Camilla on a fallen log.

"I don't get it," I said, sitting beside my friend.

"You sure don't," she agreed.

"Maybe you do?" I asked sharply.

Camilla caught her breath. “Maybe,” she said softly.

“Care to share it with me?”

A dark cloud settled over Camilla. “He doesn’t need your help or your condescension.”

“What?” I asked in disbelief. What made her an expert on race relations? “Why doesn’t he need my help? Isn’t that what we’re supposed to do?” I could have easily added, “...for these people...” but a different thought had begun to wiggle around in my mind.

“We’ve been cheating and stealing from poor people - blacks and Chicanos and Asians and Native Americans, even whites - for generations and feeding them a diet of unrealistic dreams,” Camilla said. “People are finally getting tired of it and want it to change.”

“Just because people screwed up in the past doesn’t mean my intentions aren’t good, does it?”

“Why should they expect it to be otherwise?”

I opened my mouth and shut it. I had to think about that for a minute. “Why do I have to bear the white man’s burden when all I want to do is help some black guy?”

“I have a theory,” Camilla replied. I call it the ‘Theory of Growing Up White in the Sixties.’” She paused to let me think about the title. “OK, class. What was the major event of the Sixties?”

"The Mets lost a hundred and twenty games?" I answered, not wanting to play Camilla's history game. Frankly, I'd had enough of her games already.

Camilla reached across the small distance between us and squeezed my knee. Pinched it is more like it. "You're being silly." She lightly dug her elbow into my side. "Come on, Stevie. Let's me serious."

My shoulders went up, then down. "Civil rights, I guess."

"You guess?"

"OK," I said. "Civil rights. So, what's your theory?"

"The 'Theory of Growing Up White in the Sixties' is that people like us, white - middle class - didn't 'get' what the civil rights movement was all about. Everything is different now because of the War and because the idea of civil rights has been enfolded into popular culture, like Dobie Gillis and the beatniks, or pushing The Monkeys on us when we really wanted the Beatles." She sighed. "The assassinations." She sighed again. "It's all been watered down until any meaning it possessed is used to advance political agendas or to market products."

In a way, I could see what she meant. "Like they're now putting long hairs wearing paisley shirts and bell bottoms in all the TV shows?"

She nodded. "Right. What does the *Mod Squad* have to do with what our generation thinks? They're actors reading a script. And

what characters are they playing? Cops! They talk like us. Look like us. But what are they telling us? Be cool. Do what your parents and the police tell you to do. Be good little children. What's so mod about that?"

Camilla used her fingers to tick off her next points, one by one. "When we were growing up, back in the sixties, civil rights was all about erasing distinctions between the races. Making things fair. Equal and without privilege. Atoning for the past." She waved her hands, fingers still joined, in front of my face for emphasis. "Even between men and women. So that you saw a person, not a person of some identifiable race or gender."

"Whoa! Slow down, Camilla. You're making some big jumps there. Race and gender. Race and politics. Some good things came out of the sixties."

"Right."

Her sarcasm bit me hard. "I still think you're making some big jumps," I said, more subdued than the first time.

"Am I?" she replied in her soft voice. "People of our generation are so wrapped up in searching for themselves that if 'themselves' walked up and pinched them in the butt, they would curse the interruption. Meanwhile, we let the whole civil rights thing blow right past us. What do we know about Hispanics that isn't tied to the Alamo? Or Indians that doesn't include Tonto? Or the Japanese that's separate from Pearl Harbor? Did you even

know our government put people of Japanese ancestry in concentration camps during World War Two? Do you about know how black people live except for what's shown on *The Jefferson*s?"

"That isn't any realer than *All in the Family*. We all know that. We all know it isn't real." I thought I'd scored points with that.

"But if that's *all* we know..."

"What about all the civil rights laws they passed? Black people have it better than they've had it since before they came to this country."

"That still doesn't make them equal. It doesn't pay them back for how they were brought here. And it doesn't change the history of any other group we like to call minorities."

"What makes you the fountain of knowledge all of a sudden?" I accused.

"Nothing. I'm not the fountain of anything," she said, settling into herself. "But I don't fool myself into thinking that anybody is equal just because some laws were passed. You don't just walk up to someone and ask them what the happs are, thinking you're communicating on the same level. Where's your sense of empathy?" Tears formed in her eyes. "Ever since..." and she faltered. "I thought you were different, that's all. All this time."

Ever since when, I wondered. I could feel tears coming to my eyes too. My throat tightened and I said, "I think you're the one who doesn't get it."

"Maybe," she agreed, her voice so soft and low I barely heard it. "Maybe."

We were silent after that, staring out at the river. Neither of us ate much. For the first time, I noticed how brown the Green River was. Had it been brown all along from the start?

We ran Big Falls at Chandler Creek straight down the middle, bouncing along the edge of the wave train. I didn't get a splash of water on me.

We stopped again to scout Three Fords Rapid - the worst yet. The river went over a four foot drop, rode down curling, overlapping waves through a "pour-over." where the river poured over a large, flat rock the size of an import car and then around various river features like rocks and holes with ever-munching piles of waves. From the shore, I looked at Camilla and thought, Now! At last. We won't run this section. We'll get out and portage, carrying our canoe and gear on the wet, slimly, green, slippery rocks on river left to a safe eddy far below.

No.

Her voice very business-like, she said, "See that breaking wave just after the first drop?" We stood on the little cliffs overlooking the rapid on the right bank. "We can easily sneak by

on the left, cut through that big wave - we'll swamp for sure - but after that we follow the wave train right down the middle. We'll eddy out on the right, or left; whatever, and bail."

"What about those rocks down there?" I pointed, trying to duplicate her manner. Midway down, and at the very bottom also, big rocks projected from the river. I pointed out rocks hidden below the surface too because I had paid attention to Camilla's lessons on "reading water."

"Piece of cake," she said. "See how the current comes to the rocks and then goes around them? The water will carry us the same way."

"Piece of cake," I muttered *sotto voce*. She loves that phrase.

Camilla hadn't stopped talking to me even though I had stopped listening. "Now, let's get back to the boat and tighten down our load. If we swamp, we could flip and we don't want to lose anything."

Great.

Back in the canoe, before peeling out of the eddy, Camilla called to me from the stern. "Steven! You do know what to do in case we flip and swim, don't you?"

I knew the drill. Camilla had drummed it in at every major rapid. "Float downstream in a sitting position with my legs out in front of me."

"Yeah?"

"If possible, hold on to my paddle."

"Good. What else?"

"Stay with the boat?" I couldn't think of anything to add. She had never asked for what else.

"Good idea. But what side of the boat?"

Biology was my field of study. I didn't do well in physics. But I tried real hard to figure out what Camilla had in mind. If I held on to the boat on the downstream side, it could easily wash over me and I could very well be stuck there - under the boat. No air. Bad scene. I could drown. "The upstream edge," I called out over my shoulder.

"Very good. We'll make a river man out of you yet!" she called back to me. I didn't have time to contemplate her emphasis on the "man" part because we had entered Three Fords.

"Time stands still" is an idiotic cliché to anyone who has never faced danger, imminent death [itself a phrase a bit worn around the edges] or confronted fear head on. I looked at my watch when we entered Three Fords. When we popped out at the bottom with a canoe full of water, on route just as Camilla predicted, I looked at my watch again and only 15 seconds had passed.

During those 15 seconds I had seen the building of the pyramids, the evolution of the species, rising and wasting away

of mountains and heard the cry of the Dodo, the quack of India's Pink-headed duck and the cackle of Camilla's laugh and her "woop-woop" as we crashed through wave after wave. I've known crazy climbers before but at the moment we pushed through Three Fords biggest wave, and Camilla shouted out, "Pull harder, Stevie!" I thought, for sure, I'd met wilderness adventurer's most crazy person. Stupid? I thought it for only a glancing moment. If stupidity existed, it resided in me, not Camilla. She knew exactly what she wanted, how to do it, and was doing it.

At the bottom of the rapid I turned to face up stream and didn't know what all the commotion had been about. All I could see was a bunch of little waves, foaming at the mouth in places. Maybe that made me the crazy one for not seeing the fun and adventure that Camilla saw in the river.

Maybe.

Maybe it did have something to do with the other stuff Camilla brought up, about growing up the way we did. That thought about "these people" still crawled around like a worm in my mind. I didn't like the feeling that, maybe, Camilla was right.

Five miles below Three Fords we camped on a little piece of sand with baby willows and spindly Tamarisk trees as the wild Green River placidly flowed by with ripples made only by a few jumping fish reaching for their dinners. The fish continued long after dark, jumping, jumping, jumping as the stars came out one

by one like the tiny town lights in Disneyland's "Great Bright Beautiful Tomorrow." And then, dreamlike, the moon rose - a great bright white banana.

In the wilderness you can read a book by moonlight.

The stillness of the night overcame me. There is beauty in so many things we don't realize until placed, forced, into a new environment.

I had known this feeling before, climbing in Yosemite or hiking along the great divides in the Sierra Nevada, mountaineering in the Colorado Rocky Mountains, but something hit me like nothing ever before at that little campsite along the Green. For the first time in my life I understood what peace meant. Not the absence of strife, the end of war or the peace my parents now enjoyed. But a peacefulness within myself. Or, my Self. For the first time in my life I felt at one with something. I didn't know what that something was but I definitely felt it.

Camilla and I sat on the sand, quietly listening to... to... every thing. Sitting there that night, I listened to the Cottonwood leaves dry up and fall to the ground, sounding like hoarfrost crystals breaking in the heat of the sun. I could imagine the leaves crinkling up like the cellophane cigarette wrappers my mother would throw into the kitchen garbage. I leaned across the small open space between us, found Camilla's lips and kissed her. "Thank you," I said.

Her arm wrapped around me and she pulled me into a tight embrace. “For what, Steve? You knew about this all the time. You just didn’t know you knew it. All you needed was a nudge in the right direction.”

I took a walk late that night. In the moon’s light I found the tracks of a large bird, a goose perhaps, in the mud along the shore. A bat, and then another and then others, darted in and out overhead, squeaking for their dinner.

Further down river the canyon opened more and the moon illuminated the rock walls giving them weird and odd shapes, almost animistic, nearly human in their grotesqueries. And always, always, always, always the Green slid by.

For the remainder of our trip I noticed tracks of bear and deer, flocks of Canada geese. Below one creek we had several dozen toads hopping through our campsite during the night. I listened to mocking laughter of Canyon wrens every day and the chits and chats of little passerine birds, whoever they were. The stars continued so bright the growing moon couldn’t blot them all out and I recognized many familiar friends in the constellations.

This world along the river soaked through my skin down to the bones and organs. As each night without sleep built upon the previous nights, I began to hallucinate sounds, sights and smells in the dark. I spoke to people I knew did not exist. But if they answered back, and they did, they must be real. Who decides

reality or illusion anyway? The evening this happened to me I swore off drugs forever. Who needed artificial realties when the one I lived in and created for myself was far more novel? Far more intriguing? Far more entertaining? Far more real?

I gave Camilla my pipe, papers and stash that night in a little ceremony. It made her wonder if I'd gone some sort of crazy but she accepted the gift with a dry kiss and a restrained thank you. This I knew meant something because restraint was not a trait or characteristic my friend had ever exhibited. At least to me.

Following Three Fords, Camilla guided us through rapids of lessening intensity. Either that or I was finally inured to the dangers of whitewater. Looking back up stream after we ran Coal Canyon Rapid, where we took on so much water in the choppy waves that the boat actually floated below the river's surface, the waves didn't seem that terrible at all.

On our last night out, at Rattlesnake Creek, we camped in a mixed grove of willow, Cottonwood and Tamarisk. The next day we floated the final ten miles to our takeout where Camilla's VW bus awaited. The river calmed down finally and I spaced out in the bow of the canoe, letting the September warmth wash over me.

Everything felt perfect. As if all the pieces of a puzzle that were my life and experience lay before me and I could see how each interlocking piece fit into all the others. I could

assemble the whole puzzle in my mind but the moment I tried to *think* about it, sus it out, I lost the answer. I contented myself with the knowledge that I knew something that no one else knew, or had figured out.

At the take-out we loaded the canoe and drove in to the town of Green River to find dinner and a cheap motel.

A hamburger never tasted so good.

A bed never looked so inviting.

We took showers, Camilla first. She came out of the bathroom dressed in shorts and a t-shirt with one of those skimpy white hotel towels wrapped up in her hair.

My turn next. Green River mud sloughed off my body. My hands focused on the shower water while my mind focused on Camilla. I couldn't do that for long so I stepped out of the shower and got dressed. A flood of thoughts and feelings flowed over me. They began in junior high school and ended on the river. "It's time," I thought. "It's time."

Camilla stood by the window, looking out. She turned slightly to me. I walked across the room, held her, kissed her. She kissed back.

Camilla squirmed a little and left my embrace. "My, My," she said, smiling.

With a quick movement she removed her shirt and dropped her shorts. She still looked good in her underwear.

I reached out a hand to touch her. She moved quickly to press herself against me.

It felt good.

I like the feeling of... I like the way a man and a woman fit together.

She lifted her face to be kissed and I kissed her.

Camilla's hands dropped to my waist and the space between us, tugging at my belt. "The last time we did this, you weren't any good. Remember? I don't want to be disappointed."

I assured her I'd had lots of practice since the last time. But the moment my body met the bed and my head touched the pillow I was fast asleep. You see, all those sleepless nights, lying awake, twitching in a mixture of fright and excitement, listening to the river roll rocks downstream or lap against the side of our canoe had caught up to me.

Hours later, light streaming through the hotel room's Venetian blinds woke me. The Moon, nearly full.

Camilla sat, still in her underwear, in the room's sole chair, concentrating on the white light forcing its way into the room. The air conditioner hummed and choked asthmatically.

Marco.

Two boys on a schoolyard.

A tree planted.

Dr. King.

Prejudice in a restaurant.

An old man.

My parents.

The river.

Everything.

What Camilla said about growing up white - it clicked in my mind. And about observing my world.

"I think I get it now, Camilla," I said.

She didn't move. "I knew you would, Stevie. It's a piece of cake. Only a matter of time. Now, go back to sleep. Maybe we'll talk about it in the morning."

Chapter 21

1978 - The Sky is Falling

While Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin watch from the balcony, President Jimmy Carter briefs a joint session of Congress on the success of their thirteen-day summit at Camp David, Maryland.

Trains had taken us through most of the country. It was August and hot as a steel smelter. Rob had spent time in Pittsburgh; he assured us the analogy was true. The ground was too hot for bare feet yet we were the only people who wore shoes. The countryside was dry, scenic, trampled by generations of abuse and neglect. Still, the barrenness was refreshing after the squalor and poverty of the cities.

Where the rails ended we piled ourselves and our gear into nondescript buses crowded with people, their animals and their belongings. The roads had once been paved but the British had departed too long ago. Now the dust covered everything.

Sitting next to me was a farmer, puffing *ganja* from a meerschaum pipe. An aura of dust covered him that included the cloud of smoke encircling his head. Even then, his image was so soft and out of focus that I felt he was a memory, not a man. Possibly I sat too close to him but I think not.

Paul had a front seat. He was reading *Heart of Darkness*. Camilla shared a seat with an Asian-looking woman who smiled continually in answer to her many questions. It seems that people always smile at you when they don't understand a word you're saying. It's an international sign of politeness.

Rob had settled in across from me and studied a star chart in a four-month-old issue of *Astronomy Tonight*. He leaned over to show me an article on meteor showers. Evidently this was the best time of the month to see them. "In fifteenth century Europe, it says here, the Leonid meteors poured down for three days. Big ones. Little ones. The peasants thought God was raining the sky down upon them to punish the people for their sins."

He showed me an illustration in the magazine - an old wood block carving of some European town getting pelted with flaming rocks with illuminated tails that stretched into the sky.

Rob said, "You know, there was a time when I thought meteors were falling stars - just like we call them when we're little kids. I was about ten or eleven and my dad took me camping in the Adirondacks in upstate New York. It was during the height of some meteor shower. You should have seen those suckers light up the sky! There was one that streaked across the horizon and it was as bright as Venus." Rob shook his head back and forth, as if he still didn't believe what he'd seen.

I nodded to show I had heard him and Rob returned to his reading. My thoughts bounced around. It annoys me that people ascribe everything they don't understand to the good or bad graces of God.

It wouldn't matter what century I lived in. I'd as soon believe the meteors were caused by alien space invaders who came to colonize earth as I would believe it was God. The alien's own planet could have been destroyed by a sun gone nova. They may have miscalculated their landing trajectory and burned in earth's atmosphere. Shards of molten metal rained down on early homonids.

Or, I've read of large gangs of birds, flying across the sun, darkening the sky. Were they responsible? Either reason is valid in my mind.

Last year, a flock of grebes, migratory water birds, encountered frigid air over Utah and literally dropped out of the sky like rocks. They must have frozen to death on the wing. Imagine living in caves and one day seeing thousands of small birds plummeting earthward. It could make you believe the sky was falling.

I once thought Chicken Little was afraid of hail. In sixth grade we saw a movie about weather phenomena and one scene showed hailstones the size of golf balls. They hit people and knocked them senseless. That didn't seem possible when compared to the puny, pea-sized, granules that fell in California. But a child's

fertile imagination can extrapolate the most gruesome truths from the sketchiest of details and make anything possible. Even hailstones.

I always wondered if the story of Chicken Little was fantasy or based on some primitive "lizard brain" experience shared by all humans. Was there a time in our species' remote past when the sky, truly, fell out of itself?

During our last trip together, Camilla liked to say it could have been a story that taught our hunting ancestors to scour not only the countryside, but the sky as well. Danger comes from many directions. It pays to anticipate; to be prepared.

That was Camilla's motto, her personal words to live by. That's why she became a climber; she was always looking up and out. The rest of us, Rob, Paul and I - each of us had our own reasons for climbing.

Rob climbed so he would have an excuse to be with Camilla. Last year, Rob told me he proposed to Camilla but she turned him down. As a couple, I could see no common ground between them.

I remember the contrasts between Rob and Camilla. Camilla believed life should be like a Las Vegas poker game. Rob was more inwardly drawn. He had gone through a heavy transcendental meditation phase. He believed, "Introspection is one of the ways we learn about ourselves. We need to be able, every once in awhile, to tell someone how we feel. Today, we're afraid to see

what's inside. The more you deny yourself, the less of a person you become."

But Camilla loved only to climb and if she thought about such things, she kept them to herself. In retrospect, I think something happened to her on that first trip in the Sierra Nevada so many years ago so she lacked the essential humanness that expresses our need to communicate and tell people, "I love you," or, "Can I help?" or "Do you need me?"

Rob definitely needed Camilla and followed her around like a faithful pet. They seemed to have settled on some sort of "relationship." If it didn't include love, at least they were satisfying their biological urges.

Paul climbed because he could afford to do it. When his parents had died they left him independently wealthy. Which is not to say Paul had lots of money. He didn't require much. Paul liked to say, "On either end of the working class, there is a leisure class." If the wealthy lie on the right, Paul lived to the left.

Paul also had the wonderful ability to feel comfortable wherever he was. I'd seen this our whole lives. He could always quickly develop an affinity with people wherever he went. Paul spoke only English yet could communicate in any language. He never failed to get us what we needed when we traveled overseas.

I climbed because I'm not a gambler by nature. I could never go to Reno or Vegas with a big wad of money and risk it in a card game. Early on I recognized the need, call it desire if you like, for adventure and excitement and to be outdoors. And being on the rock satisfied that craving in a safe way.

Ask Joe Dokes on the street and he'll tell you, "Safe? You have to be crazy to do that stuff." Which isn't really true. Climbing is one of the most methodical and safest sports in the world. There are certainly less injuries than in football or skiing.

Climbing is also one of the most cooperative sports. You place a hundred percent trust in your belayer, the person you tie your safety rope to. While climbing, you must unquestionably rely upon your equipment and your judgement. You see, climbing isn't whimsical at all.

I would be lying if I denied that the element of danger, of possible death, wasn't part of the excitement of climbing. Death obsesses me. I don't want it to happen. I want life to go on as long as possible. Otherwise, I can't climb.

On this, our last trip, in India, the four of us discussed rock life, Chicken Little and other things. Our goal was in the north, near the border with China, so close the map makers were unsure what country it belonged to. Not so far up in the Himalaya stood a wall of granitic rock 1500 feet high that exceeded the

cliffs of Yosemite in beauty and grace. The best climbers had been attracted to it for generations in order to avoid the beaten path of those climbers who had to belay from their car bumpers and grandstand for the tourists who came to see people fall. Only the rock purists came here.

With each turn of the road we could see an arm or leg dangle down from the roof of the bus. These were from the passengers riding above as they slid precariously to the edge. With each turn there was always the "thump-thump" of hands and bodies grabbing for firmer purchase on the roof rack.

There is a strange joy in traveling through foreign countries because your language is not the language spoken. Your mind plays games. The constant chattering, so pronounced wherever people gather, fades away. It blends into the white noise of tires rolling over hard packed dirt. The voices become instruments playing familiar songs you can't quite remember. Time doesn't stand still; it doesn't exist. Your identity gets lost when there are no people to call you by name. You begin to wonder, "Where is 'I' and what is 'His' name?"

We came to a town where the bus could go no further. The people here were more Chinese than Indian; the atmosphere, exciting and exotic, with the odor from joss thick and sticky in the air. Hanging from the squat brown buildings were flags and pennants, all dripping with dust. They looked like madras shirts

long past their glory days. To escape the heat, people had hung tarps of the same fabric over the street to make shade.

It was market day and the bus unloaded us in the center of it. We were in a large plaza with a central fountain that functioned as the community well. There was hardly room enough to move. Camilla, a woman of normal stature in America, stood a head taller than the villagers. The three men in our party towered over everyone.

I instantly wondered if we could get food. Camilla laughed at me, "That's all you ever think about is your stomach."

"Hear that growl?" I countered. "That's no gear box on a VW. It's my entire intestinal tract begging for attention."

"Feed me! Feed Me! Give me food!" chanted Paul while affecting Frankenstein mannerisms. Then, back to his normal self, "I'll see what I can do," and he melted into the crowd.

Like Gullivers among Lilliputians, we commanded the instant attention of the villagers. Would this have been the case no matter what time we had arrived? I don't know. It was intoxicating to be unique and the center of attention.

We sent waves of disturbance moving through the mob. The black haired heads bobbed and surged. Up-turned faces, like whitecaps on the ocean, peaked in various places.

None of us could speak the local language of course. We had learned only one word: *Bhatu-firingee*. It was the name of the

place we wanted to go and we repeated it, over and over. Each time the word was spoken, the faces of the villagers broke into grins and laughter. The men would raise their fists up, like in a Black Panther salute, and pummel the air, while one would repeat the name, "*Bhatu-firingee*! *Bhatu-firingee*!" Then, the other men would chorus with, "*Naga-ha, Naga-ha*."

There was a feeling of electricity and elation ringing like harmonics through the bones in my body. I felt dizzy with excitement. The sound of the crowd washed over me and pulled me away. Then, it cast me back again like a stick caught in the surf. The marketplace was a frenzy of shouts and glee.

A greasy little man elbowed his way to the front of the mass. On his large head was a comically small Greek Fisherman's hat. His face reminded me of Leo Polito's after his nose absorbed the impact of penduluming into the "Martyr's Wall" in Yosemite. Whatever color the hat had once been, it was now brown, like dried blood. A warm breeze, rising from the valley below, blew specks of dust from his hat like flakes of dandruff.

Speaking broken English and using expressive hands, the little man assured us he could guide us to the fabled rock wall. He directed his broken nose into the mountains and jabbed the air with his index finger. "Dar," he said, "Ish dar."

The little man next pointed to the edge of the crowd at an old Chevy pick-up truck. The fenders were gone but the doors were

in place as were running boards. All the windows were intact except for the back. Jagged shards of glass still hung to the frame as if a boot had been at work. "Ish dar," he said again.

We bent down to retrieve our gear. Our driver said something to the crowd which set them in motion. We were carried along to the waiting taxi as the horde swelled forward.

I saw the face of an old woman. She smiled at me and stuffed a sack in my hand. Inside was food: rice, some fruits and vegetables I didn't recognize and candy bars. I reached into my pocket for money but she was gone. Before I could think again we were in the car and moving.

I sat in the passenger's seat staring straight ahead, the sack on my lap. I felt too weak to eat. The sack rolled between my thighs. It felt like a rock trembling with the truck's gait climbing up the rough road.

My friends were in back. They gibbered and jabbered, excited by the speed with which we had arrived and continued our journey. Still morning, and well on our way. The scenery sped by faster than my mind could register. The cyclorama of mountains and cliffs, waterfalls and trees, rocks, sky, animals and people kept moving past.

With one hand, our driver pulled out a *chibouk* from his dirty vest. With the other, he extracted a golf ball-sized hunk of *hashish* rolled up in aluminum foil. Steering the narrowing

mountain road with his knees and elbows he loaded his pipe and commenced to smoke. Sweet, nauseating fragrance filled the compartment. My window would not roll down.

He offered the pipe to me but I refused. Camilla's hand, carefully pushed through the broken window frame, lightly removed the filthy thing from our driver's paw. My friend's laughter rose as the drug passed back and forth between them and the driver.

Deeper into the mountains we drove. The sun climbed higher in the sky. It poked over the crest of peaks.

With each turn the car seemed to go faster. I noticed our pilot wasn't really paying attention to the road. He looked everywhere but forward. His head nodded back and forth, side to side. The smoke had taken him from the world of actuality and placed him in the world of dreams.

I looked over my shoulder into the truck bed. Rob was smiling, his arm around Camilla, her face tucked into his chest. They were both asleep. The bouncing of the truck on the rough and rutted road rocked them like a cradle.

Wrapped around our packs and gear sacks, Paul stared straight ahead, the horror of a bad dream written in his face. I turned around to face what Paul faced and saw a wagon stopped in the road. Some kind of gaunt cow was shackled to the front. It was all horns and hip bones. Beside the cow stood a young boy who carried a whip.

The boy was gazing up at the sky from which heavy clods were falling. I could hear them now, pinging off the roof of the Chevy. They streaked across my field of view like bullets drawn in comic strips. There was a look of wonderment and fright on the child's face. He was not aware of us.

To the left of the road, a low hill rose into the Himalaya Mountains. On the right, a steep slope ran down a hundred feet or so to a small water course.

Our driver didn't slow down. He was looking at the rocks falling from the sky. The door of his mouth hung open and his bloodshot eyes were wild.

There wasn't going to be room for both the car and the wagon. This realization shattered Paul's concentration on our gathering doom and he started yelling at the driver, beating him about the head and shoulders through the broken rear window. The truck leaped ahead as our guide stood on the gas pedal.

The moment before we would hit the wagon, I reached over and yanked the steering wheel to the right. I saw the face of the boy finally looking at us. His eyes were open like caverns and his mouth formed a big "O." The cow swished flies with her tail. Little chunks of rock bounced off her back.

"We're going over!" I heard Paul shout, and the little creek, below, came up to meet us.

Round and around, the world went round and around. When it stopped, time began.

The doors had popped open. Spilled people and baggage were cast all over the hillside. The truck had come to rest like a turtle, on its back. Under the crushed hood lay our driver. Under him, what had been his life oozed into the dry soil.

I lay next to him on the cold, hard ground. I could see into his eyes. They were glassy. There was no pain. His mouth was open and smelled of garlic and curry.

It was silent except the numbing pitter-patter of tiny raindrops of rock. I fainted, awoke, and fainted again.

When I awoke a second time I was aware of bouncing along in a car, propped up in the front like a stick of wood and somehow tied to the seat. The car had no doors. There was dust everywhere. The engine roared like a jet.

My arms were bound across my chest. Paul was laid out in the back. We were returning down the hill, leaving the mountains. I tried to speak to the grim faced driver but he only shook his head. No time for polite conversation and smiling faces now. I could taste the road dust in my mouth.

When we got to town someone helped me out of the car. A couple of others grabbed Paul by the shoulders and yanked him out. They sat him on the ground, propped up against the rear tire, his head back. I sat down, collapsed, next to him. His

tongue lolled out from his mouth and his eyes were slits. There was a little light there.

A knot of people, mostly old men, gathered nearby to engage in a heated debate. I imagine they were trying to decide what to do with us. They would have to be careful. It would be so easy for the authorities to lay the blame for the foreigner's injuries on the villagers. For the moment, I didn't care about anyone or anything. I felt like crying, tried, but couldn't. Tears wouldn't come. I leaned against Paul and rested. "It'll be all right, Paul. It'll be all right."

A little wave of excitement then moved through the crowd. I could see a tall blond head floating over the ground to meet with the town elders. When they stepped aside, I saw the head was attached to a man's body, and the body to a bicycle. I had never seen such a bike. It had a big heavy frame and fat tires, like on a beach cruiser, but with hand brakes and a crank and derailleur. It was heavily loaded with rear and front panniers.

In a moment, another blonde, this one a woman, joined the group. They conferred. Then, en masse, they poured over to Paul and me.

The man knelt down and looked at me. His feet crunched on little round rocks. He said something in a language I didn't understand. German? It sounded like it, but wasn't. Something else. He faced me, picked up a stick and pointed it at me. Then,

he touched my arms and broke the stick. I nodded my understanding at him. He smiled with beautiful teeth.

The girl looked at Paul, then her friend, and shook her head. She didn't look happy.

Then the man spoke to the town elders in their language. I felt safe. Suddenly, I wanted to go to sleep. I was so tired. But there was too much activity. They loaded us back in the car and we started down the road to the train station. The two blonds biked in front to make sure the drive went sanely.

That ride took forever. I slept or passed out a number of times. Somewhere along the way, Paul died. I studied his face from time to time during the rest of the journey but he didn't look like anyone I had ever known. There were green marbles instead of eyes.

At the train station they put me on a stretcher in the caboose. A functionary from the railroad was in charge. He spoke with the blonds. Then, the official walked over to me.

He was a short man, as they are in that part of the country. He looked down on me, smiling pleasantly. His front two teeth were of gold. They twinkled in the slanting sunlight. He explained I would be taken to the railway hospital. "Your friends are..." he paused. "I am so sorry."

He wandered away and the blonds returned. I looked into their faces. They were kind people. I wanted to thank them. They smiled. I asked, “What happened?”

They called the railroad official over and spoke to him. He turned to me and speaking in the sing-song English of Indians, said, “They do not understand you. What is it you wish to know?”

“Ask them what happened.”

The official nodded and translated for me. To their answer he smiled as a patient father will do when he doesn’t believe his child. “They say, the boy with the cart stopped to watch because the sky was falling.”

The woman reached into her pocket and pulled out some pebbles. She must have picked them up from the ground near the village. She laid a handful on my chest. The rocks were heavy, roughly shaped, and pitted.

The blond woman spoke a word slowly so she would get the pronunciation correct. “Meteorites.”

Chapter 22

Ephemeroptera

A whirlpool of mayflies spirals into the mid-summer morning. They shine, back lit by a rising sun. Swirling. Cast about this way and that by competing winds - upcanyon, downcanyon. They are male looking for female, female waiting for male. With no mouth to eat with, mayflies are made for one purpose only.

The sky is an amazing shade of blue today. Mikey and I are walking up the Tablelands, a cirque of granite two miles wide. It's the first time we have seen other since the tenth grade. This trip was my idea and Mikey agreed it was a good idea. I believe it is possible for friendships to go around in circles, like a Mandela or a Medicine Wheel.

Granite is white with chunks of black feldspar, shining flecks of mica and translucent quartz. The Tablelands are more reminiscent of the Roman Colosseum than the rest of where we are in the glacial Sierra Nevada. Rings of what could be risers gather and pull us up to the cheap seats. So, up we go, climbing over granite benches and through rivulets of soil clogged by sedge, aster and alpine willow.

We stop, admire the scenery and catch out breath. We're doing pretty well. My body still aches. The muscles work but the bones and spirit complain. Mikey's huffing and puffing attest to

the fact that he hasn't hiked in years, if he ever hiked at all. He isn't fat as in high school but neither is he a rail. But he's game. Our backpacks aren't too heavy - we'll be out for three, maybe four days by the time we're finished. The air is thin at eleven thousand feet but that's OK too.

The closest trees are a thousand feet below. Foxtail pine or lodgepole pine. I can't say which because I forgot to check when I passed them. In university I learned a game called, "Freeway Botany," where the object is to identify woody plants from sixty-five miles per hour. You get good at it with practice. I've had none; and now, stationary or moving, trees all look the same to me unless I'm standing right under them.

Neither of us have spoken since leaving camp at the lake. If Mikey is like me, he is thinking about the aluminum jar we carry. Every hour or so, since leaving the trail head, we have exchanged the honor of carrying the burden. At this rest break it's my turn. I take the jar and tenderly stuff it into my pack. It is good of him to share.

The breeze this morning is an autumnal breeze and I let it wash over me. It's the kind of breeze that lingers, surges forward a bit, retreats until you think it's gone, but then returns for a final embrace - always with a hint of something else. An eddy swirls around my ear and I hallucinate, "Hello."

On cue, we shoulder our packs and walk. A cloud of grasshoppers rises from dried grass and rolls on ahead, their wings crackling and cackling like rattlesnakes. They settle and then rise again when we catch up. We chase them up to our destination - a hard pillar of rock skirted by decomposing granite, little different than a thick, sawed-off flagpole rising out of a sand dune.

The breeze has caught up to us and dances around, in and out. This is Ginger Rogers. I am Fred Astaire. Our last waltz.

We arrive at the place. To the east, Mount Whitney and the Sierra crest. South, the Kaweah Peaks group. North, the Kings-Kern Divide. Below, the Tablelands drop to unnamed lakes. Such a landscape! Country so wild, still, that no road can ever cross it.

Packs on the ground, Mikey takes the urn from my hand. He hands me a small brass plaque and a package of epoxy. I mix the two tubes, apply a big glob to the rock pillar and an equal-size glob to the plaque and stick the two together.

I take a step back and quickly straighten the plaque - silently reading, Camilla Barker, 1950 - 1978, and then aloud the inscription, “She will always be in these mountains.”

“OK,” I say.

"OK," Mikey says. He opens his sister's urn, waiting for the dancing breeze. Here it comes. He turns slowly, then faster - faster, the ash spiraling out. It flies, flies, flies, flies...

"She would like it here," I say.

"I keep thinking of things to say to her," Mikey whispers to the breeze.

I pull a quaich and a hip flask of fine single malt scotch whisky from a pocket in my pack.

Mikey's eyes open a notch or two and he quickly says, "A toast to Camilla? She would like that."

I fill the quaich and offer it to Mikey.

Mikey raises the friendship cup to the mountains and to the space where his sister's ashes have flown. "My father said that only sissies cry," he murmurs. He drinks the scotch, tears running down his cheeks.

A mayfly crests the ridge, followed by another. Then another. Flying west to east - east to west with the wind. The wind. The wind. There is freedom and quiet in the wind.

I want to listen to the quiet.

Raising my own moist eyes to track the mayflies, all I can see is sky.

The End

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