

CHAINS of PRIDE: A Story of Grace

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Preface

On the twenty-sixth day of February 2012, I was legitimately free for the first time in five long years. My professional career beckoned, so I attempted a return to the high-tech arena. I also considered a call to the ministry. A senior pastor counseled me regarding direction. Shortly after a different pursuit surfaced. I found myself in uncharted waters, but with an overwhelming sense of purpose.

I had written extensively throughout my career, primarily in a technical fashion. So, I tinkered in writing a purely fictional tale. Inconsistency stalled the manuscript at less than fifty pages. I questioned my desire and abilities for the first time.

Then my focus shifted to a memoir, a genre indicative of explicit flavor. An uncanny recollection from years of drama supported a roller coaster narrative. The plan unfolded. Ignited and determined, I exclaimed, "I can do this."

The internet yields a plethora of information regarding writing. Much work loomed to produce a worthy manuscript, so I spent up to twelve hours a day on this project. I've never been a quitter and rarely get discouraged.

Authors inspired me:

Charles Dickens: *"Reflect on your present blessings, of which every man has many; not on your past misfortunes, of which all men have some."*

C.S. Lewis: *"Experience: that most brutal of teachers. But you learn, my God do you learn."*

Stephen King: *"I write to find out what I think."*

Ravi Zacharias: *"There is no greater discovery than seeing God as the author of your destiny. Life's joys are only joys if they can be shared."*

Then TCM aired, John Ford's, *"The Grapes of Wrath"* on a 2012 evening. Which is based on the classic novel by John Steinbeck. Henry Fonda's portrayal of Tom Joad is simple and compelling. His closing reflection emboldened me.

*"Ever'body might be just one big soul,
Well it looks that a-way to me.
Everywhere that you look, in the day or night,
That's where I'm a-gonna be, Ma,
That's where I'm a-gonna be.*

*Wherever little children are hungry and cry,
Wherever people ain't free.
Wherever men are fightin' for their rights,
That's where I'm a-gonna be, Ma.
That's where I'm a-gonna be."*

The memoir was doable, yet it would require significant time and unwavering commitment. My desire never waned, understanding purpose with greater clarity. What did I have to lose? All I had gone through honed a persona. When someone happens to say "that's impossible" it always motivates me.

I contemplated essential elements while sipping a coffee of introspection:

- Decent Vocabulary (check)
- Adequate Describer (check)
- Impassioned Communicator (check)
- Interesting Style (to be determined)

"Necessity is the mother of invention." I truly understood its significance, reflecting on this adage for the first time in my life. Then *carpe diem*, "seize the day," endorsed an urgency. How else does one explain a eureka moment?

Forever adventurous, my aim is to write. Having the necessities, a unique story is about to be told. With a pinch of technology let's begin. I'm hopeful this message will penetrate the otherwise dead-end streets of religiosity.

Prologue

If we are born under a curse called sin, resulting in lives filled with struggles, is there hope? While grace and faith provide opportunities for ultimate perfection, we seek redemption from misplaced dependencies. This typically places us, our loved ones, or temporal things at the center of our lives. Are we doomed?

Many fine and beloved people live modest existences. They work hard, raise families, and appear content. I admire such discipline and stability. For me, no challenge seemed too great. I had regularly sought adventure beyond a normal existence, assuming life was to be lived at full throttle. Surrender and humility were not in my vocabulary.

Blessed with storybook lives, my family in Texas thrived in quest of the American Dream. A new marriage challenged, parents of three in five short years. Information Technology provided a lucrative career, but success rarely comes easy. Working diligently through the ranks eventually paid off.

I was privileged to have accomplished lofty goals by the age of forty. A variety of personal issues added extra levels of complexity. Life was spinning fast, the spiral aimed downward, out of control. Certain consequences were inevitable. My existence evolved into one of simplicity. From devastation to rays of hope, I'm learning to surrender these days.

Webster's New World Thesaurus contains the following definition: "**pride**, n. 1. [The quality of being vain] vainglory, egoism, egotism, self-esteem, self-love, self-exaltation, self-glorification, self-admiration, pretension."

The constant in my life, a confidence to attempt almost anything. To step out of a comfort zone. Thinking the hunt had shamefully ended, a higher endeavor illuminated my way. It started with glimpses of mercy from prison in 2008. Faith prepared my heart, trusting in things unseen. Each day yields more wonderful grace.

My struggle is yours to an extent the genesis was inherited at conception. It's an unavoidable destiny. So how should one deal with pride and temptation?

I've grown since beginning this effort. In short, humbled. The heart's confirmation through words provides miraculous peace. It wasn't easy summoning the drive to tell this story. Few challenges have been as demanding. I wanted to give up on this manuscript many times. Fortunately, the creation inside of me wouldn't let go.

Who are you? What motivates you? Where will your search for a meaning end? Why were you created? I never wanted this book to be solely about me.

Each of us was created for a clear design. It is not a pious platitude. Those who discover intent early in life seem to fare better. Most reach aim through academics or skilled trades. Some find purpose through the **way** of disgraceful circumstances. Others statically wonder. The rest roam around.

"*Chains of Pride*" is told from an enlightened perspective, which will become evident through the transformation process. I made a commitment to focus on **truth**. Other memoirs have been found fictitious. Each story I've recounted can be supported. I have omitted aspects of certain accounts because my intent is not melodrama.

I've allowed transparency, bearing much of my soul through these pages. Some will question why I've chosen to do so. Many go to their graves bottled up. This isn't a novel with a hokey plot or fictional characters. It is an accurate depiction, seeking to convey redeeming values. Portions of this trek will trudge through unpleasant topics, yet it's amazing how a **life** can be transformed.

Consider a few more questions with me. Can joy arise from sorrow? Could your worst experience be a springboard to utmost peace? Are these things possible in today's volatile and mind-boggling world?

The struggles we have faced can impact others. My kids, my sibling's kids and my friend's kids are the thirty to forty something's. They are the sometimes accused up and comers. Aren't we obliged to impart wisdom we have painstakingly endured, and to warn about poor judgment?

I believe in even the younger generation. Without hope, they are defeated. You've heard people say, "These kids are going to pot." To quote King Solomon, the wisest man on earth ago: "*There*

is nothing new under the sun." Technology has surely burgeoned, but what else is new in the world?

This story also deals with a universal subject, love. Love transcends reason; hence, it overwhelms and tends to rule us at times. I had a deep longing to be endlessly in love. One must consider what they yearn for. Love's clutches are inescapable, infusing life with spellbinding splendor. Love is eternally boundless.

I had an opportunity to live above the fray, having grown in a happy home, virtuous and functional in West Virginia. Then I was blessed with such a wonderful family in Texas. A place where we attained the finer things in life, however, I wanted more. My pride deserved it.

Pride leads a down and dirty list. Temptation lurks behind shadows of reason. Giving in rolls the dice. Falling in jeopardizes survival. There are plenty of ways to screw up. If you err there is good news. You need not live your life in regret. Get over it! Regardless of one's situation, there is hope. Telling this story is therapeutic and necessary. It is also inspirational. Not because of me.

Life is beautiful, yet intricately fragile. We all experience trouble and despair. Those entangled in turmoil increase their probabilities. The results are unpredictable. Disastrous. This tale recounts iniquitous consequences of the rash. Man chose pride over paradise in Eden. And more decisively, separation from God. The same will is exercised on through the ages. My vain life was a relentless tragedy, one that hadn't curbed a flattering appetite. It's these types of egos requiring; shall we say, more drastic measures.

Christmas drew near that unseasonably warm Saturday. Dusk was poised to fall on a hazy highway in suburban Texas. The sound of a Harley downshifted. Suddenly, a normal exit signaled dread. I diverted into the barrier, recording a slow-motion video. Metal crushing and glass breaking climaxed in airbag silence. Eeriness followed, and lives were changed in a twinkling of an eye.

That was a fragment inside the obscurity of an abysmal period. Emergence, never the same. I've elected to omit and change certain names, preserving confidentiality. I've refrained from sharing more than necessary to respect the privacy of others. Make no mistake; clearly, this book is about truth. Would you be surprised to know; the truth is free? Entertaining these

questions will leave you with a choice.

Chapter 1 "Almost Heaven"

When one's life turbulently crescendos it may reveal a paradoxical existence, resulting in a completely different journey. A friend dropped me at the airport for a short hop, the first leg toward the state of my birthplace. A redolent whiff of the skycap's cigarette caused me to consider bumming one. Instead I opted for the challenge of my crossword puzzle, then I eased through security. Passengers munched on McDonald's from the terminal's version of the Golden Arches. My stomach churned, filled with anxiousness.

Two stately pilots passed through the concourse, pulling their customary travel bags. One of them, perhaps the captain, wore his hat tilted down. The brim partially concealed eyes of bold confidence. Flanked by a pair of attractive flight attendants, the crew left onlookers gawking. I thought back to a time when I'd pondered, what a life they must lead! Then it hit me, appearances rarely tell the whole story.

I had never feared to fly before, but takeoff turned suspenseful under threatening conditions. The skies opened with a Texas downpour. Nevertheless, our jet accelerated on a saturated runway. Iffy considerations overloaded my mind: too much weight, enough velocity, possible wind shear, and required lift. Tightness extended from my forearms to the fingertips. Then more uncertainty, an ascending bank.

I settled after the aircraft straightened. Above baleful clouds calm filled my senses. A dismal period was behind me. Or so it seemed. The landscape looked uninhabited, like patchwork, toward the nation's fourth largest city of Houston, Texas. Ascending to a tranquil space, we leveled off at twenty-some thousand. San Antonio International to George Bush Intercontinental barely accommodates the requisite beverage cart. "Coffee?" an attendant said.

"Yes, cream and sugar please."

While she poured, a Bloody Mary double crossed my mind. I recalled its piquant flavor and how well a stalk of celery freshened afterward. Thought I should consume it to satisfy my health-conscious side.

A curious preschooler studied me from across the aisle. I winked at him. He told his mother. She half-smiled in my direction, then whispered something in his ear. The child glanced apprehensively, so I acted oblivious to keep him from trouble and to play his game. My heart echoed images of my kids at similar ages with distinct looks of wonder and innocence.

The first flight took longer than expected, blamed on atmospheric conditions with storms sliding in from the gulf. "We need to fly around some weather in the Houston area," the captain said. "We're taking a slight diversion, approaching from another direction."

The captain's news wasn't surprising, a commonality from spring storms in the area. But my ears perked to something more threatening, from those in the know. Overheard a crew member mentioning, "Hydraulic issues and a part swap out," which prompted an OMG. I confessed known sins, not really doubting the jet would stop, but just in case. Should have minded my business, yet I couldn't resist the crew's scuttlebutt.

We landed in Houston without much ado. Other than impending annihilation, I love traveling and airports. Always have, even after 9/11. I'm wrapped complexly, not without a foible or three. The gate for a connecting flight to my destination of Charleston, West Virginia was at the end of another terminal. No bother, a minor inconvenience. I still had time for a pre-made turkey sandwich amid the bustle of a major hub. People are a trip, traversing the world as adventurous souls with excitement and/or anxiousness. But it was time to get moving.

I passed a gate, boarding for Cancun. Light bulb. Playa Del Carmen, all-inclusive and endless Pina Colodas. Nancy and I loved Mexico's Riviera Maya. Snap. Oh...I'm headed north. And gone were the days of consenting, "An extra shot for a dollar sir?"

Nope. Not tempted, no booze period. I was beginning to view airports differently, as well as most everything.

We eventually pushed back and departed on time. I had requested a window seat for the final leg, a two-hour-plus flight. Plenty I wanted to see, not necessarily from 1A. Oh well, I would be first off in West Virginia. A captain out of Houston concluded his flight announcements. "Gorgeous weather toward our destination today."

I had taken along my gratis copy of "*The Purpose Driven Life*" and a Stephen King novel. Can you say conflicted, or eclectic perhaps? Flying northeastward, which directed our path toward Charleston's Chuck Yeager Airport, the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers snaked the terrain. They look muddier from high above.

We must have been getting close, less urbanized. Hills after hills formed a lumpy looking blanket. West Virginia is lush in spring sunshine; a forest canopy spans every direction. The panorama composed me, and everything seemed unspoiled from up there. Then I recalled how the mountains had jutted mysteriously out of the fog in my youth. Spooky. These days, I'm partial to the clear and glorious reference of God's Country. Others prefer "Almost Heaven."

Pellucid skies yielded perfect visibility for a smooth approach, so I focused way down. Yeager's runways appeared as crisscrossed Band-Aids, anchoring several flattened mountain tops. Inclement weather must elevate landing anxiety for plenty of first timers. Most of us envision a pilot and crew, cool as cucumbers. Right?

On previous flights to see the folks, I had flown into Raleigh-Durham International. Then I would drive to Princeton in a rental for unwinding and smoking time, to acclimate. Many asked, why not fly into Charlotte, its closer? Without hesitation, nah. I justified it with familiarity and arrogance. I can zip onto I-40 by the airport and the highways are faster. My way. PROUD.

Meanwhile, another cockpit announcement. "I've turned on the *Fasten Seat Belt* sign. Please return to your seats for our descent."

A new experience, landing in Charleston with defying drop-offs. Only so much room to stop, then what? Google it (Yeager Airport Wikipedia: 300 feet drops). I reminisced about the aroma and pleasurable pull from a Marlboro. Darn it, I'd quit that vice too. Suddenly, I wasn't as cavalier, nor thrilled with flying.

I mouthed the word, "S-e-r-e-n-i-t-y."

Our descending glide traversed the Kanawha River and capitol complex, a stark contrast from cities I'd grown accustomed. I peered anxiously from a Continental jet. West Virginia's majestic capitol dome is five feet higher than Washington DC's and it's gilded in gold. Not what you might expect from a less sufficient state.

A proud native there was much to prove, the youngest of six. My parents had advised that siblings would be in the terminal. I relished their welcome, we were close coming up. My excitement level steadily increased.

Our touchdown was polished in Charleston. I anticipated the sudden backdraft from flaps and hydraulics, figured the pilot must have been military. The way he landed, ex-Navy, an aircraft carrier ace. It reminded me that many of our country's sworn aviators' transition commercially.

Emotion swelled as our taxi concluded, an unusually short one. Not like taxiing on an American MD80 via DFW (Dallas/Fort-Worth International), which is better described as tarmac idling. Anyway, I sensed family as the aircraft parked at the gate. Paranoid? Not anymore. The anticipated moment arrived. "Flight attendants," the captain garbled, "doors to arrival and crosscheck."

The flight crew's cheerful attendance to annoying passengers neared an end, though, there's always an intractable one who defies acceptance. An obnoxious guy a few rows back had attempted a beer drinking record from Texas airspace. It never fails, someone will muck up a perfectly good ride. With scattered thoughts, I waited to deplane. A return from a long hiatus is a reason to celebrate and to suppress the negativity from a wake of devastation. Hope ushers in new beginnings. Purpose.

"Are you from West Virginia?" a Houston crew member said."
"Yes, but I've been in Texas since seventy-five."
"It's my first visit and it's beautiful up here."

She appeared to be in her twenties, the only one staffed on an Express jet. An Embraer ERJ 145, a fifty-passenger model. I'm fascinated with flying, only in aircraft these days. Why would I chronicle flights so markedly? It had been a while and I was back in the saddle. Goal-oriented. ALIVE.

On to baggage claim at Yeager Airport. Spotted dad's customary grin. He'd slipped ahead of the others and hugged me, "Welcome home son."

Nice moment. "Hey dad, thanks."

He eased some concerns. I reflected on the parable of the

Prodigal Son. "How's your golf game?" I asked.

"We mostly shoot in the nineties, once in a while the eighties."

Time had shown, but dad is still an amicable force. He'd remained active, teaching Sunday school at eighty-five. Then a bout with vertigo prompted consent. I'm pleased he has recovered and better enjoys mom's company. At ninety, he subs at teaching and walks two rounds of golf a week at Pipestem. He and mom go to a fitness center four mornings a week. They are truly amazing. Excellent genes.

Momma's beautiful smile is inescapable. Her tenderness always shines through, but she appeared puzzled. "I hardly knew you," she said in a motherly embrace.

"Really mom?" She knew me well, once upon a time. "I love you, Momma," whispering in her ear.

"I love you too, honey."

Moms...endlessly adoring.

Lessened activity had contributed to my girth. I wasn't corpulent, but in her mind, she'd stored a finer image of her baby boy. Mothers do as they choose, it's their prerogative. Momma is three years dad's senior and can outperform us all. A mother's love is steadfast and pure. For the record, I've lost twenty pounds since.

My sister and her husband, Debbie, and David greeted jovially. Deb and I maintain similar dispositions. But she's lovely (inside joke). We're typically gregarious and mischievously confrontational.

"Dad said," Debbie snickered, "Steve has been eating well."

"And you said?" She eyed me in typical fashion.

"Well, I'm waiting, Deb."

"Let's get out of here and eat," she said.

Jo Ann was syrupy sweet, her normal demeanor. I'd missed her nurturing way. John Jr. waited in the wings and undeniably smirked. What can I say? He's big brother. His sentiment was appreciated, asking about my kids.

The remaining sibs live in other states. I revere Donna's

extreme kindness and humility. Sharon and I sang a duet at Johnston Chapel years prior. I treasure those memories. Sharbo is wonderfully original, so alive. I looked forward to seeing them both in days to come. Some will say I'm just being sentimental, concerning family through these pages. But honestly, they're uncommon and void of many faults. Compared to me it will be obvious.

There was a time when Charleston, WV seemed so alive, busy with commerce. Could have been my overactive childhood imagination, because the capital now appears in decline. Yet not measured by the traffic around Corridor G. Maybe it was due to my sometimes proclivity toward skepticism or exaggeration. I had been gone a long time, living in and around a growing city of a 1.4 million in Texas.

I found myself newly fascinated with my siblings and parents, wanting to soak up what I had missed in over three decades. We stopped long enough to stuff ourselves at Olive Garden, then headed south to Princeton on the West Virginia Turnpike (I-77). The scenery was impressive, having missed the intimacy of an encompassing landscape. It made catching up nostalgic on a familiar stretch of highway. Some things never change. I've noticed the Ohio drivers still prefer the leftmost lane. I caught Jo Ann and Johnny looking at me, like the way the kid from the airplane had. Then helplessly my mind drifted southwestward.

"Are you alright honey?" Jo Ann said.

Back from a trance, "Yes, I'm fine."

Familiar with the Lone Star State and somewhat torn in allegiance, my home was San Antonio (1307 miles away). The odometer had read as much from a trip with my wife and kids for a 1990 reunion. So, I was back in the town I had left to find myself in 1975. Returning years later to regroup in 2010. What a peculiar trip it had been.

To be honest, I'm still discovering myself. Much of life had been hidden behind this and that, pretending to be something else. A feigning type of existence is not recommended. My way traversed nebulousity, it yielded to showiness and temptation for years. And years.

Some of us need to deal with who we were so we can discover who we are. Once family and friends read my story they may respond

with a wow or a whoa. Others will go speechless. Perhaps their heads will shake in dismay. I certainly understand it all. The fact is, mild to darkened secrets lie within the virtue of households.

I'm concerned for the latest generation of pretenders. Technology occupied. Meme driven. Impatient, material, and visceral. Proud, with questionable foundations and views. Socially and politically more liberal in the last decade, and that's not biased. It's backed by the polling numbers. I wouldn't be classified as a conservative extremist. Evangelical? Yes.

I do have fears for one's less rooted in the faith, blown by winds of increasing deception. Health and wealth seekers. Consenting that grace provides excuses for continual wrong. Or an impetus to crave personal riches. And unfortunately, those enthralled by the millennium's sensual allure. Nonetheless, plenty of hope lies ahead. Oops. I've gone to meddling.

Where was I? We'd left our turnpike at the signpost, Exit 9. Home? It was hard to imagine an extended stay in Princeton, West Virginia. From early on, I've branched from the comfort zone. This instance was a foregone conclusion. You'll understand later. My home was to be West Virginia again, at least until 2012.

People in West Virginia could be accused as over friendly, mostly in the southern region. Is there such a thing as too friendly? I had become familiar with faster-paced environments. Less sincere. Negotiations occur at certain intersections in Princeton. Each side tends to pause. They motion you; you motion them. One might utter the words, Nah, you go. Much depends on locale in Mercer County.

Most parking lots are like driving in a foreign country. Traffic darting every which way with bounties on prized parking slots. Wait, that's anywhere. Men still hold doors for the ladies at supermarkets here. They seem shyly appreciative. Most are calm and polite in the aisles, though considerably more intense at checkout.

Some youngsters attempt to wax philosophical while bagging your groceries if they aren't smoking their wages outdoors. Man, nearly five bucks a pack. Grateful I've kicked it. I hope. Some baggers complain about work stress. Headed out the door, I've mumbled, "Really...stress?"

It's a mad dash upon shopping cart abandonment. Look out. NASCAR is somewhat close: Bristol, Charlotte, Martinsville, and Rockingham. I've noticed a regional indulgence that stems from a need for velocity and risk from daring two and four wheelers, including ATVs.

While traveling the area, I'm mindful of places tied to meaningful events. Encountering people from the day, I recall how they once looked and how time brutally changes. It's odd how we perceive ourselves. I ask my sister's, Deb and Jo, "Do we look as old?" We must; I deduce.

I recall a commonly cited quote from our annuals ago: "*I wish to remain young and happy forever.*" Wonder how that turned out? Some people are more easily recognizable, even with their well-grayed coifs. Then I see others, who's that?

The native women continue to intrigue, accepting challenges and radiating a quiet charm. Many are certainly lovely. Not to brag, but I've received Valentine's candy on the doorstep. Anonymously, which never happened in Texas. Inquiries concerning my re-emergence in West Virginia have come from church and Facebook.

While visiting Princeton in 2006, I went to a restaurant where a waitress boldly asked, "Why do you look so sad?"

She caught me off guard. "Uh, I suppose it's due to a recent divorce in Texas."

She looked earnest, "Well...we take care of our men up here."

I've known hard working men from the Mountain State. They are proud of their heritage. From time to time, I'll run into a coal miner at Lowe's or Walmart. Miners have long been the state's backbone and are widely misunderstood. They're easily recognized by their work wear, accented by reflective tape. Most look detached in still blackened faces. Haven't seen many overly cheerful.

I'm respectful of their trade as they plod along. Where might the state be without them? I once asked a predecessor. "Is there peace underground?"

He responded with a halfhearted grin, confirming what his kind could attribute. I thought, stalwart. I've heard priceless

testimonies from miners and their families.

West Virginia is much maligned. Some US citizens are not aware that West Virginia had become a state in 1863. You hear them exclaim, "Yes. I've been to Richmond" or "The mountain ranges are beautiful up there." They are correct with the latter. The state is scenic but has plenty of unsightly coalfields. It is also known to inhabit hillbillies. If you're from here, it's acceptable to utter that name. I'll better familiarize you with the area, seeing it from a clearer perspective than ever. And I have a renewed fondness for the state. I have been called a hillbilly.

I remember Princeton as vibrant in the 60s and 70s, far from Princeton University's township. I once had taken a ribbing from a friend in Texas. "You're a Yankee from New Jersey," the only Princeton he'd known. Oddly, both cities lie in counties named Mercer. The street I grew up on was Park Avenue, yet high rises lie absent from the skyline. The commuting area (Mercer County WV, Tazewell County VA, and Bland County VA), contained a population of approximately 107,000 a few years back.

Times have changed. Similarities are most evident from old neighborhoods. The high school, a more contemporary design with obvious upgrades to the athletic facilities. There sure are more restaurants on the east side by the interstate. Stafford Drive has morphed into the new downtown, commerce wise.

Our house looks much as it had in the 60s. My parents made nice improvements. Only one of the original neighbors held out. I have memories of intermingling, slurping watermelon and tossing horseshoes on the fourth of July. Those are days gone by when neighbors socialized in person and celebrated holidays together. Some next door walked into our house without knocking. We weren't as bold. I don't even recognize the neighbors on Facebook or Twitter these days.

I'm not fond of reacquainting with gnats, darting unexpectedly into your eye. They are troublesome pests, drawn to the moistness of eye sockets, where they swim to the farthest recesses and are nearly impossible to expel. Yellow Jackets sting well-intended intruders, typically making their nests underground. So, detecting them in the mowing path is tricky. Filling their holes with used motor oil won't eradicate them. Don't tell the old timers, nor the EPA.

In daylight hours, it is squirrel city. When the neighborhood

quiets large groundhogs emerge from their burrows. Moles are constant annoyances for lawns, analogous to those blasted fire ants in San Antonio. Deer extend from nearby woods in the fall to nibble the remaining foliage. They're daringly skittish, having strayed from the forest and dodging a blind or two.

A giant crow landed on the hillside. Hmm, everything isn't bigger in Texas. Blue Jays are plentiful in the region. Mrs. Jay is protective, an old nemesis. She pecked at my noggin while mowing at a tender age, as I neared her shrubbery nest. West Virginia's state bird, the Cardinal, boasts the reddest males in the country. The orneriest boys didn't even shoot at them with BB or pellet guns as naughty lads.

It's not exceedingly hot in West Virginia. I'm surprised when I hear, "It's miserable out there." I just think, yeah right. I'll don a hoodie in the spring and fall. It's a craftier look. Those years in San Antonio shelled out some significant tolerance. By mid-August, one might feel fall in the air around Princeton. The heat is just getting cranked up in the Alamo City.

I've hung out on the front porch lately, where I used to wait for friends or see hot girls passing to and from Boulder Park. My writing vantage today is dominated by a well-aged oak, which towers more than a hundred feet on the hillside. A couple of sugar maples planted in the 60s matured to seventy feet. Those beauties yielded the finest hues of red and ocher in the county. But they hacked off Appalachian Power Company, causing the demise of one and the pruning of the other. The rake still hums steadily. I've noticed some are compulsive with leaves. I hadn't raked in South Texas with frequency. The wind took care of it, honking off the downwind neighbors.

Getting accustomed to West Virginia for the last few years, it's unlike the wide-open spaces of Texas. One must step on the lawn to see the sky through this sloping timber here. When dusk falls a chorus of insects and critters perform beautifully. There's plenty of roadkill once the wild and nocturnal liven. Some relate the state of West Virginia to the *Wrong Turn* movies. Those flicks are insanely kooky, quite far from reality. Don't be afraid to visit Greenbrier County. "It's an amazing place and everything y'all

I can hear those twangs from Jim Justice. Nevertheless, I'm proud of him for restoring The Greenbrier, America's Resort. And for him bringing the PGA Tour to West Virginia at the Old White Course with his estimated worth of 1.7 billion. He is making a

run for governor now.

Golf. Reminds me of a surprising snippet with West Virginia roots. No pun intended. Do you remember Tiger Wood's ex-wife, Elin Nordegren? Chris Cline, her next boyfriend, is a native of Beckley and a coal entrepreneur from up the road. You can't miss one of his estates, on 150-acres, sprawling the countryside along the West Virginia Turnpike (I-77). According to Forbes, Cline is worth 1.4 billion. He has been tabbed by Bloomberg as New King Coal. By the way, his yacht is 164 ft. Tiger's is 155 ft.

Suppose I should mention MTV's discontinued reality show, "*Buckwild*." One had to wonder how long it would air, considering the recent death and arrest of two cast members. Star Shain Gandee was found dead of carbon monoxide poisoning while "*muddin*." Prior to Gandee's death, it was reported that two cast members were arrested for selling drugs. Oxycodone and heroin were among their inventory. State politicians were likely pleased with the show's demise considering its rowdy theme and indecent portrayal of West Virginia. I viewed back-to-back episodes one evening. It seemed like an impromptu video of carefree kids in their element. If a script had been followed it was difficult to tell. Before seeing the show, I had considered changing the title of this book to Buck Proud.

I joke about West Virginia, but it is quite serene at night. My fondness stems from late night reads and meditation these days. Before turning in from writing all day, I'll go out to loosen the kinks from my neck. Stars glitter far from the glow of a metropolis. I never miss an opportunity to converse with the Master of the universe.

At times, having grown proud of my writing, I'll peruse the latest revision. Then I'll surmise, not so pleased. That's one of my horizontal conversations with the black ceiling at dark-thirty. Those reflective moments include barrages from an unshakable past and the ever-daunting future. I'm striving to live more in the moment. It's easier to pen than it is to achieve.

Princeton residents have included actors: Bob Denver (Gilligan), Sam Elliott, Jennifer Garner, and Kevin Sizemore. There are other noteworthy folks from this small community. Forgive me for not mentioning everyone. I'm continually surprised to discover others.

Denver's wife, Dreama, keeps Bob's dreams alive around here. She was raised in Bluefield, WV. Dreama is head of The Denver Foundation and Princeton's Little Buddy Radio WGAG 93.1. The foundation helps handicapped and disadvantaged people of West Virginia. I must mention Dreama Denver's memoir, *"Gilligan's Dreams: The Other Side of the Island."* It was published in 2012. Thank you, Dreama. I'm amazed by her endurance, surviving many trials. She helped inspire this memoir. Dreama signed a personal copy, which was obtained by my sister Jo Ann: *"Steve, Shoot for the stars. Mahalo, Dreama Denver."* Mahalo is Hawaiian for thank you.

I found something in common with Bob Denver, his name was mentioned in the same sentence with weed. A 1998 news wire had reported: *"A package of marijuana was mailed to Denver's Princeton area home."*

In the mid-70s, I was accused of possession in the vast state of Texas. An officer discovered weed under a floor mat. He was investigating an incident across from our late-night munching spot, Jack in the Box's drive through. My car collided with the clown's torso, preempting our munch fest. Those tacos seemed delicious in the day. Stoned, what doesn't? One of my Yankee friends uttered in a brogue accent, "Jeez, uh...I didn't know where ya stashed it."

Oh wow, I thought. "Dude," was all I could say.

I ultimately received probation and a big fat fine. His honor's speculation and judgment, "Son. You appear to have more sense than this, so I'm letting you off easy this time.

"With a record, off easy?" I muffled.

"What did you just say? Don't let me catch you in my courtroom again," the judge warned.

My relative innocence was marred, having fingerprints registered by the FBI's NCIC database. NCIC is the National Crime Information Center, a federal office located in the Clarksburg, West Virginia area. My attorney obtained an expunge order for the possession charge with twice the fine's amount. Certain records become permanent trails, unfortunately. There's money in personal information these days. Background and credit checks, cha-ching.

Never knew Jennifer Garner grew up for a time in Princeton. Her

father was a chemical engineer with Union Carbide. The plant had a large presence in Charleston, West Virginia. Ben Affleck, Garner's husband, co-wrote and produced a deserving film, "The Town." I finally saw his much-ballyhooed movie, "Argo." I was saddened to hear of the couple's possible divorce.

Princeton's own, Suzi Carr, is the former lead singer of four *Will to Power* #1 hits: "Baby I Love Your Way, Dreamin, Say It's Gonna Rain, and Fading Away." We have connected and stay in communication through Facebook. You rock, Suzi!

A native of Princeton and Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, Terry Wimmer, worked for the Orange County Register in Santa Ana, California. The only prize winner of such magnitude from Princeton, WV. At least to my knowledge. What an accomplishment!

I first became acquainted with Kevin Sizemore's acting achievements through the local newspaper, a Princeton High School 1990 alumnus. We first connected through LinkedIn. Technology, you gotta love it. We are proud of his movie, "A Christmas Tree Miracle," which he starred in and was released in 2013. He also played a role in the hit movie, "Woodlawn," which was released in 2015. Kevin has appeared in too many television acting roles to mention.

A Princeton native from professional sports is an Arizona Diamondback baseball owner/executive, Ken Kendrick. He made his early fortune in IT. My brother played sports with Ken's brother, Rick. Their dad, Earl, operated Kendrick's on Mercer Street. It was renamed, The Buccaneer. The exclusive men's store where I'd purchased a much sought-after necktie was called, The Stag. A solid white beauty. Wore it with a gold-plated tie bar that festooned the collar of a black and white striped shirt. I looked like a blonde-haired mobster.

Former president and general manager of the NBA's Philadelphia Seventy-Sixers, Rod Thorn, was Princeton-born and raised. He and I played basketball for the Princeton High Tigers, but he was a star. He and dad were inducted into Princeton High School's Hall of Fame together. Before joining the Seventy-Sixers, Thorn held similar positions with the New Jersey Nets and the Chicago Bulls. He was instrumental in drafting/hiring a couple of Hall of Famers you may know, Michael Jordan and Phil Jackson. So, coming from Princeton, West Virginia fostered a fair amount of pride.

There is John Nash, a Nobel Prize Winner in Economics. Hollywood

portrayed by Russell Crowe in the movie, "*A Beautiful Mind*." He was born down Route 460 in the city of Bluefield, WV.

Homer Hickam, NASA Engineer and author, is one of the Rocket Boys. He is a subject in the memoir and movie, "*October Sky*." Homer hails from nearby Coalwood, WV.

John Chambers ascended to Chairman of the Board and CEO of Cisco Systems, Inc. He hails from the state capital of Charleston, WV. I hold him in esteem for his storied career in information technology. If knowledgeable of the business, you can relate to Cisco's impact on global network connectivity and explosion of the internet. Plenty of Cisco engineers are millionaires.

And there's Landau Eugene Murphy Jr. He is from the northwest of Princeton in Logan, WV. Not as widely acclaimed, he released his first CD, "*That's Life*," after gaining prominence from *America's Got Talent*. Murphy stoked my creative juices through the importance of thinking big. He caused me to carry on with this book.

West Virginia boasts other of its noteworthiest: Stonewall Jackson, Cyrus Vance, Chuck Yeager, Nick Saban, Lou Holtz, John McKay, Sam Huff, Hot Rod Hundley, Don Knotts, and Brad Paisley. Josh Hamilton played minor league baseball for the Princeton Devil Rays. From the political arena, how popular was the elder statesman and longtime senator, Robert C. Byrd? A senior senator, Jay Rockefeller, brought instant recognition from his wealthy family name. He also served as two-term governor for the state. Senator Jennings Randolph wrote the constitutional amendment that gave eighteen-year-olds the right to vote.

I can't fail to mention the state without noting its prominent writers. Through my current endeavor, these legacies inspired. Pearle Buck, the 1932 Pulitzer Prize winner for "*The Good Earth*," was born in Hillsboro, West Virginia. While reading Buck's bio, I learned she had visited Hillsboro in 1960, raising funds to preserve the family farm. "*She hoped the house would serve as a gateway to new thoughts and dreams and ways of life.*" As I viewed her childhood home, I felt renewed and dreamed of publishing. You must aim high to achieve your potential. Someone heed this. Just make up your mind, then do it.

Jeannette Walls learned to write from nearby McDowell County in Welch, West Virginia. She began her craft as editor for the school newspaper, "*The Maroon Wave*." Walls is better known for writing "*The Glass Castle*" and "*Half Broke Horses*." Walls

overcame well-chronicled struggles. I was fortunate my parents never drank. I've learned how good can result from shortcomings, and how heritage can be inspirational. From the "*The Glass Castle*," I knew Walls was tough and one heck of a storyteller. So, I asked my sister, Debbie, "If Walls could write a bestseller, then why can't I?"

Stephen Coonts and Victoria Thompson, both bestselling authors, were born in the state. My apologies to others I've omitted. Cranking out a book is no easy task, but it is entirely possible with commitment. I was one who had casually stated, I'm going to write a book someday.

Some of the people I've listed readied me for a writing journey. I wondered what may have caused them to achieve their dreams. Did they struggle with pride? Would they have fallen into trappings? What extent had they experienced pain? I'm glad they endured. While not fully aware of their situations, we live in a fallen world. The question remains, how does one overcome adversity? Who in the heck pre-contemplates adversity?

The 60s

The sweet aroma of spiced ham penetrated our home on Park Avenue. Sunshine thawed the frosted lawn. Us kids ran and laughed without cares and were dressed in the latest fashions of springtime pastels. Donna and Sharon, my oldest sister's searched with jubilation. They snatched treats from evergreens and typical hiding places. Jo Ann and Debbie, the younger sisters, relied on experienced advice. Donna provided gracious hints. Sharon reluctantly pointed, "Over there, y'all."

Dad captured the morning through the lens of a Kodak Brownie 8mm while mom perfected her pudding-filled coconut cake. They joined on the porch full of joy. Such are fleeting times for parents the world over. If only we knew certain things in foresight.

"Don't mess up your clothes before church," Momma said.

Dad flashed his grin. "Let them have fun, Lois."

I stayed close to my brother to discover the elusive treasures. Forever competing, we systematically stuffed our baskets. The overflow found its way into assorted pockets. Johnny exacted a

tally and concealed his bounty with no expression. When finding a less desirable treat, he hollered, "Hey Pooch, did you get any Peeps?"

That was a nickname he had briefly installed. "No, huh-uh." Junior tossed me a pink row of marshmallows, knowing I didn't score. I had hoped for the yellow Peeps, less girlish.

Us kids had more than enough, rarely needful of things. This won't be your typical story of Appalachian misfortune. Sorry to disappoint y'all. The six of us were born between 1949 and 1956. All having teeth, shoes, and educations. Johnny the eldest, four sisters, and me. Six kids in seven years. Whoa, Momma! It's peculiar how childhood memories lie etched in our minds while others are best forgotten.

The fountain drinks at Spangler's Drugs were just plain syrupy. In the 60s, Coca-Cola tasted unique from those paper-lined metal holders. Nothing revitalized more on an uneventful day in nowhere Ville. I'd almost forgotten, people around here call soft drinks pop or coke. I recall some folks asking, "Want some Coke?" Which mystified me. Sounds tempting, I recorded. Then I ingrained it through the years, apparently. In 1903, Coca-Cola removed cocaine.

Turning older, my palate evolved for the Dairy Queen on Courthouse Road. It was no garden variety DQ. Family owned in the day; the slaw dogs were yummy. They still are. It's the chili and butter grilled buns, squared ones. Prefer my dogs with onion rings and a Mocha-Moolatte nowadays. Sidebar: Slaw Dogs originating in Huntington, WV. The city where "*We Are Marshall*" (Marshall University) is located.

A weekly indulgence in Princeton was G.C. Murphy's. I'm thinking the store had brass-handled doors, providing aesthetic access. The smell of fresh popcorn permeated the store. A wide candy selection kept Dr. Jones busy with drilling and filling on a regular basis. Large decanters packed with a rainbow of flavors caused me to side for the cherry and grape sour balls. I craved the caramels with vanilla cream centers. Cream filled anything is good.

The toy section gained my longing attention. Told Momma, "I really want a Johnny Seven OMA" (One Man Army).

"We'll see come Christmas," she said.

The Johnny Seven was an action rifle with seven separate functions, including a real sounding machine gun and a removable pistol. It featured grenade and anti-armor launchers. I wore out the triggering mechanism that expelled projectiles. Strangely, after that time, I've never cared for guns. Won't be joining the NRA real soon. Such options make one no less a man.

The surrounding area has changed. Downtown once bustled on Mercer Street until the mall opened in the early 80s. What was considered achievement killed towns like Princeton. Two movie theaters bookended main street's midpoint. The Lavon and Mercer Theaters were frequent destinations. A portion of a dollar's allowance purchased popcorn, soda, and Sugar Babies. The old cinemas were nostalgic and exhibited a Hollywood glitz. "*Doctor Zhivago*" was risqué back then. Much of my imagination stemmed from the movies. James Bond looked cool, drinking martinis and smoking cigs. The women he bedazzled with his debonair ways was way cool.

The brick I grew up in was built in 1955. It was one of the larger homes on Park Avenue, having four bedrooms and two bathrooms. Us kids had rooms in front and to a side of the house. The master and kitchen dominated the back. This is a good place for a sentimental insertion. I should record our house on Park Avenue in the past tense. On twenty-two August 2013, the homestead went up for sale. A realtor's sign was posted, I mowed and tidied around it yesterday.

This proves I'm on another revision of this text. Have I sensed editing closure? Doubt it. I'm still having mixed emotions about the house, but it was mom and dad's decision. It will turn out best for them in the long run, which matters most. I'm convicted to honor and respect my parents. And to hone my craft in the meantime.

Back to the house on Park in the 60s. Momma cooked with ease in spaciousness. The way she brandished cutlery signaled who was the boss in case you crowded her on a steamy day. Momma wouldn't hurt a soul. But when she says, "Drop it or forget it," you ought to be listening.

For years a large picture window looked out from our living room, ending the lives of various birds. It was later replaced with an array of double panes. We had a quaint dining room, but I don't recall eating in there. It became the television room from whence my sisters entertained. I was known to have pestered and interfered with their courting. Couldn't help it, the devil

made me do it.

A full-sized basement made for swell games of hide-and-seek. We grew accustomed to its dimness. It leaked a bit after heavy downpours but has since been repaired. Outside provided ample room for stretching. The woods lurked less than a hundred yards from the back patio. A small mountain was a stone's throw from there.

Our life was predictable. It seemed mundane or I was easily bored. During school months, we did homework, ate dinner, watched an hour of television, got cleaned up, and escaped into dreams. The doors were locked during the night; otherwise, they were not. We played all over the neighborhood without worries. So much of how we were reared was categorized as normal.

The six of us developed precocious identities. The kid in me looked forward to the notion of all grown up. Yet my propensity for adventure clashed with our Christian upbringing. Signs of independence loomed far on the horizon. I've never forgotten the sound of an inner voice, calling me to diversity. It still does. Smiling.

Saturday meant chores in the afternoon. We had loads of energy for the day. If not scarfing waffles or pancakes, my parents made donuts and fried apple pies. Which were generously coated with grease and confectionery sugar. Satisfying. Sufficiently gorged, we lounged on knees and elbows for classic cartoons from the floor. We concluded with late morning variety shows, yesteryear's version of reality shows. Some of us return to the familiarity of the floor as adults.

Warner Bros, Looney Tunes, resonated as maddening. The Jonny Quest episodes seemed pure, but I emulated his audaciousness, out and about. I associated easily to the zaniness of The Monkees. What boy didn't want to be Davy Jones? He drove girls wild. That's what I'm talking about.

The Beatles influenced people tremendously. I sported a bowl haircut and black boots for a season. When "*Twist and Shout*" came on the radio, we shook it alright. I often wondered if the Beatles had done drugs early in life. We first saw them on a black-and-white television, looking fab and innocent. If my memory serves, we obtained our first color set in 1967. The Red Sox were in the World Series, I do believe.

Tarzan and Elvis's movies were viable subs on rainy Saturdays. I

emulated Tarzan's diving expertise at the pool. Johnny Weissmuller, the iconic Tarzan, was a five-time gold medalist in the Olympics. And there was Jane. Was I the only dude, thinking Jane was hot? A version of "Boy" grew to be Danno on Hawaii Five-O. His mom, Helen Hayes.

My Elvis poses were done in the mirror. With dippity-do hair and a turned-up collar. I didn't own sunglasses, nor sported long sideburns. Don't know if you remember Herman's Hermits. I had rehearsed their sad version of "*End of The World*," which was written by Arthur Kent and Sylvia Dee. Skeeter Davis first made it a hit. It was later remade by too many artists to list, according to my research.

I asked sister, Sharon. "Can love hurt that bad?" Duh.

"Yes, it can, Stevie."

Our woods held plenty of adventure, and the needed seclusion for what stewed in devious minds. As curious pre-teens, we spent hours on the mountain. Stuart and I imagined we were cowboys, Indians, G.I. Joe's, and secret agents like 007. The forest helped to grow us.

I was young, nine or ten, for contemplating immoral consequences. Curiosity seemed simple enough. Those first Pall Mall's and swigs of vermouth proved worthy of manhood initiation. Occasionally, Stu might have wrestled a PBR (Pabst Blue Ribbon) from his big brother. Stuart acted like booze was the best taste on earth. "That's good and smooth," he said. Unconvincingly, I might add.

Red-faced and teary-eyed from the burning sensation, "Yep," I chirped.

After enough seasoning, I staggered home queasy from non-filtered cigarettes. It's weird how things perceived good suck in the end. I'm no longer a cigarette smoker, but thirty-five years' worth would have supplied a tidy sum. Before leaving the hideout, we buried our loot under the camouflaged foliage, which concealed an outdated Playboy magazine or two.

You know something? Those woods accidentally caught fire one afternoon. We never went back to that spot, too terrified. Stuart shrugged, "How did the fire go out?"

"Beats me." One of my earliest mysteries, unsolved.

My other friends were Ron and Mikey, a year or so later. Ron is of Jewish descent, but that didn't matter to inseparable comrades. We hadn't given ancestry a second thought. I asked Mikey, "Wasn't Jesus a Jew?" pulling his chain.

"I'm no Bible scholar but I think so," Mikey said.

Mikey, later known as Jocko, was sort of serious and on the reserved side. Their house smelled new for the longest. We hung out in Mikey's basement until we stretched his mom's patience level. He and I later expended energy, knocking our brains loose on the gridiron for the Jr. High Tigers.

Easygoing described our friend Ron. I appreciated his sense of humor. His lighthearted way alleviated my moodiness. Ron's parents owned my dream house at the time, secluded with a valley and mountainous view. Ron loved the adrenaline of go karts and motorcycles. We were speed junkies.

Stuart had a red, Honda 160 Dream. He used to take me riding at sixty miles per hour. We once crashed going a fraction of the speed. The bike was okay, but I got pepperoni burns on my inner calf from the exhaust pipe.

"Had to lay it down brother," Stuart said.

"That's okay, I'm fine." He and I were like our cats, having gone through many virtual lives.

Americans are products of foreigners, immigrants, and such. Don't we casually ignore this? Stuart, Mikey, and Ron lived close by, walking distance. All of us have diverse ancestors and backgrounds. During the formative years, we stuck together and boldly experienced the 60s in Appalachia. You would likely find us outside of the band room at Princeton High in the 70s, joined by friends from fast developing Boulder Park and other locales. Professional and blue collar raised. Our hairstyles longer, clad in flannel shirts and faded jeans. Chukka boots or earth shoes were chic, back in the day.

Have you noticed how fashions return as history repeats? Not much is new, despite the legalization of marijuana for several states in 2014. But it is still a federal no-no, which creates more confusion and separation within the government. Go figure.

Saturdays went by fast. In little time dusk had fallen. Momma called out, "Time to get cleaned up for the church."

She yelled it lovingly the first time. The third time, dad's name was in the mix. "I'm telling your father."

On Saturday nights, I watched the Billy Graham Crusades. His preaching caused emotions to swell. Those crusades and Sunday's hymns instilled my love for gospel music. It wasn't long before I knew all the verses to "*Just as I Am.*" I still get misty eyed, singing it today. And you thought I was destined to be completely vile.

I paid close attention to Elvis singing gospel. No one sang like the king. I liked him for other reasons. Mainly, his manners and style. The way he tenderly interacted with women in his films. I didn't want to acknowledge he was troubled and relied on drugs. Then I overlooked his substance abuse, thinking he'd simply aged and gained too much weight.

Sundays were church days, always assumed and rarely questioned. Eight people hurried for Sunday school. Breakfast and bathroom time caused a commotion. Mom handled it with a tireless execution. We sustained our share of sibling exchanges before the sacred hour. By ten in the morning, we were mindful of God's forgiveness.

As Sabbath veterans, we knew miracles and passages in detail. Yes, I realize Saturday is recognized as The Sabbath by Jews. Dad was Sunday School Superintendent and Chairman of the Deacons for some time. He was also a Gideon, the men supplying Bibles for hotel rooms and such. We seldom missed a Sunday growing up and were virtually raised like pk's (preacher's kids).

Burke Memorial Baptist, on Thorn Street, was the first church in memory. Our Sunday school teacher greeted us with Snicker's bars. Good old stoic Royce bribed us to behave. Until the sugar kicked in his plan worked well. I monitored and weighed his patience. He seemed pleasantly relieved, releasing his jaw as we bolted through the exit door at the end of class. Royce regularly smelled of Old Spice.

Ah, next came the days of summer and VBS (Vacation Bible School). We made various things with Elmer's glue, Popsicle sticks, yarn, and construction paper. The church kitchen workers stirred up the reddest Kool-Aid. They supplemented it with scores of sugar cookies. Does that make sense? One came to his senses by crashing into the cinder-block walls in the fellowship hall. In VBS assembly, we recited the Pledge of Allegiance and the Pledge to the Christian flags. I can still hear those piano

prompting chords. "Dun dun, dun duun, dun dun, dun duun..." Felt patriotic and spiritual at the same time, my first exposure to civil religion.

David S. was the most memorable Sunday school teacher. He had the distinct honor of teaching the pubescence, the Youth Department boys. Poor man. Most of us had other things in mind, like gaining popularity and bugging the crap out of people. David S. was rather serious, marching to a resounding beat. Looking back, he was so faithful. He once proclaimed. "Boys, next Saturday we're going to do some witnessing at the Burger Boy."

Yikes. To which we replied, "Oh no."

Our teacher's announcement wasn't an invitation, it was a directive. I didn't wanna lower David's zeal, but we boys were frightened. If our non-church friends caught wind of the Jesus stuff, there would be repercussions. I said to my peers at church, "What if they narc on us at school?" It sounded cool.

With typically hunched shoulders, Gary A. responded, "Yea man, what if?"

Okay.

"Nah," Steve C. cleared his bangs with a head jerk, "they won't."

As the week progressed, I had forgotten about Saturday looming. We met at the church. "Do we still have to go to the Burger Boy?" Jay S. asked.

"Yes," David insisted, "the BBF."

So, we headed apprehensively to the west side of town. It was quite terrifying. We must have been a sight, anxious and paranoid to boot. "Oh, stop freaking out you guys," Tim B. calmly said. A youngster of few words, so we paid attention.

What we had dreaded wasn't so bad, a good lesson for us today. We passed out a few tracts, names given to religious pamphlets. I believe they were "*The Four Spiritual Laws*." The gospel had been communicated, regardless of us chickens. David S. taught us a spiritual lesson. He tried to relate something lasting, eternal. We are responsible for sharing the Word. David knew from scripture; God's word would not return void.

I was likely ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) before it was cool. Who had heard of ADHD or Ritalin? Elementary school teachers sent us to the cloakroom or stuck our noses in the nearest corners. Dad was summoned to the school, Mrs. Mulkey's class. When he arrived, my snout was affixed where I stood in the trash can. Wonder if my friends recall such things?

In junior high we bore remembrance from the vice principal's paddle, the one with strategically drilled holes. Seven juveniles were called to the office to meet with Mr. Martin. The last to get walloped was Mark. A smart kid, he'd slipped on gym shorts under his britches. When the principal hit Mark's rear, we heard a thud. He received an extra application.

Much can be said for sports and extracurriculars. It's hard to have imagined life without basketball, baseball, football, track, cross-country, and golf. It's a wonder, I had pulled decent grades at all. I'm sure sports kept me from difficulties. I developed friendships through sports, way more than I would have otherwise.

Athletics involved me from childhood. On the sixth-grade basketball team, we were coached by Basil's uncle, J.C. I learned competitiveness early. Basil and I became solid friends until I left for the Air Force. At times, we called him Sticks. Just being boys. Like friends often do, we parted and failed to keep in touch. Sorry man, I'll shoulder the responsibility. Come see me sometime.

I spent the good portion of a summer, digging out enough dirt for a twenty-by-twenty court. That's where I pretended to be Jerry West or Pistol Pete Maravich. Considered my love for basketball unmatched. I wanted to compete with older and better players to improve my game as much as possible. If I had applied myself to basketball alone, I might have been a player.

Junior League baseball for American Block was fun. I started in center field and moved behind the plate, catching the best curve in town, Tommy W's. The final year I pitched some. Tommy caught for me. He and I played sports for the longest and flat out competed. A fastball was my ace, but I relied on the sinker. I threw an occasional knuckler disguised as a change-up. Loved to pitch, controlling the game and everyone's attention. It was tempting to bean the buttheads. Those were the most innocent days of summer. Many friends played Junior League baseball for one team or another: Rick E, Basil L, Tommy W, Jeff B, Eddie P,

Mark F, Wayne G, Kent W, Clay D, Gary M, Mike R, Jackie C, Duane H, Stevie M, Chuck R, Johnny M, Richard G, Alan H, and Poochie. American Block was coached by a class act, Vaughn York.

I played football (Pee-wee through the ninth grade) until I took a vicious hit, losing the desire to play further. I've regretted not catching tight spirals from Jeff B. in high school. In junior high, I played for a flamboyant coach and star of Concord College, Don Van Deusen. His cocky Yankee attitude inspired me. At least to look cool while performing. My limited highlights came from a single game for the Princeton Jr. High Tigers when I had the privilege to score three touchdowns against Graham at Lee Patton Field. Steve W. was our quarterback, who is now mayor of the second largest city in West Virginia. I always hoped Steve would call White Formation, which resulted in TDs from slant and z-out patterns. On the other side of the ball, I played defensive back. Which affording me the third TD from an interception return. Considered lateraling to Richard G, at his request. "Hey," he hollered, "let me have this one." Never looked back because I may have complied. I scampered to pay dirt. Wanted the glory to float from the stadium, having cheerleaders swoon in admiration. But later I felt a concern for Richard's missed opportunity, the haunt of guilt and regret.

Track was a requirement to play other sports. I ran sprints and low hurdles in Jr. High and participated in the long and triple jump in high school. My highlight came as a junior. Received third place in the long jump at Van Meter Stadium in the Coalfield Conference Relays. Jerry H. finished second. David P, my brother-in-law, took the coveted blue ribbon. "I'm proud of yooz threes," Coach Willis said. Then he shifted his cigar, moving close to our faces. "Yooz swept Woodrow at their home pit." Raleigh County's, Woodrow Wilson High, is in Beckley, WV. Coach's cigar breath scarcely mattered on that illustrious day. He insisted I was to run a leg on the two-mile relay team. Hated the last turn, kicking to a breathless finish. Besides, distance runners weren't seen as golden boys.

Cross-Country was required for basketball players not starring as football players. I liked the freedom of open trails despite its two-plus mile distance. A moderate highlight qualified me for the state meet at Coonskin Park in Charleston, WV. State amped everyone. I ran decent times in Princeton but didn't know Coonskin's layout. Burned out early, not knowing when to pace properly. A nice lesson for life's marathon.

Lastly, golf. I talked my parents into buying a set of McGregor

clubs in the eleventh grade, Johnny Miller Signatures. Miller's flash ignited my passion. I practiced, but the golf club was miles away. Played in some matches. Yet I needed to break forty-five in a nine-hole competition to qualify for an opponent, but it made practice exciting. Robert P's steady iron play marveled. As had David G's towering drives. Dave emulated Jack Nicklaus's swing and looked like him over putts. Golf taught me sportsmanship. Never knew I'd enjoy golf later in life. It's such an exasperating game. I've come to realize unless you're getting paid, all sports are games. I'm voting to not pay college athletes.

I reserved large pedestals for the professional stars. I was a huge Baltimore Colts fan in the day of Johnny Unitas. No doubt, I revered Jerry West. In baseball it was Koufax and Drysdale for the Dodgers. No one came close to Arnie in golf, until Jack. I've lost interest in pro sports, except for the Spurs. In my mind's eye there's no franchise as admired and respected. I went through a stage of lauding singers, movie stars, and rock bands. I'll mention them in later chapters. I've tried to imagine what might have been accomplished with the time spent on sports and entertainment. I've considered some of it wasteful. I let things interfere with family life, regretfully. So I'm saying, if I had it to do over, I would have spent more time with my family.

In Jerry West's book, "*West by West*," he claims a dislike for the nickname, Zeke from Cabin Creek. Born and raised in Chelyan, WV, West's book is interesting. I wanted to learn of his non-basketball exploits. Most guys from the state idolize him. His life was no bed of roses. Some of his past was hard to stomach, having held him in such high regard. Jerry West will go down as a revered West Virginian. It's widely accepted to be West's silhouette; the NBA incorporates as their logo. *Mr. Clutch* became a WVU All American and a member of the Los Angeles Laker Hall of Fame.

Charlie West, one of Jerry's brothers, gave me quarters for the pop and candy machines at he and dad's workplace. Charlie was kind and figured I needed appeasement. He wanted my mom and sisters to sift through the latest fashions on the display floor. But I still needed to pester my sisters. Charlie was a bookkeeper for the company in downtown Charleston, WV on Virginia Street.

Guthrie Morris Campbell Company relocated across the Kanawha River to MacCorkle Avenue. Dad sold dry goods, mostly clothes. He became a top salesman for the firm. "What in the heck are dry

goods," some might ask? All I know, we Robinson's were well-dressed. Dad acquired clothes at cost once his samples went out (wholesale distribution ended). His sales meetings were fun outings, providing trips to the state capital. Which included stops at the Glass Houses, the restaurants along the turnpike's off-ramps where they sold large suckers shaped by concentric colors/flavors.

Mom took us to the Quarrier Diner for lunch. I recall an exceptional dessert, Peanut-Butter-Icebox Pie. Prior to returning home, we'd stop at the Blossom Dairy for malt-frosted goodness from metal mixers. My parents and sibs were born in Charleston, WV. I'm the only Princeton native, delivered by Dr. Pace. He and Dr. Goodall delivered most of Princeton's population for decades.

Dad was a highly trusted salesman. I fancied the road with him at an early age when I went along in the summer. My father seemed patient with my antics. I learned plenty from pop, important things. At certain times, he let me steer the car from his lap, no easy task on those roadways.

When dad walked into a customer's store, I heard the owner say, "Just fill my order as you see fit, John." Can you imagine that today? After work, dad's customers might have us over for supper. A fresh baked pie heightened my taste buds, most likely cherry, dad's preference. Ice cream topped a golden lattice crust. They sometimes insisted we stay the night, not incurring an expense. "Another piece of pie honey?" The owner's wives seemed gracious. Honey is still a commonly used handle in the state. The women connected to the business doted on me. Some pinched my cheek, or they kissed it, expecting a smile and approval. I came to understand the power of persuasion from observing people early on.

Dad served as president of the Boosters Club. He held the position for over a decade and filmed games for the coaching staff. I hauled the tripod while dad toted the camera in a Princeton Tiger gym bag. With thermoses in tow, we looked official at the gate. His filled with coffee, mine with hot chocolate. Mom packed sandwiches for the road. Games were played in remote coalfields. Princeton played feared rivals from McDowell and surrounding counties. Getting there wasn't easy. You often navigated the mountains along Route 52. Food doesn't always sit well on winding roads. If you've traveled throughout southern West Virginia, then you know.

When my brother was Princeton's quarterback, I remember traveling to foe's turf like Gary and Big Creek. They had good athletes, unfortunately those high schools no longer exist. I'll go ahead and mention the Bluefield Beavers, a despised and feared rivalry. They fielded the best teams around in the day. We never beat them in football. These days, the tide has turned. It's sad to see how our main streets have dried up, but not the sports programs.

We visiting crews stood high atop press boxes, filming the football games. It was tricky to climb those old buildings. A flimsy ladder haphazardly dangled from the side. Not the safest structures, mere modified sheds. One might expect cold weather in the latter half of the season. Oak Hill's press box in Fayette County was frigid. Surely, they've moved film crews inside.

I needed more hot chocolate from the concession stand by halftime, which was boiling water with dashes of cocoa. It did help thaw my fingers and toes. I mainly left the press box to scope out the opposing cheerleaders. I probably ogled them, huddled playfully in furry white earmuffs. Some glanced and snickered. It was hard to forget those rosy-cheeked cheerleaders and pom-pom girls.

If Princeton won an away contest, you'd need to watch your back on their side of the mountain. I proudly wore my letterman's jacket, not always a good notion on opposing turf. Departing the confines of the stadium required a dignified smugness. The parking lots were dangerous, anxious fans could be out for redemption. There was plenty of verbal jousting. Red necking and black power.

Our bus was once rocked while puttering up a mountain from Matoaka. People from the hills don't need much reason to squabble. No wonder the Hatfield's and McCoy's feuded. One of our basketball games in Mullens turned into a brawl. Those boys knew how to compete and scuffle. Their junior high football field contained imbedded rocks, sharp ones. Speaking of Mullens and competitors, Mike D'Antoni, the former Los Angeles Laker's (\$12 million) NBA coach was a star at Mullens High.

Princeton and most rivals fielded black athletes. We grew up competing alongside in West Virginia. No problem. I don't recall outright racism growing up in sports. What I've seldom understood is racial discord anywhere. I've tried to respect everyone. Discrimination is certainly despicable today. It is

ludicrous.

Dad's dedication to the sports program was duly honored. They inducted him into Princeton High School's Hall of Fame with the likes of Rod Thorn, Jimmy Miller, and Coach Ralph Ball.

Dad taught me valuable soft skills, I watched him interact for years, a master with people from all over. I recall dad's fortieth birthday, when he regaled, "Life begins at forty."

Dad looked young and vital then. Some things are very memorable. Lesser things are more easily forgotten. Don't we expect our folks to thrive, living forever? Dad is a wonderful Christian man. He is the best Sunday school teacher I've ever heard. I didn't learn rebellion from him; I turned rotten on my own. Reading portions of this manuscript will be difficult for my folks. They need not blame themselves; my parents did their best. Forgive me mom and dad, for what you'll learn through these pages.

I've heard good parents blame themselves. All a parent can do is bring their kids up proper. How they end up is beyond their control. The Bible says, in Psalm 51:5 (NIV): *"Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me."*

Can you spell c-u-r-s-e-d?

It's been said, "Behind every great man is a great woman." If that sounds sexist, I'm simply quoting. It is a true assessment either way. There are always exceptions.

Mom is an amazing woman. She raised kids and splendidly took care of the domestic stuff, and I'll never say any of this in a belittling manner. The importance of all she did/does is immeasurable. Never underestimate domestic engineering, nor the sacrifices mothers make.

There is no one like Momma. She's ninety-two and can go all day. Dad refers to her as a machine. I've never met a person who didn't adore her. They all refer to her as beautiful. She's the best wife and mother I know. I've learned the importance of organization from her. She taught me the finer details, and she's a gentle example of kindness and compassion.

Momma was known for her pies, all sorts of creamy ones. She topped them deliciously with meringue. Yuck. We removed it directly when she wasn't looking. Her raisin pie goes over well

these days. No meringue. Her Carrot and Butterfinger cakes are great. Mom used to make Scotcheroos with milk chocolate, dark chocolate, butterscotch, and crunchy peanut-butter. And with Rice Krispies and plenty of Karo Syrup. I couldn't resist them.

On Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, I get to cook for my parents and brother. It's hard for mom to relinquish the kitchen. I may have inherited a stubborn streak. When cooking, I'm best solo. I don't wave knives but will wield a spatula with a curt attitude. I try to remember it is still mom's kitchen. Admittedly, I'm a somewhat prideful control freak, can't deny it. God blessed my parents with patience for my unruly character. They will find plenty of stars in their heavenly crowns. It will be grand to see them perfected in glory.

Back to mom. She and others like her are truly wonderful examples. I've always admired mothers for their unselfish sacrifices. Momma could have pursued a career, spending time from home with creative hobbies. She put God and her family first.

As mentioned earlier, I was moved by the simplicity of *"The Grapes of Wrath."* What I didn't tell you, Ma Joad's philosophy at the end of the story. It is purely accurate. Basically, she describes the difference between men and women.

It went something like this: *"Well, Pa, a woman can change better'n a man." "A man lives sorta - well, in jerks. "Baby is born or loses it, and that's a jerk." "With a woman, it's all in one flow, like a stream - little eddies and waterfalls - but the river, it goes right on." "Woman looks at it thata way."*

I'm learning humility from my Ma. She rarely complains nor says rude things of another. She might be thinking less angelic things, but wisely keeps to herself. I've been known to utter the opposite and with ornery gusto.

Stroking this sentence near Mother's Day is entirely fitting. Anna Marie Jarvis, the founder of Mother's Day, was West Virginia born. I appreciate the influence of my parents. I'm grateful for their finer attributes passed down. I'll attempt to attain and honor them.

John Junior, my only brother, is the oldest of six. Johnny bore the brunt of eldest and the responsibility that had come with it. His tenaciousness is highly regarded. He did well in school and was mature for his age. Our same teachers said, "Steve,

you're nothing like your brother." We shared a room growing up. Johnny watched out for me when I was obviously too young to understand. Big brother has a good heart. He became Princeton's quarterback as a sophomore, holding the position throughout his tenure. I remember his caginess in the backfield. A master of deception with ball fakes, one reporter said. Some games were three hours away, such as the trip to Williamson. We traveled there to play basketball in the 70s. On winding US 52, one passed the same oak four times. I get nauseous thinking about the trek. Johnny graduated with top honors in the School of Pharmacy at WVU. Big brother and I have similar regrets. We were divorced after many years from women we adore. Johnny and Connie have three kids. Jeffrey, Julie, and Carrie. Johnny lives in Princeton. I'm very proud of his faithful ministry in Johnston Chapel's, Celebrate Recovery program. And for his years of service through the jail ministry.

Donna is the oldest of my sisters. Her kind and sweet disposition remains paramount. She's a fine example of humility, can't imagine her hurting a flea. At Donna's high school graduation, she wore a gold tassel (National Honor Society). She never bragged about her accomplishments. Donna married David, then they moved to Bristol, Virginia/Tennessee. She was the first of the siblings to reside in another state. David grew up a preacher's kid. His dad, Willard, baptized me. David and Donna yielded their lives to full-time Christian service. They became missionaries with Wycliffe, Action East, and World Venture. They served in the Philippines for a quarter of a century. Donna and David live in North Carolina now. I'm respectful of their outlook. They learned early on; life is more than having things. They have three children: Deanna, Kim, and Michael.

Sharon calls people honey, but few are sweeter than she. We share passions for laughter, food, and sports. And possibly a flair for the dramatic. I admire her unique and loving personality. She played baseball, football, and basketball with me. Sharbo threw, caught, and shot as well as most guys. She looked out for me, except when she dropped me in the alley as a toddler. Maybe it explains some my brain issues. Sharon was voted Princeton High's Homecoming Queen in 1968. Sharon married Roger, who played in the same backfield as my brother at Princeton High. Roger played college football at Bluefield State, aspiring for the pros. A knee injury shortened his career. Sharon retired as a security assistant for a Virginia school. Sharon and Roger lived in Virginia Beach from 1980 to 2016, then moved to Chapel Hill, NC. They have a son, Chris, and a daughter, Renee.

Jo Ann's heart is the size of Texas. She's forever sweeter than pie. Jo is the artist of the family. I'm forever amazed at her creativity, but mostly I'm awed by her giving spirit. She and I have always been close. Jo defended me to our parents. There was an exception, which she might not have remembered. When she was in the sixth grade and I was in the third, she told mom I'd cussed on the playground at recess. I subsequently received a mouth washing with soap. Dad deferred my punishment to Momma, to my distaste. In high school, Jo waited up for me. We sat on the bed and talked for hours. We chatted about girls, life, and everything else. She never judged me, nor lectured me about partying. If any sister was to be a rebel, she was an unlikely one. A Harley rider with a tat or two. Jo Ann was voted Homecoming Queen in 1970. She's married to Gary and they reside in Princeton, WV. Gary retired as a senior manager for Norfolk Southern Railways. Jo is a long-time teacher for Mercer County Schools.

Debbie and I are united by age and experiences. After all these years, we've become quite close. We tangled growing up. She knows how to take it and how to dish it out. Beneath her exterior lies a sensitive and gracious side. She's special in her own way. Deb wrote me weekly when I sorely needed it, and it helps sustain the relationship we have today. We shared some of the same friends and memories. Deb ensured I was invited to my first dance at the Memorial Building. We enjoyed the bond from attending high school together. I formed crushes on some of her classmates. Debbie married David, who could nearly leap out of the long jump pit. David drove me home from track practice in his classic blue Renault. He'd be sure to hook up with Deb at the house. She and I spend a lot of time together, helping to season our relationship. Having meals together frequently, we find levity in the irony of life. Debbie and David make their home in Princeton. David retired as Sr. Executive Sales Representative for Johnson & Johnson. Debbie is a veteran charge nurse at the Princeton Community Hospital. They have two sons, John and Brian.

My parents and siblings hold special places in the heart. I appreciate them more than ever, for reasons that will become apparent. They have stood by me and that says a whole lot. I would love to know their inner thoughts and dreams. We'll have those discussions one day. If not here, then in Heaven someday. I love you always! Thanks for putting up with me for so long.

On the eleventh of May 1967, I was baptized. Weeks earlier, dad

had called me into the living room. Uh-oh. I didn't know what was about to happen, but with a Bible in his hand, how bad could it be? Dad beamed for the privilege to lead my brother and sisters to the Lord. It was my turn, and I was plenty nervous.

A young Sunday school teacher advised dad. "Steve has been asking questions."

"Is that right, how so?" I can see dad's expression.

"Serious questions, Mr. Robinson, regarding Heaven and Hell, wanting to know where he was headed for eternity."

"Okay...I see," my father said. I imagine his voice of concern. "Thanks for informing me," dad said.

So, we ended up on the sofa where dad covered the plan of salvation. Which is the way to explain the gospel, possibly leading to conviction of the Holy Spirit and a personal decision about Christ. Basically, through one believing that Jesus died on the cross, was buried, and rose to life and later ascended to Heaven. And after repenting of sins, they ask Jesus Christ into their heart. After dad concluded, with verses from Romans and the Gospel of John, he listened to me and then grew intent. I had all sorts of feelings. But when he asked me if I was ready, about fifty feet from where I'm typing this sentence, I prayed and asked the Lord to save me.

Our family once vacationed along North Carolina's Long Beach in the 60s, all eight of us. It was our first time to see an ocean, except for dad. I was young to be awed by nature. Our part of the beach was isolated near sand dunes and a rickety pier. A sleepy motel lined a porch-full of rockers. The Long Beach area had been devastated by Hurricane Hazel in 1954. It merged with Yaupon Beach. Five of three-hundred buildings survived the epic storm.

The sand and surf provided a tireless playground. Who cared about pristine accommodations? The sea was king. We came upon seashells galore, saving them broken or not. I poked washed-up jellyfish with a conch shell. Disappointing, no response from them at all. The weather remained soupy all week at Yaupon. Not fantastically memorable, except for unexpected burns from seemingly harmless skies.

Great memories from the 60s included family vacations and holidays. Recapturing the excitement of past Christmases seemed

increasingly difficult. Can you imagine six of us Robinsons and seven years apart? Yet mom and dad survived. The fun had just begun. The years ahead focused inwardly, and toward external relationships outside of the home. Ones freely formed, the good and the not so fitting. Like all teens, we experienced a bevy of emotions and change.

Chapter 2 Wild Oats

Innocent egg hunts gave way, blossoming into Flower Power. The 70s. No times like them. The peace sign was ever present from coast to coast. Bell-bottomed jeans and tied-dyed tees replaced more traditional attire. The hi-fi in my room blasted Barry McGuire's *"Eve of Destruction,"* while Deep Purple waited to *"Smoke on The Water."* The Righteous Brothers and Motown (Temptations & Supremes) gathered dust. It was difficult to get The Grass Roots, and their hit, *"Temptation Eyes"* out of my head.

A wandering sense clouded the semblance of close-knit families. The Vietnam War dominated the evening news. We watched teenagers die in a war that few could explain, every single day, from our RCA Victrola. Free thinking was frowned upon by the elite. Rebellion suitably expressed one's mixed emotions. Rock & roll lyrics from a slew of long-haired artists echoed the sentiment of a generation. All wired and budding forth, poised to explode.

Interestingly, mom and dad seemed more at ease in those days.

The three oldest siblings were off to college and/or married. Our family had shrunk to Jo, Deb, and I. Time for our parents to catch a break at a vacationing spot, the beach. Our first family excursion to Myrtle Beach held visual significance, and it exposed the diversity of our changing country. Cries for freedom.

How big are dramatics scenes for developing awareness? Spectacular events registered unforgettable images through the last fifty years: the Mars rover landing in 2012, Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, 9/11/01, O.J. Simpson on the run and his trial of the century, the Northridge earthquake in 1994, the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Berlin Wall coming down in 1989, the shooting death of John Lennon in 1980, Nixon's resignation in 1974, the bombing of Hanoi in 1972, the Kent State riots/shootings in 1970, the moon landing of 1969, Martin Luther King's "*I Have a Dream*" speech in 1963, JFK's assassination in 1963, and the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.

But it is perspective is it not? Millions have been murdered and raped in Sudan. Around the globe 25,000 plus children die every day of the week. Shocking statistics. Genocides claim hundreds of thousands in countries with no mercy. The devastation of the Japanese earthquake and tsunami in 2011. In Haiti, a 7.0 earthquake claimed the lives of a hundred thousand or more in 2010. The 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake resulted in a tsunami, which killed over 230,000 in fourteen countries. The deaths of six million Jews occurred under the reign of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party. Mind blowing stuff. We often neglect to register the distant and most horrid disasters/atrocities. I'm guilty.

In my little world Myrtle Beach spine tingled, at least for an impressionable teen from the hills of West Virginia. We arrived near the shore from a six-hour trip. The highway skirted the coastline at sunset. The sea, not yet visible. We sibs were anxious for a glimpse of the ocean from the back seat of a Ford Country Squire station wagon. It had a tan tint to it with wood paneling and a maroon interior. And it sported a faux rumble seat in the very back. An American made classic, which screamed large family.

The sun pierced clouds near the horizon, magnifying the aura's acuity. Highway engineers must have planned it for effect. Without warning, bam! Mesmerizing. The world was bigger, much bigger. What a change from Long Beach. I felt insignificant next to such vastness. Heads nodded in reverence. My sisters and I

investigated each other's saucers. WOW.

Something divine painted the backdrop, causing a stir deep within. Rays of pinkish orange filtered in wonder. Pewter-lined clouds billowed over glassy waters of serenity. I marveled at the endless horizon, having fallen in love with the colossal sea. Nearing dark its hue turned steely. Its grandeur demanded respect, deepening my faith in God.

Our stay on Myrtle Beach was hosted by a modest structure, the Chesterfield Inn. People vacationed from all over, some from across the pond. Behind hotels and gift shops, on the other side of the avenue, stretched the far-reaching strand. This was more awesome than Yaupon Beach. Electric.

A day following the boardwalk came alive with copious humanity. Girls. I saw females differently, awestruck by their natural beauty. They beamed brightly in paradise's setting, reflecting a calm elegance. They carved imprints on a sprouting soul. I was excited yet bewildered by the inevitability of manhood. My eyes feasted, but I eventually needed sustenance.

There was plenty of fresh seafood at Myrtle Beach that pleased us for several sit-downs. Shrimp variations and deviled crab validated my taste for the exotic. I've never been captivated by the simplicity of ordinary fish fillets. A teen can only eat so much seafood. Then burgers, fries, and milkshakes are required. Dogs and pizza. Food tastes better at the beach. And gourmet ice cream, oh yeah.

I devoured the breakfast entree in anticipation of fresh fruit. Chesterfield served the juiciest and sweetest peaches. Succulent slices accentuated by velvety whipped cream. Which caused me to envision the album cover: "Herb Alpert's Tijuana Brass - *Whipped Cream*." Google it for the picture. Then you'll better understand my curious side, one I had archived for future retrieval.

We ran into a family from Hinton, WV. I tried to consider the odds from my limited perspective. Their hometown was only minutes from ours in Summers County. The father was an attorney. His son, Brad E, was around my age (fourteen or fifteen). We had a blast, even resisted his dad's blended scotch. Well almost. "Try a sip," Brad said.

"Yuck," I said. Then to satisfy him, "Yeah, that's good."

Brad invited me to stay two extra days. An only child, he easily

conned his parents. I accepted, having worn down Momma with whining. I went through mom for those sorts of things. It's hard to resist persistence and convincing smiles. Figured I had perfected a look of boyish innocence. "Pleeze Momma," with puppy dog eyes.

"Alright. But you better behave, Steven Michael, and remember to say thank you."

No more scotch, Momma used the middle name. I wanted more of the beach, bikinis, and those darn peaches. Brad's dad promised to get me home safely. He took us to play Par-Three Golf on an island. Things sure have changed. Can you imagine a time of trust, leaving children with practical strangers and hundreds of miles from home? The early 70s were different, an iconic age.

I completed junior high, which was seventh through ninth grade in those days. My look was one of change, an awkward state. Uncomfortable with my metamorphosis, I hadn't read Kafka's classic yet. The changes were incompatible with my innate control tendencies.

It wouldn't be long before my sixteenth birthday, old enough to drive. I fantasized at the wheel of a Stingray or Camaro with the chicks going wild. The first vehicle I drove, dad's Pontiac Bonneville 455. It was a long green limousine of a car. I preferred the sleek look, dreaming of dates in a luxurious front seat, having power everything. I readied myself for imminent hurdles, a driver's test in that monster. Lucky it had fantastic steering. So fortunately, no crashes into the barrels at State Police Headquarters.

The house grew steadily quiet. Jo and Deb were into boys and whatever. The year of Stevie approached, so I insisted on a grown-up title, Steve. A coach or two called me Robi. I was okay with it because they often confused me with a Robertson. Robi provided an alter ego. How appropriate!

It was hard to ignore my sister's girlfriends, so curvy and all. They likely deemed me as nerdy. Ones I considered hot weren't everyone's dreamboats. Won't mention names, but a couple were slightly thick. Others were kind of snobbish and/or mysterious. My taste in gals could be deemed as different from what many generally perceive as irresistible.

My sister Jo talked me into a date with her friend, Patty. She was three years older, so we were biologically incompatible in

my mind. Her dad's nickname evoked the fearful image of a gangster, Lefty. I was plenty nervous for our impending exchange, so seemed Ms. Patty. I stammered a mess of syllables together and sweated profusely. Don't know if she sufficiently perspired. I do believe she had borrowed one of Jo Ann's powder blue miniskirts, shock value itself. I didn't want to confirm it, making our date more awkward. A delicious pie from Brock's pizzeria salvaged our formidable evening. Never liked the feeling of searching for words, forcing trite conversation. I must have said, "Man this pizza is good," four or five times. I did give Patty a peck goodnight. I'd held longer kisses with grandma. Not Patty's fault, I was a geek.

I passed the driver's test with a breeze, but I wouldn't be cruising to school right away. Deb used the car ahead of me. I stayed busy wrapping my brain around high school. A heady task indeed from a melon of size eight and a half plus. Knew one day, I'd have a car to drive.

The first year of high school was noticeably different, enhanced by size. The hallways wider, the gymnasium cavernous. Some gals with parts I was not accustomed to seeing. The senior girls were real hotties, outlandishly developed. Their grown-up ways drove me bonkers. Some guys wore sideburns, mustaches, or beards. Quite manly already. They cut me slack out of admiration for my lovely sisters. The teachers took less lip from students. I discerned things quickly. My tired jokes came up duds, apparently the more tenured educators lacked juvenile humor. Sister Debbie was a senior. Me, a lowly sophomore. She knew I was novice but treated me graciously. I knew little about high school and less about girls.

Deb had gotten me invited to dances with older chicks in Jr. High. The first year of high school reminded me of those times, when in the seventh grade, I could've passed for a fifth grader. The eighth and ninth graders looked fine from my wallflower perspective. They danced like girls on American Bandstand or Soul Train.

My first dance was with another seventh grader, Molly, who became mayor in a nearby city of Bramwell, WV. By the last set, I felt comfortable on the Memorial Building's hallowed floor. For the final number of the night, one of Deb's ninth grade friends, Marcia, slow danced with me. She and her mom favored the actress, Susan Sarandon. I felt a rush as some watched in amusement, while others chortled noticeably. Then my face turned scarlet, but I was proud to hold such a babe. That is until

those clowns started making gestures. I was livid, then felt I belonged.

Back to the more seasoned tenth grade, with the same group of mature girls at Sr. High. The dances moved over to the Princeton Recreation Center. I rode to school with Deb during first semester until deflating comments swayed me into walking or bumming rides. It was no longer cool, being seen with big sister from the passenger seat. I would spin suavely by summer's end. Classes became more difficult in second semester. Never liked the formality of writing. The requirement of having an essay or theme paper typed frightened the jeepers out of me. Yet few things intimidated me into a paralyzed state. I masked some insecurities through sports, leaving less time for honing creative talents. Huh...look at me know; I can't stop writing.

There were friends boozing regularly by summer. Those swigs of vermouth years earlier hadn't counted. The eleventh graders were getting smashed and receiving accolades. Television and movies made drinking look dignified. I still had the perception of winos, lying in an alley somewhere. "Chicks dig boozers," a dude said.

Yeah, sure they do.

On a simple Friday, I apprehensively rushed the maturation process. A pal of mine plotted to score some wine and raise a little ruckus. Wouldn't you know it? I was filled with conflict, experiencing premature guilt. Or divine conviction? After an afternoon of anxiety, it was time to boogie. With a phone call, I yielded to the instigator.

"Let's do it, Robinson."

"Far out," I replied.

It was on. My parents wouldn't approve. No way. Drinking was immoral, sinful. I had taken sips here and there. I'd smoked a few packs of Winchester (cigar-like cigarettes). The next step seemed inevitable. Time to experience the big leagues, no more sips and light drags. It was time to embark largely. For some, that's how it starts. And for impulsive ones and those lacking self-control, double trouble.

We headed out to Green Valley for a date with some Boone's Farm wine, a lot of it. Gerry's older brother purchased us two bottles each. It was amazing how easily he had scored. "That sucker wasn't even carded," Gerry boasted.

"Cool," we imbeciles declared.

No turning back. In too deep, rock & roll. The bottles were a variety of apple, strawberry, and blueberry. Removing a bottle from the telling bag, the setting sun beamed its sparkling essence. My mouth watered, but the rest of me stirred uneasy.

"What the hay," Eddie said. We chugged them, achieving our objective. Stupidly, we slithered down the back roads of Route 460. Now what? Postulating. I was all grown up, acting foolish out there. We staggered to mimic the part, chain smoking filtered kings. I recall overdoing the slurring to a point of sounding retarded. Really cool, oh yeah. My addictive personality ramped for a long and twisted ride; I just didn't know it. Attention getting and people pleasing came naturally. It wasn't like I'd aspired to be a drunk, however.

Gerry was arrested and later released to his parent's custody. Apparently, he had challenged oncoming cars along the Elks Club Golf Course. One vehicle happened to be a sheriff's deputy. We no longer acted foolishly. The slurring ceased, and we scattered like cockroaches under a spotlight.

"Has anyone seen Gerry?" Tom A. asked.

"Nope."

We heard he had misplaced his dad's Esso credit card. It happened during our illustrious coming out party. We didn't see him the next afternoon. Gerry lived in a subdivision north of the house. I dodged his parents cruising up Park Avenue, eluding them like an abettor. The rest of us clowns survived unscathed, except for nasty hangovers from cheap wine.

I was in no shape to lament anyone's troubles. My mouth tasted like an ashtray and my head throbbed to twice its size. Too many cigs did collateral damage. Sweat beaded on my forehead. My stomach spewed bile. The wine had seemed totally harmless, like carbonated fruit juice. Learned early on, the cure for a hangover is time, while agonizing guilt paid a house call. Sunday was coming. I felt violated and could no longer claim naivety, having forfeited my innocence to booze in shame. Simple rebellion maybe? That's it. Nah. Curiosity sounded cagier, justifiable for a Christian.

I understood how to get attention, the youngest of six. Probably should've considered a career in the performing arts.

Theatricals would've been apropos. Growing up with four sisters instilled a sensitivity factor. It was assumed I had developed a confident charm, deficient in another boy's repertoire. I figured; I'll relate well with a decided advantage.

Much of my teens were spent at the Princeton Pool, when I wasn't mowing lawns or playing sports. Such freedom opened my eyes to possibilities. An entire day to manage on my own. My thrill-seeking side was ready to explode. The solo nature of swimming and diving were right up my prideful alleyway. The diving boards provided suitable platforms. Never fearful, the daring required for dives/flips ultra-excited me. But it turned into competition, helping my esteem improve a little each day.

Princeton's city pool was a landmark and wonderful place, located near the edge of town. A gated entrance and winding road remotely positioned it above the city. Tall pines waved above thick underbrush, leading the vista upward. To a kid in Princeton, an adventure each time. A curve at the crest stood between swimmers and glory. The edge of a car seat barely held me in check, however, we walked to the pool several times. The effect from the knoll was fantastic either way. A full day of excitement was in store at the end of a dusty trail.

Those who arrived minutes late were required to wait in a slow, hot line. It created intensity and was evidenced by water chicanery, abounding in distant laughter. One could see others checking in as the line approached the entrance, girls on the left and boys to the right. I countered my impatience by plotting the day's shenanigans. Idle hands.

The boy's dressing room smelled of sunscreen, masking other odors. The sun radiated through the changing area's open ceiling, which later served as a convenient drying source for wet bodies. While the jukebox echoed, you could hear the clanking of diving boards. There were merry noises aside from the sound of an occasional lifeguard's whistle, followed by temporary silence.

The hurried fellows slapped on sunscreen, spreading it sparsely around. You better slow down, I thought, followed by disregard and goading. "Hurry up suckers," they'd roar. Okay, splatter on. Ones taking it too fast around those finished concrete corners busted their assets sufficiently. You'd be guaranteed to see or hear someone stumble. Attorneys would lick their chops for litigation these days.

While waiting at the check-in counter, our last stop before splash down, the girls arrived from their side. There was little evidence they had dressed in a hurry, looking wonderfully finished. A Coppertone bottle in one hand and a brush or towel in the other. Some wore floppy hats to counter their frizzy hair, reminiscent of Janis Joplin or Carly Simon.

Wire baskets stored our clothes and valuables for the day. Patrons were issued numbered safety pins to claim their corresponding things at departure. An ingenious device in retrospect. Such an innocent pin supplied the impetus for pranks and practical uses. I used it to dislodge popcorn kernels. Girls used them for swimwear malfunctions. Guys used them to pop blisters, buttocks, or whatever.

Time to survey the pool's expanse. The jukebox pumped hits more distinctly over the PA system. The Beach Boys cranked out California sunshine, even on cloudy days. At last, we were near the swimming area to scope a place for our towels and flip flops. An important spot for monitoring the day's to and fro.

The smell of chlorine and food wafted. Candied apples kept the bees and horseflies busy. When flies ran out of treats, they feasted on bare skin. Those black and greenish pests left welts the size of nickels. I wondered where they had come from. There must have been horses nearby, despite my limited estimation of town. I did know a horse lover, Terri. Her parents were well off, so they could afford certain things. What is it with women and horses? Is it their placid nature, except to exhibit tremendous strength? Or is it their imposing appearance and rugged physique? A raw intelligence perhaps?

I learned various dives or flips from television, and from watching the lifeguards on break. Started leaping from the high board at age six, despite a lifeguard named Ozzie's concern. Then I dog-paddled to the ladders, the extent of my swimming lessons. Taught myself to freestyle. There was a time later when no one could beat me to the wall. I eventually learned...there is always someone faster, better, and wiser.

My sisters watched out for me in the early going. I didn't have to worry about them, they would have my dad to contend with. The lifeguards studied most gals behind their mirrored shades. Meaning, I'd be free to get away with murder. They didn't realize my sisters weren't available. Later, my sisters were off to college or no longer interested in the pool. Can you say unchaperoned?

A viewing area lined one side toward the deep end where non-paying people viewed the show. A high dive in the center was flanked by lower boards. The spectator section was fenced beyond the pool's edge. Sweaty guys stood and leered through the fence. Their mission, to bikini watch and talk crap. I later discovered that some were there to deal dope. The girls watched nonchalantly from a long wooden bench. I checked to see if they were watching me. It wasn't easy to catch them glancing, directly. Their aloof form of unpretentiousness attracted me to no end.

"So fine," I nudged Tom A.

"What?" he growled.

I got that some from others.

With a viewing audience, I was brazenly in my element. The regulars at the pool put on quite an exhibit. It was expected in my mind. Billy B. and I did multiple flips and dives. He was forever pushing the envelope. Only a few attempted a full gainer from the high dive. Billy turned his into a backward dive, a reverse one-and-a-half, which elicited a chorus of oohs and aaahs. It was fantastic, Louganis looking. My specialty was a one-and-a-half. Billy's two-and-a-half was a difficult maneuver, but not as polished as his old standby. I tried a deuce and a half, busting my face and nearly an eardrum.

We sometimes volunteered to cool off the spectators, enlisting a less gaudy talent. Those who could do depth charging can-openers enhanced their splashes to penetrate the fence. Tom A. said, "Let's soak those turkeys." His idea evoked more colorful responses than oohs and aaahs. You knew a good one, having produced the underwater sound of kerplunk. Conversely, a dud sounded like a muffled fart. Showing off at the pool turned into boredom. It was time to turn it up a notch.

There was a very cool lifeguard. He had perfect hair, a brilliant tan, and a stud of a swagger. He drove a rad car, leaving others in his dual-exhaust wake. Man, did I want to be like him. Impressive for a man, he left chicks starry eyed. Supercool was hesitant to turn me on to weed due to our age difference and my family ties. I knew those who smoked marijuana on breaks, having developed a keen awareness. Determined to go with them, I waited for my chance. Besides, I'd already achieved wino status in Green Valley.

None of the older dudes wanted to steer a Robinson toward dope.

I convinced them to let me tag along. They hadn't said yes and failed to say no. The next step was inevitable. I felt in familiar territory with guilt drifting down. To enjoy things without harrowing conviction or whatever, virtually impossible. Oh well. Sooner or later, I was bound to succumb.

We took off anyway, not so conspicuously into the woods. The pool sat just below the crest of a hill. Perfect for slipping into stealth, surveying practically everything from a keen vantage point. Burned residue had been strewn about. It was their spot alright, a hardened trail and semi-cleared brush. My anticipation for a mystical experience excited. Their only difference, the rookie who had drifted along.

We gathered, squatting in somewhat fiendish seclusion. Well-rolled joints crossed from opposite directions. My palms got sweaty, waiting to hit those babies and to announce a bromide consent, "Cool man." Not paranoid, I noticed certain ones monitoring my novice reaction. So instead of keeping my trap shut, I sounded, "This is far out." Saying it all stoned-like would surely gain my acceptance.

Freaked a tad, I was determined to go through with it. "You might not get off the first time," one said. Why do some feel necessitated? Something happened. I seemed more in tune with nature. Listless but very much aware. Had I gotten off? No matter, it was more a rite of passage. My coolness factor increased. We did it again on the next break. I toked harder, holding it deeper in my lungs. Longer. One time the smoke expanded, or I'd taken too much. Man, that hurt, I dared not to cough like a dweeb.

I became known as a head in the summer of 1972. That was my first encounter with illegal drugs. Marijuana was still thought of as out there. To a casual observer, smoking weed meant something must be off in the head. Wish I had the rationale, regarding drug experimentation. It's a novelty in the beginning, then it's maintaining an appearance going forward. Enough for fellow freaks to utter, "Guess who is cool?"

Somewhat unsure, I experimented with weed regularly. I had gotten overly paranoid early on and was afraid to question, except to those close, "Is this normal?"

A stoner said, "Don't worry, you'll get used to it."

So that was high? Perplexing. Low seemed more appropriate. With

repetition, maintaining got easier. I would get cooler as time progressed, but not as outgoing. It caused me to be more inward around certain girls.

It wasn't easy balancing tireless energy and teen nervosa. I needed more outlets for my hyperactivity. Sports were big, and girls were attracted to jocks. I knew sports every way from Sunday, so I used all ploys available. You didn't have to be a silver-tongued devil; the perception of confidence went far. It also helped to have wheels.

There wasn't much to dating then, per se. It was more hooking up at popular places. By obtaining a driver's license things changed. Dates consisted of going to the drive-in at the Skyway Theater or hanging at Pizza Hut. That was until we got busted for hiding people in trunks and skipping out on occasional tabs.

My junior year in high school passed like a vapor, must have been the weed. Notable dates occurred at homecoming games/dances or at the proms. I had watched my sisters attend them for years, having established a proven candidacy. But showing up in your own ride, now that was the ticket. Hot dang.

I dated the preacher's daughter for some time. Our first date was a real winner, an action movie in Bluefield. The hot flick everyone buzzed about was "*Deliverance*." Had no idea Ned Beatty would squeal like a pig. How embarrassing was that with my arm around the preacher's girl? Fearful of walking Cheryl to the door, the pastor may ask questions. Steve, what movie did you two see tonight? With a distant guitar strumming, we kissed goodnight. Cheryl and I eventually moved on. Couldn't fault the instruments, nor the tune, "*Dueling Banjos*." Chemistry is a tricky thing, and she was heading to college at the start of my senior year.

With new determination, I invited Paula to homecoming in the fall. We took classes together, so I had formed a major crush. I debated asking her for days, having eyed her serious demeanor. Quite sure of herself, she adequately impressed me. Paula was very kind.

I didn't want to wait too late to pop the question, but there was pressure to secure a monumental date. Finally, I got the nerve. She accepted, and I was flabbergasted. My date with Paula changed things, stepping beyond the dating comfort zone. She was a blonde bombshell. Tried to keep myself under control. I wasn't sure what to wear. Who really cares? But if my memory serves, I

wore a corduroy suit, camel colored.

When I picked Paula up there was no mistake how she was adorned. She looked fashionable in an autumn-colored mini-skirt suit. She wore brown shoes with straps, medium heels. I was privileged to provide her with the traditional accent, a mum corsage with school-colored ribbons. Paula's beauty surpassed things. Her confidence was so attractive, yet she was not overbearing.

I sneaked looks at her during the game. She sat unassumingly in the bleachers. Girls good at that enamored me senseless. I can't remember who won the game, but the dance was a hit. Our yearbook shows Paula dancing, but with me out of view. I'm glad. I wouldn't relish a shot of me cavorting. For some reason, we never went out again. I'm sure it was my fault.

One of my sister's boyfriends had a younger sister. We became acquainted after pickup basketball games at their house. She was younger, but it didn't prevent a mutual attraction. As odd as it sounds, we double-dated with my sister at the drive-in. I assumed our chances were nil because my sister would surely marry her brother. Confused? I was. Guess I thought we'd be related, making a future impossible.

Increasingly, I would hang out with older dudes. Wilder ones. Ones with better dope. Once word got out acceptance was a cinch with the hippies at school. It was unusual for an athlete to be hanging with the long hairs, who were the eccentric and the freaks. A few other jocks got high. Once we stepped out others followed. It wasn't due to our lead, but more a sign of the times. I'm sure it didn't help that my friends smoked weed. Sinking deeper, reverting to innocence seemed unlikely.

As Sunday arrived, so did church. I plodded through a enough conviction with the stamp of Christian and all. It wasn't cool, being at church so often. Once a week was acceptable. But twice on Sunday and Wednesday nights, not cool. Choir practice was before prayer meeting on Wednesdays. For that reason, I didn't mind speculation. I love singing in harmony with a choir. Music brings peace to souls like mine, a great equalizer. No matter the mood, music always makes things better.

The chameleon conflict and other teen ambiguities were difficult to sort out. Drugs complicated my life unnecessarily. Feeling there was no place to turn, I rationalized. It led to stressing incognito. As time progressed, a turn from the party scene seemed even more improbable. My split life contributed to

insecurities. I was certain to live life on my own terms, but I had a way to go.

Newer freedoms arrived toward the end of 1973. Several of us spent Friday nights at a house. Our friend's room was in the basement. We were able to do our thing under partial seclusion. Frequently, it was dark down there. A lava lamp and black light posters lit our way. We came and left as we pleased. The basement contained a bar, refrigerator, and pool table. We were a close-knit bunch. Gallivants, extraordinaire. Not everyone got high over there, so we usually drank booze. Our girlfriends eventually came over. Life was a blast, but for me it was deceptive. We all did some of that.

We often drove to the state line, nearly ten miles, to purchase cases of beer. West Virginia's is 3.2%. Virginia's alcohol content had been rumored to be higher. We didn't know for sure, but it sounded good. Our sister state sold Rolling Rock, the real clincher. The little seven-ounce bottles tasted fine, and they looked cool. When not drinking Rolling Rock, Iron City Beer sufficed. Oddly, we funded two Pennsylvania breweries. We never turned down a Pabst, Schlitz, or a Budweiser. Most of us smoked Winston's like freight trains. Smokers looked independent, free. Those cigs made wind sprints a challenge at basketball practice.

Our group was made up of mostly basketball jocks. A star football player completed our entourage. He had a dandy pool game as well, teaching me to shoot unflinchingly as smoke rose to the eyes. A rather tall b-ball standout joined us on occasion. Tall never imbibed to my knowledge, nor had he smoked anything. I maybe saw him take a sip once, but his face said, "Nay."

Our host and his family taught me to play rummy, hearts, spades, and poker. They also introduced me to golf. Us pals were tight over there. A couple were tops. Loyal too, but like friends have been known to do, we squabbled. Our girlfriends were allies, for the most part. An interesting blend of personas were we.

Back at Princeton High, gravitating toward the hippie door was inevitable. The back door, by the band/music room, classified us as we had aspired. Stoners. I would guess that forty to fifty students smoked weed. Our enrollment exceeded a thousand. Some were doing harder drugs, but not many. More girls began to turn on. Some got into the world of drugs rather deeply.

Our parents were reputable, making good livings. Some of my pals

had fine transportation. One living nearby had a 57 Chevy. Others drove a MG, Monte Carlo, and Mustangs. They hung out more than I had. I'd venture they got high daily. My life didn't allow for such frequency. Yet when it had, I partied with fiery passion.

The munchies led us to the Loven Oven or Brock's. The Oven had great subs and a jukebox. "*I Shot the Sheriff*," by Eric Clapton, played or was regularly queued up. Food tasted scrumptious to our ravaged taste buds. A Brock's pizza stood little chance against the munchies. It was the most slammin pizza around, high or straight. I could polish off a medium. Pigging out was socially beneficial, hanging with the not so cool through mutually preferred grindage.

The Lavon Theater was popular on Saturday afternoon. I accompanied two friends for a memorable film. We headed to see "*The Exorcist*." The talk of the town and a must see. We arrived late from a short cruise, getting our heads right. It was dark inside. "Whoa it's crowded," Jorge said.

An unknown voice filtered through the maze of humanity. Uh. It's about time." What a genius with such profundity.

Muffled noises, "Did ya see...? Yadda yadda and so forth." Ensuing laughter. Paranoia. We kept walking.

"Here?" Jorge said, eyes popping through his glasses.

"Yep."

"You're kidding," Jorge said.

"Nope." I checked the seats for gags. All clear.

More jeering. "Sit down man." A female was in our midst. Echoes from around the theater, "Down in front turkeys."

The front row had the only vacant seats, three of them. From such a distance we were already spooked. Then paranoid. "Dang, we missed the previews," she said. The eerie soundtrack began.

Noises behind, "Sshh..."

It wasn't Dolby Surround Sound, but those malicious sounds reverberated as if Satan himself was in the speakers. Our paranoia was intensified by Sir Cannabis Sativa. In all seriousness, have they made a scarier movie since, considering the gains in technology?

The charade continued between Sundays, messing up my psyche. I felt a need to come clean, one way or the other. A facade was easier to pull off. I didn't know the battle would have a residual effect, unable to shake it. My style gained capricious momentum. Those early years of drinking and drugging became the poison of my life. What a time to meet someone special.

My life found certainty, leading into our senior year. I'd fallen in love, if only from afar. With an assumption, the dynamics of love can be understood at seventeen years old. One of the best-looking girls in school had driven me purely ecstatic. Karen.

Few had constituted my fledgling list. Many girls were beauties at Princeton High. No doubt. I scanned my sister's yearbooks since 1968. The 74 ladies shined brightly, but I was biased toward the gals who made me pant heavily. Maybe some weren't on everyone's A-list, yet they were charmers. There were those who'd stricken the finest unbeknown poses, a massive turn on. Intelligent and strong willed with varying degrees of humor. All admirable qualities. I was wild about girls.

With Karen it was fascination, looks, and chemistry. She was exquisite. Who was the dazzling blonde with blue eyes? My attention focused on her at enrollment time, and it turned laser like by the fall. It didn't matter where she had come from as long as she was staying. The way she made me feel was a definite first. It was hard to imagine Karen breaking up and I would be her steady. We hit it off so well, I was taken aback. All the while, hoping I was good enough. I wondered, what the heck had she seen in me? How could I maintain our relationship through a masquerade?

Our times were swell at Karen's house in Quail Valley. She was my world and it was good to be alive. I wanted to soak up every moment. Smitten, I had that sickly look of justification. Life had turned serious. I wondered what she was thinking, really thinking. What were her dreams and fears? What drove her utmost desire? We hadn't discussed the deeper topics such as God and purpose in life. I was too gaga, not mature in a sense. I didn't have a whole lot of sense period. Except my focus shifted anew, I wasn't partying as often. Karen became my drug of choice.

She attempted to put up this front, a tough little girl. Little in stature, Karen wasn't much over five feet, but she had plenty of will. Headstrong. Her determination was admirable. I got a kick out of her spirited attitude. It sometimes caused me to

chuckle. When I mocked her, she gave me a squinted look. "What's so funny?" she said. There was silence. "You better cut that out mister." Her seriousness involved me deeper. Aware of Karen's tender side, I needed to ensure her.

"You know I'm only kidding, I'm crazy about you."

Karen's features caused me to stare. She had perfectly sculpted cheekbones and her dimples made me delirious. Those times were unforgettable. It was my first time in honest to goodness love. It thrilled me to engage her in laughter, seeing happiness pleased me. I missed her when she was at work. I'd arrive early, at Burger Chef, before she got off. I cherished our time. When we were together time stopped and everything seemed perfect.

One day we had kicked back at her house, restless. "Would you put straightener in my hair?" I was serious.

"You're kidding," she said.

"No, I'm not."

I needed to enhance the external. My hair was quite bushy. When the straightener took it got visibly longer. Karen joked, but I liked it. No more afro. The look endeared me more to myself. Thus, it must certainly appeal to others. Esteem logic. Why do those with curly hair want straight, and vice versa? We often want what we can't/don't have. I wonder why? Oh well. More of life's mysteries.

I had joined the school choir earlier. Assuredly, because Karen was a member. It helped solidify our deepening relationship. She had a lovely voice. There were occasions when I would be positioned next to her during a performance in the auditorium. I stood close enough to rub against her arm. One of those shots made the back of the senior yearbook. It made me singularly proud. Hearing her sing was a genuine motive. I attempted to harmonize at times, imagining a romantic duet.

Ms. Moody, our choir director, was a sweet lady. I fancy choral music to this day. Not many athletes or cool people sang in A cappella choir. It didn't faze me, nor does it today. I'm happy and joyful in song and thankful the Lord had made me so. Ms. Moody asked me to be an alternate with the Madrigals at Princeton High. The group was considered an elite ensemble. We performed, wearing Charles Dickens-like wardrobe. The Madrigals perform today under the direction of Mr. Kade, in formal maxis and contemporary suits. Like many things, they've improved over

time.

Back to the dregs. I wasn't overly pleased with the taste of hard liquor in the beginning. An observation and something I hadn't realized; I never drank to be social. Which is normally deemed as having a couple and calling it quits. My thinking, the design of alcohol was to assuage one's funk. I imbibed in excess to gain the fullest buzz possible. A perfect recipe for a problem drinker. Strangely, I had friends whose parents were alcoholics. I never imagined a similar predicament.

I had an older friend who got me into the Hideaway, a restricted club that served booze and live music. It was frequented by area dope peddlers. Intimidating in the early going, I used it to inject esteem. There were those as old as my brother in there, ones who left me wondering what they thought. Paranoid, I sensed their words. Is that who I think it is? What's he doing in here? So, I got wasted to fit in, drinking after smoking dope in the parking lot.

To be cool at school you did drugs, or so it seemed. Acceptance from stoners fueled my ego. It was us and them. We weren't down on others or the establishment. Drugging away issues seemed sensible enough. There wasn't much excitement in Princeton, so we relied upon euphoria to fill our void. When we got high it transported us anywhere. Getting stoned made us somebodies, no longer simple hill jacks.

We belonged to an exclusive club, the misguided ones. Only some could handle such intensity. Drugs had been around for centuries. Did we know? Nope. Would we have cared? Maybe. The 70s formed polarizing lines. It was important to be on the laudable side, even from a distorted perspective. I knew people content, thinking them strange. It may have been wise to befriend them, and I'm not talking about Facebook alliances.

My intellectual friends weren't getting high. But who knows? I'm sure some were. I was inferior, struggling to make decent grades. They made easy work of the subject material. My goal was not a studious one, yet I admired their classroom excellence. And I respected them in private.

An explanation is needed because I've mentioned "straight." Back then, straight meant you didn't do drugs. It didn't mean you weren't gay. I'd bet straight people struggled less. We were so fogged they seemed lame. While we were out huffing weed, they were in building character. It's a shady commentary, thinking

drugs make you cool.

Substances degraded my performance in academics and sports. Cognitive learning took decisive hits in classrooms. It was harder to concentrate on polynomials and linear equations. Sorry Mary Hopkins, not your fault. You were my favorite math teacher. You probably never envisioned me, squeaking out a 'C' in college Calculus.

Stoned in Ms. Roncellas class and attempting to solve chemical equations was bloodcurdling. Being high made analytical thinking a virtual nightmare. My reading comprehension was severely diminished. I resorted to providing comic relief, which didn't do much for my GPA. But it got me a few laughs.

Then after school, we needed to learn offensive and defensive schemes & plays. Which wasn't complex, but still. Running Chinese killers after basketball practice resulted in holding back puke on the baseline. Partying killed my chances of competing at a higher level. Could've contributed more to the team, but a lack of discipline reduced my effort and minutes. Coach Ball was no dummy. He knew what was going on with his athletes. I had some ability but was foolishly in denial. I loved sports and dreamed of college ball. Guess in the end, partying and perception counted most. I usually achieved objectives. Was my newest goal to become the coolest person in town?

The senior prom was an exciting event. Karen looked dreamy. She wore a white backless maxi, flecked with blue and orange. Her soft blue eyes were intoxicating. While slipping on her wrist corsage, I envisioned a ring. Promised mom I'd bring Karen back to the house for pictures. I did, but what happened to those photos?

The prom did not disappoint. It was like it was supposed to be. Sweethearts together, friends together, and faculty together. The songs were rock, peppered with slow classic tunes. Chicago's "*Colour My World*" was our prom theme. Wonder how many proms played Led Zeppelin, "*Stairway to Heaven*," as an anthem for the times.

Proms maintain certain time-honored traditions. Our dates preferred a sweeter, mixed drink. Several of us guys invested in a grain alcohol and grape juice concoction. We wanted to put an exclamation point on the event. The coronation ceremony seemed fuzzy, due to sampling a jug prior. It was hot for May, matched

only by our hormones.

After the prom, the brickyard collected a stream of taillights. In my front seat, the finest gal in school. Couples went there for one reason. The brick yard was a place to go parking. To tell the truth, I'd rather been at Karen's house. I wasn't the greatest fan of publicly displayed affection. Nevertheless, the prom was quite memorable. Magical.

As a graduating senior, I had matured somewhat, but I still catered to various whims. All while harboring a volcanic cauldron. My immediate problem was not planning for a future. What did I want from life? I wasn't sure, not having the math scores to be the architect I had envisioned. Law and politics interested me as well.

I've always marveled at tall buildings and skylines. One day, I would conduct business from the impressive skyscrapers in cities such as Chicago, Los Angeles, and Houston. My bucket list includes seeing the amazing city of Dubai. The architecture there is simply incredible.

I considered the jet pilot track for a time, requiring more advanced studies. Yet I had the misfortune to witness the aftermath of a single engine crash near Princeton, WV. A man's skull got separated from his body. Didn't want to lose my head, literally. Probably a good thing, I hadn't become a pilot. After seeing "*Flight*," I felt akin to Denzel Washington's demons. The film is a little too real, you'll understand later. Moreover, I was touched by the ending between father and son from the prison yard.

My soft skills hadn't blossomed. I wasn't modest, but I was no orator. Time and situations taught people skills. Certainly, I thrived in the center of attention. If bold enough, one could command enough respect to overshadow a virtual be.

I've never underestimated the power of communication skills. They are very important, or at least they were before social networking, texting, sexting, etc. I'm amazed how people are enslaved to their gadgets and apps. I must surely be, in an archaic sense, considering the smartphone's latest users.

I had attempted to excel in subjects that interested me in high school. History, Biology, and Literature were among my preferences. Which brings certain teachers to mind. Mrs. Wade was beset with a herculean task in the tenth grade as she was

required to teach English Composition to a classroom of clowns. I can't recall an assembly of such rowdy characters. Truthfully, I don't know how she did it. Her dedication was unmatched. This composition is no reflection on Mrs. Wade's fine teaching abilities. Thanks for putting up with my showing off and scholastic ineptitude.

Mrs. Ayers, my English Literature teacher, seemed unlikely to tolerate a lot of horsing around. She instilled a desire to read and write. I'll not forget what she'd written in my senior yearbook. It went something like this: *"To my average Steve. When you get older and look back on life, you'll be able to say: Mrs. Ayers was not responsible for my success. She accepted me for who I was and hoped to admire the person I could be."* Mrs. Ayers held the added responsibility as yearbook sponsor. Please forgive my editing oversights. She possessed a certain moxy, an attitude. I'm thinking her confidence came from a strong will. I liked it and wanted to emulate such a style.

I can't fail to write about two other teachers. The first, Mr. Runyon. He had the misfortune of teaching some of the worst cutups in school. It included a cage of imps from World Cultures class. Our session was after lunch of our senior year. Don't like to admit it, but we were known to toke stuff prior to receiving culture. He had to deal with us rather blitzed. I believe he had served in Vietnam. From what I could tell, he'd been through some things. I've heard interesting stories from combat vets. Anyway, kudos to Mr. Runyon for hanging.

Miss Montrosse was my homeroom teacher throughout. High school was sophomore through senior in those days. Her late father, Angelo, built our house on Park Avenue. Her mom called me "Clem Kadiddlehopper." A satirical label for the comedian, Red Skelton. Miss Montrosse was Princeton's art teacher for thirty-four years. I took Art I & II from her. She is quite accomplished. Miss M's craft is on display in various locales. I've viewed some of her work at Tamarack. Wished I'd been inclined, incubating an artsy side. I didn't have it canvas-wise, but she graciously said, "Steve, you have some natural ability." Thanks Rita.

Princeton has certainly changed, but haven't we all? Time can be a cruel indicator, hopefully it brings about wisdom. I'm glad to be healthy. The mind is clear, yet my heart tends to lag. I'm thankful for blessings and memories. Nevertheless, some memories would have been better lobotomized.

High school graduation was in the books. I was leery of college because tuition might have been squandered. Life was good, but I needed to come up with a reasonable plan. With a job, car, and friends, I still entertained the idea of leaving West Virginia. To make all of my own decisions. That's scary, thinking back.

Near the end of school, we had been visited by past students who'd joined the Air Force. They assisted recruiters to administer entrance exams. Some were stationed in South Carolina, Florida, and Hawaii. The beach loving side of me snapped to imagine the warm ocean breezes. Don't be fooled by recruiting posters. One might end up in an Arabian desert or atop an Icelandic glacier.

Daytona Beach

To explore the aquatic, four of us pals decided on a Daytona Beach graduation celebration. We crammed into a Mustang and headed for the world-famous beach. Our blast began with a ten-hour road trip, keeping our heads right on the way. Once we reached I-95 South, no way to get lost. Blacktop and high times forever toward an idyllic setting and a place to let it all hang out.

We jammed to the innovation of a "*Sgt. Peppers*" tape, by the Beatles, and blended in some David Bowie and Grateful Dead tapes. Led Zeppelin amped us with "Whole Lotta Love" and YES mellowed with "Close to the Edge." An eight-track player enhanced the ride through jacked up speakers. Serious listeners rocked Pioneer gear.

"Let's listen to some Dead man," a friend said.
The first time I heard them, "What is this?"

Once tuned to their eclectic style, I was swayed. On a certain buzz, the lyrics to Grateful Dead sounded unmistakably clever. Careful, what happened to Sweet Jane may happen to you.

I made a proud announcement in route, "Know where we can stay in Daytona man." At the time, every sentence ended with man. Not just man, but "maan." We booked rooms at Perry's Ocean-Edge Resort. It was familiar from years past. The family had vacationed there prior.

The Hawaiian Inn was right down the beach. A place where I'd met a glittering gal. Kitti was a luscious brunette from South Alabama. Sorta sophisticated, she wore a teeny orange bikini. A

neon one. Her extreme accent grew tedious, however. Kitti certainly played beach volleyball well. I got spiked in the face while checking out her form, serving. Or was it her setting form? I was digging it. Get it? Never mind.

Some staff members from Perry's were recognizable, so the coolness factor doubled. A familiar lifeguard had recruited his younger brother for the trade. They were natives of New Jersey and scary alike. The older brother asked about my sisters with a sly grin. He'd described them a little too well.

"They're spoken for," I said.

"That's cool," he said.

Recalled that dad had been leery of the eldest from the get-go.

Perry's lifeguards knew all aspects of the strand. Their expertise aligned with beach volleyball and beach partying, after the continental breakfast. I had legit concerns for the pastries, a fresh donut or two. Frosted or filled ones satisfy most. Anyway, for nighttime action the lifeguards chimed, *Big Daddy's*.

But first, volleyball showcased the pearly sand and teal colored waters. Daytona is a preferred beach in the contiguous states. There were plenty of chicks to impress. Kitti was numero uno that day. One needed to be mindful of burning to a crisp while gaining enough admiration. In the heat of competition, the volleyball games went on and on. Miniscule sand grains found every crevice of discomfort, making a dip in the sea more significant and pleasurable.

I like to body surf. Who needs a board? On certain days when the waves get angry it's exciting. Vigorous enough to have paralyzed some unfortunate souls. Seriously, I know real surfers are laughing about now, but give me a break. It is fun to catch one and freestyle a breaker into shore. Then I'm amused to watch little kids try to master it the rest of the day. Daytona was no exception.

Time for hygiene, seafood, and party prepping. After choking down shrimp po'boys, we needed to get our minds right again. We weren't bold enough to fire it up on the beach in broad daylight. An old practice came to mind, placing a towel at the base of the door so telling odors were less to escape. A paranoia thing. We hit a bong from the guest room for a considerable time. One knew they had enough from nearly barfing

up a lung. In step with the Floridians, we guzzled Busch. Beer after beer. It was abundant and cheap in the Sunshine State, and it was a cool choice back then.

On to the pier and Big Daddy's. We dressed like the rest of the crazed populous. Tees or tanks and cutoffs. Sandals or topsiders. Adorned with Pukka shell accessories, wrists and ankles draped by rawhide. I liked the look of wearing a visor. Thought my unruly hair looked cool, protruding sun-bleached and free.

The stoners toked freely from cars and dune buggies while we plodded past through the sand. That tangy odor drifted and lingered in familiar fashion. Their prepping beat ours, in our hotel room spooked by conjured narcs. Deliberately they fixated on the gorgeous sunset in peaceful disregard. Close to the pier senior citizens occupied the surf. The sun wasn't nearly as angry then. Some stared at us as though we were Martians.

A rock band echoed from Big Daddy's, reaffirming our resolve to get down funky. The marquee hadn't registered the names of famed stardom. What a sight we must have been? Like bumpkins all ripped and ready to jam. I whiffed the staleness from a frequented night spot. Musty odors aren't inviting. Getting past a bouncer was our overriding concern. Anxious in line, warm bodies were qualifying as ID's.

Acquiring a drink was as simple as walking upright. Tequila shooters arrayed the bar like mindless clones. They slammed the cheap stuff while shouting and howling like coyotes. I stuck with Mr. Daniels (black). There was a real circus on display. We were the latest arriving animals. The joint was filled with babes all baked by the tropical elements. Halter tops and daisy dukes composed their scanty wardrobe. I wondered how they had transformed burns into incredible tans so quickly. They looked sufficiently wasted. We would join them, invariably.

Trying to hold a conversation was nearly impossible. The bands played extra loud, covering their amateur flaws. They sounded good enough, yet not like J Geils at Cobo Hall. I liked early Geils before they went bubblegum. Some pretended to hear what the chicks were saying.

"You're such a fox," a friend said.

"What, I can't hear you?" she said.

"Would you bare my children?" a stranger spouted.

Glad she didn't register that mess. We squeezed further through the crowd, having noticed a party upstairs. The top floor of Big Daddy's was extra raucous. Hard to hear yourself think. But who needed thoughts? If you made it up top you should probably stay. Girls straddled guy's shoulders, engaging in chicken fights. Guess they were déjà vuing the swimming pool. Drunk and hazed were simple prerequisites. A gal's halter had gotten ripped away. Which created an uproar of deafening proportions, causing others to exuberantly comply. "Did you see that man?" one hollered.

"What dude?" a fella said.

"Oh yeah, far out man," another blasted.

Then bouncers entered, stage left. We headed down the right stairwell.

On our last night at Big Daddy's, we met up with some wild Gainesville, University of Florida students. They taught us a few things. Each was sun-bleached and frazzled. Met a good old boy, Phil, who was a suave creature. We hit it off well, reviewing football schedules and the latest on dope. The conversation reverted to girls. He had them, gaping from every side.

"Do you guys wanna party at our place?" Phil said.

"Sure," having registered an audible.

We headed to a raunchy motel down from the pier. I stopped and wondered, why would the U of F's stay in lower-end places? To negate cost. Crowds packed adjoining rooms where they absolutely trashed the place. It smelled moldy with a faintness of vomit. The air stayed thick with hemp and tobacco smoke. There were kegs, makeshift bars, and recognizable paraphernalia. "What the heck," a dude said. The beds were shoved into corners. One was broken to pieces. Geez man. Crazy.

A bikini-clad partier passed out in the bathroom. She was overly burned and had been placed on her side to recover from the tub. People went on with their toilet business as if she wasn't there. She may have been dead for all we knew. That was my first time seeing someone badly off. She looked breathless and had apparently soiled herself. I looked for signs of consciousness. "I'll never get that wasted," shouting to a pal.

"What?" he said. Yes, the decibels had migrated to the sty.

What sums up such a party? We had seen drinking and drugging before, but that sea of humanity was debased. Along the lines of evil (Sodom and Gomorrah)? No. Nothing like that, but orgy-like in appearance. We were still half-naive boys, trying not to register shock. Restraint hadn't prevailed in the minds of those revelers. I'll leave the rest to your imagination, or not.

Later, at pre-dawn, we skinny dipped in the moonlit sea. Then we passed out by the pier. When abruptly something stirred us, the big bad sun. The peaceful sounds of gulls tend to sooth. Not that morning, noise grated nauseously. My head pounded in sync with the crashing waves. The sweating affliction was absent from alcohol dehydration. We attempted to recollect the night's activities, then considered heartbeats fortunate. It was time for farewells to Daytona Beach. I didn't remember much until North Carolina. Glad I wasn't driving. Those last hours were sobering with the realization, life was about to dramatically change.

The Air Force (Basic Training in San Antonio)

My last summer job in Princeton, detailing cars and retrieving parts for Gibbs Motors. I signed a commitment with the USAF under the delayed enlistment program. The war was winding down yet we still occupied Saigon, Vietnam. Orders had me reporting to basic training in January of 1975. Fairly content, I yearned to see the world. Receiving a regular paycheck was good, making nearly a hundred dollars a week. Not bad for living at home in 1974. I wanted to make a deal with dad to have the car for my own. I proposed taking over his payments on the Gran Torino Sport.

Then I prepared my mind for leaving West Virginia, not fully in sync with the heart. I was taking a big step and far away challenge. All my sibs went to in-state or nearby colleges. I branched out in the Air Force, needing to experience life unlimited. The only question, leaving my girl. I hadn't properly prepared. Christmas rolled around with two weeks before basic training, so I wanted to spend it with Karen.

Inductees from the area took a forty-minute bus ride to Beckley, West Virginia, bound for the Air Force Entry Station. We spent the night before flying into San Antonio for swearing in. Felt uneasy in the hotel room, but totally riveted. A loud disturbance in the hallway rattled me. "Whatever," my roommate said. The military police stormed our floor and were in the

process of busting five enlistees for smoking weed. I jabbered; my roomie stayed silent. Our last night of civilian freedom was otherwise quiet. The stoners were on a bus headed home next morning. I was glad, having not partaken. I wanted to be done with drugs.

Bound for a connecting flight in Chicago, I considered the coming days. My plan was an adventure and to design a new identity in the military. A plan that did not include drinking and drugging, but I knew little else regarding my future. A recruit sat beside me in the aisle seat. He heard about the bust. "That will never happen to me," I said.

"Never say never man," he said.

Fascinated with flying, the 737 from O'Hare to San Antonio International thrilled me. San Antonio has grown tremendously and holds seventh place in the nation's most populated cities. Some aren't aware of its size and popularity. It is an uncommon city and those living there for long periods won't relocate often.

My perception of Texas changed. It wasn't all cowboys and tumbleweeds. There were five to six military bases within a thirty-mile radius of the city in 1975. A couple of bases have closed or transitioned since then. San Antonio's majority is Hispanic and remains vital to its culture and flavor. The weather, food, and entertainment are hard to beat. And it is home to five-time NBA champions, the Spurs. My ex-wife, youngest son, and daughter still live in The Alamo City area.

For the most part, Air Force Basic Training is mind games. The TI's (Training Instructors) are burly sergeants in Smokey Bear hats. They reminded me of past coaches. The physical requirements, a breeze for those with athletic backgrounds. To run a mile and a half in less than ten or twenty minutes wasn't stringent.

The classroom material was a heck of a lot easier than Chemistry and Geometry at Princeton High. You don't need to be a rocket scientist in the military. With exceptions, some pilots become astronauts and NASA engineers. The Air Force's enlisted men (non-officers) with less than the rank of sergeant is considered airmen. I made it to the rank of Staff Sergeant (E5). If afforded a do-over, I would have gone Bootstrap (OTS - Officer Training School).

The Air Force is a beneficial experience, instrumental for disciplining an assortment of personalities. Six years whizzed by in kaleidoscope fashion. Basic training is like the media's portrayal, a six-week trek that brings young men from many states and all walks of life together. It challenges, an infused jumble of cultural differences. The military's formula for molding extremes works darn well.

I got along with the boys from New York City. Our attitudes meshed. A bit callous on the outside and affable on the inside. I identified with a recruit named Morelli, who signed my photo of the flight: *"To the Hillbilly. Best of Luck, The Boy from New York City."* Having known several New Yorkers, there's a uniqueness to them. I've formed important friendly bonds with Northerners, who are presumed sometimes as despised Yankees.

I've always gotten along with minorities. Basic is a rounding experience. Some put up walls for one's dissimilar to themselves. I find differences and various nuances interesting. There's much to learn. I'm embarrassed when my race treats others as lesser.

The Midwestern boys leaned toward their own or kept to themselves. They came from farms in Iowa, Indiana, Kansas, and Nebraska. A proud Corn Husker adored his prize pig, Honey Butt, concerning me a little. Some had never been out of their states, much less from rural settings. I was a city slicker in comparison to those farm boys.

The West Coast dudes were sort of out there, laid back and pretentious. The Southern boys hailed from Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. A proud bunch of young rebels. Had plenty in common with the Texas boys, family & football as kings. I didn't know much of my life would be lived in their state. I had become as much Texan as West Virginian. Looking back, West Virginia is akin to a small Texas in certain respects. Good and solid people.

Basic Training helps for grasping all levels of social strata. Knowing how to redneck helped me during friendly skirmishes. Fights were common and not necessarily discouraged by the training instructors. Those raspy sounding and hardcore lifers, that's them. A close encounter with a TI happened on my first day. We lined up and were told to remove everything from our pockets. I waited by my rack, listening to the sarcasm being spewed. One of the TI's rifled through my wallet, pulling out the photo section. It unfolded like an accordion. He scanned my

pictures like a machine.

He barked, "We've got ourselves a playboy, a real gigolo."

"No sir," I said.

"Did I tell you to speak boy?"

I thought, no old man, but kept to myself.

"Who are these sluts?" the TI said.

"Argh."

Blood elevated instantly. I wanted to lash out, not concerned about the consequences.

I gained some composure. "Most are pictures of kin."

"What!" he yelled.

"They're my sisters and one is my girlfriend."

I concluded; this sucker better not say more. I mean, what kind of a monster would say that about your loved ones? About then he hollered, "You answer me with sir, Don Juan."

I barely whispered, "Whatever." I learned that sort of ugliness would be directed toward everyone in harsh and unpredictable ways. Their duties, to administer training and instill discipline, forcing the weak to capitulate under pressure. And to test the rough and unruly.

There was an arrogant recruit from the state of many lakes. I'll affectionately refer to him as Minnesota. Our personalities contrasted from the get-go. We had no desire to buddy up, holding mutual contempt. He was cunning but acted oafishly. In doing so, he prevented some harassment. I'd be interested in his view of me. Certainly, I've rubbed people the wrong way.

As time went on, staying clear of Minnesota appeared prudent. He was ripped. I was in decent shape, but he was Hulk-like. Before lights out we stayed busy shining boots and belt buckles, needing to ensure our lockers were squared away. A ritual in the case of crash inspections. Everyone jawed back and forth. One thing led to another.

"You're a hillbilly asshole," Minnesota said.

Causing my stupid comeback, "That sounds a bit queer."

We met in the aisle like Rock'em Sock'ems. My days in the hills

came in handy when Tommy W. and I strapped on gloves to go a few rounds like Ali and Frazier. Didn't have Ali's trunks or tassels, but I had swung a left hook onto Minnesota's right eye. The big galoot threw me on concrete in a sleeper hold. The next thing I knew, TI's came in with whistles blasting and batons twirling. "Break it up you are freaking idiots!"

The ox would have hurt me had the TI's not entered. We sealed an unspoken agreement to avoid each other. For the next few days, a juxtaposed respect dictated latrine duty attitudes. You didn't want to clean the filth from fifty guys clad in boxers. We were provided an abrasive, scouring pad, and a rotten toothbrush. Our knees and elbows bore reminders, but our egos took worse beatings. Minnesota never uttered a word.

One of my best pals in basic was a brother from Pope, North Carolina. His name was Carl, a gentleman, and confidant. We became allies during an arduous time. There was a murky problem, the unjustness of human inequality. We found that Minnesota, and other sod busters, were highly unfavorable of blacks. It was all too familiar, a jaded sense of fairness. Minnesota's dislike revealed deeper-seeded issues. Ones difficult to correct with diplomacy. He couldn't understand why I stood by a black man. That's the way it was in 1975. Some things change, others do not. The upcoming years in San Antonio exhibited another form of prejudice, anti-Mexican American. I learned a new lesson, discrimination isn't regional.

I certainly missed Karen during brotherly strife. We had made it through three tough weeks. Feeling energized, ready for the home stretch. Mail call came early that afternoon. I expected to hear from her and pour over her words several times. I heard from her alright, she'd broken up with me. Devastated, I looked forward to seeing her after technical school. Couldn't fault her; I was the one who'd left. My view of the world turned gray, I drooped along in mourning. I'd heard long distance relationships were difficult. Sister Sharon was correct. It hurts deeply.

Back to the rigors of basic training. Each TI appointed a flight leader. Tish had broken his arm in another flight, prior to his final week of training. He ended up repeating the entire six weeks as our flight leader. Tish got away with plenty. He and I got along, making the remaining time easier. He was an amiable old boy from Houston, Texas. Little did I know, he had an affinity for weed? My Mexican American friends might say, "Otra vez, la mota." (Loosely - Again, the weed).

I regret smoking herb in basic; I do. Tish steered me to the flight line a few nights a week, he twisted my arm. He was able to store things without recourse. No locker inspections due to his elongated status. Using the cover of laundry duty, we slipped into the shadows. Then reality set in. It wasn't worth it. I'd never been so paranoid. Not knowing, which was worse, the SP's (Security Policemen) patrol trucks with German Shepherds in tow, or the paranoia of suspecting airmen at the barracks.

Oh, and I learned another tidbit about Minnesota, he wasn't happy I'd been favored by our flight leader and was spiteful all over. His concern pertained to my newfound freedom with Tish. Not simply his aversion for hillbillies, or befriending blacks and Latinos. He was full of hate. My Tex-Mex friends avoided the fray. I respected their focus. Most were from the San Antonio area, on the home turf, near their casas.

I hoped for a smooth final week. By surviving five weeks, one wouldn't necessarily wash out. With seasoned status came freedom. We were given access to previously restricted locales: BX - the Base Exchange is like a military department store, the bowling alley, and the Airmen's Club. An added benefit, mingling with WAF's (Women in the Air Force). Yee-ha.

At the Airmen's Club, I met the cutest blonde from South Carolina, Lisa. Her unflattering uniform didn't detract from a petite and perky figure. She was the best thing I had seen in weeks, makeup or not. Her schoolmarm shoes and orange stockings nearly spoiled the moment, but her electric eyes held GIs like me in a trance.

Lisa hailed from the central part of her state. She was delicately packaged with a discreet kind of charm. It wasn't the best time for romance, discerning a heart requires considerable measure. We quickly related and established a fondness for Myrtle Beach. She was amazed I knew so much about her state. If you've vacationed at Myrtle, then you've seen the West Virginia license plates and gear. Some Mountaineers have adopted its coastline. Fond of Lisa, her state never mattered.

As the DJ mounted a platter, we chatted about life beyond basic. Other airmen scoped the crowd, talking jive. The DJ announced his next up, "*Desperado*" by the Eagles. Distracted, I led Lisa to the dance floor. The song was a favorite of Karen's and it had only been weeks since our demise. "Snap out of it," I muttered.

"Excuse me?" Lisa said.

The slow dance rekindled some of my passion. Conveniently positioned, I whispered into Lisa's ear, having plenty of sweet nothings saved up. We were captured by the music, the mirror ball, and each other's embrace. It was good to hold a woman again. She smelled amazingly fresh. "This is wonderful," I softly said.

Near the end of the song, Lisa lightly kissed my neck. Then she said, "Can't believe we're having such a good time in basic."

My previous pain lessened. Hesitant to rush into a passionate kiss, I kissed her dainty forehead. We agreed to hook up on the final weekend of basic.

Town pass arrived with enthusiasm. All graduating airmen were allowed a day to tour the city of San Antonio. We boarded the bus for downtown. I reflected on the future. Seemed like no time before we passed in front of the Alamo. Its history sent chills up my spine. I waited for Lisa's bus to arrive. The WAF's buses were held back by design. Most recruits headed to the Texas Shrine (the Alamo), or to the Wax Museum & Ripley's Believe It or Not across the way.

I was to escort Lisa, having been advised of the city's romanticism from Tish. He told me the best place to be semi-alone. She stepped from the bus, pausing to pin a beret on her silky bun. Downwind, I caught a whiff of her Jovan Musk. Forgotten were the chills, things heated up. I walked Lisa gallantly down Commerce Street toward the famous Riverwalk. Recruits in basic were not to show affection in public. That's why I appreciated the directions to Tish's hideaway. I was proud to be with her in uniform, all grown up.

The river was picturesque when not focused on Lisa. She appeared doll-like, strolling along cobbled walkways. Her eyes held modest compassion under fair and warming skies. We passed quaint little shops and Mexican cantinas. Mariachi's strummed in the distance, a timely serenade. Lisa inquired as to my love life.

"What's your girlfriend's name?"

She caught me off guard. I felt my face distort and I nearly said, Karen. "Uh, I'm no longer attached."

"Hmm," she sounded.

Oddly, I never asked her the same question. The river winded in an ess fashion. A stream of tourists lessened. We turned from the main passage. Intent on the destination, I saw no uniformed personnel. Then I noticed a sign above a bridge's suspension. It was as Tish described, a tranquil place at the bend. And it was tucked beneath a rock-lined arch.

I smiled at Lisa, "This is the spot, the Navarro Street Bridge."

She smiled back.

"Would you like to sit for a while?" I grinned.

"Sure, you betcha," she said.

Southern girls, gah-lee.

Occasionally tourists passed. They too in their own world, snapping photos and shuffling along. I took notice of lovers. Time slowed down. I relaxed for the first time in months. Lisa removed her beret to unfasten her locks. I asked a vital question. "How is it that women know how to shake their hair, letting it fall like that?" I was being serious.

"You're too funny," she said.

Lisa glanced intimately. Those delicate looks drove me insane. I felt my pulse quicken. She gradually pinned back her hair, then she confidently winked. Oh my, I said inside. Pigeons gathered at our feet, so I brushed them aside with USAF Corframs (dress military shoes). Sunlight danced across the water, creating the moment. I proceeded to thank Lisa for her very existence. I was truly grateful for such splendid company.

Poised, I kissed her freshly glossed lips. Okay...not bad. It had been awhile. Again, we kissed, staying sealed. I tried opening my eyes for enhancement, then waited for the electricity. Surely there had to be more, all was right. The air had left my balloon. Back to earth. No chills or flutters. Confused by the absence of fireworks, I pondered, what went wrong? Shook my head in disbelief.

"You okay?" Lisa asked.

"Uh yes, I'm fine."

After more sullen moments, we marched up the river in step. Our

mood had formalized. It felt like we were in flight formation on the parade grounds.

"Thanks for today," Lisa said.

I felt peculiar, at a loss. "Sure thing."

We wandered along, deciding on a place to dine.

"Would you care for Mexican food?" I eked.

"Sounds good," she said.

We walked up to street level on South St. Mary's Street. I ordered, attempting to force a conversation.

"This sure beats the chow hall," she said.

Relieved by the break in silence, "It certainly does."

The day with Lisa was nice. It beat Minnesota in his boxers. The freedom of completing basic was good for my esteem. Though melancholic, we devoured Numero Dos Plates and Tres Leches cake at El Mirador. I certainly miss Tex-Mex food from San Antonio. One of my more recent indulgences, the Oblate Cafe near San Pedro Ave. The Mexican Plate, with those fresh flour tortillas, yummy. I once preferred the Mexican Manhattan on Soledad. I liked their salsa and corn tortillas. The tangy tomato sauce on their soft chicken tacos was delicious. The cheese enchiladas weren't bad either. Boy did I digress.

Where was I? It wasn't magical under the bridge. My heart lingered eastward, accustomed to another. Love flexed marvelous strength to convey its lasting power. As we neared the bus stop, I envisioned what Karen was up to, turning jealous.

Then I shook off the notion and blurted, "Whatever."

"Huh?" Lisa said.

Silence. Reflection. We exchanged contact information, then hugged and parted. Our futures were elsewhere. I hoped for Lisa's best. I focused on the days ahead. My mind shifted to Colorado. The bus ride back to the barracks breathed new life into me. I would fly to Denver on Monday for technical school. No more long-distance relationships. Never heard from Lisa again.

Colorado (Technical School)

After the graduation ceremony at Lackland AFB, my flight departed for the snowy Mile-High City. Our United flight touched down smoothly at Stapleton Airport in Denver, Colorado. Lowry

AFB was just outside the city, my APO for the next eight weeks. Military branches used APO's for address designators. Stapleton Airport and Lowry AFB have been decommissioned and are no longer operational.

The evergreens, crispness, and snow reminded me of West Virginia. The Rockies were different from the Blue Ridge and Appalachians. The Rockies rose high in the distance. They aren't intimate like East River Mountain near Princeton. Lowry AFB was a sprawling expanse. Shuttle buses facilitated commutes because the base was like a small city. I walked when feasible to clear my head and focus on training.

I shared the experience of technical school with federal/civilian employees and other airmen. A friend from Princeton happened to be stationed at Lowry. Ron B. had once dated a sister. He invited me to go skiing. "Bring along your roommate," Ron said. Never doubted I could pull it off, though, I'd never attempted it before. My roommate, Robert, was an accomplished skier. He owned all the pro gear, having admired it from a shared closet. I'd only water skied on Bluestone Lake near Hinton, WV with Basil and his family. How hard could it be on the slopes?

With little time to get adjusted, I was ready to take on Keystone Ski Resort, at least in my mind. I geared up in rentals and felt like a bozo, borrowing used equipment like a rookie. My fellow skiers looked seasoned. This wasn't near their first rodeo. After a few runs down the bunnies, Ron pronounced me ready. "You think so, really?"

Since I'd left West Virginia, a ski resort opened north of Princeton in Ghent, WV. The name of it is WinterPlace, having twenty-seven trails and nine lifts. It is the largest teaching area in the Southeast. Funny, my research indicated the Southeast. Back to where most equate snow skiing, Colorado.

Robert was from Boston, Massachusetts. He turned me onto Aerosmith, a band from his very own streets. Familiarity with their hit albums, "*Get Your Wings*" and "*Dream On*," came easy in the weeks to come. Robert injected with a Boston non-rhotic accent. "Didn't know yooz hillbillies got awf to rock & roll."

I ended up like an Aerosmith groupie, seeing them perform multiple times through the country. Robert had hinted at something a few days prior. He searched for a way to ask; do you get high? What a surprise, my roomie smoked marijuana. I had

attempted to forge a new identity in Texas and Colorado, but the same temptations summoned. I pondered yet was done stalling. "Yep, I've been known to partake."

So much for willpower. No, in case you are wondering, I didn't get high and ski the black diamonds at Keystone. Black diamond trails pose a high degree of difficulty, usually steep and narrow. I sat those suckers out. Snow skiing is dangerous enough. Wow, I had no idea. Even looked for the orange safety nets that I'd seen from downhills on ABC television. I quickly learned to plow, turning the tips inward for balancing and slowing. By the end of the day, my calf muscles ached. So had my glutes.

Our time at technical school hurried by. I gained valuable knowledge and was eager for an assignment to apply my skills. I dreamed what my ego could attain. Meanwhile, Robert had a party friend across the hall. I was glad and not slighted in the least. I liked the Denver area and wanted to experience it on a natural high. There was much to see and do. I needed to get it together as well.

Kind and sincere, a civilian couple from North Carolina invited me on sightseeing trips. They took me to Central City, Garden of The Gods, Estes Park, and Colorado Springs. Their names were Bonnie and George. I've never met a friendlier and pragmatic pair. Bonnie worked on Seymour Johnson AFB. Her husband was retired and along for the trip. They fit perfectly and treated me like a son.

George never wanted to meet us for lunch. Maybe he was stepping out or something, I guessed. The next time we were at the grocery store he got overly excited. He asked in a serious country accent, "Do you like head cheese, Steven?" George pronounced it, Stefan.

"No. That's okay." I'd never heard of head cheese and assumed he was pulling my leg. I thought he was going to tell me something sinister.

"Come on...I'll show you over yonder," he pointed.

That was it. George would confess an illicit affair, asking me to cover. I felt uncomfortable. "What's up?"

When he pointed to a jellied meat substance, I was surprised. Not necessarily due to its nastiness, I was relieved he was

being genuine. The reason George hadn't met us for lunch, he wouldn't give up his head cheese sandwiches. "He eats them every day," Bonnie said. Yuck.

I wanted to experience the Denver area food. Several people had suggested I do lunch at the Blue Onion. I wasn't overly impressed with my plate. Possibly I ordered the wrong thing. We classmates digested and took in the cliff divers at the then famous, Casa Bonita. Their food reminded me of Poncho's in San Antonio. Except with no miniature Mexican flags, signaling table service.

I savored the French Onion soup and prime rib at the Ninety-Fourth Aero Squadron by Stapleton Airport. There you could listen to audio from pilots as they landed on visible runways. It caused me to reconsider my profession and dream a little. The pilots sounded so cool and confident.

Later that evening a classmate coaxed me over to Colfax Avenue, a dark and seedy joint. Women picked up things with unexpected parts of their bodies. That's all I'll mention that distasteful place. I should have gone to Mile High Stadium, or to Cinderella City, to say I'd been there (once the most prodigious mall west of the Mississippi).

Since referencing Colorado Springs and the Blue Onion, they recall strange coincidences. While at Colorado Spring's dog track (Greyhound races), I approached one of the betting windows. Apparently, I had known the attendant behind the glass, she was from Princeton. I ran into her recently at Berkshires in our hometown.

"I last saw you at the track in Colorado Springs," she said. And then she added, "You won big that evening, Steve."

\$800 bucks, not so big. "Yes, how are you, Rhonda?" She looked surprised I'd remembered her name.

"Fine," she said. More small talk. The conversation died. My mind and stomach focused on lunch, the slaw dogs. And a maple-walnut custard held by a homemade waffle cone.

Rhonda was a childhood acquaintance. She and her sibs had attended our same church in the 60s and 70s, Burke Baptist. She was voted Most Athletic Female in two classes ahead. Having a decent memory, I don't recall her in Colorado. I wonder if she hadn't brought it to my attention because I had a few too many

at the track.

Coincidence two. While dining at the Blue Onion, I ran into someone familiar, who was believed to be my sister-in-law's mom. She'd been sitting nearby with a real estate logo on her blouse. I was certain when I approached her table.

"Is that you, Mrs. Reeder?" I knew it was.

"Hello, Steve, I heard you were stationed at Lowry."

We exchanged pleasantries and caught up. Then we headed on our separate ways.

While waiting for a bus, I thought, very strange. There are situations that seem mind boggling. It sure is a small world at times. These abnormalities keep turning up, time and again. I ran into Mrs. Reeder while having lunch with the lady in the next paragraph. It gets weirder. I made this lady's acquaintance on Lowry AFB. She was a federal employee, a GS-7, from the training class. Her home was Las Vegas and she worked at Nellis AFB. Vegas was quite attractive but happened to be forty years old. I was nineteen. We exchanged chit-chat between classes. Vegas's face was framed by short dark hair. Something about her reminded me of Doris Day, no kidding. Think it was around her mouth, the way she pleasantly smiled. Her hair was never out of place. This woman dressed fashionable, classy looking. She was well read but came off reserved. I had no idea of her plans during our stay at Lowry AFB. Zippo.

One evening she had invited me to her room. The dorms were co-ed, so our suites were on the same floor. I wasn't naive, but I hadn't considered the cougar thing. She offered me a glass of wine, having downed most of a bottle already. I politely refused.

"At least, have a drink of mine," she insisted.

"Okay, you twisted my arm."

Vegas could be quite convincing. The rim of her glass was caked with a ruby shade of lipstick. An overpowering Lauder fragrance drifted about. I took a long-exaggerated drink. It tasted like a Bordeaux Merlot. After sitting the glass down, Vegas pulled me onto the bed. She looked pretty, but I got the creeps. Ooo...my mind said. Our age difference, extreme. Feeling schoolboy strange, I left her room without saying much. The next time I saw her, she entered her room with a chiseled looking instructor.

Randolph AFB and Cibolo Trail

Upon technical school graduation, my orders read Randolph AFB. After a quick visit to West Virginia, I would proceed to my assignment. It felt strange going back home, but I was proud as were my folks. Didn't dare see Karen, so I never tried. The week zoomed away. I left home again for what would be a lengthy stay in Texas (thirty-five years).

Here is another strange coincidence in route. The small world thing, very spooky. It's unbelievable but true. I had traveled around 1300 miles from West Virginia and was on I-35 South, about fifteen miles north of San Antonio. I was on the lookout for a Randolph AFB exit when a luxury car caught my attention, traveling at a high rate of speed. The Mercedes had West Virginia plates. I'll be darn. It was a Princeton High School classmate in the back seat, traveling with her family. The familiar face of Dr. Cardenas nodded from the driver's seat. Esmeralda looked so surprised. Oh wow, what else could I say? She was agape, freaked out as well. I smiled widely in amazement. I had not seen Es since graduation. Rodolfo and Nacho, her brothers, were along. Crazy coincidences. What the heck! All were strange occurrences and within a month's time. One doesn't forget such things. Maybe we're all more closely tied than imagined. This book could have been titled, Coincidences.

My assigned base was in Universal City, Texas. Across town from Lackland AFB where basic training is administered. Randolph lies a few miles inside of Loop 1604 and is north of San Antonio on FM 78. A sign entering the base reads, "*Randolph - Showplace of The Air Force.*" The name of our dorm was Pitsenbarger Hall. I was in the Supply Squadron. We shared our facility with the Maintenance and Security Police Squadrons in a three-story dorm with constant chatter and blaring music. A couple of guys walked to the showers in the buff, my roommate was one of them. Why me? It was no short jaunt, our room to the latrine. Come on man, at least, wrap yourself in a towel. Geez already. A sum of annoyances convinced some airmen to move off base.

John, at 6'6", was from Maine. He'd previously worked in a paper mill. Lurch loved Michelob and Jim Beam. Apparently, he was fond of flashing unflinchingly. I once found him drunk in our room, dancing on a broken bottle of whiskey. He liked to get high on a regular basis. Peculiar how we ended up sharing a rental house. The other airmen made fun of him in basic training, so tall with

high-water fatigue pants. I tried to take up for him and they deemed me a hill jack. Fast forward. Lurch called me after an abrupt exit from the military. He had lost his job, his wife, and his house. How does one respond?

Rewind. Another rental house roommate, Jim, grew up in Long Island, NY. He played lacrosse and spoke avidly about the sport. He and I developed a good rapport, and we had a fervent quest for life. I understood his exuberance; he made me laugh. We partied a whole lot together, having such wild and hilarious times. Every night was Saturday night and we took it to the limit each time. Jim left the service after completing assignments in Alaska and New Mexico. The next time I saw him, he'd become a Christian and I knew something had changed his life. I was a bit envious.

I told him, "Wish I had your faith."
"I'll pray for you brother," Jim said.
"Thanks, I need it."

Lastly, our beloved roommate, Rick H. One of my best friends to this day, an earthy human being with a whole lot of compassion. His ways were a bit unusual, I liked that about him. And he knew an inordinate amount of sports and rock music trivia. When I met him, he listened to Pink Floyd and Jethro Tull.

"Whatcha listening to?"
"*War Child*," Rick said.
Cool...dark comedy.
"Hey man, I've always liked the Mountaineers," he said.
"Well alright." Bingo, a friend.
"Too bad about the Marshall's football team."
He referenced their tragic plane crash in 1970.

"Chuck Howley played for WVU and my Dallas Cowboys."
This guy knew his stuff.
So, I jumped to his state. "You a Texas fan?"
"Hook'em Horns," Rick flashed his index and pinky.

Then he qualified his patronage. "I hate the Aggies."
Okay cool, a dislike for an in-state rival, Texas A&M.
I wasn't totally into Marshall University myself.

Rick H. graduated from Thomas Jefferson High in San Antonio. He is well-acquainted with my family in Texas and West Virginia. I know his family in Texas and some in Michigan. He attempted to keep me out of certain jams. There's no friend as loyal.

Our residence on base had been limited to a required six months. The gents and I leased a place on Cibolo Trail. Rentals were cheap in the surrounding communities of 1975. Three hundred bucks secured a three-bedroom house in a decent hood.

In the beginning, it was a blast and to experience such freedom. We partied like apprentice rock stars. Certain times and events were too wild to record. From here forward it's not my intention to glorify drugs and alcohol, nor to boast about loose living. It is important to convey some facts, reflecting such levels of degradation.

From the first night until the last, on Cibolo Trail, a continual party. There wouldn't be a normal life while residing off base for two years or more. Two dudes previously occupied the house. They dealt dope, mostly weed, in large quantities. Changing a locale is common for such entrepreneurs. I never sold drugs; it just wasn't my thing. The dealing abated at our place, not so had the volume of stoners. Lots of freaks were unsettling. I was anxious with wackos around and just needed to relax at times. So much for privacy.

While the party scene was exciting it evolved to burden us all. Finding quiet time was impossible, so it was easier to go with the flow. Any number of people crowded in every single night. Our place was a regular destination for those on base and off. You needed to keep an eye on your bedroom, fearing those who might muck up your quarters. I had a huge waterbed, the old style that motioned a lot. Not ideal for those who suffered from back pain.

The only peace was before work, lasting fifteen to twenty minutes. With the house trashed, I was anxious for the sanity of the workplace. Have you lived in a community where you knew drug activity occurred with constant traffic, day and night? Many know. When you're young and daft you lack horse sense, or you are simply drugged out. When I was sensible it made me paranoid. It was a matter of time before we attracted suspicion and the likelihood of a bust. The night in Beckley seemed far off, but I hadn't forgotten the results.

The Cibolo Trail party house served beer, whiskey, vodka, tequila, and wine. Anytime other than work hours joints, pipes, and bongos burned with various grades of weed. Some nut cases smoked weed via gas masks. I'll leave that process to your imagination. It was always an adventure, stepping over crashed

bodies. Particularly, on weekend mornings. Some were sleeping in beer cans and whatever while others had obviously puked or something. Ooh ooh those smells. The haze of marijuana and tobacco had lifted, but not the stale aftermath. Those recognizing such odiferous qualities can sympathize. There's no stench like it the morning after.

For harder drugs, they were available from peeps we knew. Crank and angel dust (PCP) were popular. Crank was analogous to the homemade meth of today, except Crank wasn't odorless. Such ether-based stuff = extremely potent dope. It is another pungent smell that is instantly retrieved. Heavy users reeked from their pores. Can't believe such odors enticed, speed and I agreed. It provided endless energy, helping my mind to work faster and not to fret from nagging conviction.

Angel dust was anything but angelic. It was indescribable, I'd say horrific. Never liked any drug that elicited over-paranoia. I witnessed a guy beating his car with a baseball bat on that stuff. Talk about brain damage and distorted perceptions. I was so paranoid doing dust, I begged friends not to leave me alone. What was that stuff, the scientific benefit? It just wasn't right. Don't ever get dusted.

Quaaludes were popular, they had Rorer 714 etched on them. I didn't care for downers much, but I did a couple and chased them with a pint of whiskey when a friend drove down from Princeton. Guess we were celebrating a reunion of sorts. My friends feared I had expired.

Someone said, "He's not breathing."
Another said, "Do you think he's okay?"

I couldn't say, I could hear them, and I was alright. With no pain whatsoever.

LSD was a phone call away. I occasionally did acid, instilled by my fear of its too freaky potential. Of the acid freaks I knew, my apprehension wasn't unfounded. Nevertheless, few people imbibed as much. I'm not proud to say, I held my liquor well. It's hard to write about those times of ill renown. Some were awfully hellish. It was rumored that LSD contained the alkaloid, strychnine. Not a high percentage because strychnine is basically poison, a lethal compound. Rats don't like it very much. Something in LSD disagreed with my system. Not to mention, unfiltered information allowed to enter my brain.

My short-lived sensibility had declined. Months passed; I was invincible. At times, I got completely wasted and wasn't required to think. Sound like fun? We had certain associates that lived nearby. They were the previous tenants of Cibolo Trail. One night, while obtaining things over there, the telephone rang. A neighbor from across the street phoned to warn us. The cops had a guy in cuffs out front. Red and blue lights glowed behind the living room shades, producing a more than alive feeling. It was hard to describe adequately. Must have been eight of us inside. The homeowner, Big Mike, rocketed from the sofa. "Oh my God!" he said. Frantically, he urged us to gather and flush, peaking on loads of crank. I couldn't believe this was happening. "What are we going to do?" someone screamed. I shook in dismay.

Then I rushed from room to room, knowing little else. Peering into the bathroom, I witnessed an all-out frenzy, one of the toilets overflowed with weed. The pills had no place to go, so a dude tossed them out a side window. I looked through the rear mini blinds, a cop milled around. No use slinking out back. Time stopped then started. The front door had not bashed in.

"Why haven't they crashed it?"

"Sshh," Leonard sounded, peering over his glasses.

"I don't know. Quiet dude," he said.

The once glowing lights disappeared. All was conspicuously quiet. The cops had apparently been satisfied with an outdoor bust. Likely, they had no inside warrant. It was later discovered; they confiscated several pounds of high-grade Columbia weed. Most of the drugs inside became food for the sewer. Small consolation.

I considered my inner struggle, having escaped another tragic end. I was relieved, but not entirely. Had frequent escapes numbed my futile denial? I chose my will several times. Bad things continued to occur. Was I blind? I still felt like an outsider among friends, yet all in on occasion. I was never at ease. Conflict robbed lasting pleasure. The little there was seemed negligible.

This period marked the concert time of my life. For a couple of years, we purchased tickets weekly. Stone City Attractions staged events at The Municipal Auditorium and The Convention Center Arena where a phalanx of stoners came armed with dope. Not to incite, but to converge in peaceful exuberance. We never missed rock bands touring the city. It didn't prevent us from

traveling to see them in Houston, Dallas, or Austin.

Besides seeing Ted Nugent and Aerosmith multiple times, we saw the likes of: Black Sabbath, YES, Deep Purple, KISS, ZZ Top, Rush, ELO, REO Speedwagon, Boston, Steve Miller Band, Blue Oyster Cult, Styx, Foghat, Trapeze, J Geils, Montrose, Van Halen, Bob Seger, Steely Dan, Journey, Marshall Tucker, Joe Cocker, Kansas, Foreigner, Supertramp, Johnny Winter, Edgar Winter, Black Oak Arkansas, and Wishbone Ash.

A friend saved his ticket stubs from 1975-1978. RIP David Hill. I was unaware we'd seen so many shows. You name the band, we saw them. Never made it to a Led Zeppelin performance. The Beatles recorded one of my favorite albums, *Sgt. Peppers*. They toured before my time, I dreamed of seeing them live. As for the Stones, I liked the tune, "*Honky Tonk Woman*." Missed their trip to SA in the 70s.

Cowboy, a friend and temporary roommate, loved the band, Nazareth. He was from a little-known place in Carolina. When he named the town, "Never heard of it," we'd say.

"It's close to Gastonia," he said. "Dallas, NC."
We looked clueless. "Nope doesn't ring a bell."
"It's near Charlotte," Cowboy conceded.

We finally got it. I don't know if it's true today, but ninety percent of the crowds smoked weed in the arena those days. Cowboy rolled up an ounce or two for the Nazareth gig. One could only get so high, one after another. Where were the cops and fire marshals? We may have seen a couple, standing at the back. Yet they acted oblivious. Guess they feared riots from 10 to 15,000 freaks.

We went to local clubs for rock music, beer drinking, and pool shooting. Our joint was outside the base, Charlie's Quarter Place, an affordable dive. A quarter purchased a twelve-ounce cup of draft beer. A cover charge on band nights, Charlie regularly booked local rock bands. Heyoka was a frequent gig. Sometimes, a Friesenhahn gal sang vocals for a Schertz-based band. We were busy cranking, so some bands could have been from Mars.

If anyone wanted to disco, you could frequent the Crystal Palace. A classy Universal City joint compared to Charlie's. The palace held wedding receptions, so it could transform into a family establishment. It went out of business and became a club

called Snookers. Then it turned into a strip joint and was managed by a Middle Eastern man.

For serious disco dancing, in San Antonio, a favorite night spot was The Last National Bank or Burgundy Woods. Those places drew a sorted clientele. You may have partied next to a military person, business executive, professional athlete, or a drug dealer. It worked if you maintained sobriety going home. The cops parked nearby at closing. Drunken clashes occurred frequently, inside and out. Patrolmen staked out the ramps of Loop 410 after midnight. There were power drinkers and druggies, eventually requiring roads.

Burgundy Woods later became a co-ed strip joint. An insane conversion, I surmised. At post 2:00 a.m. one might encounter a drunk person on Loop 410, heading the wrong way. I would go to those clubs to escape the frenzy of Cibolo Trail, not to get smashed in a head-on collision. I'd heard it was common to see the craziness in that area on weekends. Drunks going the wrong way. How could they get that wasted? I wondered. A friend looked unfazed, slurring. "Whize yooz aaskin mee?" Never mind bourbon-breath. Some people called him that, affectionately.

To relieve the monotony of 1976, we visited three sisters at their apartment (14-D). They were fun and entertaining to say it mildly. All had been to Cibolo Trail on many occasions. We socialized with their brother as well. He was pals with a party friend of ours from Charlie's. His dad happened to be a decorated general in the military. No lie.

We got to know the sister's parents well. They invited us to their summer home near the lake. I'm sure they wanted to see the wackos interacting with their kids. Principally, the way we behaved around their daughters.

I became interested in Youngest-Sister, notwithstanding her propensity to smack gum. She inspired me from a challenging standpoint. We shared an adventure. Yet regular dispute strained our turbulent relationship, which resulted in making out or arguing it out. She demanded more attention than I was willing to supply. The youngest was set on getting her way. Period. Once I tried to advise her about an issue with her car.

"You better get that checked."

"There's nothing wrong with it. It's temperamental."

"Like you, huh?" I said. Wrong response.

She knew how to sling sideways punches. The feminine kind, striking unexpected blows in defense. We aroused each other's dispositions. The apartment pool cooled our tempers regularly. Youngest was restless, so peace with her was rare. She was simply a spoiled handful. She joined the Air Force and eventually married an officer. Good luck to you, sir.

Middle-Sister meant well, a rambunctious trip with dark hair and eyes. Animated described her well. She excelled at social occasions. Middle was quite fun, but a real drama queen. She favored wine, weed, and Marlboro Lights. I have her to thank for switching brands.

She insisted, "Lights are better for you, Steven."
Right. "Okay, I'll give them a try." I got hooked.

Middle reminded me of a brunette, Bette Midler. She never sang like Bette, but she tried. Whoa. We had one fling and a lasting friendship of the three. Her melodramatics invaded one's personal space.

I once asked her, "Are you European?"
"Why, are you saying I'm fat?"
Where had that come from, scratching my head?

Middle-Sister aggravated some of my friends. I'll never forget this. She made a grand entrance prior to my wedding. Middle strolled up to my best man at a side door, requesting assistance to zip up her dress. Rick H. was nervous and too short for her high heels. Guess who was left to assist? Which allowed me to see her well-powdered back. Holy cow, I was about to get married. That's Middle, she never gave many things a second thought.

Oldest-Sister was uniquely interesting. I courted her for the longest time, which now seems rather lengthy. She could be described as boldly provocative with looks enhanced by a noticeable attitude. Sexy. She knew the art of pouting. A skilled manipulator not advanced like Jodi Arias. Oldest could be darn right playful, then erupt into a volcano. Older once convinced me to lie down with her in the middle of a remote highway, near an undisclosed lake house.

"Don't worry, relax," she calmly said.
You're nuts, I said to myself.

There wasn't a future with Oldest-Sister. In ways we were

similar. Arbitrary. You can probably figure the rest. She became ultra-dramatic and had likely mentored Middle-Sister. She asked, near our demise, "What are you going to do with me?"

I needed to think about that one. "Pardon me?" Oldest appeared deadly serious. I hadn't forgotten the hurt love could delve, and I was skeptical about us long term. Oldest wanted to get hitched, moving to St. Louis, MO. I believe she sincerely cared, however, we faded apart.

In July of 1976, a van load went to Willie Nelson's Picnic in Gonzales, TX. A big one, the Bicentennial Celebration. Willie had his usual acts, Leon Russell, and Jerry Jeff Walker. I rode along with Steven and Brent; they were brothers and decent friends. I had invited a girl from Kentucky, Debi. She was a sergeant from the base. I was attracted to her balance and confidence. She could transmit a sweet and tender side when sober. It is funny how substances change personalities. Significantly.

Willie's picnics were paramount to Woodstock events, just not as many acts nor fans. A commonality, overdosing from the hot summer heat. With inhibitions relaxed, indulgences were magnified. Some had swum in muddy ponds of snakes amid whatever else. The water was not inviting. Livestock and humans used it, but it hadn't bothered those druggies. They gleefully splashed in naked disregard.

After a wild Friday night, Debi decided to go home. She was tired, drunk, and in a redneck mood. She threatened to hitchhike to San Antonio (90 miles away). "Go for it," Crystal uncharacteristically said.

Debi turned to leave in a trashy delivery, "I just wanna kick y'all's ass." She always walked like her feet hurt.

"Hey Robinson, can you pick'em or what?" Brent said.

The brothers wanted me to head for Southeast Texas after Willie's picnic. Rick H. and a lovely girl named Crystal rode back to San Antonio with JC. My destination was to Brent's and Steven's family farm. We were on leave for another week, so what the hey. Steven said, "We might cross into Louisiana for a spell." Good, I could add it to my bucket list.

"Let's chankle," our lingo. I was on a personal quest to visit every state.

"We are there Bubba," Brent would holler. The brothers were way cool, Texas gentlemen. Both soft-spoken and politely sorts. I was drawn to their peaceful nature.

Steven asked about my parents in his drawl. "Howz yur fowlks?"

I admired their devotion to family. We often swapped memories of youthful adventures. On the trip east, they alluded to a discussion about "shrooms." My first foray into mushrooms occurred near the Texas/Louisiana border. These fungi have a purple ring underneath the cap, which contains the psychoactive compound, Psilocybin. We consumed a few in a manner I don't recall. We ended up freaking out in the rows like *"Children of The Corn."* We roamed until dawn. I was glad to come down from such a wild ride. Don't try those at home y'all. You know that certain ones can kill you, right?

Ironically, the brothers were raised like me, Southern Baptist. They had also been RA's (Royal Ambassadors are like Christian boy scouts). They were amazed, I could still recite the RA Pledge: *"As a Royal Ambassador, I will do my best to become a well-informed, responsible follower of Christ. To have a Christ-like concern for all people. To learn how the message of Christ is carried around the world. To work with others in sharing Christ, and to keep me clean and healthy in mind and body."*

My inner struggle rose/rises from the context of good and evil, mingled. This conflict is traced to passages in Genesis ago. The Garden of Eden, Adam & Eve, the tantalizing fruit, and the crafty serpent. We often desire supreme control, exercising our will while aware of the consequences. It was tempting then and it's tempting now. What a battle!

Before heading home, the brothers had chores. We fired up a fatty (a joint) to enhance the project. I know it sounds strange. People get stoned for all sorts of reasons. What's yours? As we got high, Brent asked, "Have you ever pinched any bulls?" Thought he was joshing. "Nope." Brother Steven held what appeared to be oversized tongs. The actual name of the device is an Elastrator. The pressure points are lined with elastic bands. It looked somewhat like the thing women use to expand their eyelashes, but much larger. Anyway, I didn't know what to expect. Figure the real ranch hands are getting a chuckle now.

The brothers and their dad demonstrated the process. They turned a bull on its side. One braced against the head, the other on

its rear. The third performed the ugly deed. The tool was designed to stop the blood supply to a poor one's testicles. OUCH, my face said. Apparently, this procedure benefits the beast and farm alike. I didn't want to participate with a fresh buzz on. For sure, I wanted to avoid being the pincher. Man, that was a dreadful experience. The next morning, as we loaded the van for Texas, the other bulls stared pensively. They appeared to be thinking, just try it with me buster.

The Reservation

Back near San Antonio in 1977. I couldn't exclude "the reservation." A name that had been applied to a rustic party house outside of Randolph's gates. It was adjacent to one of the base's flight lines. The noise wasn't an issue for the neighbors, nor for anyone else. Pesky insects and small wildlife roamed about. We didn't have to worry about cleanliness, the place qualified as a dump. It was perfect for partying, twenty-four-seven.

The reservation had actual tenants and it was "home" to approximately thirty regulars. On weekends and extreme occasions, everyone showed up to get waxed. Weekdays were for the hardcore. A good friend, JC, resided there. He was a likable guy, extremely bold and confident. He boasted a scorpion tattoo before tats were cool. JC put a lot of faith in horoscopes and such. I tried to tell him about God a few times. He just gave me that hollow look, "Are you serious?" We were like brothers to an extent.

JC had a tempestuous relationship with an attractive girl, Margaret. Everyone called her Margie, which easily rhymed with a party. She was a busty blonde from nowhere else but West Virginia. Yup, another blonde. Somewhat of a coincidence too, Margie was a student/fan for a football team we had scrimmaged while we attended Princeton and St. Albans High's respectively. We hadn't known each other prior, yet homeland proximity provided an inroad to form a quasi-platonic relationship. Still, what were the chances?

I was attracted to Margie, not because she was shapely and from my state. You can believe this or not, I'm drawn to a nice face and tender heart. I longed for love, the real thing. I looked out for Margie whenever possible. That was no easy task. She excelled at partying and drama followed her at times. Several guys vied for her attention. JC and Margie were an item. I was purely interested but tried not to show it. He had a suspicion;

I know he did. JC denied loving her, so it never diminished our friendship.

High, she attempted to hold her own with the fellas. I think JC preferred her more passive. Margie was more attractive prior to getting wasted. She often appeared upset and was in denial over JC. He seemed to ignore her unless he wanted certain things. I tried to stay out of it, but then I decided to take up for her. That was a mistake.

One night, Margie and I came up with a plan to provoke jealousy. We pretended to pair up, ensuring an awareness. We entered a bedroom in a rather convincing manner. Listening to chatter from the outer room, Margie giggled. I was the serious one on our side of the door. Thinking the situation needed authenticity, we began kissing. Uh-oh, we had been partying. Nevertheless, we started getting into it beyond our strategic plan.

"This is going too far," I cautioned. With a fair amount of resistance, it ended.

"Why are you stopping?" Margie said. Then she leaned in to kiss me. Flustered, she grew irritated. I was entirely confused.

To make a short story shorter, Margie yelled at me. Then she slammed the door, leaving in tears. How stupid was that whole idea? Later I tried talking sense with JC.

"Her heart will break if you let her go."
No response. But he gave me a look, "What?"

JC seemed newly concerned, now that she'd shown another interest. Regardless, she became involved with a guy from near the Texas coast and they ended up marrying. I wished them the best.

JC and I would slide off to Galveston, Texas when he grew tired of the reservation. To the place, Glen Campbell sang about. Relaxed, we fished out back of their property. JC's mom cooked breakfast, but the Bloody Mary's were the house specialty. Following a night of partying on the beach, and three of those, the fish just laughed. "Let's fire one up then go inside," JC said. I never partied and interfaced with my parents right away. Such was required in Galveston. It was plain weird, but all seemed cool with his folks. It took some getting used to, buzzed on whatever. My recollection of the area was on the foggy side anyway. Visits went by in a blaze. Before we knew it, time to

head home.

JC avoided my fascination with love and romance. He knew it garnered too much of my attention, leaving us talking sports on the trip home. As we passed the Astrodome, on Loop 610, our focus shifted to the Houston Oilers. We were big fans in the days of Pastorini, Campbell, and Billy White Shoes Johnson. When West Virginia's Rhodes Scholar finalist, Oliver Luck, took over my devotion increased. JC liked the "Snake" (Kenny Stabler) at quarterback (RIP). He linked to his riverboat player persona. Oiler fans never fully appreciated Warren Moon's accomplishments, maybe due to blowing an epic thirty-two-point lead to the Buffalo Bills in the playoffs. To the surprise of many, the team eventually folded in Houston and moved to Nashville, TN. The owner, Bud Adams, showed questionable logic. I feel certain it had something to do with pride.

Anyway. I'd been searching for an opportunity to ask JC about a girl from the reservation, one surely captivating. Having mentioned my seriousness for romance, I sensed she was a possibility. Well, I never got the chance to elicit his response. Once we sampled some "skunk" he had obtained, my passion drifted to the clouds north of Sugar Land, Texas.

An observation about my friend, JC. While close we were miles apart. I typically leaked feelings or flat out spewed. JC kept bottled up, normally. Rare occasions may have found him with his guard down. I witnessed compassion in him and loyalty I staked plenty on. I hope you found peace and happiness my friend, you were remarkably unique.

Back to the reservation. It made our house on Cibolo Trail look like a daycare. The only neighbors lived a safe distance away. Once or twice they came over to drink a beer. We all felt strangely kin, and sometimes paranoid. Why they never called the cops? I couldn't imagine. Ninety percent of us revelers were military, so I believe they acknowledged our service for the country. But they could have been axe murderers for all we knew.

All races and creeds were welcomed at the reservation. We didn't discriminate whatsoever. Our fun involved a full complement of alcohol and drugs. Imagine that. I never knew of one's shooting heroin. That doesn't mean they had not, yet there were few glowing problems. If issues at all, it was due to alcohol consumption and innocent rowdiness.

There were several WAFs at the reservation. A bright-eyed Air

Force girl, Crystal, had stricken me wildly. She was the one I'd intended to ask JC about on our return from Galveston. Everyone admired her peaceful and nurturing way. I sensed an impeccable spirit. She was a farm girl from South Dakota, unassuming and relatively quiet. She fancied plenty of singing and dancing.

Crystal adored Peter Frampton. I got into Frampton. Primarily, because of her true fondness. When not partying, she was politely elusive. She was easily embarrassed with a playful ribbing. I admired her acceptance of everyone. The type to take home to mom.

She once said, "For some reason, you seem out of place here."

I tried to think of a good comeback. "You too." I couldn't help from considering an ulterior motive. Of those at the reservation, she was interesting each time out. Her big expressive eyes won hearts, and those pouty lips never hurt her cause. I figured Crystal was real beneath her translucent naivety, clearly one to have grown serious about in those days.

There was a snag between our destinies. Crystal held affection for my friend, JC. We've been down that road. He showed little interest at first. I considered them a strange pair. They didn't work somehow, yet I went along with it as a suitable friend. What had I become, a matchmaker? If she was meant for him, I wanted their best. I could tell she was hooked, following him like a puppy.

"Are you serious about Crystal?"

"I like to maintain my availability," JC said.

Then he truly confided. "Love hurt me bad, Steve."

JC normally called me brother, so I knew something was amiss. I was surprised he was forthcoming. I stumbled for proper words.

"I appreciate your friendship," he said.

"No problem, I'm sorry man."

"I don't want to talk about this anymore," JC said.

That was the most he had shared in like manner. JC needed to display the macho image. His hurt must have been before Margie. I did find out there had been another. I understood him better after speaking with a mutual friend. I didn't push him any longer. We never talked about love again. I knew it had dealt him a devastating and lasting blow.

Rick H. and I hung out regularly for years. He knew me well and enjoyed the reservation as much as anyone. He disliked JC, Brent, and I getting too drunk. Rick was a fun-loving guy. Apparent disunity bothered him, not understanding it was all in the fun and our outlet for letting off steam.

To escape boredom, burn testosterone, and provide entertainment JC, Brent, and I punched out. It was animal behavior. We basically traded licks to our biceps and torsos, giving/taking some serious shots. The survivors were left standing. If you had enough you sat down, or you fell out. Excessive bruises were badges of honor.

"Have you seen your arms?" Rick H. said.
"So," I negated.

When I examined my body later, I noticed. Then I blew it off and got high again. Deterioration took time, being so pickled. Those times toughened me in multiple ways. A West Virginian, I needed to do the state proud. Couldn't let the Texas boys one-up me. Testosterone.

The weekend was a long party. One slept when crashing at the reservation. Hopefully, not from passing out. You might have been awakened by a "shotgun." A shotgun provides an alternative for inhaling weed. It is performed by someone placing a lit joint in their mouth, backward. The shooter blows the joint, causing it to expel smoke from the open end. The smoke is aimed into a mouth or nasal passage of another. Not uncommon in weed land.

Many states were represented at the reservation. Al was a cool dude from California. Everyone liked Al. When we got high, Al got loud. He'd tell some elaborate stories. We all did. Our conversations were as random as we were. We sat around stoned, out of our gourds, and discussed everything. Cerebral things occasionally. Al resembled and had the voice of James Earl Jones. Sometimes our conversation included an ethnicity such as Al's. Whoever was telling the story might forget his presence, or the narrative involved a black. When this happened, our attention drifted toward Al. He was a fine sport. At first, he looked bothered, disgruntled. As all were quieted, Al would burst out laughing. He was our friend. His race nor other's mattered. The prerequisite was peace and love.

We at times brewed mushroom tea, adding grape juice for a sweetened freak show. Fungi is plentiful in the South-Central

Texas humidity. We ingested shrooms in a variety of ways (raw, cooked, or smoked them with weed). It grows naturally in cow manure or just alongside. The high from shrooms is cleaner than synthetic LSD. At times, shrooms can be overwhelming. As if you ingested something disturbing. Hello.

Canyon Lake

I knew people who'd messed up their minds on LSD (acid). Our faithful flock could easily obtain Blotter, Orange Sunshine, and Purple Microdot. A California friend, not mentioned so far, popped purple rather frequently. Some from the reservation tripped from the lake's shoreline. The only decent and tolerable hallucinogenic trip I had taken was on Windowpane at Potters Creek. I dropped acid a few times, but I do not advocate LSD, nor any illegal drug.

Canyon Lake is in Comal County near New Braunfels, Texas. A popular spot for water sports, camping, and party enthusiasts. We headed there on Friday afternoon. JC could take off work early to ensure a prime campsite for the gang. In the early days, it was North Park. When I could swing it, I'd ride along to get the party started. As time progressed, we found better locations to suit our flourishing needs.

Our ideal spot was Potters Creek, located on the north side of the lake. It was shielded by oaks, cedars, and mesquite trees, and was secluded at the trail's end. We arranged our vehicles in a semi-circle to provide added privacy. A lagoon provided a shallow access into Canyon Lake. I can picture the spot vividly, crashing many nights under its googol of stars. I loved the serene setting, where I felt free.

Seldom did we get into the water after dark. The cove was hundreds of yards across. Four of us were extremely high one night, so we decided on a crossing to speculate. We boarded a boat bravely; haphazardly. Too many for its size and in our condition. Near the middle of the crossing, a couple of guys rocked the craft back and forth. Not a good idea under a considerable influence.

Gary and I jumped out. We dog-paddled, waiting for the horseplay to stop. I think that was the gist of it, we were peaking. The other two, Brent and Mikie, had also abandoned ship. They proceeded to capsize the boat for added excitement. We continued to float, having philosophical debates over the expanse of the universe.

Though Christian, philosophy interests me with what-ifs. You know what I mean? But you may not have known this. There was a theory from the 60s; purporting, certain substances expand the human mind. Right. I'm not sure about that one, Timmy Leary. Let's revisit the lake ordeal, then you decide. All was fine until the boat had drifted away.

"Think I'll swim to shore," Gary said.

"That's not a good idea," I said.

Gary took off anyway. Noticed Brent had swum for the boat and was about to seize it. My attention focused on the security of the craft. We needed back in.

After a few moments, Mikie said, "Where's Gary?"

In a chorus, "Ohh shoot!"

There were other variations.

Gary was far away, struggling to stay afloat. The scene reminded me of a virtual life-saving demo. It seemed quite serious and all-consuming.

Someone yelled, "Stay calm...dog-paddle."

We boarded, rowing frantically toward him.

As we neared Gary's body, he floated face down.

"He's drowned," Mikie sighed!

Dead silence.

We pulled aside Gary's lifelessness, terrified from his state and our predicaments. You can't just turn off highs, but we gained enough lucidity for a moment. As Brent reached for Gary's body, he popped up roaring with laughter. "Ah-ha, ha...ha...ha!" he boasted, "told you I could make it, Stevie."

Relieved, tragedy had been very possible. The lake was safe for the most part. None of us needed to drive wasted. Few slept for long periods. Some were active all hours. There was swimming, skiing, hiking, and football. Yep and we punched out there too. We were satisfied until late Sunday afternoon when it was time to head home for reality.

Clark and Skeeter tested the system. They drove home a night early one weekend. Our friends had become overly aware. Go figure. They claimed visions had forced their hand. Rick H. warned them. "It's a mistake, don't do it." Others said, "Stay here man." Wise words. Rick had a practical sense, which caused

our friendship to last through the years. His regular sensibility offset my frequent insensibility. Well, guess what? On River Road, the cops pulled Clark and Skeeter over. They weren't clothed in shirts or shoes. Yet they had gained a place to bed down, the Guadalupe County Jail. We laughed the next day when they joined us at the lake. They looked like whipped puppies. "Why did you drive home that way, and not I-35?" we scolded. River Road was often taken for its scenery, but best navigated soberly in the daylight. "We feared the cops would know we were ripped on the interstate," Clark said. You bet, fine logic, my friend.

We played football on sparse patches of grass, but mostly on graveled drives between the camp sites. During a full moon, we played at night. Sometimes, an idiot chimed, "Let's play tackle."

Most everyone agreed. "Let's do it." I got tackled by George during an unforgettable contest.

"It was a clean hit," he said. No argument. Unfortunately, I'd landed in sprawling cacti. That hadn't stopped play for long. A broken limb might delay the action.

I had been aligned with a young lady that day. Her unique name was Coral. I held an interest, confirming my affinity for the exotic. She was another girl from South Carolina, far from Lisa's disposition, and not ebullient at all. Coral's expression rarely changed, but I knew there was sincerity. She proved it, offering to pick cactus needles from my butt. Being a jet engine mechanic on the base made her handy with instruments. "If you don't hold still, I'm going to leave them in Robinson," Coral said. Few if any called me that. None supplied her piercing looks.

Never argue exposed; clearly, with an Indian wielding needle-noses. She was part Native American, a curious little tomboy. Coral and I were vastly different, yet both frustrated with romance. I was unsure about her esoteric nature. But she cleaned up well, trying her hardest at lady-hood. She had also purchased a new conversion van. It had all the bells and whistles, including a quadraphonic sound system and reclining bucket seats. At the time, my Gran Torino Sport, he was indisposed. Coral carted me around to work and play. I preferred more feminine gals, yet we had our time in the sun. As for the Torino, that's another story.

I haven't written about something vitally important. Mortally. If you think of partying like us, then DON'T. If you can't help it, please listen. **Do not drive impaired by alcohol and/or drugs!** Do not take chances behind the wheel. If you don't care about yourself, please care for others. You could hurt someone, and you'll regret it. You could take a life. If you think it can't happen it will. Having a designated driver may be the smartest thing you'll ever do. There's usually someone in your circle who doesn't partake, or at least sporadically.

Several of us were returning from a swim party at the Meadows Apartments in Live Oak, TX. It was after 1:00 a.m. I was driving my Torino. The people in my car were surely wasted. I should not have been driving, but I was considered better off than most. It was my ride. I had met someone very interesting that evening. An enchanting young lady, Nancy. As we waited for the light, under a train trestle, I had been thinking about heading to my apartment. Wanted to dream about the gal I had met. I needed to drop off my passengers first, the drunk stoners. The rare placidity was less than a mile away. The reservation was peaceful because the ruckus was at the swim party, or elsewhere. No matter, I wanted to sleep in my own bed. The light changed, then I made a right turn onto the highway. As soon as my car headed straight, "Pow!"

Apparently, an impaired driver slammed into my front left quarter-panel. It was a glancing blow yet powerful. It startled me sober, but my passengers seemed unaffected. The vehicle that hit me kept trucking. My car was barely drivable, thus disinclined from a previous paragraph. In our condition, I knew not to call the cops. We would have paid the consequences, far worse than a deductible. I was able to get my car to the reservation. When I saw it the next day, I wasn't sure how we'd made it. We were fortunate to have not been seriously injured. If I had made that turn a little wider it would have been head-on. Thank you, Lord, sparing us/me again. Please don't drive under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

Time went on in our lives. The partying continued at the reservation. Folks had gotten used to seeing JC and Crystal together. It became common and I wanted to forget things. I accepted it by getting numbed, escaping in familiar ways.

The reservation's predictability was getting old. The same asylum. I'm sure Crystal broke some hearts and is now a great wife to a lucky man. I've heard she became an excellent teacher. Such news came as no surprise. I feel certain she found her

happiness.

I followed a local band from 1977-1978, Flatbush Junction. The band was formed by people from the base, friends of mine. My main contribution was a stagehand. I was ready to provide vocals if called upon. I loved their music, which was chiefly unplugged with acoustic guitars.

One night there was a gig at Fort Sam Houston's NCO Club. The joint was rocking. During a break, and before the last set, we stepped out back to torch one. After a few minutes, an Army Security Policeman tapped on his lights. Ugh-oh! I assumed we were busted. It felt like a setup, but it wasn't. Merely bad timing. A regular night patrols through the alley.

"Again," I murmured. Idiomatic, I thought.
A cop said, "You shouldn't be out here."
Brilliant notion.
Then another cop said, "You know better than this."
"YES SIR," abounded...and other desperate replies.
"You have ten seconds to get back inside."

We stood with dropped jaws, then scurried. What a relief. Cops often get bad raps. I've been let go as many times as not. It depends on the officer. The offender's attitude could have a bearing. It's best to be humble with peace officers. They're doing their job, the best they can. If I sound preachy so far, I have the advantage of hindsight.

I wanted to branch out, see the world. The Virginia's, the Carolina's, Ohio, Tennessee, Georgia, Florida, Colorado, Arkansas, Texas, and Louisiana hadn't fully qualified. It became time to move on from the carousel. In three short years, I had experienced quite a bit. Change swirled in with the fall season.

Chapter 3 Destiny Down in Texas

On a shadowy night, we left the northeast side of San Antonio for a relatively short ride to New Braunfels, Texas. Wurstfest is an annual event adapted from Germany's Oktoberfest. Traveling in the same van, we had barely met in 1977. I had no idea what was about to occur. When she emerged, a vivid moon slipped from the clouds and shined on destiny. Ours.

Nancy garnered plenty of attention, but she captured my heart. Her blonde hair flowed around catlike hazel eyes. A white turtleneck sweater and faded hip huggers enhanced her curvaceous figure, and I recognized her fragrance as Jovan Musk. Deja vu. Inside the hall, her coy glances did a number on me. Can't tell you who was there, what we consumed, or none of that. So many feelings rushed in, I couldn't process them all. She was irresistible, a knockout! No one had compared to Nancy.

The chemistry between us, undeniably strong. We didn't say much for some time; our hearts were becoming one. From that moment on, I was convinced of love's fate. The rest of the evening was magically romantic. It's a Wurstfest tradition to kiss frequently. I never knew kissing could be so sublime. Nancy's lips were shaped for mine. Those tender exchanges sealed a sensational future. Clearly, we were destined for the altar and

nothing could stand in our way.

Back at Randolph AFB, I had been seeing someone prior. It was hard for Kay to understand there was someone else when I outlined my future with another. Fortunately, she and I were not in love, having maintained an equivocal relationship. We severed ties in an ironic fashion, explained in a later chapter.

It mattered not, I was a goner and prepared to meet Nancy's parents in a San Antonio suburb of Live Oak. We dined over a delicious recipe, Sputnik, derived from its inference, "out of this world". I quickly became one of the family. A splendid cook, Nancy's mom excelled as an educator and administrator too. Legendary. She was a people person, so we hit it off well.

Nancy's father was a Chief Master Sergeant on the base. At the time, a stern looking gentleman. His transition lenses made him look more intimidating. I recall his words. "I'm not sure anyone is good enough for my little girl." The chief's propriety was impressive, matched by the orderly rows of medals and ribbons above his shirt pocket. Upward and lower rocker stripes dominated his sleeves. He mellowed with age and wisdom.

I looked up at Nancy's brother, Kevin, towering at 6'5." He offered no advice. I sensed it was best to remain silent at that point, a big step for me. Then the chief said, "We'll have to wait and see." Man, I was subdued but never doubted my resolve. To surely win the heart of his first-born beauty.

My in-laws were very uncommon people. Extra gracious. We shared many good times and lasting memories. They were like blood, which helped to form close family ties in Texas, Kansas, and Arkansas. We related well, primarily under favorable circumstances. I hope they remembered it that way.

Manee was kind and gentle, much like Momma, but she grew up on a farm. She and I had a good relationship. I tried to be a worthy son-in-law, assisting her when possible. Manee, the name adapted from Jay's earliest reference, resulted from her giving him money. We grew accustomed to his adoring pronunciation and it stuck over time. My mother-in-law exuded absolute humility. She was a loving parent & grandparent. I thought the world of her.

Pa was generous, a quality man. He looked and acted tough, but his way warmed and pleased. Pa would do anything for his kids or grandkids. For that matter, he'd do anything for a neighbor or friend. Pa taught me to do practical things. Things I lacked the

knowledge and confidence to construct or repair. He fixed anything he put his mind to. I attempt to honor his tradition these days. Persistence works well. Thanks, Pa. He was a superb father-in-law. He passed away some years ago with a failing heart. I had so much respect for him.

This is a July 2012, insertion. When God ends the lives of ones that are dear, we search our painful hearts, and then we attempt to justify things beyond our control. We also tend to hold things back, regretting it too late. I just received word that Manee had passed on in her sleep last night. I am filled with sorrow and feel powerless, it's a terrible sense. She was always patient and accepting of everyone, including me at my worst.

I miss Manee and Pa. I'm likely to face the death of my aging parents. Death can occur when we least expect it. Wish I could have seen Manee again, to tell her what she had meant and how her life had touched me. When death happens to someone you love there's nothing more sobering. I'm hoping Manee knew of my deep affection. For days, I was sad from the news, but she's with Pa in a better home. It helps to know their resting place. My kids adored them. I mourn for Nancy and the kids because I wasn't there for Manee's passing. In memory of her, I vow to think of what I can give today, not what I may receive.

Reverting to 1978 and happier times. I drove Nancy to West Virginia to meet my parents. We were both a little anxious, but ready to proclaim our love to everyone. My heart was filled with so much joy.

One night on the porch dad revealed. "Son, I like her." He smiled broadly. "She has strong convictions," he said.

"Thanks, dad, that's nice of you to say."

We discussed Nancy's family at length. He shared in my excitement. Glad of his approval, I wasn't sure what he'd meant until later. Nancy's sense of right and wrong helped her draw finite lines in contrast to you know who and his handling of conviction. Didn't mind showing Nancy off in my hometown, and I wanted my family to love her as well.

I wondered about Momma because her opinion is important. I suspect there is much credence to mothers thinking gals are not good enough for their boys. It's interesting to watch the interaction with a prospective daughter-in-law. Much can be deciphered from a mother's expression, the body language. Momma

knew I was head over heels, so she consented in her way.

"Nancy sure is tall and pretty," mom said.

I chuckled, "Thanks, Momma."

A few days in Princeton clipped by. We headed back for the long haul to Texas. Interstates traveled: I77, I81, I40, I30, and I35. I glanced at Nancy while she napped in route, knowing what it meant to be happy and blessed. Miles and miles to ponder our future.

Each time she awoke, I said, "I love you, Nancy."

She responded with a look and words I cherished.

"I love you too, Steve."

There's something special, speaking the name of a loved one. It validates the object of passion, and it centers on a specific heart. Who doesn't appreciate, hearing their name in a romantic context?

Nancy and I made the best of our time, our lives revolved around each other. We could hardly wait to marry in the fall of 1978. Our wedding was set for the chapel on base, having met less than a year before. My parents and sisters, Jo and Deb, flew down for the big day. Nancy's family came in from across the Midwest. I never doubted our forthcoming union, no second thoughts.

Rick H, my best man, suggested we have the bachelor party at the apartment's clubhouse. He invited some of our old friends; we hadn't seen them in a while. To tell the truth, I hadn't missed them nor those crazy times.

An uncommon thing occurred. Nancy and Doreen (her maid-of-honor), showed up at the bachelor party with a few other women. No one expected a combined bachelor/bachelorette celebration. It didn't bother me. I hadn't anticipated anything wild, typical bachelor stunts. I looked forward to marrying my sweetheart. The countdown was on for the next day's wedding.

Rick arranged for a keg at the clubhouse, and there was tequila. I paid for it the next morning. Nothing gave me a hangover like beer from a barrel. It went down too easy in those plastic cups. Rick took me for menudo the next morning. "This will fix you up," he said.

The traditional forehead sweating began. The butterflies flapped in my stomach. The menudo must have slowed their wings. "Hey,

I'm feeling better," I declared.

It was sinking in; incredible emotion was about to wed. My mind needed to defog a bit. One of the most important days in my life, I wanted sharpness. I'm not sure why some grooms get tanked for the actual wedding. Maybe it's the "hair of the dog" thing. Perhaps it is fear.

At the chapel, I met with Minister Motzer in his study. He was a Chaplain Major on base. He surprised me with a black robe, purple sash, and gold crucifix. Having come from a Southern Baptist background, I expected a modest suit and a King James Bible. I believe his denomination was Methodist, which was fine with me. I was stoked to proceed with the ceremony. As we talked, I felt more at ease.

Then Motzer said, "Do you see that door to your right son?"

I had already scoped it out. "Yes, sir."

"If you aren't sure of this, then you may take off now," the minister said.

I paused in disbelief. What was he saying? Had he sensed something in me or was there standard protocol? I wondered for a few seconds. "Oh, I'm sure of this marriage," I said.

"Then let's get it done," Motzer grinned.

I don't know about you, but the build-up and ceremony seem drawn out. Wanted to move on and get to the honeymoon. Then all the sudden, my eyes drifted to the back of the church.

"Oh gosh, she's beautiful!" I proclaimed.

I'm sure my face went flushed.

Rick H. stayed silent, looking as if to cry.

"Gee, don't do that man," I said.

The wedding, dreamlike. Watching Nancy come up the aisle, I was awestruck. With much adrenaline, I barely felt my legs. "I love you," I whispered. She grinned, maybe I embarrassed her a little bit. Alongside, I thought we were in Heaven. Nerves had uttered the sentiment from my heart. My knees trembled somewhat, and then there was peace in my soul. Eyeing her through the veil, I simply melted. With no doubt, I was ready to hear the pronouncement, Man and Wife.

I'd wondered if newlyweds were shy about kissing in front of the guests. I wasn't, the photos tell the story. Any opportunity to kiss my gal was golden. Turning to depart, all was magical. People congratulated us down the aisle in nodding acceptance. I sensed we were moving in a vacuum. Then I snapped as rice pelted me in the face. It was September 30th, yet the temperature hovered around mid-to-high eighties. I felt rice crunch under my feet. Some of it had clung to my face. My bride removed it, kissed me, and we cheerfully drove away.

The reception was ideal and hosted by Nancy's parents, so their poolside provided a scenic backdrop. With family present, I was pleased to see their interaction. The food theme was Filipino cuisine. It was great, Nancy's family spent many years in the Philippines. Pa's assignments had taken them to the PI for several tours. The reception menu included: chicken adobo, pancit, fried rice, lumpia, and wonton wrappers.

Our first home, a romantic studio at the Phoenix Square Apartments in Universal City, TX. I loved the loft, our own private nest. The apartment ignited and fueled a torrid romance. We were oblivious to the outside world. I did have a job on the base but rushed home directly afterward. We were all that mattered.

Our forgotten friends wondered if they would ever see us again. Neither of us cared for a return to regular madness. Finally, the party life was behind. I told Nancy, "You've made me the happiest man on earth." There's no describing such a feeling.

The first year of marriage was better than imagined. I was extremely proud. I didn't worry about the challenges newlyweds frequently face, if we stayed together. I can't say enough positive about those times. Our early disagreements never amounted to much. Being married to your love is a fine gift. Some people never experience what we had. I was truly fortunate.

Retrospect: It's no longer about self. If you truly love someone it is sacrifice. You know it's real when you put another's desires above your own. It's making a commitment and trusting it. You don't boast of your way, and you never keep score. Having patience and learning to endure, because the alternative turns to misery.

We joined the First Baptist Church of Universal City. A while later, we became involved in leadership positions that kept us busy and fulfilled. Nancy took on the role as Children's

Division Director, putting forth a tremendous effort to grow them significantly. I held the same position with the Youth Division. We sang in the choir each week, bringing gladness to my heart. I gained an added opportunity to sing bass in our church quartet. It added richness to my soul. Our lives were taking shape beautifully. I wasn't drinking or doing drugs, so I felt good about myself for a change. Life was good. All was right in the world.

Jay, our first child, would arrive in 1979. We were elated by the news, then we prepared for our son by moving into a rental house in Schertz, TX. I wanted to be more responsible, thinking less and less about the party scene. I loved the idea of a family. We anticipated a happy and successful future. I looked forward to a decent job with my Air Force training in computers. A few months prior, we planned tangibly for parenthood. I didn't know there was so much involved with a nursery and all. The bills added up, causing me to imagine a monetary strain. That's what ordinary people do. I told myself, "One day, we won't be ordinary."

Meanwhile, I played league basketball with the Supply Squadron on base. I still loved to compete, and basketball satisfied. We were set to play the 559th Training Squadron. Their team was made up of college grads and newly winged pilots. They were a hoity-toity bunch, the movie "*Top Gun*" captured their essence well. A few of them had played college ball. Our team was no slouch. We had youth and athleticism on our side, so we made it to the base championship by defeating the pilots in overtime. Our team relied on me as a scoring point guard. Many years of experience paid off in the gym.

Next up, our rival, MPC (*Military Personnel Center*). Their duties handled assignments worldwide. It so happened, they had pick of the Air Force's best athletes. Nancy would come to our games pregnant, and still, the most beautiful girl around. She probably wondered if I would ever grow up and out of sports. We lost the championship due to their skill level at every position, and the depth of their bench. It's only a game.

Our son Jay arrived at Wilford Hall Hospital on Lackland AFB. I remember Nurse Puffer. Who could forget such a name? There's nothing compared to parenthood. It places you on top of the world. You want to be a good dad and a better man in the process. It appears everything had changed in a very short time.

I was married and a father in less than a year. We were so proud

of Jay. He was walking and talking before the age of one. He performed a solo at my parent's church, at the age of three. Jay sang "*Victory in Jesus*." Everyone was stunned by his vocals and memorization.

It didn't take long for educators to discover his intellect. Jay was placed in the gifted and talented program at school. I didn't mind driving him to Trinity University for the Saturday Morning Experience program. It was his opportunity to match wits with the brightest. He ended up graduating near the top of his class in high school.

The memories from those years are wonderful. Jay lives in Tokyo (Machida) Japan with wife Yasuyo, son Dan, and daughter Shanna. His family visited me during certain holidays when I had little hope. I will not forget your compassion. Thank you all.

I was hard on Jay. I'm sure it made things tough for him. He probably didn't realize, how proud he made me. I love you for hanging in there. He taught me many things. I was amazed at his mind, and his heart is very large. I could usually sense a disappointment when his parents were at odds. We had our disagreements through the years. Many of those times, he was right to challenge me. I was too selfish to acknowledge it at times. I'm sorry son. Thanks for the courage you showed from our back patio. It helped to initiate a miraculous change in my life. I'm so proud of you, I will love you always!

In early 1981, I was fresh out of the Air Force. I worked for Bexar County Information Services. They hired me as a computer operator and soon promoted me to supervisor for the night shift. A good job on the outside, I was big stuff. Not that large, the bills were piling up. My \$2200 monthly check wasn't going very far.

I worked part-time at Joske's in Windsor Park Mall. Dad was in the wholesale clothing business, so I knew my way around fashion. I wasn't bad selling, but it was an hourly wage. It was more of an incentive (\$50) to snitch on would be shoplifters, which was more than I'd netted from a part-time shift.

With two jobs, I still took classes at San Antonio College. There wasn't much snow in San Antonio to walk all those many miles. Nancy and I seldom saw each other. Except, when I headed out the door. I worried that she was doing most of the child-rearing. It prompted the question, "Is this worth it?" I knew it was rhetorical. We both wanted it for the betterment of our

family. Our hearts were in the right places.

One afternoon, Nancy called to inform me that she was with child. We'd be due again in January of 82. We decided on a move to a larger home. It seemed a short time before Ricky arrived at Northeast Baptist Hospital. I witnessed his birth in the delivery room, helping to form a bond we would continue. It was wonderful to see our second son born, taking his first breath outside of the womb. He was a ten pounder with dark hair.

Ricky was named after Nancy's dad, Richard. His hair turned white blonde by the age of one. His personality was different than Jay's. We loved them equally. I learned how each child is unique. As a tyke, Ricky didn't enjoy having shoes forged on his feet, which made getting places a challenge. He was more reserved but no less talented, and he performed very well in school. I was extremely proud of him, amazed at his tenacity and inner strength. His endurance was unmatched.

I enjoyed helping Ricky to learn the sports of football, basketball, and golf. He caught a bomb for a touchdown at Kitty Hawk Middle School; I was glad to have been there. We shared a passion for sports. Those memories can't be measured. On the golf course, I learned of his competitiveness. His ex-wife Michelle, son Ashton, and daughter Avery reside in San Antonio. Ricky and his family visited me when I didn't have much hope. I'll not forget your compassion. Michelle arranged a visit for me, with her minister, when I was distraught with grief and fear. Thank you all.

Ricky's way of discerning moods helped as we came along, staying out of the other's way when times weren't especially peachy. I love you for your wonderful sensitivity son. Your heart is uniquely special. His sense of humor coincides with mine. I love to recall our comical episodes. Our second son is highly talented, not only book smart, he is skilled at fixing things. He would offer help to anyone. In that way, he is much like Pa. Ricky is the genuine article. I'll not forget our golf outings and thrills of victory. Thanks for helping me. Especially, when I didn't deserve it, son. I am so proud of you; I will love you always!

Meanwhile, I transferred my recently earned college credits to Southwest Texas State University. I drove a total of 105 miles a day. South to downtown in San Antonio for work, north to San Marcos for night school, and back home to Schertz. I had entered the school's MIS (Management Information Systems) program.

Around that time, Nancy waited for me to arrive home from night school. She looked beautiful as ever. Little did I know, she was about to announce the exciting news. We were to expect the arrival of our daughter, Christi. By May of 83, the Lord would bless us with a little girl.

Christi was born with the shortest amount of labor. I was overjoyed to have a daughter, ecstatic. Growing up with sisters, I wanted Jay and Ricky to share in a similar experience. The father-daughter relationship is grand. I see evidence of it from my dad and his daughters. I felt over-protective of my baby girl. It excited me; Nancy would have the mother-daughter relationship. I related to Christi as youngest of the family.

Christi competed for attention with her brothers and often won. She gained fame in high school, an integral member of the UCA National Cheerleading Championship squads at Converse Judson High School in 1999 and 2000. She appeared on ESPN, performing synchronized cheers and amazing stunts in Orlando, Florida. I was very proud of her. She is a beautiful lady and resides in the San Antonio area.

Christi visited me when I needed the family. Don't know if I told you this honey. I'll not forget your compassion at various times. Thanks. You too, Brian. Chris is my little girl, what can I say? She won't mind me referring to her as such. I've often called her Chris. I prefer to think I'm the only one. I'm going to say this too, "I'm not sure anyone is good enough for my little girl." Hang in there though, Brian. Christi and Brian live in Converse, Texas with his son's Joaquin and BJ.

My daughter is something else, everyone says as much. Christi has a unique and wonderful personality. Within the first few minutes, you'll know where you stand. That's good unless she takes umbrage, which is part of her charm. Thanks for being the youngest. She and I sometimes clashed. Mainly, because we are alike. She may have recognized when I was up to no good. I'll always hope for my daughter's best. I won't be able to protect her forever. But knowing one day, you must let go and trust. All our children have special hearts. Hers is huge. I am so proud of you and will love you always!

Nancy and the kids make me happy. They are my joy, which certainly comes from the Lord. I wasn't a good steward. Nancy deserved a better husband. The kids deserved a better father. My family provided me with more gladness than anything on earth!

You never forget the preciousness of loved ones. There's much more to say, but I'll stay true to their private lives.

The years Nancy and I had, for the most part, were wonderful. I was certainly proud to be her husband. There are memories one cannot come close to describing, I wouldn't want to mess it up. Nancy was not only beautiful; she had an adorable heart. I write some in past tense, not because it's no longer true. We haven't communicated much since 2005. I want to be fair to her and the life she leads today. But I've yearned to tell her I've changed. To show her. We began to email in 2017.

What she probably doesn't know, I hurt deeply for her times of unhappiness. Whether I caused it or not. I had hoped to share in her joys and sorrows. I wanted more than anything for us to be joined forever. Not knowing how to make Nancy happy saddened me greatly. It tore at my very being. It seemed I was a disappointment at times. I didn't know how to correct the situation. For a time, I was doing the right things.

Nancy has many talents, besides her professional achievements as a teacher, vice principal, principal, and Associate Superintendent of Curriculum & Instruction. She has other gifts. Nancy is a fine artist. Most of her paintings were oil based. There was a still-life hanging in my parent's home. I saw it frequently. It's a single pink rose. She painted it as a gift for Momma, and she signed it, N. Robinson '86.

She produced countless paintings of Texas Hill Country landscapes with beautifully depicted live oaks and bluebonnets. There was a painting, I wanted for my own. The last time I saw it was from our library at the top of the stairs in Universal City. It is an ocean scene, looking out from a cave. Nancy was very good at crafts. Her grandmother, Mimi, had similar talents. Nancy's comparative research was done at Michael's, Garden Ridge Pottery, museums, and other creative outlets. I believe she had conjured up crafting notions from those places.

Nancy appreciated the wonder and was sentimental concerning zoos. We became annual members of the San Antonio Zoo. I liked to watch her when she wasn't aware, seeing her compassion for the animals and the lives they deserved. I wondered what else she was thinking as we toured the exhibits. Having her way, all the captives would go free.

She held a singular attraction for bodies of water. Nancy loved the ocean more than I can adequately describe. An excellent

swimmer, I can't think of a more beautiful specimen all wet. I knew she was an expert diver, but I never had the fortune to learn. I had difficulty snorkeling, so I wasn't a diver deep down. She loved the adventure of the sea and how it teemed with things. It helped me understand her nature. She used to tell me about dives in the Philippines and Hawaii. I was a little envious; I never got to share in that experience.

You can't know how much you'll miss someone until they are gone from your life. I'm only a part of me, the rest is her. I'm on a path, one I should have taken before. She would be proud of me, I do believe. Beware! The one you love may slip through your hands. You must appreciate, respect, and cultivate your love every single day. It's simple in hindsight. Divorce is like death. In ways it's worse.

Here's my appeal to parents. Always take the time to listen to your kids. When you have the opportunity, spend time with them. You'll have time to do your thing when they are gone. Stay interested in what they find interesting. They will know when you are not sincere. Give them enough freedom to make mistakes. In other words, don't hold the reins too tight. But don't let loose of them.

Always protect them and show them respect. Tell them you are sorry. Particularly, when it's your fault. When they move on stay in contact. Keep out of their marital issues and the raising of their own. Help them when they can't help themselves. Always love them, and always forgive them.

Chapter 4 College, Career, County Government

I decided to enroll in freshman courses at San Antonio College in the fall of 1981. A full load wasn't possible, working for the county government. Life became more complex. For the first time, I knew more than many of the students around me. The downside, I hadn't been in an academic setting for a while.

The freshman requirements weren't ideal once I had matriculated. I wasn't overzealous to discover they were English, History, Biology, and Algebra. I wanted to take courses such as Astronomy and Archaeology. Even Anatomy for crying out loud.

Biology probed deeper than expected. It was one of my better subjects in high school. Must say, however, I was glad to be done with fetal pig dissections. The textbooks were thicker in college. Our first Biology lecture held debatable promise. The initial chapter conjectured, concerning the genesis of life. You know...the creation theory, evolution and such. I wanted to spew forth a biblical foundation to show the professors a thing or two. My dogmatic tongue made it difficult to suppress the fervor in my sinews. I hadn't extensively considered certain studies in a paradigmatic and contentious sense.

One can attend conservative schools, but the academic world is quite liberal. Secular. Fundamental thinking is thought to be one sided and narrow-minded by many professors out there. An education portends additional perspective, which is not a bad thing for producing well-rounded freethinkers. How would you know what to think unless you knew the other's argument? Well, the professors were getting paid to lecture, so I'd get my chance.

This came sooner than expected. English Literature allowed ample opportunities for impressing with my burgeoning knowledge. You bet. The prof baited the class for a discussion, concerning the existence of God. His rationale was scientific based. The course progressed and ended well but was largely philosophical, fueling my desire for more erudite literature courses. Most professors were equally ardent concerning a humanistic concentration. None of the professors disproved the authenticity of the Bible. What they upheld placed miracles and the sovereignty of God on symbolic and practical planes.

College was an excellent endeavor and one of the most important things I've done. I even signed up for a Saturday morning class at SAC. That was my first mistake in academia. For some reason, it was when the weed-heads attended in vast numbers. To beat all it was Psychology 101. As the Abnormal Behavior topic was covered, some stoners beamed with pride while others reflected paranoia.

I would show the youngsters how old-school rolled. A few heads plotted a place to get high after class. It was either behind the tennis courts across from San Antonio College, or within the seclusion of Brackenridge Park. The park won out. The kids considered it freakish to party with the aged. Twenty-five was ancient to them.

Adjacent to SAC was a club, Doctor Feel Good. Catchy title. Having a mirror ball and multicolored disco floor, the joint mostly cranked out rock-n-roll. It catered to the happy hour crowd. Unfortunately, it was before night classes. I justified participation in the buffet from missed opportunities to obtain nutrition after work. The "free meal" required a purchase of two mixed drinks. A few bucks a piece at the time. Rock on.

I had nearly exhausted the acceptable number of credits at San Antonio College. I was ready to declare a degree, moving on to a four-year institution. SAC had me for a final semester. I had gotten to know a couple of gals in History class, named Yvette

and Dora (not their real names). I'd seen them around on campus and at Doctor Feel Good. They were native to San Antonio, Hispanic. I've never liked that reference for my local friends. Some prefer the Mexican American label. Others, Latina/Latino. American says it best in my opinion. We're all descendants of some race or creed.

"Do you get high?" Yvette bluntly asked.
HERE WE GO AGAIN.

Instead of saying no I hedged, unsure of the diversion that bailed me out. At least for a while, I sat in the not seat. Yep, the not seat. I didn't know her tremendously well and I had turned over a new leaf. A friend once told me, "That leaf has turned over enough to have crumbled by now."

Anyway, I was purely satisfied by shooting the breeze with the girls on occasion. We became college friends and allies, nonetheless. I kept up with Yvette and Dora from time to time. Occasionally, I'd meet them for lunch at the Mexican Manhattan on Soledad.

During San Antonio's Fiesta, which is a local celebration like Mardi Gras, Yvette asked me to come by to make cascarones. I inferred her latent intent, marijuana motivated. I acted unmindful. Then I considered...it was related to heritage and independence from Mexico. Why not?

A cascarone is a confetti-filled egg. Most people break them over another person's head. The tradition is to bring about luck. I didn't see any harm in that; I needed some luck. Yvette's parents passed away at young ages. Their home housed her brother and his wife, located near an I-37 ramp in southeast San Antonio. The brother's wife was the mother to a fourteen-year-old. I feared they might engage in drugs with the lad around. He appeared to be a good kid, and I still had half a brain.

Their neighborhood was on the fringe of gangland. I'd hoped the boy wasn't involved. He visited a friend shortly after I arrived. Since he left, they sparked one up and we laughed away, making fun of the professors at SAC and anything humorous. Everything seemed cool; however, I was paranoid in that hood. It wasn't Cibolo Trail, nor the reservation.

I heard several gunshots from an automatic weapon. Then the rounds sounded closer. They were followed by dueling sirens. To

them it was another day, they said as much. My thoughts drifted to the boy down the street. I decided to go. I wanted to see my three-year-old son, safely at home.

A few days passed before I saw Yvette's nephew at the Diamond Shamrock (now a Valero store). Valero Energy is headquartered in San Antonio. Anyway, he smiled and joked as we talked about Spurs basketball, sharing our love for the game.

The last thing I mentioned, "Take care of yourself."

"Thanks. I'll see you, sir."

Good kid. Polite.

The following week I ran into Yvette at Little Red Barn, a popular San Antonio steakhouse. She didn't seem right and obviously disengaged as I waved from across the room. I finished chewing my T-bone and strutted over.

"What's up Yvette?"

Dead silence.

"The boy is dead."

I leaned in. "Oh no, how did it happen?"

"They got to him on a gang initiation run."

I conveyed my sorrow. I'll never forget her response. She looked at me stone cold, then said, "That's life man."

Those were the last words I heard her say. I contemplated his death and her response for some time. I had just met the boy. Wished I could have prevented the tragedy, yet I was living my own world of denial. I knew about the danger of gangs in San Antonio, but I didn't think he was in impending danger. His life had been snuffed out by a senseless act. The gang element is one of the saddest things I know. I didn't have to deal with that growing up. For some, it's all they've ever known. Those lessons and others I gleaned from the streets taught me more about abnormal behavior than Psychology 101 ever had.

On to a new college. I enrolled at Southwest Texas State in San Marcos, Texas (now Texas State University). Our ex-president, LBJ, attended the institution on a hill, which was good enough information. I signed up for their MIS program and took Finance, Economics, and a computer programming course. My final class at SWTS, Introduction to Management. It was administered by a software engineer with IBM. His life exemplified success in my mind. A high-profile job, happy family, spacious home, and a

slice of American pride.

I grew weary of the daily commute. Randolph AFB hosted degree programs for several universities. Texas Lutheran's, Computer Systems Management appealed to my sensibilities. Come spring I transferred my hours for the long haul, spreading the course load over three evenings and a Saturday afternoon. My classes would be closer to home.

Computer programming can be an intimidating occupation. I knew it would be a challenge, attending college and supporting a family. I worked hard to apply my new skills. Programming boomed and was in high demand across the US. I wanted to capitalize and make a name for me. The dream of owning our first home enticed me as well. That was a time to have taken stock in all we had. Blessed, my pride wanted more. Much more.

My first manager, Terry, rose from the ranks of computer operations too. He was patient and understanding of my early programs. I made some novice design mistakes. Through programming classes and sheer coding repetition, I became more proficient at the craft. Then I was promoted to analyst programmer with more responsibility. Six months later, they promoted me to a mid-level analyst.

In less than another year, I was promoted to a senior analyst position and selected to lead our team. I recall that time when I scanned the San Antonio Riverwalk from my Dwyer Street corner office. My self-worth had expanded. Our application team was responsible for the county's Ad Valorem Tax System. We designed, wrote, and maintained programs for personal and commercial property taxes with a half-million accounts in the database. It was a consuming and stressful job. Account values worth hundreds of millions needed to balance under my watch. The algorithms in our programs were complex.

I authored accounting, billing, and receiving programs. Each accounting period required a reconciliation with the tax office. One year we were out of balance, so I wondered if we had bugs in our suite of programs. After many late nights, it was determined our team was not at fault. The discrepancies were elsewhere. Someone had been shaving minute interest percentages from thousands of accounts, a sly attempt to cash in undiscovered. The culprit was discovered and subsequently relieved. The situation taught me an important business lesson. Rapaciousness (GREED) will find you out.

In 1987, I gained an opportunity to change my career path to systems programming. Systems employ the most technical people in IT. They install, test, implement, maintain, and upgrade the system software and hardware. They support the domain's infrastructure: operating systems, subsystems, and application programs, programmers, and analysts. In other words, the buck stops with the systems staff. We had to be well versed in all platforms (Mainframe, UNIX, and all other servers).

After a year in systems, they promoted me to a senior programming position. I'd made it to the top of the technical tier with a lot of responsibility. I was solely responsible for the county network and its WAN connections to counties, cities, and state agencies. I also maintained our network software and hardware, mainly the IBM mainframe products.

My career change was facilitated by our Systems Manager, Carlos. We first worked together while he was DBA. I was a rookie programmer while he mentored my development in applications. Most people didn't get along with Carlos because he was culturally different, very bright, and extremely confident. I find it strange, how his type threatens some with degrees of distrust. I saw him as one to learn from. He was a fabulous teacher.

Carlos was fashioned by business practices in Mexico City, so his methods seemed unfamiliar. He would make you aware of mistakes, often abruptly. Not in a degrading manner, but objectively and stern. He was known to correct on the spot, which discouraged some on staff. If you wanted to improve, he'd spend the time to train. He was always willing to stay late for learning sessions. I was amazed at his drive.

We became friends and socialized away from the office at times. His wife was creative and charming. I loved her piano playing. Their small son learned to play piano at an early age. I owe much of my confidence and ability to work under pressure to Carlos.

I'm including a shout out: Rex, Ron M, Vera, Monte, Carol, Cindy, Holly, Rosi, Jeanette, Desi, Pat, Nora, Lina, Kathy, Dominic, Robert, Curtis, Alex, Becky, Paul, Darryl, Dan, Mark O, Dicky, Link, Victor, and Gary. I won't forget those early days of my career. And the rest of my colleagues at BCIS, who aren't listed.

IT is a demanding field. You can go as far as your technical

ability dictates if you can handle the inherent rigors and demands. There's not a more lucrative career with an undergraduate degree and a few years of experience under your belt. Stress comes with a cost, though. In my case, it was easy to rely on the dependable crutches of alcohol, drugs, and tobacco. I didn't drink in excess then. I did, however, smoke a little weed to escape. Excuses are easy outs. Loser logic.

It's essential to maintain technical skills through the years of rapid change in IT, which is typically accomplished by vendor training around the country. In the 80s, most techies attended Amdahl, Comdisco, or IBM schools. Some were fundamentals or methodology refreshers. Others consisted of formal and advanced training in operating systems, networks, security products, or centric applications. Training courses are now geared toward specific certifications, such as Microsoft or Cisco.

My first remote systems training course was north of Chicago in Rosemont, IL. I attended a network fundamentals class. I'll refer to our instructor as Jane. She was well versed in the subject material. Her presentation skills were excellent. I would have called her a consummate professional. That is, in the classroom. Her other skills were less tangible...so to speak.

Jane rated a conference suite at the Westin O'Hare. Our rooms were comfortable, but hers was penthouse spacious. She invited all the students for an after-hours social. "You can enjoy hors d'oeuvres and drinks at the company's expense," Jane said.

Well alright, we thought. Many from the class attended, ten guys and several gals. We loosened up with a few drinks from long days of instruction. Room service sent up some munchies. That night was such an idiosyncratic event, I vowed to tell it one day. Someone should have warned us, attend at your own risk.

The drink conversation shifted, centering on exercising. Aerobics. To be more specific, our instructor was an avid gymnast. Jane talked about her performances with a whole lot of confidence. Her feats sounded spectacular. She honed on a couple of skeptics. They were classmates from San Francisco and New York. They bantered back and forth, concerning the likelihood of the instructor's prowess. She became frustrated and offered them evidence.

Jane jumped onto the conference table. We were about to witness a hoax, I reasoned. Several classmates snickered and whispered among themselves. Others laughed out loud. Nevertheless, we

backed our chairs away and removed clutter from the table. Jane was clad in a yellow sundress, looking mighty determined. She hiked up the excess material and performed several walkovers, smack down the center of the table.

Several guys hooted and whistled.
One shouted, "So what."
Jane looked perturbed.
The rest of us, "Ah's...oohs and aaahs."

Jane followed with successive back handsprings. More sounds and kudos. There was not a bashful bone in her well-toned body. One of the female students bolted. Jane dismounted with a back flip to a perfect landing. Two males stopped in their tracks.

This was one strange encounter, but I'm not recording the entire night's escapades. A bit too lewd, in keeping with my story's guidelines. Jane's dress was restricting her, so she excused herself to the bedroom.

In a matter of minutes, Jane returned in a one-piece navy swimsuit. I thought she had donned tights, mounting the conference table in balance beam fashion. We witnessed flawless routines: flips, back flips, handstands, and hand-walking. All were performed on the conference table or just alongside. She was one daring individual and with zero modesty. These activities went on for some time. The previous doubters sat in silence. Many needed their drinks freshened.

Then Jane wanted to know if we cared to go for a swim. The hotel was equipped with an indoor pool. It had piqued my interest when scanning the guestroom guide, so I wanted to explore it by week's end. A nice dip would divert my attention. We left to go change. When I arrived at pool level, San Fran and NY were already immersed. The two remaining female students, and five or six other guys showed up for a dip. The pool closed at eleven p.m. It was five until.

"We're cool, no problem," Jane said.
Others were unsure. "Maybe we should go."

Jane enacted a string of uninhibited maneuvers from the side of the pool. We were glad to be at safer distances. One dude applauded boisterously. "Are you for real?" a guy from Indiana shouted.

Jane was real, alright. More evidence, a gainer from the side of

the pool, a perfect 10. "Oohs...aahs."

Around twenty after eleven, a hotel employee entered the pool area. "Do you know what time it is?" There was a big clock and sign on the wall.

"Who cares?" San Fran spouted. He received a well-deserved stare. Jane held a brief conversation with the hotel employee. She could persuade the staunchest of libidos. The man looked heated, Jane or not. We towed off, ready to escape repercussions. Jane tilted her head, shaking the water loose. She winked defiantly, then directed the gang upstairs.

What a night. San Fran developed a crush on Jane through the extent of carousing. He was twenty-one, she was thirty-something. Jane showed photos of her truck-driving boyfriend. He looked like a man to be reckoned with. Enough was enough, I headed to my suite.

The next day, I heard sordid innuendos. We had a half-day of class prior to our afternoon flights. Most of us were tired, and the late nights had hung us over. Not Jane, she was ever the professional. If she had a thing for San Fran it didn't repress a morning scolding.

"Don't nod off in my class again San Fran," picking up her stack of papers, "or I'll tear up your certificate right now."

I had never experienced a training course like that one. It still seems unreal. On the way to O'Hare Airport, aboard the shuttle bus, San Fran whined to NY. "I'm in love."

I'm thinking, oh my.

NY looked at me, "I'll talk to him."

"Good."

NY attempted to explain the situation to San Fran.

"Don't you realize, Jane does that fairly often?"

San Fran sighed, "I don't care man; I love her."

What a trip.

I found a niche back at work, broadening my skills. It's important to communicate to those, not computer savvy. A person with good soft skills can be taught adequate technical skills, but the reverse is rare. The better your skills, the more responsibility. You may be rewarded with the diversity to lead projects. I welcomed a challenge and looked forward to the personal interaction with other groups and individuals.

Super busy, I tried to be a good husband and father. My remaining classes at TLU were difficult. I made the mistake of delaying the hardest hours until last. Calculus and Assembly Programming were my most difficult subjects. I was certainly no math whiz, by any stretch. Calculus is a combination of three disciplines: Algebra, Analytic Geometry, and Trigonometry. I felt intimidated but was determined. On the first day of Calculus, the professor asked, "Who hasn't taken Trigonometry, raise your hand?" Only three hands went up, one was mine. I debated my shortcomings while Professor Musgrave continued the introduction. "For those who raised your hand, see me after class." The other two bounced.

As Calculus ended, with an explanation of Limits, I went up to plead my case. The concept of Limits was tough enough to decipher. Man! Nonetheless, I had already waited for six months for the course to be offered for evening students, and I needed Calculus and Assembly to graduate. I wanted that sheepskin and I could not be deterred. So, I talked the professor into letting me stay on. "Please, sir."

"You can't eke it out with a 'D' average. You need a 'C' average to transfer," the prof emphatically stated.

Talk about pressure. It was on. Somehow, I made it. It wasn't easy. Calculus humbled me sufficiently. Did I use the word humbled?

Assembly Programming was another tough test. It's basically machine language, what the CPU understands. The central processing unit is the brains of the computer. Assembly language represents an understanding for detailed instructions, not strictly symbolic substitutions. Byte and bit-level stuff. Know you're on the edge of your seat. Ha!

I needed a mid-range 'B' on the final to obtain enough credit for the course. Once again, I found a way to plow through. Thanks for mentoring me, Marvin. Thanks for your patience professor, Dr. Sieben. I learned more regarding sacrifice and humility. My pride was restored, in December of 1988, when I shifted my tassel at TLU commencement.

Nancy looked for a new teaching job. Things fell into place, piece by piece. We mortgaged our first home. We had looked at used ones, but our hearts were set on a new two-story. The housing market was fair for a cost-effective build. Nancy took a

job with Spring Meadows Elementary, so we'd focused our search on a nearby development. The subdivision's association maintained a pool and clubhouse, perfect for our upwardly mobile family. We wanted our piece of the ever-shrinking pie.

The building process excited us. Our house, a charcoal two-story. We were glad to be moving up with the Joneses. It was located atop the hill on a sizeable corner lot. The driveway was positioned for a decent basketball court. The kids were perfect ages. I still liked the game but had no idea our place would become a magnet for the neighborhood youth. A game was regularly in progress after work. I often played with the gang, feeling capable again. I hoped to make up for lost time with the kids and to give Nancy some needed downtime.

Life was good, and we were happy. I loved my family. We remained active in our church. Our quartet practiced and performed often. Debbie W. played the piano graciously for us. I never grow tired of music and its relaxing effect on my soul. I needed lots of distractions from stress then.

I also felt guilty, not spending enough time with my family. Such an important period, I should have been very aware. I was selfish in many ways and sometimes grew angry when Nancy reasoned with me. I let unrest and pride win at crucial times in our marriage. Two gifts you can offer are time and patience.

I assumed my faith was strong enough to battle any storm. In Franklin Graham's book, *"Rebel with a Cause,"* he quotes his friend Bob Pierce from Samaritan's Purse: *"You don't exercise faith until you have promised more than it's possible to give."* From many years in church, I didn't know what that meant. I had hoped to gain a better clue someday.

All seemed well, we were solid members of the community. Yet there was something missing. We all experience it, whether admittedly or not. Busy with life, careers, and other things. You'd think that's enough. Well, we weren't designed for ordinary lives. I hadn't put the Lord or my family first, nor had I understood the application of God's will for my life.

It is my belief, one of the most important books written in this century was *"The Purpose Driven Life"* by Rick Warren. I've read it and still use it as a devotional. Its message can't be stressed enough. The words make perfect sense. We were created for a purpose greater than ourselves.

Why had I fled from the truth? I was into ME. Continually struggling and lacking understanding in the wisdom of, *"It's not about you."*

"The truth transforms us," Warren says. *"Spiritual growth is the process of replacing lies with truth."* He goes on. *"God has a purpose behind every problem."* And lastly, Warren says, *"He uses circumstances to develop our character."*

My self-involved ways caused all sorts of conflict. A perpetual self-medicating routine fueled my pride. I can trace many vain issues to smugness and to drug & alcohol abuse. In hindsight, I was also insecure and depressed. I didn't know what being a child of God meant; I was too busy with Steve.

Chapter 5 Love, Romance, Her

God is love. He created the love we all desire. We owe our first love to him from humble and thankful hearts. Love and wisdom are precious and limitless gifts.

"Love is patient...it is not proud."

The unconditional and selfless love of God, agape, solidifies our faith and hope in an eternal being. Loving God enables us to love others genuinely. Sacrificially. John 15:13 (NIV): *"Greater love has no one than this that he lay down his life for his friends."* Fulfilling one's mission is better accomplished through love and devotion.

Love is far, far better than any drug. Love is more exhilarating than sports or adrenaline rushes. Love is thrilling beyond worldly endeavors, regardless of magnitude. Love with the one intended is simply spectacular. It is too marvelous for an

explanation, unspeakable favor. To love and be loved is to see and understand with the eyes of the heart. You'll know if you've been blessed this way. Love wants to give more than it wants to take.

Throughout this story, my use of the adjective marvelous pertains to love. One of the best definitions for marvelous is *causes wonder*. I've spent a considerable time, wondering. No one knows what is in another's heart, but destined love is providentially perfect.

I've always wanted to write about this stuff, not the *Her* section. I might feel differently than some, weighing love's significance in the balance of life. Perhaps I'm willing to discuss it more than many males. A chauvinist lacks delicacy in these matters, to understand women better. To love them in ways they fully expect. Completely.

I'll admit it, most of my years were focused on outward beauty. A lady's inner beauty is vital, so we probably need to highlight the importance of character in retrospect. It can't be just the look; I certainly appreciate attractiveness. What about charm?

Charisma. I can't think of a better description for an appealing female, according to Wikipedia: *"the term charisma has two senses: 1) compelling attractiveness or charm that can inspire devotion to others. 2) Divinely conferred power or talent. The English term charisma is from the Greek kharisma, which means "favor freely given" or "gift of grace," blessed."* I love the word **GRACE**.

Deb and I sometimes eat at a place called Sisters. It's okay, laugh, but they have some of the best salads and sandwiches in town. And she is my sister. They cater to a Princeton lunch crowd on the dainty side. Sister's clientele reminds how we're surpassed in obvious ways. The males I see in there haven't altered the stereotype, having seemed predictable. Through my observations, guys could surely listen more effectively. We should certainly appear more interested than to fiddle with potato chip scraps and pickle spear remains.

Women today can do nearly everything. It seems their dependence on us grows less and less. I have wondered, was it because I had grown up with four sisters, having groomed an inside perspective? At times, I grow weary of talking sports and such ad nauseam. Too much macho stuff may be a sign of insecurity. I am secure in my masculinity, so it doesn't matter if you chuckle

or loathe what I have suggested.

The women in my life are such positives. I admire them very much. I don't deserve all they mean to me. Somewhere along the line those influences escaped me for a time. Not that women can't be mean, crude, and vindictive. I've known women to act on revenge in very inventive ways, rarely seen in men. I'll attempt to suppress stories, concerning a woman's scorn. No use adding fuel to the proverbial fire.

Do women love differently than men? I'm not convinced they do in all instances. Why would God intend romantic love, Eros, to be experienced differently? I just don't think he would in entirety. But what do I know? Are opposite sexes so dissimilar, from different planets? Not hardly. Just saying. What do you think, brotherly loved (Philos) pals?

Ever since the second grade, at Mercer Elementary, I was attracted to girls. Ginny was so cute, an adorable child. She wore a blue dress and a white cardigan. I watched her skip down the school's sidewalk at recess. One of the lines must have snagged her toe. Oops. Ginny went tumbling, scraping her knee unmercifully. Kindly, I laughed to a point of bending over. She went back to school sobbing. How quickly I learned to apologize. Is it just me or do you know if females have forgiven you?

In a latter year of elementary school, I discovered a sweet lanky friend. I posted her name on my three-ring binder. It read, "Steve + Debbie, 4-ever." She was taller than me and pretty to boot. Well, forever lasted two solid months. Never got use to looking up at her. In the market for a pristine notebook, I found one in the basement.

Then I met Cindy, a cute strawberry blonde and much shorter in stature. At times, I prefer certain extremes. She had a dimple that flashed me senselessly. It was enough to possess my heart through the sixth grade. I saw her at Mercer Mall in West Virginia (2013). Funny how old friends see each other and clam up. I felt the blood rush to my face for a moment. Then I remembered a more innocent time. Way, way more.

Ah. The innocence of grade school became the game playing at junior high. When did junior high become a middle school? I must have missed that transition. The school on Straley Avenue wasn't far from our house. The only middle school in town, so we mingled with less familiar graduates from Thorn and Knob Elementary. There were more girls to choose from. Adolescence,

puberty, and zits. Those were the days. Not. Girls were somewhere on the radar in 1969. Dating consisted of seeing movies or going to house parties. And at times, showing off for a female's attention at church.

In the eighth grade, I developed a huge crush on my Spanish teacher, Mrs. C. She may have been of a Latina persuasion. I considered her perfect; I stared at her for hours that year. She caused me to continue an admiration for ladies of her supposed descent. It wasn't just her looks; she had a way. When Mrs. C. spoke Spanish, I barely maintained. When she asked, "Que pasa, Esteban?" (What's happening, Steve).

I folded saying, "Nada." (Nothing). I didn't know how to tell her what I really thought. "Senora C. es muy bonita" (Mrs. C. is very beautiful). She inspired me to learn the language. I'd taken the course as a requirement and cared little about Spanish prior. I finally snapped to the reality of our age differences. Her husband came to school one day. Mr. C. was well over six feet and built sturdy. It made me glad to see she had plenty of protection. Que las tima (What a pity).

I became more interested in girls at church. Many were older, so I focused on my age group. I was spending so much time there, why not? I'd marry Becky one day, I figured. I didn't know much about love. Ours extended beyond the puppy variety. All data I had collected needed to be refreshed. New feelings dictated a strangeness within. She was my first serious kiss. So fantastic. I just knew our destiny was sealed. I was entranced by Becky. Although, I primarily viewed her profile. She appeared angelic in the pew next to me. Particularly when she wore a mohair sweater, I went gaga over. She acted all grown up, which charmed me instantly. A look slightly upward gave her a royal countenance. When she passed me a note, during a sermon, I crumbled to pieces. The meticulously folded paper read: "Love, Rebecca." Her dad gave me stern looks. Leo was a kind man, but he appeared stoic at times. I'm sure he was looking out for his little girl. We eventually broke up, there became another for her.

Felt I should involve myself with Christian girls. It seemed appropriate. There is scripture: "*Do not be yoked together with unbelievers.*" I recalled some passages over others. Courted the preacher's daughter some. We even hooked up later in high school. Cheryl inviting me to a prom. I was a lowly junior, requiring a senior invite. I liked her, but our chemistry became soluble over something consequential. Besides, a new babe

grabbed my attention at school. I knew Cheryl would be off to Concord College anyway. My developing ego wasn't ready to compete with those preppies in Athens, WV from all over.

A big-time romance was forthcoming at Princeton High. I'd be sure to fall in love, such as lovers do. I was certain of it. The intimidation factor increased, gazing at the senior girls in awe. I hadn't seen most of them since the seventh grade. They looked a lot different. The footprint and width of the hallways weren't the only things that had changed. My oh my.

High school subjects were surely more difficult, so I started out studious. Once the hormones increased, I wasn't so erudite. So many precious beauties to behold. From an early age, I was attracted to blondes. The media helped with their subliminal messages. Are blondes truly more fun? Our school had lots of light-haired wonders and plenty of winsome brunettes. If they wore bluish or dark brown eyes, "fuggheadaboutit!" A dimple or two put me over the edge. Dimples are so underrated, and when they're accompanied by glorious smiles...mercy.

The day I saw Karen, Cupid aptly poised himself above the halls of PHS. He had sighted me with a quiver of heart-shaped arrowheads. The only problem was her boyfriend. I went out of my way to stand by, hoping she'd break up, harmoniously, of course. It happened before our senior year. All the sudden, I was giddy and anxious as heck. I had gotten over some of that through the classes we attended together, breaking the ice with friendly humor. I became more hopeful. Karen was inclined to laugh at my ridiculous nonsense.

I eventually steadied myself enough to ask her out, and God had smiled down. Dad traded his second car for a Gran Torino Sport with a 400-V8 (Ford 351 block). It was black with a hood scoop and a white vinyl top. It had larger than standard, raised-white-letter, General tires. Can you hear Tim (the tool man) Taylor grunting, "Arh-arh?" Dad's work car was a station wagon. The Torino became mine to drive most of the time. An opportunity to impress skyrocketed me. That car did wonders for my ego, it made me feel invincible.

In retrospect, ours was a love with hormones mixed in. Karen was voted Best Looking, a real blonde stunner. I wanted to know her on the deepest of levels. I knew it was cooler, playing hard to get, but I'm not very good at pretending. My heart had been taken. I was simply in love. Karen allowed glimpses into her true nature and I felt fortunate to share her spirit. She was no

pushover, no sir, strong-willed and independent. A trait I would be attracted to down the road. She was mine and I was on top of the world.

All teens struggle with insecurities. For some reason, I didn't think I was good enough. Karen was gorgeous and popular. Feelings of inferiority often plagued me. Never knew exactly why, yet it affected me. Complete satisfaction was trumped by internal junk. Why couldn't I celebrate us fully? It puzzled me, but otherwise, she did wonders for my esteem.

My unsettled way yearned for lasting peace. Something felt missing. It was easy resorting to alcohol, weed, and tobacco. Still I sensed a void and being a Christian, it was ironic in a hypocritical sense. A semi-clandestine lifestyle compounded my struggle. The chameleon tendency interfered with what I thought was surely fate. I soon dodged college and a commitment in West Virginia to enter the Air Force in 1975, putting romance on hold.

I experienced some "love" interests through the early military years, but most had drugs and alcohol in common. A challenging time for romance with low expectations for meaningfulness. I grew tired of a wildlife and wondered, would I ever meet someone and break out of a crazy cycle? The partying escalated when I moved off base with three lost boys. Thus, my love chances diminished from that vortex of empty. I've detailed that part of my life in other chapters, caught up in the 70s, heading nowhere fast.

In 1976, I met a sizzling blonde at Randolph Air Force Base. Voluptuous described Kay, but she acted timid. Almost embarrassed. As I got to know her, she evolved into a fireball. Her hair was long, yet I rarely saw it flowing. In the Air Force, regulations caused her to wear it up on duty. I'm sometimes between, regarding hair up and hair down. Suppose it depends on the woman. Yes, I'm certain it does. Some women neglect to show their lovely faces, necks, and ears.

Kay's smallness reminded me of Lisa from basic training. The squadron scheduled mixers by the flight line, normally held in large hangers. I searched all around for her one evening. Over by the refreshments, I saw an impressive lady during some fellas. Closer, I was pleasantly surprised. Kay looked totally different. Her hair was down and very long. She wore Wranglers and boots, making her two inches taller. It took a while to become acclimated. Then wow.

Kay wasn't strong-willed or outgoing, in contrast to what I find interesting. She was fidgety. We got along because we were in ways similar, a match made in Texas. My nature has been characterized as somewhat restless; I wouldn't say fidgety. Nevertheless, we were a good fit and I was able to relax away from the office. I welcomed the notion of peace, but something about her was peculiar.

It had been over a year since my breakup with Karen. The time seemed right again. Kay became a welcome distraction from the constant partying and my second guessing. Having decided she was the answer to my hole inside, we started seeing each other more. I got a funny sense when she wouldn't see me on weekends. My usual time was spent at concerts or hanging at the lake, so it wasn't a big deal until things got chummier. The weekend anomaly made me leery of her surreptitious way.

Time passed as it often does without purpose, fecklessly. Without prelude or fanfare, I met that certain someone. The end of Kay became an instant reality. While explaining who I'd met, Kay dropped a bomb. She revengefully said, "Well...! I'm married, but we are separated."

Whoa now, I was speechless. She said her husband was in the sports industry and came home during the off-season. Had she meant they were "separated," during the season? I never found out, oddly so.

Around that time, I took a respite from Canyon Lake and the reservation. The partying continued more discretely at my latest apartment on Aviation Blvd. Out of the blue, the Army Corp of Engineers purchased our apartment's land. Rick H. and I were paid a handsome check, enabling us to upgrade our residence to Universal City at the brand-new Kitty-Hawk Apartments (renamed Inverness Apartments and then Sable Ridge Apartments). It signaled a fresh start. We had grown tired of the endless craze, constant noise, and every night chaos. Might this be the time to chill, I considered?

Not long after we had situated, I met someone astonishing, her name was Nancy. The one. You are familiar with this from a prior chapter. A van of friends went to Wurstfest in New Braunfels, a celebration of Germany's Oktoberfest. My friends brought along one recognizable. I'd bumped into Nancy at a swim party, and again at my apartment on Aviation Blvd. This occasion changed our lives. Besides sausage and Oompah music, Wurstfest had a

long tradition of kissing. Its patrons adorned "*Kiss Me*" buttons. They came in varieties: "*Kiss Me I'm American, Kiss Me I'm Lovely, and Kiss Me I'm Breathing.*" You get the picture. Nancy had one, "*Kiss Me I'm Swedish.*" I became an instant admirer of Scandinavia.

No one made me feel that way. Love had stricken deeply, and all together new. You know when it zaps amorously. Nothing could keep us apart. It was pretty much a done deal. We spent every available moment together. I didn't relish her need to return home. I was primed for true love and didn't want to be separated. Never had I experienced a stronger wanting. I knew we were bound for the chapel, so we were never far from each other for the next quarter of a century.

I should mention a jealous period. It goes with being taken for some. My blue-green eyes turned greener. Those were the 70s and love was all around. I didn't appreciate ones who had carried on extended conversations with Nancy. I remember that overpowering sense, the ooky way it felt. Anxious, fuming. Nancy didn't appreciate my jealousy, not one bit. "If this doesn't stop, we won't have a chance," she said. She was beautiful and personable and attracted easily. In time my bouts with jealousy abated. It mattered little after our betrothal. We only had eyes for each other. Love conquered my narrow affliction.

In less than a year, we were saying "I do's" in 1978. Other women were no longer relevant. I was hitched and happy. The luckiest man alive, how it was supposed to be, and madly in love. The first few months of marriage were not without difficulties. We had cat fights, but we knew how to make up, which included the R-rated stuff. I never envisioned us separated, ever.

After a few months into marriage, Nancy began to feel ill in the morning. Our family would increase by one. I'd always heard how women glowed. She had a radiant aura that made her more desirable. We were closer than ever, and I was glad she was with child. I was looking forward to fatherhood. In her last trimester, Nancy was sensitive concerning her appearance. I acknowledged her beauty continually.

Seriously, I pondered parentage and quit partying to be the best man possible. Our first, a healthy blonde boy. Thrilled with Jay's arrival, there's no way to describe those feelings. We would have two more wonderful children by the summer of 1983, detailed in an earlier chapter. Five years went by in a

whirlwind. I loved my family. We had shaky times but stayed committed to our lives. Yes, those years were trying, yet I would not exchange them for anything. Our love had grown to an extent, we completed the other's thoughts and sentences. The intuitive kind of love, which couples dream of. Nancy and I talked about growing old together.

Times of struggle in a growing family may not be fond memories for some. Those times were the happiest of my life. God blessed us richly. I was content for a change. So, I can't explain what happened to my thinking going forward. I still don't have all the answers. There are no perfect marriages; I'd venture to say, a far cry from reality. Having learned that helped me to understand. The rest is difficult to ascertain. I've known a few, finding greener pastures. For the large part, however, the opposite is true. If you've known love and lost it, you'll be haunted for a considerable time.

Years later. On an ordinary day, I waited by the elevator at our office on Dwyer Street. My attention was diverted. A woman chatted with a co-worker of mine. I hadn't noticed her before. She was exotic looking and wore a distinctive perfume. The elevator arrived before introductions were complete. The co-worker and I got off. As I turned in a welcoming nod, the elevator closed on her courageous smile. A new day began.

I had forgotten that encounter until running into my co-worker the next day. During our conversation, the woman in the elevator came up. Her.

"Guess what?"

"Huh?"

"She asked about you."

It stroked my ego somewhat. She said, "I told Her you were happily married, with three kids, and to forget about you."

Flattered I chuckled, agreeing with the assessment. Then I brushed off the inquiry, resuming another busy day. A few days later, I ran into Her again. She was alone at the elevator and we carried on small talk. She was striking and emitted a different look. Provoking, yet oddly perplexing. I didn't turn to look when the elevator closed, but I had sensed a gaze. She continued to invade my thoughts forward, inextricably. I attempted to ignore Her in common workplaces, and I was unsuccessful at avoidance. We would bump into each other throughout the county complex. Our jobs brought us into

proximity whether I liked it or not. I realized this could be trouble. But I wasn't afraid.

I'm not proud to say, I've been flirtatious in the past. I saw it as harmless for much of my life. I learned the hard way. It is one of the most dangerous games of all. Watch out! Her had a way, without words. I'm not talking enchantment, primarily. It was more a teasing fashion, and difficult to explain. It was as though she had relayed, "I know you're interested, but you're not in my league. Even so, would you have what it takes?"

That type of transference is somewhat scary. Vainglorious enough to fall, lurking was insidious pride. For several days, we hadn't conversed much. Mere hellos were exchanged. In great wisdom, I had come up with a superlative notion. I'd extend an invitation to lunch, explaining my marriage. To convey simple friendship. Her responded in a demure manner, thanking me gratuitously. She explained of a recent breakup with a boyfriend. I hadn't considered the rebound effect.

I had no idea what was in store. For days, premeditation ensued. Then something happened, which neither of us planned or had control over. An office move was in the works, bringing us together. Several county departments relocated. From Dwyer to a new building on West Nueva. My boss had arranged for refreshments as part of the post-move celebration. He invited other offices in the building.

Information Systems occupied certain floors. My office was located by the data center on the first floor. No continuous elevator rides. Yet my duties had me reporting to management and application analysts above. My co-worker friend strolled into the celebration with Her. She wore a white cotton blouse, tied in a knot above her navel with jeans tailored fit. Her hair was long, dark, and faintly streaked in auburn. The perfume she wore was different. Her daytime fragrance, Bob Mackie, was the unmistakable scent from the elevator. Her other fragrance was lighter, Chanel's Coco. I'd never registered it before, the way it mixed on Her.

I tried to keep my senses. The harder I tried, the worst it got. The trap was set, and I was the meat. Dead meat. I silently repeated; I can handle this. It won't get out of control. As it turned out my boss had a thing for my co-worker friend. They paired up and disappeared. I didn't know what to do. I felt nervous, but under control. Or so, I had thought. "Would you care for a drink at the Cadillac Bar?" I asked.

"Why yes," she said.

Then I swiftly replied, "I'll meet you there." I mumbled in the car, "What was I thinking, like a drink would settle things down." Duh.

After several margaritas, I sank. As she spoke, I plotted a way to get out of the evening unscathed. I went on to discuss work and family to dissuade further allure. She was visibly hurting from a breakup or up for an Academy Award. Mercy. Feeling sorry for Her, I suggested seeing her home. I walked her to the door, saying goodbye. While leaving she called to me.

"It's for you." She held out her hand.

"Me?" I think it had been under her blouse.

She handed me a cotton ball sprayed with Coco. Something was awry. It sure was safer in the confines of the office.

During the week, I knew when Her had been on our floor, in an elevator ahead. The scent of Mackie engulfs and lingers. That fragrance continued to haunt me, whiffing it for years. It's a subtle reminder when it drifts about today. It had gotten to the point, I considered complete avoidance. Her knew it, but I think she calculated I'd give in. Let's just say it went on too long. I became beguiled and continually possessed, zombie-like. I'm not sure how to express it. It was as though, she had me under a spell. I didn't know how to escape.

On a strange and pivotal night, I planned to end it. She uncannily sensed those things. Determined, enough was enough. The front door was ajar. Inside her condo, a candle lit the way. I noticed indiscriminate rose petals, then a trail of them. The sound of a piano led me directly to Her. In the music room, she played softly. Looking defiant, she wore a teddy.

On a table next to Her were expensive gifts. "Those are for you," she nodded.

"Me?" Uh-oh.

"Yes darling."

My birthday approached. None of this was right. I sort of snapped, stepping back. I wandered in the hallway. How could I end it? I hadn't a clue. I reentered the room, "I can't accept those gifts."

She grew hostile. I'd never seen Her incensed. So, I turned and left for the evening. A dark cloud formed over the relationship. It's difficult to think and reason in the throes of an affair. Similar situations are warnings. It just isn't right. The blatant immorality should end a relationship outside of marriage. If you are a Christian, then why?

I was no bastion of the faith. It was my fault, no one else's. The best advice is to run the other way when tempted in the slightest. I can't explain that inappropriate time. I was human, and we live in a fallen world. I gave in irrationally. Time passed before learning the consequences. Hurt lasts a lifetime, I tell you earnestly.

Wasn't sure then, but I'm certain now, your wife can tell when something isn't right. It is said: "The wife is the last to know." I'm not buying that. Denial yes, not knowing, doubtful. Women have a sense. It's built into their DNA. Apart from the strange phone calls, unexplained time away, and mood swings. No-no. Put yourself in the other's place. Be reasonable, not selfishly insane and completely idiotic.

It had certainly gone too far. I needed to handle the situation carefully, concerned it might become public. From that time on our family was never the same. Please don't cause this to happen in your family. Please!

On a warm Christmas morning, it came to a head. Her forced the issue. I was ready to get it in the open, basically admitting the obvious. I had let another woman into our life, and she was standing on the other side of the door. I went out to say, "I just confessed to everything."

Blank stares accompanied mutual silence. I shut the door in total shame. Of all days, she'd pushed the envelope on Christmas. Such grave circumstances, the days that followed were the most challenging of our lives. I had much to explain and be sorry for. Nancy and I spent months talking, hashing, and rehashing. We discussed our lives and pessimistic futures, all mixed up and emotionally spent.

The situation exasperated me. I even doubted my true feelings. Having ventured, I attempted to justify things. So, I thought...I must care deeply for this woman, acting seriously involved and risking so much. She spoke of love more than anyone I had ever met. We were insanely enamored. I've nearly forgotten

how it felt to be aboard an out of control roller coaster. I likely push it far from consciousness these days. The difficulty with fantasy and skewed thinking, when it deceives it's too late. To imagine a utopian relationship through starry-eyed minds can fool hearts into believing it's possible. It had with Her.

Thoroughly confused, I loved my wife. Even if it wasn't crystal clear. Nancy said I was crazy, among other things. She said it was impossible to comprehend what I'd been saying. I tried to imagine what she was going through. I attempted to soften things between us, the heartache. We eventually passed out from despair and exhaustion. Nancy wasn't doing well; I could do little to console her.

Time passed ever so slowly. It was a difficult time, handling the torment of guilt. Each day was another nightmare. The looks in my kid's eyes tore me to pieces. One's kids can sense when things aren't right. Don't fool yourself, thinking they do not. They may become permanently scarred by a parent's stupidity.

My work suffered, adding more stress. A longtime boss called me into his office, another vital mentor. He'd empowered me to attain my level through his position. That moment was uncomfortable. The respect I had for him was tremendous. "Robinson," he said. "If you mingle with Her again, you can turn in your access badge and get out of here." Then he added, "You will be terminated, so consider this your last warning." That was it. I knew he was serious with reference to my last name. He had previously called me lad or son.

Disturbing, how it seems like a few years ago. Some memories lie etched in our minds while others are better off forgotten. That was never truer. My stomach felt ulcerated, a gut-wrenching state. I drank more during that period and smoked a joint to escape occasionally, which intensifies suffering. Weed inherently does that whether you like it or not.

I tried to stay focused but didn't know how to proceed. I attempted to forget, lessening the pain. Guilt and regret would not subside. I didn't know where to turn and felt completely lost. Time moved on, yet our marriage had been badly splintered. There were times when we'd gotten closer through soul searching and mutual dependence, but our future did not look promising. It's not something you brush off and quickly dismiss.

Fed up, she readied to move on. She had received a job offer,

making a move westward. "You have a few months to make up your mind," she said. Honestly, I couldn't blame her. I was responsible for so much that went on. At first, I was relieved. Maybe my marriage could be saved, suddenly there was hope. At the same time, I felt pressure to decide, still confused.

On a stormy Saturday, I talked to Her. For some reason, I was ready to push fate. Losing touch with reality was more like it. I was thinking about heading west as well. Then a possibility began to crumble as she detailed plans. In an instant, a fresh sense came over me. I got an overwhelming feeling, a deep gnawing. Something inside said...this is wrong, don't do it! It must have been evident because she said as much. It was virtually over.

There was plenty to make up, ashamed of what I had become. My goal was to stay married. I loved my wife and kids, not wanting them to think we were through. I needed to fix everything, like I did at work. After more time, I was no longer confused and felt optimistic. I prayed and pondered, wondering if the Lord would hear me. It's hard to admit, but I knew, unconfessed sin hinders fellowship with God.

Some stress in our life had lessened. I learned an important lesson; trust is something you do not break. The wounds and scars last forever. There's no getting around it. Maybe if Nancy knew, I still had hope. How was I to convey it with more than words? Time. It kept ticking away.

Those were difficult days with no easy fixes. I didn't know how to make it right. It frustrated the life out of me. My poor wife, I saw the hurt in her eyes and actions. I caused a divide between us forever. There are things you can lose and never get back. I never believed; we would lose each other. Ever.

Breaking a commitment may be permanent. It's a deep pit to climb out of. Some days, I found myself back in the abyss. I ended up letter writing, waxing poetic, or wallowing in pity. I longed to make it right. But how?

The violation of our union marks my deepest regret. Any improper relationship outside of marriage is wrong. You cannot expect the Lord to bless it. Period. I can't change the past but can say unequivocally, no partner deserves to be cheated. I take full responsibility for my actions and the impact on our family. I'll always be sorry. I made the wrong choices, leading to our demise. Please learn from my prideful mistakes.

There was much baggage with everything that had transpired. I never got over the hurt I'd caused, which I have assumed to be at the crux of a continuing spiral. I've also realized things in retrospect. I remember a disagreement Nancy and I had.

"Everything is not black and white, there are gray areas in life," I said. She looked perplexed, her face said we disagreed. I have since been convinced, such things as right and wrong are black and white.

I've frightened people down the line, vocalizing my anguish in vivid dreams about the unsettledness between us. I've also dreamed we were reunited. Unblemished and full of joy. I continue to pray, asking the Lord to watch over our family. No matter what.

I finally came to a stark realization, mere humans can't love unconditionally, the way God can. Perhaps that's what I had thought was missing. It's not uncommon, having unfair expectations and misplaced dependencies. Couples are fallible, but that's no excuse for infidelity. Why had I gotten the sense Nancy didn't love me enough? Insecurity on my part. PRIDE. In hindsight, I made HUGE mistakes.

I've learned how important communication must be for a lasting marriage. Your soul mate is the person you are sworn to. There is big danger, allowing issues to be manifested in a third party. The moment you consider sharing outside of a marriage is the time to pinch yourself. Hard! It has been suggested, impale yourself.

The rest of this chapter is devoted to saving marriages and families in this country and around the world. It's about cherishing loved ones. My 1981 Sociology 101 professor, from San Antonio College, was of Native-American descent. I was a relatively young college student. Working, married, and blessed with a son.

I recall his lecture plainly now. "What's the biggest problem facing America today?" he asked. After a myriad of answers, he stated seriously: *"The biggest problem facing America today is the breakdown of the nuclear family."*

Wasn't sure what the professor was saying, but I expected we were about to discuss the Russians and nuclear war. No. In hindsight, I fully agree with my prof. He went on to say, *"If things don't quickly change, we are headed for social and*

economic disaster."

He talked about his heritage and discussed vast cultural differences, alluding to the spirit world. The family he described sustained unity. The old were cared for and their opinions were held in high regard. Families facing problems solved them as spirited teams. To him the family was utmost.

As the lecture went on, the professor outlined such things as divorce, drugs, gangs, and other social problems. He sighted these as triggers for society's breakdown. That's all you'd heard in the media. Not much has changed, huh? Involved firsthand had blinded my perspective. Drugs, alcohol, etc.

What I'm saying is this. Do everything possible to promote the family and maintain unity. If you put God first, He will take care of the rest. Honor, cherish and love your spouse. When you have a problem, personal or otherwise, do whatever it takes to solve it. Put yourself and pride aside. When it comes to the family, show them how important they are.

I don't want to sound old-fogyish, but a statistic I heard on the NBC news was startling. The report mentioned, *"In 1964, the percentage of couples living together was 11%. In 2011, it was over 60%."* Living together is not commitment. It invests in trust over time. Put rings on under an authority, making it known to the world. Make sure to honor your marriage.

I failed as a husband and father. Please don't make the same errors, don't exalt yourself. If you exalt anything, exalt God. Together you have a fighting chance. You don't have to go through the pain of guilt and regret. Address issues before they become problems. Don't be afraid to open with your spouse and children. What's worse than losing them, or not being involved in their lives?

I didn't cherish God and family enough. I valued me the most. That's what the professor was saying, value your family. Respect one another, especially those wiser. No matter what you think, you don't know it all. Wisdom and humility come from above. Once you believe, your heart will change. Then your mind will change, I promise you. Hindsight.

Chapter 6 Corporate, PRIDE, Cocaine

In December of 1993 the Capital Group Companies Inc. recruited me for a Sr. Network Analyst position. My experience and skills aligned with their specific requirements, paving my way into corporate America. The Capital Group planned on moving their data center to the Alamo City in 1994. A couple of their better-known companies, American Funds Services, and American Funds Dealer Services, employed associates on the northwest side of San Antonio in the Forum Building. No one I knew had ever heard

of the Capital Group.

Orientation addressed the firm's low-profile culture. CG was a sleeping giant yet known widely in the financial community. In the 90s American Funds was the third-largest mutual fund company in the world. With billions under management their global presence expanded. The Capital Group's conservative philosophy, long-term investment excellence, bodes well. Their funds yield good returns during bull markets and tend to perform well during cyclical downturns. Top fund indices took decisive hits under highly publicized bear markets, but American Funds surpassed market averages.

Capital owned large portions of stock in blue chip companies such as IBM, Exxon, AT&T, R.J. Reynolds, and Warner Brothers. They've also managed institutional accounts for some of the world's largest organizations. American Funds, Washington Mutual, was the second largest at the time. Only Fidelity's Magellan Fund exceeded its assets. Assets under management determine a fund's size. Certain indices reflect strength. I haven't kept up with the financial minutia these days. Some of the data may have changed. Yet I've noticed American Funds prominence continues in the top thirty nowadays.

Capital's dedication to customer service was unparalleled in my eyes. Through time, I learned of their diverse monetary principles. The company's training, development, and mentoring assistance programs have proven beneficial. I witnessed seasoned professionalism regarding personal interaction. Capital's people were the sharpest I'd encountered through my career. My communication skills sharpened as a result. Once versed in Capital's legacy and pecuniary customs, I wanted to be a part of their success.

After a few years, my annual compensation tripled over the salary I had received in county government. Annual bonuses and generous benefits were among the best in the city. A better opportunity was unimaginable. Nancy and I used the money to purchase a new home and cars. We saw this time as a fresh start for our lives, having emerged from certain difficulties.

Nancy landed a principal position at a local elementary school. We were proud of her amazing climb through the ranks. Jay was in his last year of middle school, the kids grew up fast. Happy we were together, my guilt and regret lingered. It hadn't diminished enough, regardless of external change.

Corporate was more private and far different than the government sector. The Capital Group energized me to new levels. I traveled to Los Angeles to collaborate on several projects. The data center was still on the West Coast. Orange County was the technical hub, so I traveled to the LA area via John Wayne Airport.

Orange County imposed noise abatement, requiring jets to cut back their engines overpopulated areas. Taking off felt like climbing the first steep hill of a roller coaster, then sensing a backward fall. Air travel was common with CG. I loved to fly.

For the next ten years, however, I traveled to Orange County via LAX. I found it better to navigate, relaxing on the Artesia Freeway eastward. Leaving LAX on Century Blvd, I took the 405 to the 91 for acclimation time and focus.

I learned from our California associates, the proper prefix for a freeway is "the."

I'd say "I-10."

They said, "What?"

Then they corrected me. "It's the 10."

The 91 comprised most of the commute. From the 91, the 57 left a short clip into Brea. I was amazed at the number of Los Angeles area freeways. I avoided the 5, mindful of pile-up images from various newsreels.

My regular accommodations, the Embassy Suites on Birch Street. I frequently located an In-N-Out Burger, post haste. Where I swallowed a Double-Double, fries, and a shake. The first time in the area, I drove by the famous park to say, "I went to Disneyland."

I rarely missed an opportunity to see a major sports complex, so I zipped past Anaheim Stadium. I remembered watching a televised Billy Graham Crusade from the same venue. A record crowd of over 80,000 had attended in 1985. I simply register such grandiose things, and it wasn't even sports associated.

Business was priority with the Capital Group. I thrived on its corporate buzz. The Brea office on State College Blvd was more laid back than expected. Principally, the IT employees. Though they weren't as social compared to the San Antonio campus of regulars. I formed quality friendships and important alliances in Brea, California offices.

The Los Angeles office on Hope Street was stiffly corporate. It posed formality well. I had pictured granite statues and mahogany desks with dimly lit corridors. Most of the decor seemed less rigid. I enjoyed visiting headquarters, feeling the pulse of the brain trust. What I hadn't warmed to, the swaying effect on the fiftieth floor. When the smog cooperated, I caught a hazy glimpse of Chavez Ravine and Dodger Stadium.

California associates suggested we cruise the 55 for dinner out toward Newport Beach. There were plenty of eateries, yet we regularly opted for Italian. I sampled the regional cuisine, having toured the area extensively. Many dining experiences occurred in and around Orange County for convenience. I remember The Catch, a seafood restaurant. The Texans who visited were directed to feast on prime steaks at the Orange County Mining Company, with a nice view up there.

I wondered about the Mexican food out West. I'll side with Tex-Mex over Cali-Mex. I sampled an East LA burrito, not far from Imperial Highway. It was tasty, but I prefer tacos from the San Antonio area. Burritos are more an LA thing it seems, but they are becoming more popular in SA.

The weather in southern California is predictable. Beautiful and sunny most every day, at least during my tenure with the Capital Group (1994-2004). I recall one or two days of sprinkles. I took in Venice and Santa Monica beaches. I must say, they beat out the Texas gulf shores in many categories. A wide-open ocean should.

The section of Laguna Beach I visited wasn't riveting at first. We arrived after sunset, so it was dark from those cliffs on a moonless night. Scary. I'm back peddling a bit after viewing a movie, which was partially filmed on Laguna Beach. Wish I had visited that location in the brilliant sunlight. The ocean scenes of Laguna were breathtaking in Oliver Stone's film, "Savages."

A quick observation about Californians. They did not seem rude, having been foretold by some. For the most part, I encountered warm and friendly people. I've found they are obsessed with working out after work. There were those who van-pooled. Some had two-hour commutes, and I thought an hour was bad in San Antonio. High cost equals pressure to maintain lifestyles, and it leads folks to overextend. Modest real estate properties were pricey in LA. California income taxes caused me to consider,

would Texas lawmakers ever levy a state tax?

Brea CG associates rarely imbibed heavily to my knowledge, with the exclusion of wine connoisseurs. I juiced at night when solo in the late evening. The bar at Embassy Suites was convenient and safe. To break the monotony, I would sometimes go to Friday's across the way. I quit frequenting Bobby McGee's because they played Hip Hop for a predominant Cal State Fullerton crowd. I never did drugs in California while on business. Ironically, I did not.

My first project with the Capital Group involved the relocation of the corporate data center from California to Texas, which was a huge undertaking. The project plan contained thousands of tasks. In a nutshell, we were to run San Antonio's mirror-imaged test system in parallel with Brea's production system. Once tested, the date was set for a production switch over. Because the mainframes, UNIX, and other servers held assets in the billions, reaching a trillion. Downtime had to be virtually transparent. Much depended on months of planning, documenting, testing, evaluating, and executing. I loved the involvement and accomplishment of it all.

A handful of techies were hired for the data center relocation project. It was our job to pull it off through millions in software and hardware assets. Our level of expertise spanned operating systems, subsystems, and applications. There were hundreds of associates in support behind the scenes. The company looked to us for the critical event. CG's mainframe environment was still the heart of the data center. UNIX and other smaller servers multiplied as applications were systematically migrated from larger footprints, the legacy systems.

Although a failsafe data center was in place, we weren't going to fail. No way. The new data center would shift and reside in San Antonio without question. Our technical responsibilities were diverse, yet intricately connected. If any screwed up, we all paid the price. This was the most important project of our careers, and ego expansion time.

Video conferencing occurred daily. Management from the West Coast and key personnel from around the globe conferred on technical support strategies. Status updates provided communication for tasks and milestones achieved, and for potential issues. It was critical to stay on top of our games and to sustain confidence in our backers from LA. There was much riding on our shoulders. Stress was constant. We double-checked

all possible conversion scenarios. I added checks to my responsibilities. An OCD vein ensured the veracity of my technical domain.

The entire project was deemed successful, labeled a non-event by CG. Which was how execs envisioned it, reporting it as such. Corporate heads in LA downplayed significant events. It became apparent, the Capital Group kept most everything on the downlow.

A grand example of humility was smack in front of me. The Capital Group and their credo regarding achievement are built on a selfless principle. Much the firm achieved was done unpretentiously. My sense, far from selfless. I wondered; how did I get by Capital's stringent interview process? In retrospect, it was okay to possess kinetic pride. Just don't wave it for the world to see.

We five to seven techies were a haughty bunch, rewarded in kind. We became the technical leadership for the company. The honor had previously resided on the West Coast. We knew the money would follow, so our confidence bordered on bridled arrogance. We were well acquainted with obstreperousness. Cocky. If anyone cared to endure our heroics, we shared it openly over drinks at Lyndy's.

I gave my all to the relocation project, 100%. All the while, I shouldered a bunch of guilt for personal things. But I simply needed to let it hang out. This brings up an interesting question. Have you heard people say, "I gave that effort a 120%?" I ask you; how does one give more than 100%? It is analogous to a golfer, who says, "99% of the putts I hit short never go in." Wouldn't that be 100%?

Technology nuts deal largely in specifics. Our livelihood is based on completeness, connect the dots, and no room for error. Regardless, it was hard not getting caught up in the glory of tremendous accomplishment. Which was right down my alley and jazzed me even higher as time passed.

The stock market continued to boom, so had Capital's assets under management. We grew at a steady pace, but the press never stated it expressly. New projects were staged around the globe. There were already plans for a new site in San Antonio by 1997. We used a similar plan to relocate the data center again. It didn't matter if it was across the country or across town. It amounted to another monumental task. Same risk and similar reward. Dollar signs and attitudes. Power.

The Capital Group made a big investment in San Antonio, Texas. Yet their end game is cost efficiency. The company planned a sprawling campus on eighty-eight acres of property at Westover Hills near Loop 1604. I thrived on the growth and excitement. We would operate and maintain a new state of the art data center. My sense of accomplishment took a backseat to no one's.

CG was truly a unique place to work. To me, magical. The opportunity for personal growth was tremendous, however, its strength remained in numbers. I still felt extremely fortunate. PROUD.

"Capital: The Story of Long-term Investment Excellence," by Charles D. Ellis, is a book that entails CG's illustrious history and ongoing presence. It explains how the company diverts attention from star managers to a multi-portfolio management concept. Their philosophy makes better sense as one seasons fiscally.

The book defends Capital's low-profile culture. They refer to employees by a grouping of initials. The founder was JBL (Jonathan Bell Lovelace). Not all initials worked as exact acronyms. Mine was STMR. A previous employee, who has since deceased, inferred my initials stood for *Still Mentally Retarded*. Thanks, Ron Wong (RAW).

Capital's prospective employees were carefully screened to find the most appropriate fit possible. The interview process was extensive. I had seven interviews prior to receiving an offer. Multiple interviews didn't guarantee employment. Because decisions were made largely by a committee, little was decided on an individual basis. The control freak in me made it difficult to understand and to deploy such democracy.

I can't forget to do a shutout to: George, Frank, James, David G, Brad H, Dion, Mike M, Mike L, Ima, Phillip, Brian M, Dave, Victor S, Irene T, McCabe, Ron F, Hector, Glen, Sharon, David V, Angelo, Irma, Ron G, Rachel, Paul B, Cheryl, Kathryn E, Paul L, Kathy L, Grace, Laurie, Bill K, and Dan R. To Kent and Ming (RIP). And certainly, to their better halves, who stayed strong. Thanks for the memories at CG everyone.

Capital's book was an interesting read. I discussed some of its content with managers and peers, but opinions varied. Thinking you knew the organization barely scratched the surface. For instance, I discussed how Capital differed overseas, affecting

technology cultures and processes. Some methods were similar, but others required synergy with European and Asian flavors.

I'm sure there are corporate tales one might not be privy to. I heard some very juicy tidbits from longtime employees. The book provided an interesting footnote, which alluded to the former president, John F. Kennedy. It mentioned his interest in the eventual wife of a Fullerton, an early company pioneer.

You still won't hear much about Capital Group in the media. Privately held, they seldom seek notoriety. Take my word for it, their investors and stockholders know them. The Capital Group Companies Incorporated are an interesting study and unlikely categorized. An enigma, I do believe.

I attended my share of training classes and vendor conferences while at CG. Some business engagements required trips to other cities and states. I tried to schedule them in Texas when feasible. I traveled to Austin or Houston for proximity. Occasionally a vendor opportunity led me to the cosmopolitan city of Dallas.

In 1996, I flew to DFW for technical training with Sterling Commerce at Las Colinas in Irving, TX. In route, I perused a magazine from the seatback. My attention was drawn to an article, concerning a local gentlemen's club. *D Magazine* is a monthly publication that outlines politics, business, fashion, food, and things to do in the Dallas metropolis.

The copy I held featured a dancer from The Men's Club. The article was written by Glenna Whitley, *"THE NAKED EMPIRE, The Dancer: WHY NIKKO IS #1*. It was subtitled: *The Chamber of Commerce doesn't mention her, but she's one of the city's biggest economic assets.*" Hmm.

Reading portions of Nikko's story, I was drawn to learn of her persona. Not simply in the manner you are suspecting. I mean something about this didn't equate so I wondered how accurate their depiction was of her. How thorough they had investigated? The feature described her as voluptuous and Rubenesque, but it mentioned she wasn't plump. An obvious contradiction. What else?

I detected a sincerity from the publication's interview. The story explained how she had turned down \$25k to do a centerfold for Playboy. From the article, I perceived she may have politely scoffed at the offer. Because one of her prominences could net \$250k a year. According to the article, she would have needed to

refrain from dancing for a year in accordance with Playboy's contractual agreement.

Meanwhile, it was typical for me to frequent a hotel bar. No surprise there. Or drive the rental to an outstanding restaurant. After business hours, of course. Now I was no angel and wasn't proud of my questionable choices, but they are truthful, nonetheless. Those trips never resulted in infidelity with anyone out of town.

I had gone to some suspect dives. Some places weren't considered exactly tawdry. An associate embarrassed me in front of some Playboy Bunnies, on *The Roof*, at The Westin Galleria of Houston. In Anaheim, I sat next to several PGA Tour players at Fritz's. They spent thousands in an hour or so. It must have been the week of the LA Open at Riviera CC.

Back to Dallas in 1996. After dining on a fine steak, from Henderson Avenue's restaurant row, I drank at the bar. I must have misplaced my lighter, so I asked the bartender for a light. He tossed me a book of matches; I settled into a Crown rocks. As I folded the matchbook cover, I noticed an advertisement. It was for *The Men's Club* on Northwest Highway. What a coincidence.

The ad touted, "*Best Club in the US for two years running.*" By Playboy no less. I knew it wasn't far from Texas Stadium, which has since been imploded. You're already aware of my affinity for sports venues. I felt constrained to pay the club a visit as well. Besides, the bartender's recommendation tempted me. "The Men's Club is a classy joint pal," which came with his convincing wink. "Furthermore," he said, "it's frequented by members of the Dallas Cowboys."

This establishment boasted exclusiveness for the elite. My interest was more than basic allure. Yet I did such things because I was above reproach. It wasn't long before I headed to Northwest Highway. I wanted to see Texas Stadium from past trips. Okay. I'll admit it, I also wanted to check out Nikko.

I bypassed their valet service, not driving a worthy enough rental. The club didn't have the expected decor. Seedy curtains and dimly lit corners. It was opulent in comparison. Spacious tables were complimented by plush chairs, the kind you'd find in upscale dens. Higher backed and rounded. But obviously, ambiance was not their principal piece. The joint was designed for tricky business.

The magazine article fell short. "Nikko" compelled with resplendent charm. Not to mention, her classic looking beauty. The assumption is a stage name enhances showiness. But her given title, Leslie, fit well. She looked exclusive in a royal blue and sequined maxi. It was impossible to dismiss her as unrefined. Had I suddenly doubled as a reporter or critic? Which was in line with what my former VP and good friend, Kent, might mockingly cite.

Miss Leslie was very gracious, and behind her labeled mystique was a charm found lacking in the more presumed. She asked to sit and chat. It was early for show time, so I was surprised she had paid the slightest attention to me. I was decked-out in a Brooks Brothers suit and a crisp white shirt, which boded well for the Dallas nightlife.

I know unsettled impressions are being formed through these pages. I'll admit to weaknesses not considered honorable of most standards. Yet I wanted to see the good, and to my detriment, in those deemed lesser. I'm not sure how to explain it rationally. It's easier to focus on others than to be consumed with your insecurities. Especially, when there is alcohol involved.

With Nikko, the dubious resulted in actual pleasantries. In tune with her compassion, she enticed early arrivers. I didn't see her as a gruesome dancer or trollop. I saw Leslie D. as kind and caring. One searching, perhaps for her design in life. She was delightfully polite, speaking of her home in suburban Richardson. Puzzled by her complete sincerity, it was time for me to leave.

While in the process of mentioning business travel, I'll relate a vendor conference story from Florida. A more respectable adventure. Sterling Commerce, also known to techies as Sterling Software, hosted the best extravaganza in the business.

In 1997, I attended one of their conferences in Miami Beach. Sterling went all out for its customers. Sure, there were the usual seminars and trade shows, but their closing night galas were legendary. Each event attempted to surpass the previous years. This gala was held on a villa's grounds in South Beach. It was rumored to have been located near the properties of Madonna and Stallone.

Before I describe the gala, something eerie occurred upon my arrival. As our jet descended on Miami International, the weather looked ominous. With added precaution we flew near the

Everglades, which had claimed ValuJet Flight 592. Out toward the beach, I saw serious skies. I wouldn't see such cloud formations until South Padre Island from Hurricane Ike. A murky and greenish hue blanketed the area.

Outside it was more humid than usual, even for South Florida. While checking in at the Biscayne Bay Marriott, I overheard a telecast from the lobby. The meteorologist reported a possible tornado. I can't accurately describe the next half-hour, but I'll try to lend it credence.

The circular bar provided the clearest view of the bay, so I slid my travel bag under the stool. I ordered a Crown double, straight up. Then another. I should have told the bartender, "Leave the bottle," like cowboys from old westerns.

A twister was out there doing the Watusi.

"Oh...shoot!"

Guests panicked. The bartender was a local guy.

"It's just a waterspout," he said.

"Huh. That thing?" I pointed at the obvious.

Apparently, it was a common sight for coastal denizens.

The cone looked deadly. It shrouded my view of the horizon. The bar held front row seats to impending wipeout, airing real time from the overhead television monitors.

The twister slowly entered the bay, skirting buildings from side-to-side. Some spoke in manners of desperation. It sounded like the Wailing Wall, garbled and surreal.

I prayed. The newscaster grew intense with his verbiage.

Followed by moments of silence....

The twister didn't sound like a freight train, but it made a malevolent noise. "Shwoosh." Shuddering winds caused me to ponder mortality. The funnel shifted, spraying a coated mist to the windows. Racked glassware from atop the bar trembled in its wake. It whisked by, gaped in, and skipped out to sea. I sighed in relief. Welcome to Miami. You won't see that depicted in travel brochures.

Moving on to more tranquil settings, Sterling's gala on South Beach. I'll attempt to convey this concisely. After days shut in by the conference hall's rigidity it was time to party. Sterling arranged for our transport. The plushness of the charter bus barely detected a bend from the beaten path. We arrived at a

secluded location in jubilant fanfare. Latin music accompanied our stop. We were greeted by human bunnies and men in tuxedos, standing by with trays of chilled champagne flutes. Then we were surrounded by exotic couples, dancing Salsa expertly.

Along an inlet, a glowing string of lights illuminated an assortment of iced seafood and hors d'oeuvres. Moving forward, bars were stocked with premium libations. Chefs in crisp white uniforms took choice beef orders. The intricate yet fascinating effect induced a reveler, "What a spread." Some IT geeks are easily impressed.

Strolling toward a private lagoon, we encountered what appeared to be a Spanish Galleon looking craft. It was near the water's edge. A single ray of light focused its beam on a brass section. They played chords from a familiar tune aboard the vessel.

The suspense kept building. Kettle and bongo drums grew louder. Trumpets blared. Instantly, multi-colored lights displayed a prism that highlighted a band, KC and The Sunshine. What a night. Unbelievable!

I met some impeccable twins from Duluth, Georgia at the gala. They were an ornate pair, both brunette and capable dancers. Polka dot minis made it difficult to tell them apart, reminding me of a Rachel McAdams pair. You know, from *The Notebook*. They were polished yet effervescent.

Everyone danced. The twins made my cavorting look somewhat refined, with help from KC's rhythm section. There was nothing sensational to add from our experience, just fun. I gazed in splendor, so this is what it's all about. I vaingloriously punctuated with my voice inside, look at me world. We had a fantastic time, thanks to Sterling and South Beach.

Back at our mundane Texas office, I was entrenched with business and technological challenges. Management's reliance on achievement resulted in personal success, moving projects forward. My eyes were cast on loftier things, but it required me to handle projects adroitly.

Everything was going well; the money was great. I found myself internally saying, I've arrived. I'm going to do something extreme. So extreme, in fact, I'd need more of an ego boost. To flaunt my stuff in public. The center of my life was me. Continuing a vain existence was awe natural, and I wanted to strut my stuff.

I know many of these stories are raw and they ramble, but that's the way it is. The life of addiction is random and disjointed. It is filled with nonsensical rationale. If you receive a flustered sense, then I have achieved a minute objective. Such experiences are highly ridiculous. Awful. Hang in there until it smooths out later on.

Thursday after quitting time was a night to relieve stress from work at The Capital Group Companies Inc. Our first office was in the Forum Building on the northwest side of San Antonio. There were no shortages of night spots. Our watering hole was very close by. It was a dark, back road trek to Lyndy's. The shortcut path through a residential area was our preferred entryway. Lyndy's became a regular destination, comparable to Cheers.

The surrounding area employs many of San Antonio's professionals. The medical center and insurance giant, USAA, were down Fredericksburg Road a piece. There was nothing special about Lyndy's except for its proximity and refreshing quaffs. Its atmosphere was benign and rustic. Lyndy's clientele were mostly yuppies. One spotted them inside and outside. We manly geeks felt as if we owned the place. I'm sure our antics were rightfully despised.

I respected a Lyndy's waitress, Margo. She wasn't drop dead gorgeous but was naturally striking. She was always entertaining. The kind of girl that looks good with little or no makeup. She had a curt attitude, a practical approach. Margo didn't beat around the bush. Most of the time her directness was appreciated. When she got pissed, look out. She could rip guys and gals to shreds if they crossed her just right.

We maintained a friendship. She convinced me of her good-natured heart underneath such toughness. I had already learned life's hardest lessons, which were better off unexplored with her. I had hoped the right guy came along for her, knowing he would need to be solid. Margo wouldn't accept a pushover, nor a dominating extremist.

Margo introduced me to one of Lyndy's specialties, a Martuni. That was the name for a drink someone came up with. It stuck over time and the regs shortened it to "Tuni." We were sort of proud, naming a libation. It was basically a dirty vodka martini. With a nice amount of olive juice, vigorously shaken. It contained, at least, two free poured shots of Absolute, Stoli's, or Grey Goose. Generous amounts of shaved ice enhanced

its overall quality.

Margo dropped in two to three jumbo olives, which often served as supper. When a Martuni came cloudy and opaque looking it was a winner. A yellow-greenish tint meant olive juice overload. Four or five of those felt right. I once downed eleven of them. That's what they said. Don't worry, I didn't drive home that evening.

The routine of Lyndy's carried on for years. We were known to smoke a joint on shortcut road, or on the way from the Hyatt Hill Country Resort. To say Lyndy's was a regular outing is an understatement. We were pulling the same stunts three years later. Fast forward to 2001.

The month was September, the eleventh day to be exact. I heard it first on my car radio. The earliest report, *"A single engine plane has likely crashed into one of the World Trade Center's towers."*

At first, I blew it off. Then random reports filled the airways. The situation was dire for those inside and the rescue forces. I became instantly anxious, forgetting my issues on the way.

When I got to the office everyone was in shock. Many gathered around radios and televisions. The look on faces, hopeless uncertainty. I knew the gym had two large screens, so I plugged my laptop into its docking station and rushed over to see/hear the reports.

I looked at the smoldering tower in disbelief. The workout equipment sat vacant and still. Suddenly, the first tower fell. I've never experienced a moment like that, ever! How do you describe that feeling? You can't.

Alone, there was no one to share the grief. Most people watched from the cafe or were glued to their computers in horror. I went over to console someone, but who? What was there to soften? The pictures left everyone in the same condition. Frightened and saddened.

Most knew the second tower would fall but hoped and prayed it would not. When it had there was a ghoulish silence. Then we trudged on to our cubicles. I called my wife to see if she was okay and if she'd heard from the kids. I just wanted to hear their voices.

The weeks following were much the same. Shock and fear abounded. Life went on. For a while, we forgot about our petty differences in the office. It seemed to unite us for a greater cause. My personal demons hadn't lessened. Not to use 9/11 as an excuse, but I spiraled quickly afterward. Wondered if I was looking for a reason to further darken.

In addition to Lyndy's, we frequented other bars and clubs. Some are not worth mentioning. On a Halloween Thursday, a friend acquired some potent cocaine. We had just left Lyndy's and reached a brand-new destination. We were in the parking lot of The Fox and Hound, an English pub on De Zavala Rd. An upscale place in comparison. It was still a bar, yet even more of a yuppie place. I never found a bar as cozy and with the same feel as Lyndy's. It was one of a kind. I hear they went out of business.

I hadn't done cocaine since the 70s. When I saw it, something inside said, **DON'T?**

I'd never done the good stuff, so I hadn't learned of its potential and addictiveness. Well, times change. I wanted to think for the better. How was this possible where I was headed? Thursday nights took on a whole new meaning, when I boarded an unfamiliar train.

Regarding the jingle, "Everything goes better with coke." Well...that's not exactly true. I had no idea what I was getting into. In the beginning, I'd split a "teener" with a friend. A teener is a half of an eight-ball, or technically, 1/16th of an ounce. After two weeks we progressed to halving an eight-ball. He'd do his amount on Thursday night. Guess that's how he justified, not being hooked. I wanted to conserve mine for the next day or two, for an extended boost.

We scored cocaine after work. It began as a weekly trip, then turned into Monday, Wednesday, and Friday rituals. Traveling south of town, we waited in a gas station parking lot. There we purchased Bud-Light, twenty-four-ounce cans. Which eased and primed the wait for our fix. Often anxious, other times we were paranoid. As time drew near to partake, we salivated like kids for candy.

Time progressed in la-la land. So, did our frequency and usage. Waiting until after work was too darn long. Our loved ones were suspicious of later arrivals. We devised another plan, arranging to meet our connection sooner. We used our lunch hour for the

task, which meant a twenty-minute drive, one-way. We were bound for a warehouse on the northeast side of town. I was more paranoid at this location. Or was it the coke? I experienced a common side-effect, that's for sure. It was partially guilt. We had just enough time to score and head back to work. Perfecto.

The ride back was always better than the ride down. We had what we wanted, sampling for good measure. Because we could. Later, I used out of necessity. We used a CD case and the back of a credit card to smash the crystals into powder. Then we snorted it through a straw or from a key. A friend showed me how to use the tip of a key for a toot. I preferred a wide and shortened straw. Those trips went on for a time. The quantity increased to chase a similar buzz. I was doing more and more but assumed I was in control.

Back at the office, I had the fortune to meet a lady who worked for one of our service companies. She worked for a golf buddy of mine. Stylishly fashioned, she was refined and every bit a lady. Smart. I'd never met anyone quite like her. We became friends and enjoyed each other's company. Our birthdays happened to fall on the same month and day. We discussed a slew of topics with mutual interest.

She inspired me to quit partying. Yes, she enjoyed a casual drink, yet always maintained control. Her looks were splendid, yet I was drawn to her will and character. I'm not trying to make excuses, but at the time, I was far from control or character. I was a jerk. A few paragraphs ago, I thought to have obtained wisdom regarding overtures. Guess I had carelessly relapsed, and I felt there was little hope of avoiding a crumbling existence. Cocaine made me feel invincible, but it never filled my void inside.

Instead of being content with our friendship, I somehow placed it in jeopardy. It was assumed, I had sent an ill-advised email, which basically stated she was an important friend. I appreciated her positive influence when I needed a friend like her. It must have been apparent, I suggested more. I think I had inaccurately perceived her signals. Man, that was stupid of me. But I felt certain, I hadn't said anything inappropriate. It bewildered me.

I had taken pride to a new level and lost a friend in the process. She still spoke to me, albeit from a distance. The experience solidified an important lesson, respecting a person even more for taking a commendable stance. "What a dummy," I

told a friend. He just looked at me strangely.

Meanwhile, I was still good at my job, at least until I used more and more. Comfortable in my role and proud of my career accomplishments, I'd carved out a secure niche in IT. I was offered more responsibility in a project lead role. I entered formal project management training, leading smallish projects. I loved a new challenge and used it to consume my tireless energy.

The extra work was overly stressful, but I craved success and thrived on project management. Something had begun to take the place of my continuous partying. I cut back on the drug and alcohol use, immersing myself in professional endeavors. Managing projects became a competing drug. I always wanted to direct and lead. In project management at CG, I led functional teams during carved out portions of their regular work week. I found time to manage aspects of the project day-to-day. It was fulfilling and a timely distraction. Things were going great, considering.

My manager hired a new supervisor. She had worked with him in a previous job. Another level of supervision to filter my pride through never thrilled me, but I wanted the best for our team's success. At first, we got along yet I was skeptical. Something about his style bothered me. As it turned out, the morale of our team diminished. The personality of our supervisor intensified. In my mind, he became more and more difficult to follow. Peer to peer communication was strained. He attempted to implement drastic changes to our technical and administrative processes. Hold the phone. This was not the Capital Group I had revered.

It appeared that team members were being pitted against each other. The situation worsened. Unrest and daily conflict filled the ranks. I was unsettled, questioning the direction of our team. With daily technical responsibilities, the added pressure of managing projects became ultra-stressful. We were also having personnel and managerial difficulties with the West Coast. Once the data center shifted to Texas, the California associates were to become planners. They wanted to continue in technical roles, which caused a rift and a tougher acclimation scenario. Accepting sheer planning roles go against a techie's tendencies.

On top of everything, the senior management staff changed in California. A new vice president was hired, replacing a respected ally in the chain of command. Our latest issues were clouded by an administrative shuffle. A new leadership style was being imposed, presenting additional challenges. More hurdles

and hoops to navigate. I loved the experience of working in the private sector, but we evolved into a more rigid corporate structure.

I spoke with my manager regarding the frustrations. She assured me. "This will not affect how we do business." She added, "It's my job to handle these issues." Then my capable boss said, "Take care of your responsibilities as you have before."

I felt somewhat relieved but no less concerned. Due to steady stress and additional hours for project work, I relied upon my drug again. My old connection dried up. I needed to find another if I were to survive the onslaught. Excuses.

Dealers weren't difficult to find. Users/addicts always have backup dealers. We referred to our dealers as connections. It didn't sound as bad that way. My newest connection was in supply, always. He had a legit job in the golf business. He also operated a "night club." I was fine with it. Who was I to judge?

I won't elaborate on my drug dealer in minute detail. I must have been one of his best customers, however. We had been acquaintances for some time. For years, I knew him from around town, but not as a cocaine connection. Over time, we developed a close alliance.

He trusted me and often left me to tend his bar, business, and dogs (two sweet and loyal Great Danes). I became so involved in the cocaine world; I would frivolously spend. Even bought my dealer a pool table and some Ping golf clubs. He had become a very important person in my life, number one. For a while, I was able to separate work from leisure.

The issues at the office were getting tougher to resolve. The drama with our planning section escalated. My technical role wasn't affected. Nevertheless, I was smack in the middle of controversy. I've never been one to sit back when there's adversity, and I was eager to make others happy. People pleasing is a tough road to hoe, believe me. I've come to recognize it as another form of insecurity.

I was the only associate that did what I did. Consequently, I'd been left to manage the environment as seen fit. It wasn't performed with a whole lot of humility. I didn't lord it over people. I'm simply stating a fact.

I maintained the mainframe network and other software products that transported billions in financial assets. I know that's scary, but I never left the system in a quandary. I was dead serious about my responsibilities. You may question it, yet my work record speaks for itself. During that time, my technical domain experienced no significant issues or outages.

Very little project work suffered during strife. I needed to enlist the cooperation of functional teams to move projects forward. Their tasks were critical for the overall success. Some of the resources were in our planning group. Lucky me. Many on the project team were in Texas and California. Others were in Indiana, Virginia, and across Europe. There were always milestones and deadlines to meet. I tried to circumvent things by involving myself deeper into project deliverables. Which found me slaving away through the night. My drug allowed me to keep pace. It did so very well, but the results were nearly lethal.

I grew tired of conflict with various personnel. The morale of our San Antonio team was at an all-time low. Not one person's fault, it was a fact of life and the nature of change. The concerns of our western associates remained. Something had to be done. I was not going to let a project fail. I initiated discussions with my former vice president. I held him in high regard. He was concerned and always professional. The obstacles in my new chain-of-command were tough to overcome. The daily grind killed me. My former and decorous VP said, "Hang in there Steve, this will get resolved." I was temporarily satisfied.

Meanwhile, I had become addicted to cocaine, unable to shake it. No longer for the buzz or pleasure, but out of necessity to function. I had always been able to walk away. Like everything else, I would find a way to handle it. At the same time, I was addicted to alcohol. I drank to come down from the coke. Then I did more coke. Ultimately, I drank more and more to sleep. The amount of straight liquor I could chug was phenomenal, off the charts. I was spinning out of control.

I made a questionable decision, seeking help from the company's Employee Assistance Program (EAP). I knew about the clause protecting associates if help was sought voluntarily. What else was I supposed to do? I needed help. More frequently, I came in late and was being watched. My discontent with team issues exacerbated the entire process. "You need time off," my manager urged, "to take care of your problems." She sincerely wanted to help.

I respected her, so I listened. "Okay, I'll check it out."

I also decided to go forward with morale issues to management in California. I didn't know how else to handle it. I learned an important lesson. Be prepared to stand alone when you're a focal point on issues. Many team members shared discontent in small groups. When it came time to speak up, in more formal settings, I was largely left holding the bag. Work issues took a back seat to personal issues. I was out of control. Professional issues festered, while I sank deeper into addiction. The nightmare worsened. I had turned into a miserable wreck.

A friend of mine liked to bet. We gambled on the billiards table and on golf and basketball as well. I wrote some sizeable checks to Alex from billiard's losses. That was aside from cash payments. I won some, but he came out on top. Mainly, because he wasn't zonked on cocaine. My thrill-seeking dependencies grew stronger. Outlets. My wallet took more of a beating than my pride. A new concern to deal with.

Back at work. I sought outside help for rehab. I'd found a service provided by a local medical group. EAP was my best option. HR and management approved an advance on my vacation and compensatory time. I attended half-day sessions, every week, for an undisclosed amount of time. I was to be tested for drugs and alcohol weekly to satisfy everyone. My counselor's name was Smitty. He was someone I had come to venerate. A terrific model of successful recovery.

Smitty had walked the same dark trails ago. He knew the insane plight of little or no return. We hit it off well. He was also a Vietnam Era Vet. We had much in common. Mainly drinking and drugging. I admired Smitty's resolve and didn't want to let him down. He inspired me to be free from addiction. All the sudden there was hope for my life. A disconnect at work made morale issues worsen. My focus needed to stay on rehab. It was hard to let work issues slide. I was left with little choice.

Our regular rehab group contained a cast of real characters. Most seemed worse off. I insisted on seeing others as harsher. In a way, it made my life justifiable. Such as seeing drunks or heroin addicts lying in the gutter, I'd think, I'm not that bad. Well, I was my own kind of bad. Vile. In the later days, I came to a stark realization. I had been ridiculously problematic for a long time. It's hard to see that in yourself.

I spent two months in rehab and was practically dry. I justified a slip or two but stayed fairly vigilant. And I never failed a substance test, let's put it that way. I felt more responsible there, for others. Was it Smitty? Maybe he had been the catalyst. Perhaps that pleasing thing again. Ugh. In rehab, you must be there for YOU (hindsight). Smitty was proud. I was happy for him and for me. Heck of a job Smitty. I wish you and your family the best. You had a nice gift and honorable profession. I apologize for not making it to the Christmas party at your place. I know your family stays proud of your courage and sobriety.

Being back on a regular work schedule was difficult. I remained without for several weeks. Rehab seemed like a distant memory. The work issues hovered like a gloomy cloud. Recent talks with LA management had caused a rift between me and my manager. I was sad our relationship had soured. She and I once left HR in tears. The situation troubled me more. I used again. Management didn't know I'd relapsed. It was hard to admit I had a weak constitution and gave in so easily, but I did time after time. That's self-medicating.

I headed on a business trip to Chicago, needing a performance course in another network discipline. As I looked over the itinerary, I fantasized about my drug. Would I be brave enough, stupid enough, to take it along? Surely, I wasn't considering a federal offense.

I blew off the notion until considering it the morning of. It wasn't worth the stress at security. Relieved wasn't the word. I witnessed a shake-down at the gate. Shoot, it might have been me. It made me uncontrollably nervous, so I chugged a Bloody Mary near my gate. I had several doubles on the flight to O'Hare. Oh well, at least, no cocaine in the Windy City. For some reason, I drew the line not using while away on business.

The first day of class went well. I stayed interested in the material and felt good without cocaine. I had a few Crown Royals at the bar, before ordering room service. Then I crashed for the rest of the evening. I went back to my hotel, the downtown Marriot, after the second day of class. I bellied up to its circular bar. I was contemplating an invite, by classmates from Jersey, for a meal at one of Harry Caray's establishments.

Wish I had some coke, my inner voice said. Instead, I ordered another Scotch Rocks, a double. I seldom drank that stuff; I was a bourbon man. Scotch was a poor substitute for cocaine, yet

part of my drinking habit had begun to impress people. How better than with scotch?

After four rounds of Chivas, I met classmates at the Hotel Sofitel. I'd stayed there before and appreciated the truffles on my pillow, but I'd tossed the French bread at checkout. My classmates were at the bar, drinking Guinness and Patron shots. Uh oh.

One said, "Hey Texas dude," and ordered a round. After three, I had no appetite. I was restless without my cocaine. They were hungry, so we bolted. We arrived at Harry Caray's and found three seats at the bar. I drank Crown & Water, to sip on casually. I was already mixing several liquors. Not recommended for the squeamish.

One of those guys ordered an appetizer of jumbo shrimp cocktail. The biggest suckers I'd seen. Needing some food in my stomach, I munched them down. I left for the restroom. It felt weird with no coke to do in the stall. Upon return, the Jersey boys were doing more shots. They ordered rounds for everyone at the bar.

We never made it to the dining area. The boys ordered more prawns, followed by mussels and fried calamari. At least, something was fried. I sucked on a lemon to ease my tummy. The last thing I recollected was a chorus of Caray's, "*Take Me out to the Ball Game.*" We left for other stops on the Navy Pier, but I can't tell you more. I knew we had drunk more beer and shots, yet that's it. I heard my alarm clock ringing at six-thirty a.m. Ouch.

My temples felt as if they were between a vice. Losing my balance, I nearly fell into the tub. As I bent over to douse my face, I puked in the sink. Then I hurled again from whiffing masticated shrimp in the basin. The last time, I upchucked in the pristine toilet. From what appeared to be the mussels in a white wine sauce. Apparently, the Jersey boys had the wherewithal to set my alarm clock.

Do you remember, when I told you about the worst hangover? I had not. My head throbbed, making it hard to stand upright. Vertical meant cookie tossing. I don't think we had eaten dessert.

I did make it to class. Thank goodness for aspirin, a hot shower, and black coffee. The color of my face was ashen, corpse-like. One thing was certain, I had forgotten about cocaine. The scary part was blacking out, unaware of everything

from the night before. That's scary, life in a dumpster.

Back home to a routine. It was as though, I'd never left. I made a quick stop at my dealer's house and was back in the saddle. I enjoyed it rather immensely, then I had guilt and conviction to deal with. I wanted to stay centered enough to work, needing to apply what I'd learned in Chicago. Hopefully, I learned other lessons.

My issues continued, and I was eventually put on notice at work. I was being monitored for sobriety, punctuality, and effectiveness. I couldn't quit addictions by altering my behavior. Cocaine and alcohol were parts of my relentless style.

On a crisp November morning, an associate came to my cubicle with a furrowed brow. He looked very concerned. "I've been asked to accompany you for a drug screen," he said.

"Would you give me five minutes Jimmy?" His disappointing nod said, okay.

I drafted an email of resignation. A ton of dreadful bricks fell. At the same time, I experienced a strange relief. For once, I'd finally get the help I sorely needed. That was my saddest day at work in thirty years. I tendered a resignation to the company I loved and revered.

I never imagined this situation, walking out of there with nothing. Part of my belongings were packed in an empty box used for stock paper. Someone told me I could pick it all up on another day. I drank myself into oblivion later. When I woke up, in the night, I did two humongous lines. I got wasted again. It didn't resolve a thing, my solo pity party. One of the best jobs in the city had been trashed in senseless disregard.

I needed more cocaine. Regardless of my demise, at home and work, I thought it helped me to cope. A false sense of security was better than none. Cocaine was the most addictive drug I'd ever done. By far, the most expensive. I was enslaved by its pseudo-positive effect. The cold reality is a total negative. The drug's progression is a force so powerful; it's a miracle when one ceases, even when their world is falling apart. Many have stopped by dying a lonely death. Please, don't ever be curious about cocaine. Leave it alone!

Chapter 7 Addiction, Scraping Bottom, Misadventure

The scourge of addiction is sickening for everyone involved. I have experienced it from several sides. It is a consuming madness, one that defies reasonable logic. While addicts exhibit common traits their treks and outcomes are not the same. On the using end, one boards an impending train wreck on steroids and it's not over until it has run its pervasive and destructive course. The other side consists of helpless frustration. Most often, all one can do is to hope and pray.

My abuse was out of hand and I was not prepared for the increasing onslaught. I would tell myself, I'm okay; I'll straighten up someday. If one sobers is the ultimate question, or if he or she survives the craggy cliffs of potential obliteration.

After resigning from Capital Group and the divorce became finalized self-destruction was in full swing. Honestly, I stopped caring about life and celebrated a huge pity party. Did I party? I could have set an ATM withdrawal record in the local area in support of narcissistic habits: alcohol, drugs, golf, clubbing, gambling, etc. Plainly self-centered and outrageously proud, I had an attitude.

Addiction sprouts when problems aren't confronted in the seed stage. Hopefully, it doesn't start from an early age. I've never been a proponent of the theory; marijuana is a gateway drug. All types of abuse may evolve as conflict goes unresolved. One doesn't have to abuse drugs to be classified an addict. Plain old albies are significantly addicted. I should know. I was well on my way until cocaine mollified a desire to exclusively drink.

Families pay an unbearable price in more ways than one. Those who love you are hurt and disappointed. They don't have a sense of the relentlessness. Some may feel responsible in undeserving ways. Above all, the people who care want you to stop. They may not consider you cannot, solely because they want you to. Addicts must come to an end of themselves. The cliché is very true.

Control freaks make excellent addicts. I know this subject well. For me, it was largely about control. You can surely call it manipulation if you want. Games. When I realized it was impossible to control things in my sphere, I vowed to control

all that I could.

Cocaine was my drug of choice, hands down. My habit grew more than a hundred dollars a day. Do the math, totaling the ad hoc and connected stuff. I did so much, I needed gallons of booze to come down. Not nearly as expensive as coke, alcohol can be a significant expenditure over time. During long periods, I did coke to maintain on the booze. The drug seemed to slow my mind down, the opposite result for some. My thinking, cocaine allowed me to deal with a world of madness. I led a delirious pack from my run with the prowling hyenas.

I wasn't on antidepressants at the time. Who needed a doctor or a pharmacist? I was diagnosing, treating, and prescribing just fine. I sometimes purchased larger quantities (quarters and half-ounces of cocaine). I never sold drugs. I bought cocaine for personal use and for some appreciative loyal, the ones who condoned my generosity.

Wish someone would have videoed me all wired, I might have seen the absolute stupidity. When using, I seldom looked in the mirror. Guess I knew what I would see. Drinking and drugging professionals have a false sense, thinking they have it together (hugging toilets, strung out for days, acting totally screwy, and looking like death warmed over). I knew the score but thought stopping was impossible. When I looked in the mirror to check my nose for powder and/or blood, I saw a face of horror.

Addicts often say, "You don't understand what I'm going through." Everyone knows you're a bozo except for you. When you are a former addict, seeing it from the other side is no fun. It is disheartening when a loved one succumbs to using and belongs to the robotic asylum. You know they must come to an end of themselves, the lasting cure. How that finally happens is up for grabs.

My so-called friends loved to see me. I was truly a set them up Joe. I knew users who wouldn't throw out any of their stash. I was like Santa Claus with mine. There were the concerned ones. "Don't give your stuff away." I'm certain they were chiefly concerned with what might be their shrinking portions. I became more and more paranoid, distrusting my closest allies. You don't want to hear the truth, not from them. An addict can be the harshest to their most reliable friends. They become disillusioned. One day you need them desperately. The next day, you might slam a door in their face.

I did a large amount of cocaine and had little desire for other drugs. Yet there was plenty of "ice" around. Ice is a form of crystal methamphetamine. More expensive, it didn't supply the rush like coke, at least for me. Many meth heads will disagree. I did ice when that's all there was, or when friends insisted. Some of the coke I had done was rather pure, which induced overly paranoid fits. By the way, not all addicts are typical coke or crack heads. You would be surprised at the number of professionals who partake.

There are so-called experts cooking meth, selling coke in a vicinity near you. All thinking theirs is the best. Ice is fashioned by whacked-out wannabes, brewing a cocktail of volatile chemicals. Many cookers started as meth heads themselves. Should one trust their expertise and poisonous product? Have you seen the external sores that stuff can produce? Imagine the internal damage. One might retrieve some bad cocaine as well, to be fair and reasonable.

For information purposes, the key ingredient for making crystal methamphetamine is the drug, Pseudoephedrine. It is a nasal and sinus congestion medicine. That's why it isn't easily obtained these days for your allergies. I'm inserting this caret from an article I perused in a local newspaper. A Charleston, West Virginia (AP) headline from the Bluefield Daily Telegraph: *"Meth lab numbers up 400 percent in West Virginia since 2008."* Wow! My home state has gone to pot.

Back to the San Antonio area. Knowing a meth head may familiarize you with a potential Xanax abuser. Xanax is a commercial, commonly prescribed, anxiety reducer. It was a mainstay with the meth heads I knew. "It mellows me when I'm tweaking," they would say. Sure thing. I thought booze did that well enough for me.

Ice and Xanax folks exhibit some bizarre behaviors. Particularly, those who smoke methamphetamine. The ones I knew used all kinds of inhaling mechanisms. I'll forgo to elaborate extensively, but the people I knew needed help. I wasn't the best to assist, yet I tried several times. They spent long periods being paranoid. Certain females threw up often, a lovely image. I didn't equate the puking thing. Hope I don't write a series, don't relish recording the most extreme and outlandish material.

There was a meth head who had frequently fortified the front door with most of her furniture. She got up every minute or so,

peering through the window shades. The worst case of paranoia I'd seen. Who could forget? "Sshh, didn't you hear that?" And like clockwork, "I know you heard that."

She would get hostile if I didn't agree. I might say, "It's your imagination, good grief." An eye-opener, even for me and in my condition. I would eventually undo the barricade, then go outside and coax her to confirm.

I might temporarily convince her. "Look, there's no one around."

As she peered, "They might be hiding."

Oh my, shaking my head in disbelief. She downed my buzz. In five minutes, we were back to barricading. Then suddenly, she jumped straight up. "Did you hear that?" Geez! It caused me to reflect on the annoyance I was to others. Many pardons to all.

Let's not forget the weed, which I purchased to supplement drugs and alcohol and to be cool in certain circles. Good grief. Marijuana has become more fecund and potent through the years, while the cost has risen exponentially. I don't see how the young and the old-school function on such high-grade and prolific weed these days. There's little comparison to the dope of yesteryear, unless one had access to certain Columbian blends. In my opinion, marijuana is psychologically addictive. Yet tobacco is physically addictive. It goes without saying, plenty of drug and alcohol users are tobacco users as well.

For a significant stretch, I spent loads of time at my dealer's place. Six nights a week to be exact. On most Sundays he closed. My connection was a decent musician. In fact, several of his friends became local recording artists. He held mini concerts at his place, supplying jams on the weekends. Because I love music, what better scenario? I sang along with Eagle's tunes and golden oldies, such as Otis Redding and Percy Sledge.

I played countless games of pool on my dealer's old and new table. Why not? I had purchased the latter on a compulsive day. Every day is compulsive on cocaine. It's hard to fathom, only a few could regularly beat me at Eight Ball. Talk about proud, I strutted around the table like a rooster. There was always coke, alcohol, weed, music, and billiards. Can't explain how fun it seemed at the time, and it helped to temporarily forget the hurt I had delved.

Showing off wasn't anything new. Don't know how to make this

sound plausible, yet I'll give it a shot. When I had a certain buzz from the confluence of cocaine, alcohol, and weed, I played well at pool, golf, and basketball. At least some of the time. I was lucky, not to have experienced a heart attack playing hoops. I had been aware of the Len Bias tragedy.

One night, we played a game of three-on-three on my dealer's court out back. The lights were always on. Do you think we played basketball for cash? Yup. This may sound farfetched, but some of these guys could ball. Not the type you'd envision as athletically supple. The game was tight, back and forth. We played to fifteen by ones, needing to win by two. The game was still going, nineteen to eighteen. They had the ball for the win. A timeout was called. From a distance, I saw their team snorting. "Let's do it," a teammate said.

This was madcap behavior, having done enough blow already. Regardless, I stayed buzzed on the action. "Forget it, let's win right now."

The game was physical. We weren't going to give up a point easily, and we didn't. The game teetered. One of ours committed a hard foul on one of theirs. Some dude acquired a gash under his eyebrow, which took six sutures later in the ER.

"Play you bunch of wussies," he said.
We told him to stop. "Just blow off our bet man."
My dealer was hyped. "We'll play after a timeout."

He wanted to win and needed to regroup. He was no youngster; I was pushing fifty.

After several minutes, the dude with a laceration came back on the court. He was bandaged. In his hand, a Glock. "Does anyone care to argue about finishing the game?" he said.

We looked at one another, and in choruses: "Nope, nah, no way, heck no, and play ball."

They eventually won. I went off to contemplate. "Let's go inside," Rick H. said.

"In a sec." I gazed at the stars to acknowledge my Creator, having those repeated reminders from the Spirit inside of me.

I went back in to mingle. As I started to relax, a new situation developed. My connection had taken the loss hard, pride and

pocket wise. It was difficult to determine his protective side. He stood behind the bar, making lines. Big ones. One of the other team's players came in with his dog trotting behind. The dog growled at our host. Rut-row. My dealer pulled a .38 special and shot the dog. Pow!

Then he walked over and grabbed the dog by the scruff of his neck, tossing him out like garbage. "I told you, no animals in here." Silence. When I left hours later, the dog was stiff with a hole through his head. I contemplated the night's events in disbelief.

My dealer trusted me to tend his bar and handle his business enterprise. He had been known to crash, leaving me in charge. I know, a scary thought. My head got bigger as time passed, if that's possible. The bad boy lifestyle amped me. Some of it were fear. Strange how fear can be manifested. My life evolved into dangerous territory. I've never cared for guns. I would scrape mano-y-mano but drew the line with firearms and explosives. In reflection, I had been on a powder keg for some time.

We patronized a club on a certain weeknight. It hosted amateur musician's night. Some were semi-professionals. A few were burned out has-beens. A squalid and perilous dive, this place was always overcrowded. In the next chapter, I'll mention a dangerous bar on the north side of San Antonio. It did not compare. This joint was regularly filled with power users, dope dealers, gangbangers, ex-cons, and wannabes. It was located on the southeast side of town. If not for my dealer's association, I would have been foolish to enter the establishment.

A tiny restroom serviced every male. Hard to register the number of dregs in there. The scum of the earth. I wasn't any better. Avoiding confrontation was smart, but it often found me. There were scads of pool tables. Betting was done at one's own risk. Fights broke out for the usual reasons. I was too high and confident to be frightened or to acknowledge an imminent danger. I was in denial. I was rather green, identifying a psychopathic. At least, I was still green about something.

My dealer was upset one night. His girlfriend tried to talk him down. He was having none of it. I got involved. "Butt out man," he said. Okay, since he put it that way. Besides, whiskey shots called. Or was it the dark-eyed senorita at the bar? A few minutes later, I noticed a scuffle in the hallway. Some guy had my connection on the floor and in a headlock. Another dude was kicking him in the ribs. Feeling decisively bold, I walked up to

the guy kicking my lively hood. He turned at me with a blade.

"Get the hell out of here," my dealer said. No need to reply. Much to my chagrin, the senorita had bounced. After shaky moments, my connection came to the table with a pitcher of beer. "It's cool," he said. Apparently, my dealer was selling coke to another dealer's customers, and on his turf. I wondered what I had progressed into. I knew right from wrong. I still knew the difference, barely.

Many nights were sleepless, thanks to a trusted friend, Mr. Cola. While most enjoyed replenishing rest, I used continually. In those days, I had little regard for my health. Some revelation. Since I often went days without sleep, I dozed at inopportune moments. Not only a hazard to me but to others behind the wheel.

One sunny day, I headed down Bandera Road in the afternoon to catch some zzz's. This well-known San Antonio thoroughfare has many stoplights. I functioned fine between traffic lights. Yet when they turned red, I slept from inactivity. Then I was awakened by cars behind, blowing their horns in disgust. I couldn't keep my eyelids open. It wasn't like I'd planned it. Addicts feel they have free reign. Invincible.

Before reaching Loop 1604, a few stop lights prior, a lady got out of her car and tapped on my window. Her look was of concern. "I've been following you for blocks," she said.

"Okay."

To which she replied, "You need to pull over and rest or something."

The lady wanted me to drive into the next lot, to speak with her more. I got paranoid, thinking she had called the cops, so I took off in a hurry. I glanced in the rearview mirror to see her head shaking. The incident woke me enough to get to my apartment.

The price of the next sleepy episode earned me a night in jail. Public Intoxication, a misdemeanor charge. It was late night or early morning and I was still carousing on the northwest side of San Antonio. Can't remember where I had been or where I was headed. I may have been temporarily lost. One of those nights simply driving. Finally, I recognized my surroundings and left the access road. I took the on-ramp to Loop 1604 but was tired

and strung out. I pulled to the side of the ramp for a quick nap. I removed my keys from the ignition. Wise move, yet I parked in the wrong spot.

I was out, dead asleep and dreaming, flying over a luminous sea. I had often dreamt of gliding aloft. An out-of-body experience that transported me to and fro. I always soared in those dreams, with no need for a craft. Only the landscape changed. That night on the ramp; I was flying at night, up and down the coastline of a well-lit metropolis. I wonder what the recurring dream meant. Don't have it anymore, probably a good thing. Impish and rascally ones could be analogous to fallen angels. Just a thought.

Meanwhile, rush hour began on a weekday morning, unbeknown to those in never-land. That is until I heard a faint noise but ignored it to doze off again. The pounding grew intent by my left ear. I opened my eyes to an outline, but the sun blinded full detection. Yeppers, it was the silhouette of a San Antonio Police Officer. Impatient motorists zoomed by, giving me looks and fingers of disdain.

The officer was patient and kind. Given the situation, he was remarkably professional. The cop was going off or coming on duty. Policemen never cease to amaze. They are a trip. "What's the problem sir?" he said.

"I was tired at the wheel, and I didn't want to enter the highway and cause an accident." We discussed some mutual marital issues. He'd been recently divorced and seemed sympathetic, but there was a limit to his compassion. He impounded my car, driving me to the San Antonio Detention Center. I got some much-needed rest in an uncrowded holding cell. The night detainees had been released or moved to the county jail. Sometimes one needs to sleep, regardless of accommodations.

Back at my lonely apartment on the northeast side of town. I was tired and strung out, sick of the addiction sewer. I noticed various ailments cropping up. Severe stomach pains bent me over at times. My headaches were cluster migraines, susceptible to light and noise. By gracious mercy, I passed out from exhaustion. Blood stains appeared on my pillowcase when I made it to the bed. I coughed up blood at various times. I had also experienced diarrhea or no movement at all. My scariest moments, the heart flutters. They throttled intermittently, often racing into the red zone. While pleading for calm, I pondered death. I wanted a normal life, but what in the heck was normal?

I paid some attention to my breakdown in health. The physician in me needed relaxation. Sleep. For a while, I cut back on the cocaine, drinking myself into a stupor. Not the rest I needed. Impatiently, I waited for Don's and Ben's doors to open at ten o'clock in the morning. Those times were excruciatingly long, next to one of my favorite liquor stores. My wait was only minutes. Didn't need the guilt and conviction I'd come to detest. I needed to disengage remembrance of things. I looked at the other sickos, waiting for their medicine. Then I realized, I was one of them.

Finally, the doors opened. Once inside my mood lifted. I was so thankful to the clerk; you'd think I was running for office. My usual half-gallon was Jim Beam. They stocked it in the middle of the display floor, making it difficult to pass each day. According to my need, I might have taken a big slug in the parking lot.

I didn't need much besides my shot glass and a supply of cigs at the apartment. A glass wasn't always necessary, depending on my disposition. I preferred the way the handle felt in my hand. Other times, I attempted to break a personal record of continuous shots, prior to losing count horizontally. Guess that's why I drank alone with my trusted friend, Mr. Floor. Some of us return to floors as adults, yet it doesn't matter what's on TV.

When not passed out, I needed to eat. My cooking passion was put to the test. I merrily created, inebriated in song. I made a variety of pasta dishes. I loved to experiment with herbs and spices. Choosing the right entree challenged. I opted for poultry often (grilled or roasted chicken), which I marinated in ginger and white vinegar. For beef, I preferred Worcestershire or Soy Sauce. I like fish butter-crust and brushed with a lemon-pepper seasoning. A Parmesan/garlic blend works as well.

Suppose it fortunate, I never torched the apartment building. By the time I completed the feast, my hunger pangs had subsided. So, I offered my neighbor a healthy portion. She was a pleasant lady. One I respected, having single parented while her hubby served in Iraq. Thanks for your friendship. I apologize for the clamor you were forced to endure.

I walked to the apartment's office building when not boozing extensively, where I visited staff. I used those occasions to look at various job sites. To draft poetry. By the way, the name

of the apartment complex, The Villages at Lost Creek. How appropriate was that? I was one of the early tenants, living in Building 7. Mercy, I was far from perfect. My intention is not blasphemous here. I just realized the irony, and this happens to be Chapter Seven. Numerology is a fascinating study. Another time.

Plenty of times, I got questionable urges for long rides in my car. A black, custom Nissan Maxima SE with gray leather interior, titanium accents, spoiler, and aluminum wheels. Most of those senseless rides occurred at night. During a typical day, I'd snorted enough coke to sedate a woolly mammoth. My Bose system was queued with: Creed, Nirvana, Nine Inch Nails, Soundgarden, Metallica, and Aerosmith. I seldom grew tired of the Toxic Twins (Steven Tyler & Joe Perry). I also listened to Savage Garden when in a mood.

I developed a bond with Scott Stapp, lead vocalist for Creed and the son of a Pentecostal dentist. In my distorted world, he was cool and righteous. I thought we shared similar backgrounds. When one knows as many gospel hymns as rock lyrics they may be in a quandary. I've memorized both and I'm amazed to recall them now.

Creed was a favorite of mine during the mid-2000. I had friends who never understood my affinity for the band. Stapp's songwriting and vocals skills are underrated. You think it had something to do with my buzz? Creed sure sounded good in my car.

On one of those long rides, I'd traveled to the southwest side of town. The part of San Antonio I knew least about. I just drove, getting lost in the process. I've always been good at directions, so I never worried. That night, I had my ex-wife and kids in mind and missed them extraordinarily so.

On an unfamiliar road, and all the sudden, some guy zooms past. His horn sounded. He and his girlfriend motioned something. Difficult to make out, I forgot about it. In a few minutes, they came by again, making similar hand gestures. I ignored them. More time passed. In the rearview mirror, I saw lights flashing with on and off high beams. A horn blared. It was the same couple. Agitated, I considered the situation dangerous.

I pulled over; he did likewise. When I got out, I realized what had happened. I'd been driving in the wrong direction on a divided highway, thinking I traveled a two-way access road. There are many of those in Texas, one-way and two-way. Suddenly,

the gestures made sense. Didn't know it, but they had called the cops. From a distance, the blue lights of a police cruiser approached. Oh no, I grinded my teeth.

The only positive factor, I wasn't driving as he arrived. The keys were firmly in my pocket, so I wouldn't be charged with a DWI or DUI. The couple drove off. The officer had briefed them. "Do you know what's going on?" the officer said. "Yes sir, thought I was on the access road. I'm unfamiliar with the area and it's dark out here."

Because it was a remote highway with minimal traffic it was believable. The officer said, "I can't let you drive home." He noticed my address, considering its distance. "What are you doing out here?" he said.

"I was recently divorced and needed to go for a ride, to clear my head."

The incident was sobering. "I'll follow you to a hotel, then you can stay the night," he said.

"I'm out of cash and need to get home tonight." He just peered at me. I tried to ensure him. Besides, my credit cards were nearly maxed. You may not believe this, but I'm being truthful. I bargained with the officer, proving my point. "If I drive well, with you following for a mile or two, will you let me go on home?" The officer hadn't agreed, just yet. Skeptical, he waited. There was no other traffic out there, and it was the middle of the night. Well...I passed the test, making it safely home. What a huge sigh of relief! Unbelievable.

Luck wasn't always my friend. Another night, I'd just left my dealer's house. It was in the wee hours and I was looking to buy cigarettes. I made a left into the center turn lane, having sighted a store. I noticed a small red car from the opposite direction. She too had entered the center turn lane, delivering a late-night pizza. We met head-on; my hood flew open. I drove onto a grassy area, no room to pull over directly.

An officer received a distress call. The lady in the red car described her version to the officer.

"He was taking off," she reported.

"That was not my intention," I said. I needed to get off the road safely. Besides, my hood was stuck open."

Looking sheepish, "How was I going to take off?" I said.

She complained about an injury, something with her neck. Yikes, I thought. Respectfully, I attempted to convince another officer of my partial innocence. He planned to charge me with a felony, Failure to Stop and Render Aid. Although, an injury was never confirmed nor reported to my insurance company. Hmm. She must have been unharmed that night.

I was able to convince the officer, to an extent. He reluctantly changed the charge to a misdemeanor, Failure to Stop and Render Information. I was fortunate but not entirely. I earned another night in the San Antonio Detention Center. I was bailed out by Rick H. the next day. Only a good friend will bail you out of jail more than once.

Reflecting that night, I knew my situation was dire. I needed help, not wanting to hurt anyone with negligence. My biggest problem was cocaine. Alcohol ranked closely behind. I had gone more and more into isolation. When an addict isolates, look out, they are in trouble. I hated what I'd become, not knowing how to fix it. I wasn't sure I wanted to be fixed. I asked myself in pity and hopelessness, does my life even matter? Does anyone care about me?

Chapter 8 Detoxing and Relapsing

My oldest son, Jay, wanted to chat on the patio at our house in Sunrise Canyon. I knew it was a serious matter because of his formal demeanor. He prepared to leave for Japan, to teach English in a male technical school. His aim was to convince me into seeking professional assistance for my addictions. I didn't get help immediately, but it was his genuine concern that guided me toward detox. I was proud of his courage, yet embarrassed for the situation I'd put him in. A short time later, on a cloudy July fourth weekend, I was ready to seek the help I sorely needed. Rick H. drove me to the county hospital. My youngest son, Ricky, met us in the emergency room. I didn't want to imagine, facing the inevitable alone.

My detox occurred on San Antonio's northwest side, the medical center complex and close to the rehab facility where Smitty was employed. I felt a growing sickness in the ER waiting room. Hadn't gone that long without a drink or snort of something. I sat in misery, dreading the next days and weeks. I feared a life without drugs and alcohol. I was cold then hot. After that, I became nauseous.

Every now and then the paramedics brought in critical accident victims, trumping the triage priority queue. Other addicts arrived in worse shape and not breathing on their own. Next to me sat a sick little boy.

"Are you okay mister?"

Not knowing what to say, "I don't feel right pal."

"I'm sorry sir." He was as sincere as he could be.

That is sobering to admit in front of an ill child. Ricky looked at me, assuming I wasn't aware of his feelings. You never want to see a similar look of concern on a son's or daughter's face. Wish I could have completely shielded my family from those times.

After fourteen gut-wrenching hours, without substances, they admitted me to the evaluation wing. In there, I experienced DTs. They put me in a small room with a bed, a chair, and a trash can. I recall the trash can, specifically. It was like twenty snakes protruded from inside. The best description is akin to Medusa's head of vipers from classical lore. I went through a period of imaginary creeping crawlers. When half-lucid, I thought about loved ones. The memory of that room is nightmarish. Having been there a short time, it seemed to never end.

After someone checked my vitals, a shrink stood by my bed. He asked all the standard questions. "How long, how much, and do you want to hurt anyone?" Then he said, "Have you thought about killing yourself lately?" The way I felt was a good time to consider death. The shrink must have stayed longer. He did say, "There's a chance you'll be released."

I pleaded, "Please don't do that, sir." I worried. Obviously, I was in the right place. While taking deep breaths, I waited in desperation. Finally, a gurney arrived for my lift to the eighth floor. The wing was reserved for addicts and such. I overheard talk about the floor above. The ninth floor was reserved for exceptions, the nut cases.

"I'm not crazy," I told the nurse.

"I know dear," she said.

The nurses were professional, well-versed in addiction care. Some were kind and compassionate. Others, not as nice and gentle. One took my signs, then hooked me to IVs. I never considered this stage of detox and wasn't brave enough to think beyond the next minute. What were my choices? In a moment or two, I felt appreciably better. The IVs sedated, legally. I was so relieved; I passed out. Who knows for how long?

Awake, I felt a strong urge to get up and stretch. After lying around for a day or two hooked to Ativan and Librium drips, you get a little restless. I wanted a cigarette badly, so I asked the busy yet patient nurse, "May I get up and walk around?" I used persuasive skills, but to no avail.

"No sir." I pictured my sister's face, Nurse Debbie.

The nurse feared I would hurt myself, or one of them. Found out later it was policy. I eventually coaxed a nurse into letting me

stretch. One said, "Are you sure you're able?"

With no hesitation, I answered, "Yes maam." Much depending on how stable I had seemed. I was grateful for the nurse with mercy, and she was charming. After a couple of days, I became ultra-uncomfortable. I wanted, no needed, something else. They turned up the drips. I was out of it again. You can't imagine the restless pain, unreasonable fears, and vivid dreams. I hadn't experienced such hurt and shame. I can't write about it more because I'm unsure about the progression.

After two weeks, I felt human. It had been a long time since. A doctor tried to convince me to the ninth floor for an additional evaluation. Grrr. The family wasn't available, so it was left to discretion (clearance from the staff). After sixteen days, I was released to my best friend's care, unsure and needing to move forward.

My first craving was for a Marlboro. During those last few days of detox, I could go outside for a smoke, unable to kick the habit. I smoked cigarettes regularly at Rick H's house. Reds. Their strong, full flavor provided respite. I wanted to remain sober; I really did. I tried to communicate with my ex-wife, but she was having none of it. For a week, I did nothing but watch television like a frightened hermit.

The next couple of weeks were horrific. I wasn't cured, the panic attacks increased. I didn't know the extent of my problem. Was I having withdrawals or simply freaking out from sobriety? Panic overwhelmed me. Rick H. didn't know what to do. I wasn't sure, but it hadn't kept me from devising a solution. I paced around his house and walked outdoors for a mile or two. Inside felt safer. Reading and praying helped considerably. Comprehension was often an issue, however.

It's hard to describe the panic attacks, they were incredible with intensity. It was like trying to process a hundred thoughts at once. I wasn't very rational. There was little slack from the craziness in my head. I needed help, but nothing sounded reasonable. I didn't want to drink alcohol. The thought of it scared me into a panic. I wanted a tranquilizer, needing to be zonked into la-la land. That's where I felt safe.

Underneath it all, I suffered from severe depression for who knows how long. Had I gone to the ninth floor as suggested, I may have been properly diagnosed. Didn't think I had such a problem, but my thinking wasn't trustworthy. Duh. After all the

years of self-medicating, it made better sense in retrospect. I didn't think about it then, but I've wondered about the need for meds all along.

It was a matter of time before the temptations returned. Figured I could handle a drink, more loser logic. Yet I wasn't stupid enough to dip into cocaine. I had overcome strong drinking urges for weeks. I eventually resumed, but only in the form of beer. I normally drank shots of whiskey, tequila, or vodka with beer. You know already. My rational, if I drank beer, all would be fine. Don't be fooled by such leaky defense. Addicts aren't rational people. I knew plenty of alcoholics that drank only beer and wine. They guzzled it well. So, had I for a month, until I graduated to Guinness and stronger brews.

Wasn't long before I was back at the liquor store, buying half-pints of Crown, Jack, or Jim Beam. How much could eight ounces of medicine hurt? Half-pints turned full, and fifths became quarts. There is always a relevant scripture passage. Proverbs 26:11 (NIV): *"As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool repeats his folly."* Half-gallon bottles were more my speed anyway. Why mess around with tiny bottles? Drinking again, unconscionable. My mind slipped a few more noodles. I must attempt to inject humor along the way, and I hope you'll understand the irony.

Chapter 9 Golf, Bars, Invincibility

I grew up playing golf at the Elks Club in Princeton, WV. A hilly layout, the Elks hosted some of our high school matches. The others were held at the Pipestem Championship Course in Summers County where I carded my first sub-eighty round (shot 77 at the age of twenty-two). I love the game but I'm foregoing the passion to complete this story. I still play at Pipestem with Dad, Sandy, and Dennis. It is nice to play again after such a long layoff. The best part is to spend time with my father at something we both enjoy.

Before an addiction to cocaine, I had played golf in multiple states on some serious layouts. In high school, Basil's parents took me to play Pinehurst No. 2 in North Carolina. They maintained a summer home along one of the resort's fairways. The late Payne Stewart won a U.S. Open on the pine tree lined course. They also had taken me to play Muirfield Village Golf Club in Dublin, Ohio. It had just opened in the early 70s. The Jack Nicklaus Memorial Tournament, not yet a PGA stop. A recurring swing fault made it tough going on a drizzly day. That is a difficult course when you don't strike it solidly.

I've played golf in California, South Carolina, Virginia, and Colorado. The ball flies farther in Denver. While working for the Capital Group, I played near Los Angeles, a Diamond Bar layout. I mostly played a course that has since closed in Brea, CA. The longest rounds I've played took place in the Golden State. Certain foursomes seem to analyze every shot with their playing partners.

While on the West Coast, I dreamed of playing Pebble Beach on the Monterey Peninsula. Besides Augusta National, my second preference of all. The Masters inspired much of this chapter. It's great television and one of the best sporting events in my

estimation. Unless, that is, my beloved Mountaineers were to play for a national title in football or basketball.

I've primarily played golf in Texas, and on every course in the San Antonio area except the new TPC Course where the Texas Open is now played. I've played La Cantera, a good challenge. A layout that hosted The Texas Open after it was discontinued at Oak Hills. Some pros disliked the hilly terrain at La Cantera. Don't think they were thrilled with the seventh hole. A Fiesta Texas roller coaster, The Rattler, looms in the background.

Tiger never went back to La Cantera after finishing second his rookie season, nor have the mega crowds. The Palmer Course is adjacent to La Cantera. I played it in gusty wind and with their greens running twelve on the Stimpmeter. Thanks for taking me, Mike P. I did not forget you or your better half, Bonnie.

I loved the expertly manicured and slick greens of Oak Hills. If you remember Lyndy's, the entrance to Oak Hills CC is across the street. One may not know a course is tucked back there. It is set among aged oaks and old money homes. The Champions Tour held an annual event on the track for years. The seniors appreciated its tradition and walkable layout. I've always considered it tough. One needs to be good with the longer irons. I never had a great round at Oak Hills, due to the unforgiving Bermuda rough. When missing a green, the ball settles in "alfalfa." If you get a clubface on the ball, you still can't predict its outcome. When putting those greens, don't have the yips. Oak Hills incorporates a par three at the finishing hole.

The Champions Tour, once called the Senior Tour, was once played at The Dominion. Some of San Antonio's elite live along its fairways. You better be careful on some shots. One might need to apologize for hitting their ball into a courtyard. Fore.

For ordinary fun, I preferred The Quarry. It got its name from an abandoned rock quarry. The front nine is more of a link design. It's not easy. One can see the entire backside from the clubhouse. It is challenging to pick the right club. You feel no wind below, so the ball flight deceives. One may come up short, thinking they'd stuck it pin high. In August, it's extremely arid within the granite enclosed backside.

I've played many fun rounds at Canyon Springs and Silver Horn. Other than the munies, I've played these tracks the most. Canyon Springs is cut from the Texas Hill Country, close to US 281 and Evans Rd. Silverhorn is tucked between Bitters and Blanco Roads.

Not many courses contain holes like number one at Canyon, a drivable par four. Plenty of trouble, unless you happen to drive the green, then you'll have the clubhouse as a witness. I've made some exciting threes and some disparaging sixes. Canyon's last hole is a good one. Not an easy par four, the green is difficult. Enjoy the waterfall, but if you're long with your approach, watch for snakes. Hiss.

SilverHorn has a drivable yet tricky par four on the backside. I've driven it right in front and still struggled to make par. The entire track is a challenge. If your tee shot wavers, you'll be in for a day of chipping out. The fairways are tree-lined, and water lurks at strategic locations. I holed out for an eagle on eighteen once. I was hitting a gap wedge from the bottom of the rise, but never saw it go in. I played with friends, Ron F, and John S. Say hello to Elaine and Lavon fellas.

When a new course opens, I rarely get excited. Courses need to mature. An exception, out Highway 90 on San Antonio's outskirts. I believe it's toward Del Rio. The Golf Club of Texas is a good layout. When it opened, you might find "*The Iceman*" (George Gervin a Spurs legend) and other teammates there. I obtained an autographed #44 pennant for my son, Ricky. Gervin is a gracious man. One might have seen him around town, his head protruded from the sunroof of a silver and black Porsche. I liked The Golf Club of Texas, and they had a fine bar. Lee Trevino's son was pro out there for a while.

Speaking of bars, The Hyatt Hill Country Resort & Golf Club maintains Charlie's Long Bar. There you'll find a copper-topped counter (fifty-six feet in length). Their tequila selection was the best in San Antonio. The Capital Group is near Westover Hills. We often started happy hour at the Hyatt before migrating to Lyndy's. The resort hosted colleagues from California on business in San Antonio. We often ate the brisket and smoked turkey at Rudy's Barbeque close by. Ron Wong loved the cream corn. RIP Ron. Thanks for helping me obtain a job at the Capital Group.

How did I get back about drinking? Oh well, some things die slowly. Back to golf. Tapatio Springs, out I-10 by Boerne, expanded to twenty-seven holes. I played the new nine once. An interesting concept, providing a choice of back-nines. The new nine needed time to grow. After dark, the long ride home tested me.

I would be remiss not to mention hundreds of Saturday and Sunday

rounds played with my good friend Paul L. at Fort Sam Houston's two courses, La Loma and Salado Del Rio. Though we played those layouts the most together, we also played the other courses mentioned in the San Antonio area.

So many San Antonio golf courses are worthy to mention. Pardon me, if I've sounded like a spokesman for the city's Parks and Recreation Department. As I sank deeper into addiction, I found myself playing less expensive golf courses. Mostly, Cedar Creek. Since resigning at CG in late 2004, I had plenty of spare time on my hands.

Not working led to more golf nonsense, so I joined Woodlake Country Club to play unlimited rounds. Which was minimal, thirty-six holes a day. The location and price were kosher. Another factor, consistently fast putting surfaces. Those who putt decently appreciate quick and breaking greens. Makes the game more pleasurable. Under pressure, it separates the pretenders. Ben Crenshaw won his first PGA tournament at Woodlake in 1973, The Texas Open. My handicap came down to a five while I was paid my member dues. I heard Woodlake CC closed. That is a shame.

Several buddies were sick about golf as well, gambling each time out. We gambled against each other, other partners, and you name it. It took time to figure our bets over drinks at the end of the day. I'd never gambled this way. You could always stir up a high-roller or two. It had gotten so wild, after multiple presses, a hole swelled to a thousand or more. Not chump change.

When I learned to draw the golf ball, my game changed dramatically. By making your ball draw/hook (goes right to left for a right-handed golfer), you can manipulate a variety of shots. The over-spin from a draw provides a longer carry. I can't take credit for learning this on my own. It began with the patient instruction from a friend. My pro's name was Bradley. He didn't teach me a draw, per se. He taught me: grip, ball position, stance, take away, shoulder turn, spine angle, staying behind the ball, releasing the clubface, and rotating the forearms at follow-through.

With endless hours of practice, I learned to shape shots, hitting with power and accuracy. A by-product of swinging from the inside with a lag. If you ingrain it and maintain a decent short game, it's easier to go low. I learned to chip well, missing many greens. When my putter got hot, I could play with most accomplished amateurs.

At Woodlake, and traditional layouts with doglegs, one needed to work the ball. The trouble with playing a predominant draw, a cut/slice is harder to hit (goes left to right for a right-handed golfer). The sidespin from a cut provides less carry. A sliced ball skirts more directly to the right when it lands, leading to trouble. When my draw was working, I ripped a high sweeper over and around the doglegs.

The first hole at Woodlake, a straight away par four. The green was narrow and sloped from back to front. If fortunate to birdie, then I was off to the races. The fifth's par five was a tough approach. The pond in front of the green claimed many balls and discarded clubs. The par three sixth was all carry and over a lake inhabited by nutria. At first, I thought they were enormous rats.

Number eight, left to right, but it was possible to sweep a draw over and through. Then one might have found themselves in front with a flop shot for an easy bird. The par five ninth had water on the right and left, so you picked your poison from the tee. A sand wedge approach may have spun back from an elevated putting surface, leaving the same shot (three putts, common). You might need a stiff one inside to regroup and press on.

Number ten was such a great hole. A lake to the right and OB stakes on the left. I loved the challenge of its severely sloped green. The highest point on the course, having naturally the slickest green. What made it extra fun, a fresh bump from the locker room (bump: a snort or two of cocaine). Just being truthful.

The twelfth and sixteenth were often adversarial, demanding par fours with tricky greens. I hit some of my best middle irons to number seventeen, a par three. On downwind days it was like stopping your ball on a tabletop. The eighteenth was a tough driving hole with an equally tough second shot. It was a difficult par five, particularly into the wind. I lost some moolah on that blasted hole.

Because my game was weirdly decent, while drinking and doing cocaine, I planned to play in the San Antonio Men's Amateur at Mission del Lago. It was years beyond my best rounds at Willow Springs in the same event. I wondered aloud, "Could I shoot in the 70s again?"

Prior to the start of the tourney, I vaguely sensed what it was

like to play sober. Needing some positives, I reminisced. The confidence from Willow's third had left my score at one under par. I'd birdied the first. Then I had survived one of the longest par fives' in the US, number two, a 662-yard monster. Number two's green is protected in front by a large sand trap. An ancient oak shields the left side's surface. One needs to hit a towering approach or draw it inside of the tree-lined right. In either case, you must stop it dead. The thicket lurks densely right, just behind the green. There is no getting to that green in two. If you hit a 300-yard sweeping draw, and a solid second, you might think birdie from a well-positioned iron.

I replayed that hole, shot by shot. I would prepare my mind for Mission del Lago afterward. As I stood on the tee of Willow's intimidating second, the shot I wanted had formed in my mind. Methodically, I went through my pre-shot routine. My tee shot stopped around 275, avoiding the water hazard on the left side. Couldn't afford to miss it right, the woods cost you stroke and distance.

For my second shot, I had laced a solid three-metal at around 230. It stopped left of green-lighting position, so I faced a lofted approach. Which meant I needed to come in steep, crushing an eight iron from 155. I had barely missed clearing the highest oak limb. My third shot glanced into the trap. Nervously, I blasted out and left myself a twenty-footer with sand in my eye.

The heat was beating down on that muggy day. The mixture of sunscreen and sweat made the putt harder to conceive. My anxiety increased, having waited on a playing partner in the woods. I never take much time with a putt; over-thinking creates doubt. Time to put a smooth stroke on it. With a final look, I had stepped over my ball and knocked it in with my Cameron Newport. "Yeah," charging forward to the third tee. Noe, a playing partner, high-fived me. We were also friends, the partying type.

That was the best competitive par I have ever played. It gave me the confidence to shoot in the 70s. The competition was fierce. The winner and runner-up scored in the mid to higher 60s. A point of reference. There is a big difference between shooting 85 and 75. Going from 75 to 65, an astronomical improvement. That's why few make it to the bigs. I was realistic about my limitations, for once in life.

My last San Antonio Men's Amateur was played at Mission del Lago. A golf course with familiarity. Its link style can lull you to sleep. I had practiced but my old crutches were fully

ingrained. Rolling Oaks Practice Center and Sports Bar became the place to hone my skills. Bradley, the guy who taught me a draw, was a pro out there. I would be under his careful eye. I didn't count on his scrutiny regarding personal affairs. Thought I'd play well, even in my hapless condition.

Bradley experienced misfortune with something or the other, but he had played in a couple of tour events. He told me about the Houston Open, at The Woodlands, which is now called the Shell Houston Open. It is currently played in Humble, Texas. I watched Brad hit irons for hours before I'd ever met him. Never saw him miss a shot.

I approached him one day. "I love your swing."

"Thanks," he grinned.

"Would you consider helping me with my game?"

"Not like that," he said.

"Pardon me."

"I'll be glad to help you, not while you're buzzed."

Was it so apparent? Always to others, rarely to oneself. I considered Bradley's words, then left to hit a bucket down the range. He may not have known that when sponged and dosed, it focused me (laser-like). After the first bucket, I went to the restroom for a couple of bumps. Heading back to the range, I hit my wedge to the 100-yard flag. Ignoring Brad's words, I fell into a groove. Must have hit twenty balls within ten feet of the other. Hey, cool. I turned back to the facility to see if Bradley had seen my swing from the porch. Likely.

Time to impress him with my driver. "Watch this Brad," I said to myself. Took out the big stick to hit a dozen good drives, straight and long. I turned to check for his admiration. He must have gone inside. I finished the bucket with my Ping three-metal. I saw Bradley as I was leaving. He nodded, "Why did you stop hitting the wedge?"

"That's my routine."

"Your routine is wedge to driver?"

He had me, busted. "Guess I wanted to impress you."

"Aha," he said. Then he added, "Think I'll be able to help you, but we'll work with your middle irons."

Then it hit me, I'd always seen him practicing with his Ben Hogan blades, with the precision of a machine. Lovely high draws, landing more softly than anyones.

"Can you teach me to draw it like that?"

"First things first and remember what I told you."

"Okay, thanks."

Bradley helped me, but he knew I still imbibed and such. We continued each week, becoming friends. I enjoyed his company and loved to talk golf with him. But I was jealous of his sobriety and appeal to the ladies. We talked about women when not focused on golf. He gave golf lessons to several lookers. It was plain to see the attraction, his gentle nature and incredible swing.

Bradley gave me a look when I reeked of beer, whiskey, or weed. He rarely said much, except for one night. A country friend was drunk, hitting practice balls with my Ping three-metal. Everyone coveted that stick, a limited design. It must have been one of a kind in San Antonio. I had obtained it through a bootlegger in Arizona. Ping Golf (Karsten Manufacturing) is in Phoenix, AZ.

Country was a decent golfer, but way too juiced. I didn't like it when others used my clubs. He had a certain charm, and he had an audience and loved it.

"You should stop before it's damaged," I told Country. He challenged me. Then he positioned a ball in his stance. Another hard swing. Whack.

He ignored me still. An extremely hard swing. WHACK. I was angered. "Stop you idiot!"

In Country's hick delivery, "Uuhhh. It'll be aw'right." Then he added, "Watch yurr prop'blm?"

I'll show you sucker. We went to blows, verbally and physically, in view of everyone. Bradley pulled me aside and commenced with a spirited tongue lashing. I knew it must have been awful for him to unleash. For his sake, I walked away broiling. "I'll see you next week," Bradley said. Anger was another issue, having mixed blood. Heard I was a blend of English, Irish, and Scottish. My anger has significantly diminished over the years. Wisdom? Anyway, pride and anger don't mix well.

Ready or not, on to the amateur at Mission del Lago. It is located on the south side of San Antonio, a course where you regularly hear distant gunfire. I assumed it was from the nearby SAPD Academy or a rural neighborhood. Try not to let things spook me, but I have been known as rabbit ears. My friends are

saying, we know.

Mitchell Lake's foulness drifted with a wind shift. The course played hard and fast from tee to green, normal conditions for South Texas. The SA Golf Association's tent was adjacent to the first tee. It gave Mission del Lago a different look, very official. I checked in to receive my scorecard, pin sheet, and local rules. The tees had been pushed back. The vicinity buzzed with excitement. Not much stoked me more than a real event. Competition and the heat of battle. Those with approaching tee-times readied, pacing in nervous fashions. I marked my golf balls with a black Sharpie, arranging the dots to form a triangle. It's a golf thing. Not in a scholarly regard, ala Maslow's hierarchy.

I vowed not to watch the preceding group, but I did anyway. It's just a game. Right off the bat, I witnessed anxiousness from a participant who'd teed it up. His backswing, way too quick. It caused him to snap it left.

"Ooo."

"Out," someone said.

He tees another. A smoother takeaway.

The spectators, "Ah, oh no."

Expletive. He yanked it long and left. Out again.

The butterflies come naturally with the first tee jitters, even for the pros. They'll admit it. "What a start," I mumbled.

You have just experienced a seasoned golfer hitting two consecutive tee shots, out of bounds, far left. Those hooks sailed over a barbed wire fence, onto grazing land. The first hole intimidates and punishes early miscues. A thicket looms right and a stagnant drainage ditch guards the left side. Either may swallow an errant shot. TMI. I know, but it is vital information for an avid golfer.

It is hard to recover from a dreaded start. That poor guy's penalties left him hitting his fifth shot from the tee. Wish I hadn't seen him flip it left multiple times. He carded a disheartening score on the first hole. Possibly, a quad. A quadruple bogey is an eight on a par four hole. Ugh.

I wanted to hit a nice draw on the same tee shot, leaving me a buck-fifty out (150 yards from the green). Then sticking my approach within the shadow of the pin. An easy birdie...tweet-tweet. Golfology.

The previous one's misfortune played over in my mind. Weighing my chances, I considered going back to the clubhouse for a bump. But I resisted. My tee time was minutes away. Best not, may get "DQ-ed" (disqualified). Well, I survived my tee shot on number one. But I bogeyed the hole with a three-putt. Birdied the par five second. My round went downhill from there, struggling to make pars the rest of the way. I made one more bird on a fluke chip-in at number sixteen.

To score in the 70s, improbable that weekend. My score found the 80s. Not too bad, considering. Needed more help, so I did more coke and extra booze. Shot lower the next day, but higher the last two days. Such is golf. Are you kidding? I had no business competing. Didn't get a chance to play in the amateur for a while, because I would be somewhere else.

I told Bradley, the following week, "I'll be back someday." That was the last time I saw him, until years later at a different range. He sported the same beautiful swing. I was in no condition to play at Mission, sick with dependencies. It's one thing to play that way with friends, and another to play in an official event. Those guys in the top flights played some serious golf.

Certain SAGA participants have made it on various pro tours. Some with stints on the PGA Tour. The area pros, who I had the pleasure to meet Cameron Beckman (played with him at The Bandit in New Braunfels, TX), Ray Caldwell and Anthony Rodriguez (played with them at Cedar Creek in San Antonio). Jimmy Walker (my son, Ricky, and I played with him at a club near San Antonio). It is great to see Jimmy Walker's name on PGA leader boards. It's likely he will win multiple times with a major or more.

When not playing golf, I funded bars in the area. I stopped in for a drink at a San Antonio northside establishment where a trio of sisters were employed. What's the deal with multiple sisters in this story? I can't explain it rationally. Anyway, their mother tended bar there as well. Can you spell quadruple trouble?

The bar was close to Rick H's house. Convenient. My apartment was seven miles away. This club made better sense when I moved in with Rick later. The bar was owned by a man with more pride than a muster of peacocks. My kind of guy. The description of the pub is easy. It is in the corner of a strip mall, having a

crimson decor. And with a smell I had come to recognize, an oddly evocative one. I wondered about the color scheme of red. "*Warning Will Robinson*," you remember, "*Lost in Space*." Forget it.

This place had an established crowd. Not friendly with outsiders, at least, in the beginning. Pictures of the owner from his heyday lined walls. As well as shots of celebrities and media types. A couple had been snapped with the owner, Mr. Ego. Other photos were of little interest to me.

"Time hasn't been good to him," I said to a patron.

"Mind your own business," he said.

Uh-huh...so it's gonna be like that, I thought.

I didn't know what I was getting into, receiving chilly receptions for a week. Attempts to kindle conversations resulted in icy shoulders. Sensed I should leave. The thing about alcohol, some folks can't help but to turn cordial with sufficient doses of medicine.

I got along well with the band, with two of them. They performed rather decently. They knew I loved music, so it won me over to their creative sides. I tipped them with preferred drinks between sets, aiding my cause. Whatever that was.

On to the bartending trio of sisters. Unlike my sisters, these girls partied. Did they ever party? I don't know why I watched out for them, feeling responsible for their welfare. Divorced, I needed someone to care about, but I found them in the wrong place at the right time. Or was it the other way around? I felt certain they needed my help.

I've never grown accustomed, seeing women treated like property. It riles me. But maybe I hadn't understood the demographic profile of this joint. I didn't know that some women were okay with such crap, putting up with stuff for extra spending money. Just saying.

What on earth was I doing? These gals were younger and faced addiction issues themselves. Not to mention relationship issues I knew zero about. It didn't keep me from sticking my nose in the middle of their businesses.

As with all bars/clubs, this place had regulars. Politics and drama follow, day and night. There was a section of seats at the bar called "The Row." It was reserved for the bar elite.

Seriously, no joshing. I hadn't seen a thing like it before, but I knew better than to diminish one's standing. I aspired to sit there one day. The nutcase I had become.

So, I began a campaign. Later that evening, I told Rick H, "I'm going to sit on the row one day."

He gave me the "Really?" look.

Don't be fooled, thinking bars are havens. They peddle vats of alcohol to unpredictable people. This bar could be a dangerous place. I had overheard that certain convicts were among its regulars. Here's likely proof of that notion. I was once held at gunpoint, in the restroom, by one of the so-called elites. He didn't appreciate my patronage. Moreover, one friendly with the help.

"Do you know who I am?" he asked.

"Uh...no," I'm thinking of giving him the "Really?" look. Not a good time. Would you believe it? A loss for words. I eventually uttered, "That gun isn't necessary."

"Are you testing me man?"

"No way." I maintained nervous eye contact.

He relaxed, then explained. "That bartender," the one I had spoken to, "she and I have this thing."

"Is that so?"

"Oh, yeah." He sorta smiled.

Found out later, they did have something once upon a time. So, I needed to play along with the machismo thing. "I was striking up a friendly conversation with her. You know, getting acquainted for stronger drinks." We came to an understanding, kind of. The owner had become fond of me in his own contrary way. He discouraged that fellow's angst against me. I didn't care too much for Mr. Ego before then. I wondered why. Maybe because I saw too much of myself in him.

There were certainly other deviants lurking. One was a likable yet arrogant billiards hustler, who nurtured a protective side. He traveled with two back-watching sidekicks, both adept at the skill game. We formed an eccentric alliance. Hustler displayed mild qualities, but I never trusted him completely. You just get a feeling with certain characters. An innate intuition for those

with twisted agendas.

Hustler once used a tempter's snare, "Here's your forty dollars." During that time, I was adrift. No kidding, double-duh. I was virtually out of it in several ways. I competed on pool tables a little too loaded. Grateful for Hustler's shrewdness, I refused the forty smackers. "You won it fair and square." I wasn't aware of being schmoozed for bigger bucks. That's how pride ridden I had become. I would compete with anyone, anywhere.

A simple addict, I was accepting of most. Not that I couldn't redneck if called into action. Hustler and I had a run-in one night, which led us to the parking lot. Where he spotted the cops, "Another time, I gotta go." Found out from a reliable source, he was on probation. I didn't want to know why. Hustler stopped coming around. Neither had his comrades.

Regarding the stories behind the trio of bartending sisters, the first was an important ally. I'll call her, Sister-One. Deceptively attractive, she was. The night we met; I was deeply involved with cocaine. She quickly introduced me to Red Snapper shots. They were tasty. I ordered two with each successive double. I didn't know what they were beyond her recommendation. I knew it contained Crown Royal, enough pertinent information. They were sort of sweet and spicy, an acquired taste. Acquiring my taste took seconds.

Sister-One was a highly trained listener. My saddest stories interested her, or it could have been my wallet. I've always tipped decently. I helped her close the bar at 2:00 a.m. We'd go on to her home where I sometimes crashed on the sofa. That was if we had come in from the garage, smoking who knows what and hashing life from A to Z. We gabbed for hours, sometimes till dawn. She preferred to smoke ice but would do coke if that's all there was. She loved beer and cigarettes. Both needed to be available, twenty-four-seven.

Sister-One's girlfriend wanted to kick my butt from day one. Said she didn't trust me. Suspicious was overly jealous, not wanting us getting too chummy. She appeared capable of handling some guys in a scrape. Suspicious and I discussed their situation and then we mutually agreed, I was no longer a threat.

Sister-One seemed distracted most days. She kept me guessing about her state of mind. Something preoccupied her to the point, she needed reeled in. Which turned critical when she begged to

drive my car with extreme velocity. She was an adrenaline junkie. More than my custom golf clubs, I was extra-protective of my custom ride. Sister-One lived a demanding life. She took her job seriously, however. She rarely called in sick and kept the customers happy. There weren't bartenders more efficient. It took a lot to pry a genuine smile from her. Few knew of her underlying playfulness. Kindness.

People had wrongly determined we were an item. Likely, because we hung out traditionally. We were more like sibs or pals. Sister-One was troubled with a thing I knew little about. I had wondered what she was really like behind the substances she abused. The psychologist in me.

Sister-Two was an enticing lady. Diminutive and superbly sweet. Her way easily attracted guys. I was extra protective of her docile nature. I wondered if it was largely a facade. Bars aren't the best places to discover peaceful souls. I'm sure her sisters were aware of my admiration, but they never accused me as preferential. Guess she needed defending by the way guys treated her. She seemed to prefer bad boys. Why do the tender ones go for such types at all? The daring and excitement, I assume.

I was getting rather wasted on Sister-Two's shift one evening, doing plenty of tequila shots. She liked Patron tequila; I preferred Don Julio Silver. We compromised by alternating shots of each. I wasn't lecherous, but I leaned across the bar for a whisper into her ear.

"Another reason I hang out with Sister-One is to be around you as well."

Sister-Two looked surprised. "What!" Annoyed by my shabby declaration, her look was genuinely harsh, not one of meekness. I gained respect for her, protecting little sis. That was Sister-Two, sweet and slightly twisted.

I traveled to see Sister-Two at another bar, Martini's. She toiled there to make ends meet, I assumed. Her hard-working efforts were in part to satisfy a semi-lavish style, and to make payments on a Celica GT while maintaining her extensive wardrobe. I rarely saw her clad the same.

I showed up at Martini's all dapper.

"What are you doing here?" Sister-Two asked.

"I came to apologize, to see if you were okay."

Then a dude about 6'4" came along. "Who's this?"
"He's my cousin...from Virginia," Sister-Two said.
"You don't say," Studly eyed.
Then he said, "Let's do some Patron shots, cuz."

Sister-Three looked and acted reserved. She was simply unaffected by things and pleasant to be around. Yet she could be distantly mysterious. We conversed about more grown up matters it seemed. She liked to do most of her drugging in private. And with the bar's focus on her family, she was wise.

Sister-Three appreciated dry humor, the serious one of the three. There was something sorta refined about her, a way she carried herself. We shared laughs on her shifts. Other than a few lines that's about it. She was like her mom in demeanor. The secretive thing about her carried a certain mystique that piqued my interest for many a night.

And lastly, the mother. She tended bar on Saturdays and another busy shift. I grew fascinated with her well-traveled stories. Several hours' worth. I'd catch her observing me while I focused on her daughters. Her look was to say, "Think I know what you're up to, sonny." She couldn't have because I didn't know (LOL). The mother was a flirt in a sneaky way. She once slipped me the tongue with a birthday kiss. It happened to be tobacco flavored. That was the last time I saw them all outside of the bar. They had experienced difficulties in the past. I tried to imagine the number of Steve's they'd run into. It's not every day you meet ones like them. I am hopeful they are safe and happy.

I sank lower, downright unsavory. Disreputable. I had become interested in another bartender at the same location, spelling trouble in sister land. Vicky was no good for me. Felt sorry for her and I truly wanted to help with her predicament. Peculiar I wanted to help others sinking. I may have considered myself hopeless, needing to improve another's lot.

I had seen jealousy before. Vicky's presence caused cruelty and vindictiveness from sisters thrice. You should steer clear in such instances. Vicky was nice to gaze at, but she had the increasing look of abuse (drugs & alcohol). The sisters never gave her a chance of survival. She got the shifts they didn't want. They loaded enough slander on her to sink the Queen Mary. Obviously, I could rescue her.

The newest bartender had a Vicodin and beer addiction. Thus, my

name for her, Vicky. She also liked lemon drop shots. Bad combinations. My earliest forms of charity consisted of helping her close the bar. It was chiefly due to Vicky's condition. A bit of power all bar closers have, choosing who remains after closing. They are taking a chance; cops stay vigilant near certain locales. With access to US 281, and a nearby Denny's, the bar was conveniently positioned. There was also an officer's substation in the vicinity. Just my luck.

On an odd and telling night, Vicky asked a man to stay after closing. He had been sitting at the bar for several hours. My suspicion, they knew each other from elsewhere. Any who. Her ploy that night, incite trouble. To infuriate me. In my state of mind, it wasn't a problem. I could do some drama. Drugs and alcohol don't mix well. Moreover, there's a snapping mechanism in people.

I had no claims on Vicky, it just honked me off she had tried something so low. I played right along with her oblique maneuvers. Then she started chunking glasses at me while I accounted for tabs and balanced the cash drawer. Some of the glasses landed, glancing away. Breaking things was her dramatic scheme. I ignored her at first until she pulled a bottle of cheap Vodka, breaking off the neck on the bar. Had she planned on cutting me, herself, or what?

The dude who waited said, "I'm outta here."
"Don't go, honey," Vicky said.

Oh man, now it was on. Stuff flew around as fast as she hurled and reloaded. A persistent knock on the door interrupted the festivities.

"Stop it," I said. "Sshh."
"Make me," Vicky said.
More glasses headed my way.
"Open up y'all."
It was Sister-One at the door. She freaked.
"What in the heck is going on?"
Some things don't require an explanation.

Scoping the mess, she said, "The cops are across the street."

That got everyone's attention. We calmed down, then cleaned up and left. The cops nonchalantly watched us drive away, knowing it strikes a certain amount of fear. It worked. Vicky got into a pile of crap with the owner next day.

A not too distant weekend provided lasting clarity. Vicky had talked me into driving to Laredo, Texas. She wanted me to meet her mom. They both sold items on eBay. The weekend went okay, nothing substantial had occurred. Except for one small thing. Vicky said, "You proposed to me last night." She tried to look serious. What? I wasn't buying it.

We had been at a local establishment on Halloween, shooting pool and laughing at ghoulish drunkards. I believe someone spiked her drink with a trick, not a treat. Sometimes you don't remember everything that occurs, hence the proposal.

The next morning, I packed my car for the trip back to San Antonio. For an unknown reason, Vicky had called the cops. Two police cars zoomed in, ordering me out of the car. Man. What's next? Vicky ran into the house. "He's dangerous," she said to an officer.

The cops told me, "Leave and never come back."

That was fantastic news. "I'll be glad to sir, and good luck with her."

Something told me they knew of her dynamic exploits, which were uncontrolled at times. I pushed her once and squeezed her arm another time. Not that day. I never hit her. I don't hit women. The officers followed me to the International Checkpoint on I-35, then they headed back to Laredo. It was a long time before I saw Vicky again. Ran into her selling newspapers in front of a San Antonio grocery chain. She acted oblivious. That was our final encounter, perfect for me. She needed to get straight. I hope she has.

I was drinking a lot more at my northeast side apartment. Alone. With half-gallons of Jack Daniel's or Jim Beam within reach. I had a cooler filled with beer, Bud-Light or Michelob Ultra. If you think about it, that was a little strange. The refrigerator was a few feet away. Okay. It was a lot strange.

It's part of the condition. I awakened from a stupor and headed to the golf course, not forgetting my cooler and such. My Ping G2 golf clubs lived in the trunk. I considered trading for a 350Z to limit the number of passengers. I had always wanted one. Luckily, my credit had turned suspect.

On the way to the golf club, I stopped at the Valero gas

station. The station was next to a liquor store. I'd go there to restock my flask with whiskey. The man at the liquor store gave me a look as if to say, don't you need help or something other than that fifth of whiskey? He saw me the same time, several days a week. I always left with a satisfied smile. He wasn't my only alcohol connection. On alternate days, I traveled to golf courses in other directions and to liquor stores less speculative.

At the previously mentioned Valero store, I would choose a slice of pizza or a burrito from the stay-warm oven. I had enough sense to eat once a day, toting my twelve-pack to the counter. Then I'd call for two packs of Marlboro Lights. Half of the twelve-pack went into the cooler. I took a long pull from the fifth before filling up my flask in the parking lot. It was around two miles to the golf club, giving me time to pull out my powder and straw. You know what happened next. The rituals were obsessive. A common thing with addicts, the routines. It is a relentless process, the lunacy of compulsion. COCAINE.

Few things revved me like an imminent round of golf, especially steeped and coked up. I dropped my clubs by the practice green, then claimed an electric golf cart. Choosing one with the number I wanted to shoot for the day. Somewhere in the low to mid-seventies was fine. If eight, twelve, or forty-four were available, I might opt for one of those. I'm not superstitious, and it's only a silly game.

Time to buzz out to the parking lot and load the cooler. I would grab my superfluous stuff. My polarized Oakley's were secured tightly. If not hiding telling eyes, they were fastened to my hat like a touring pro.

The next stop was to check in at the pro shop to purchase a customary sleeve of Pro V1's. I meticulously marked all three balls with my lucky Sharpie. The new drivers and putters stood enticingly by. They gained my attention, so I gave them a few covetous waggles. Then I was ready to head into the bar. The rituals, slightly overdone. All these stories are obsessively truthful.

This golf club employed three nice looking gals; none was sisters. Gotcha! One was the owner's daughter. She was young and naively zany. I liked her dad, so I ensured to respect his little darling. When she wasn't tending bar, Zany operated the barbecue pit. Though not hungry, I'd buy a sandwich from her at the turn for a giggle or two. The turn is a place between the

ninth and tenth holes.

The other two ladies were bartender/cart girls and part-timers from Texas universities. Most of the day, they drove around the course with refreshments, striking every time. One was blonde, the other brunette. I'm sure they made plenty from tips. I must have funded some of their tuitions. Surely enough to defray the cost of textbooks.

When ordering a tall double, *101 and Seven* (Wild Turkey 101 and Seven Up), the girls turned it up to a quad. Detecting Seven-Up was difficult in a sea of brown ice. The whiskey evaporated the soda pop. You might have wondered, why did he order booze from the bar while toting a flask and a cooler? I wanted to be legit and one can never have enough. There was a need for vainglorious interaction.

All the preparations were complete. Almost. By that time, I needed a fresh snort of powder. The downside of coke is a limited buzz span. The club's changing room had a preferred corner stall. I launched my round from there. You know something, telling this makes those times seem a little too real. Feels like I'm living it again, if only in words. Someone warned me about the potential for a dangerous remembrance and slip. "Be careful," she said.

I was stoked to play the game I loved. In some instances, I made unbelievable shots in those conditions. Hey, I'd shot in the 70s on good days. The right drug and alcohol mix made me feel invincible, but true consistency remained out of reach. For the next four to eight hours, nirvana.

Most days, playing golf ended at dark. That's where I felt most useful in those days. I greeted my buddies at the practice green, awaiting the betting terms. When playing decently, I would play most takers for two/four. Example: two dollars for holes won by pars and four dollars for holes won by birdies. I often had five of those bets with various golfers. Can you say sucker? Not really, not always. Like all golfers, I made bogeys. I could put together a string of pars and sprinkle in a few birdies. I even recorded an eagle occasionally.

Perry was a good buddy, so we gambled for five/ten. He called me Player. You think he knew how to stroke my vanity? He performed so well, I wondered if he was hustling me. I was just paranoid with that notion. He was a cool dude, one of my more trusted friends. Perry and his pal, Barry, were inseparable (not their

real names). We were always together in foursomes.

The three of us were pretty much alike and Vietnam Era vets. Gambling, coke, and weed made us compadres. They preferred to sprinkle coke on their weed, then covertly smoke joints during our round. The regulars were acquainted with our habits. We played Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. I once asked a retired participant, "Don't any of these guys work for a living?" I had the gall to ask that question.

There was a different level of gambling aside from personal bets. A rather complex system determined competitive outcomes. All participants held chances for winning a blind drawing. We all fed the pot, a method not considered gambling, nor had it awarded prize money to amateurs. Therefore, our playing status stayed the same.

That wasn't the end of the gamesmanship, not while the sun held strength. The high rollers went out for another round. In the extra rounds, an escalating scale was used. Instead of two/four or five/ten, we'd play ten/twenty or twenty/forty. Multiple presses were essentially automatic. A press cumulatively doubled the bet for subsequent holes. That's how betting stakes swelled to thousands.

I craved the adrenaline rush, giving it my all. To retain my high, I was snorting cocaine on the course. That's where the straw came in handy. I became skilled at sneaking a toot from the golf cart, in between shots on the hole being played. The more I snorted, the more I drank. An endless cycle. All things must come to an end. It got dark. Time to shower, recover, and do it the next day. My recovery included doing more stuff. This narrative makes me dizzy.

My golf pals socialized away from the course. Perry and I were known to step out. We dropped in at a couple of bars after golf, shooting some serious pool. Mostly, we played eight-ball. Perry beat me regularly in nine-ball. We played for five to ten dollars a game.

Anytime you mixed alcohol, drugs, and gambling with a redneck joint in Texas, look out. Trouble finds you. There might be a drunk, wishing to play for fifty or a hundred a game. It's best to excuse yourself before running into a real hustler. They legitimately work to higher stakes. Don't play the nefarious ones, not even once.

There were cowboys who didn't take kindly to losing. Their girlfriends sat resolutely by. I wondered how they had ended up with such jerks. Man, was I a hypocrite? One redneck lost to Perry several times.

"Tell your buddy, if he looks at my girl one more time, I'm going to kill him," he said.

Perry was a cool customer. "Tell him, when he's ready, I'll be outside."

Thank goodness deadly violence wasn't necessary. I'm relieved when it's wisely averted. Those cowboys had smart girlfriends, guiding them out with craftiness known to women.

It's hard to explain the hole I had dug for myself. You may think I was living the high life; I was miserable. Know it's foolish, but I somehow wanted to implode. I didn't see hope for my situation and needed to come to an end of myself, but I never knew how sensibly. Wanted to search for the answer, aside from my unfathomable dependencies. So, I sobered up.

I had gotten to the point, however, where I needed a job to fund my lifestyle. I simply wanted to work for posterity. Wasn't going to include this part, but I felt it was needed to be forthcoming. If you remember, I worked for Bexar County Information Services for thirteen years before the Capital Group. I interviewed with the county for a Sr. Systems Programmer position in October of 2005, willing to join my former employer.

Are you kidding, attempting a return to my career with addictions? Yes. I had convinced a county assistant director to go to bat for me with Commissioners Court. They are department overseers as well as county legislators. Because I had performed well at Capital, they wanted me to lead the revamping of their systems environment. The assistant director, a friend of mine, was able to garner a salary exception for the position. Not a common practice for civil service jobs. I felt sort of proud again, and fortunate.

In November of 2005, I did things I had done at a high-level before. The first weeks renewed my vigor. Unfortunately, I hadn't put away my vices for good. But I was certain to accomplish the task before me. Things went well for a time. Then I figured, some extra help couldn't hurt. Let's just say it wasn't long before I used again, voraciously. I felt so ashamed.

Chapter 10 Two-by-Four

Christmas drew near that unseasonably warm Saturday. Dusk was poised to fall on a hazy highway in suburban Texas. The sound of a Harley downshifted. Suddenly, a normal exit signaled dread. I diverted into the barrier, recording a slow-motion video. Metal crushing and glass breaking climaxed in airbag silence. Eeriness followed, and lives were changed in a twinkling of an eye.

I emerged from the wreckage in shock, unsure of my surroundings from the sunset's sheeny reflection and just because. Able to assess, I surveyed the scene with trepidation but didn't see anyone in the aftermath. Then I heard a woman's voice, "He's under the car."

Gas leaked, spreading down the ramp. I rushed to turn off the ignition. Shards of glass covered my interior. The car was surely totaled. It was later stated, "He attempted to leave the scene." How was I going to leave with a smashed car and the airbags deployed?

Children in passing cars stared with mouths open. The scene was surreal, reality hadn't sunk in. Why didn't he take the exit, I

asked God? Trembling in disbelief, I was stunned he hadn't safely passed to my right, avoiding a rear-end collision. That's why I had opted for the barrels. Regardless, I may have certainly triggered something to happen. Then aghast, I saw him. The accident played over and over in my mind. It still does at times.

The man lying helpless, my greatest concern. Was he alright? I needed to know for his sake. An account from one of the witnesses sounded questionable. But because I took responsibility for the accident, other inconsistencies scarcely mattered. I certainly deserved the consequences, being under the influence. There's no excuse for that. Ever!

EMS quickly arrived. I tried to engage the paramedics as to the victim's condition.

"Please, just stand back," one said.

"Hey...get out of the damn way," a woman shouted.

I was terribly worried, not for my well-being. Distant sirens approached from the south. Air LIFE landed on a grassy surface, but this wasn't a dramatic movie scene. Policemen lit flares and directed traffic. One of them readied to administer field sobriety tests, which gave rise to feelings I cannot explain. Another officer removed beer cans from a demolished interior, the remains of a twelve-pack from my golf routine. Dusk turned to gloom. Arriving emergency vehicles shrilled. News crews filmed officers slowly emptying containers.

In serious t-r-o-u-b-l-e, a cop pulled me back and slapped on the handcuffs. He lowered me into the cruiser's back seat, while film crews enacted spots for their ten o'clock broadcasts. No one advised as to the victim's condition. I prayed earnestly for him. I feared my family would see the footage before I had a chance to explain. What frightened me most, the man headed to a trauma center by helicopter.

An officer looked exasperated; I had passed his field sobriety tests. Oddly, he didn't persuade me to blow into a breathalyzer. Maybe he figured I would not. Next stop, the Brady Clinic for a blood test. Oh no.

Headed for deep difficulties, an officer read rights as we drove away. "Do you understand what I've stated?" I nodded in consent from the back seat. The charge, Intoxication Assault. Then the officer cautioned me in route. "The charge will be upgraded to

Manslaughter if the victim passes away." What does one say to that?

The ride to the clinic was shorter than expected. Inside, I told San Antonio Police Officers, and a sheriff's deputy, "I request the presence of my lawyer." They took it as an act of defiance, holding me down with overkill. Then a nurse withdrew blood from my arm, the standard tubes. While held in cuffs for another hour or so, the nurse withdrew again. To make the charges stick.

An officer transported me to the detention center. "You'll be appearing before the night magistrate," the officer said. I can't assimilate to describe my thoughts and worries during the next hours.

Rick H. posted bond and I was released the next morning. A morning like none other. I called my lawyer. He tried to assure me. "Things should improve, pending the victim's consciousness." Hearing from him later wasn't any better.

"The victim remains in critical condition."
"Oh no. I'm sorry, what can I do?"
Waiting in fear was all anyone could do.

Meanwhile, I dreaded going to work on Monday at Bexar County Information Services. Glad I was employed again and hoped no one had seen me on television. Associates I knew for years looked as if I had the plague. I messed up royally, having only been with them for a month. Everyone knew about Saturday's accident. I couldn't feel any worse.

The assistant director who had hired me held a brief conference in the afternoon. The look on his face said it all. Sorely disappointed, he had put himself on the line for me. A rehire after eleven years in corporate. This time, I was under a six-month probationary period, so I could be terminated at will by the county. On Tuesday afternoon, I was escorted from the building in shame.

I felt horrible for each and everyone connected to me. Apparently, certain high-level officials were calling for my dismissal (chiefly, the district attorney). Citizens viewed repeated clips of the accident. MADD used the footage to deter drunk driving over the holidays. I saw it as extra disturbing. A job loss, the least of my worries. I wanted a job for the right reasons.

Back to the legalities of my case. Discovery and posturing occurred from both sides of the aisle. The victim's injury status was paramount to the case. More council meant, waiting for the process to play out in the system. Ugh.

My attorney eventually called, unsure of how I would bear the news. "The victim has recovered from a coma." More than a month had transpired.

I was truly relieved. "Thank God." I felt better for a little while. My attorney said little more. Legalities...waiting.

Investigators prepared, doing obscure and necessary things. Lawyers handled their duties with as little emotional involvement as possible. I was able to accept their job better through the process. Meanwhile, the time passed agonizingly forward. The thing lost through this, I was genuinely sorry and truly remorseful. Out of such concern, I prayed persistently for the victim's recovery. I wanted him to be well. But I was instructed, "Don't attempt to contact him, nor his family."

Several continuances followed that did not require my presence in court. The fourteen months waiting for a hearing seemed like several years. I was torn between guilt and regret. Sorry, fearful, and unemployed. Attorney fees, debt and my bills piled up. Depression and anxiety were constant companions. I still have nightmares from the accident, leaving me unsure to this day. Why had it gone down in such a way?

I felt alone, contemplating suicide more than once. Seriously, I had sunk that low. Not having devised a detailed plan, the jugular came to mind. Foremost was the notion of overdosing on pills and alcohol. I feared such a method might fail. They would pump my stomach, adding more disappointment to a pitiful existence. I've never feared death, yet there are times when I'm scared to live.

Well, I eventually needed a drink, like a lunatic in denial. Can't say I wanted to for numbing or pleasure. Flat out addicted, alcoholics can't simply quit with willpower. Which is the truth when your loved ones are involved. You must face it and attempt to understand. The problem with addiction, there are no hard and fast rules. One either kicks it or they don't. Some know, I'm speaking the truth.

Quitting on my own was impossible. Detox was the best alternative. Ashamed of recurrence, I sobbed like a two-year-

old. You would think monumental losses, multiple accidents, and near death would've taught me. I made excuses for all that happened, continuing a downward spiral. No family members showed at detox this time. Couldn't blame them, yet one naturally wonders. That left Rick H, who I already owed so much. What he had done can't be measured in dollars and by things. I owe him my life.

A physical mess, I coughed blood at various stages. Rick knew I needed medical attention, not waiting to detox. At the county hospital, they feared I had incurred TB. They placed me in makeshift semi-isolation prior to consideration for admittance. They put me on a gurney in the hallway behind an enclosure, a transparent plastic drape. Then they hooked me to machines with an attendant nearby. My weight was down to 145. Typically, I weigh around 180. My blood pressure was through the roof and my liver enzymes were elevated. I was a shameful deteriorated mess. If I passed it may have been better for everyone.

Other problems concerned the doctors, so CT and MR scans were ordered. A test detected an issue with my pancreas, and there were some tumors on my liver. Test data also yielded the need for a colonoscopy. As they were putting me under, I warned the doctors. "I have a high tolerance to most medications."

While the surgeon removed benign polyps, I woke up. The level of pain was brilliant. Hot as heck! I attempted to sit up, then collapsed. No one uttered, more anesthesia. I finally heard something pleasing. "We're all done here," the surgeon said.

The tumors on my liver were not cancerous. Medical personnel had expressed plenty of concern for the fluid on my pancreas. The diagnosis was incomplete. A prognosis presumed grim. The rest turned into a waiting game. Rick H. called my sister, Debbie. He wanted to update my family in West Virginia.

While time passed, something unexplained occurred. For a miraculous reason, the fluid on my pancreas had declined. Then it disappeared. Explain that with purely scientific rationale. One should consider the validity of miracles.

Won't elaborate, concerning my second detox. Except to say, I stayed half the time as before. With additional Ativan and Librium, I may have responded quicker. Who knows? Detox isn't easier the second time, but you know what to expect. A limited stay would get me through the worst of it. Release and sobriety were short term goals. I hadn't counted on help from a photo in

the hallway.

A psychiatric evaluation had occurred between various tests and procedures. Can't tell you more, my memory is vague. I'm not sure what they gave me, but I was out for days. The next thing I recalled, departing the hospital with prescriptions: antidepressant, high blood pressure tabs, a reflux med, and an assortment of vitamins.

Those next months were long and hard at Rick H's house. Panic attacks were day and night. Anxiety was severe from withdrawal or something else weird happened. I paced in the same hallway, over and over, while I dreaded every sunrise and prayed for each sunset. I was losing hope until my focus shifted to a photo on the wall. It was an image of Jesus. Mercifully, he looked at me with love. I felt in my heart his radiant glint of compassion. "Heal me, Lord," I wailed. Hurting I cried, "Hear my prayers Christ Jesus, please heal me!" I felt unworthy, my faith had wavered and diminished from years of denial and neglect.

I knew the advantage of an elsewhere focus. When panic heightened, I concentrated on heavenly things. The following days brought glimmers of hope. The anxiety madness seemed to retreat. The severity subsided but not fully. As I boasted, "I'm better," the panic invariably returned. I headed back to Rick's hallway to pray. That went on for a long time. I can't recall a worse feeling.

"Jesus, in your time, make me whole."

I prayed for all hours. "God, I need grace today, please be merciful. Heal me for your will and glory."

Exhausted, "Please God, please...." I learned an important principle, waiting on God. That's all we can do at times.

I called Deb and Johnny with frequency. Their rational words comforted, helping to ease the racing anxiety. My state improved. I hoped it had. Being okay seemed impossible. At least, where addictions are concerned. My sibling's support meant a great deal. Without them, and Rick H, I may not have made it. Everyone needs someone.

Then I experienced an adverse reaction from the antidepressant, Celexa. This went on for a couple of weeks. I finally got straightened out with a tolerable dosage of Prozac. It was a time that required my mend. Regardless, I climbed the hump physically and mentally. Which caused me to exclaim, "Praise God."

My legal issues moved to the forefront. More trouble, varying degrees. The weight of everything mounted on me. It was overwhelming every day. I just wanted to give up and die. Only mighty God can atone in such instances, trusting his provision of love, grace, and hope.

I didn't sleep a wink the night before my hearing. It was a cold February morning in San Antonio. The walk from a parking lot to the justice center was bone chilling. We had arrived early. My stomach felt a foreign queasiness. "I'm headed for prison today," I told Rick H. He didn't even look up from the sidewalk. We passed directly under my old office window on West Nueva. So ironic.

Having known the inside of a jail, I never faced the likelihood of a penitentiary. I was terrified, then I felt the sudden warmth of new clothes from sister, Jo Ann. It placated my unrest, along with a sense of the Lord. From that point on, I wasn't afraid. The line was long at the building's metal detector. County employees could bypass them in the early days of security checkpoints. "What's our big hurry?" I asked.

Rick appeared more nervous in the elevator. "I'm scared for you," he said.

I wouldn't have wanted to be in his shoes either, unable to affect an outcome. We got off at the second floor where my fate would be decided. "Here we go. Let's get this over with," I said. Rick furnished a small grin.

I scanned the faces of other defendants, meeting their lawyers in the hallway. I understood those looks without knowing their details. Fear, the unknown. A possible loss of freedom and an albatross of regret. Throughout the complex, I recognized bailiffs from my county days. "They know I am headed up the creek." Figured they would, at least, look at me.

"No, you're just paranoid," Rick replied. My turn to wryly grin.

My assigned courtroom was filled from the rear. The victim in my case was front and center in the viewing section. So were his parents and a female companion. I can't describe it well; I was ashamed and in a fog. But how he must have felt, seeing my face and healthy body. One must wonder...what manner of grace had I been bestowed?

The victim wore a decorated Army uniform. I noticed a brace on his leg. His damage was painfully apparent, worse than expected. The recessed surgical evidence from his hairless head haunts me to this day. I can only imagine the anguish I had caused. I wanted to walk up and say, I'm sorry. I have the same desire this moment. I am so very sorry! Whatever the verdict, I deserved punishment.

"Where's my lawyer?" I asked Rick H. He shook his head, disappointed by his apparent tardiness. I went into the corridor to find him in a conference. "What a relief," I sighed.

"I'll be with you in a sec," my attorney said.

Moments later. "I told you to meet me out here." He was not overjoyed. You see, my lawyer knew better, I did not. There was no need to confront the victim or his family, nor anyone else but my lawyer. That's just the way it is.

We entered the courtroom, sitting far from the fray of others. My attorney held a conference with the DA's office. The courtroom inundated with lawyers for the morning's docket. Most defense lawyers were dressed in fine suits. Some of the prosecutors were females. The one for my case was lead chair. My sense wasn't positive. I knew deep inside; I was going away. Watching the lawyers negotiate, there was head nodding. Mostly, by defense council. An offer was being extended and weighed. I wasn't privy to the conversation.

My lawyer ushered me into the hallway. My heartbeat increased. We left the main foyer for quiet, by the outer judge's chambers. A spot where I recognized familiar surroundings through the window of an overcast morning. It was the crossroads of Dwyer and Nueva. The county offices where I'd flourished in IT through the early years. "How did I get to this point?" I asked my attorney.

"That's over, here's the deal," he said straight-faced.

Then I thought, here comes the legal minutia. Verboseness. My lawyer eventually stated, "Your options are these: I can make a motion for a jury trial," his eyes intent, "or we can cop a plea."

"Tell me about the plea."

"The DA is offering five."

I wanted clarification. "Do you mean five years in prison?" Maybe I just needed to hear someone say it.

"Yes, but the judge could rule on probation," he said.

I sighed, knowing it wasn't happening.

My attorney got ultra-serious. "If we go to a jury, they could send you up for eight-to-ten."

I knew a jury trial meant thousands more in attorney's fees. Didn't have it, wiped out. Sadly, I'd partied enough away for several jury trials. And all at the expense of a traffic accident investigator, who'd been suggested to prove my potential innocence. Hindsight.

Probation wasn't happening, short of a miracle. The way I understood it a law rewrite would've been required. Impossible if you'd been on probation. I had been, ala the possession charge in 1976 from Jack in the Box. One such is ruled ineligible. I'm still learning about the law. The same goes for a Shock Probation motion. I understood that Shock could be invoked after six months' time served. How would the judge rule on probation, regardless? The victim had obvious medical issues. I had caused that for another human being; I deserved to go to prison.

After a few more minutes, I was nearly decided about the plea. "What are my chances for parole?"

"You'll do two-and-half years max," my attorney said.

I leaned closer, whispering, "When were you going to tell me that?"

He looked sincere. "It wasn't a consideration unless you opted for the plea."

Lawyers, geez. I pondered the plea. "Let's do it," while I had the courage to proceed.

Then he presented a legal document, laid out finitely. So much jargon, no way to decipher it all. A lonely signature block loomed at the bottom, punctuating my end to freedom. I hadn't been free for a long, long time.

I began to second guess, "Should we pursue the trial?" My lawyer's look read, probably not. Though he had left it up to me, certain things are pivotal because of our will to choose. To work for the good of all things, providentially.

The following is hindsight regarding my decision to accept the plea, and not go to a jury trial. Legal teams all but know outcomes before hearings convene. It's a numbers game. That's the way it is, working best for all concerned. Justice is an interpretation of the evidence, culpability. Legal precedent. Proof. Rendering the law's punishment. Sentences: short ones and long ones. If that's true, then why go through with so many predictable proceedings and hearings? Our courts couldn't sustain such large numbers of jury trials. Can you imagine, the number of pleas occurring daily in metropolitan counties?

I was hopeful for a miracle in the courtroom. I didn't know for absolute certain it was a done deal. "Take your time," my attorney said. "And...be sure about the plea before you sign."

I thought about Nancy and the kids. A disclaimer that stated "No Recourse" caught my eye. Considering it for a moment, I may have wanted to explore. "Hey, I was thinking...."

My lawyer interrupted, "What is it?"

"Uhm." I signed it with reluctance. "Nothing let's go."

My case was first up on the 9:00 a.m. docket. It was frightening to hear, "The State of Texas versus Steven Robinson, case number so-and-so, is now in session in District Court so-and-so."

After opening remarks, witness testimonies, rebuttal ops, and legal stuff, the judge rifled through a stack of papers. Then Judge Sid Harle eyed me, "Do you have anything to say on your behalf?"

I proceeded to apologize for the accident. The judge interrupted, "Turn to face the victim and his family."

No matter the speculation, from ones in the courtroom, I meant it. "I'm very sorry." It was hard to look at the victim and his family again. The dad seemed to take it hardest, weeping. I wanted to cry as well.

The sentence remained: "Steven Robinson. You are found guilty of

Intoxication Assault and hereby remanded by the state. In accordance with the DA's acceptance of your plea, you are sentenced to five years in the penitentiary." Or something like that.

Convinced of doing time; I wasn't stunned, but an avalanche cascaded inside. I handed over personal effects to my lawyer. Then I glanced at Rick H and took a final look at the outside world. A cathartic moment. My rotted existence would get forcibly changed. Oddly, I felt a sense of relief. You need to be me to fully understand.

A deputy ushered me into a small holding cell behind the courtroom to sit alone in silence. He unlocked the cell in an hour or so. Downstairs, a paneled van arrived for transport. I exited with an indelible imprint. Guilty.

Next stop, the county jail property room. They issued me an orange jumpsuit and sandals in exchange for my dress slacks and a blazer. For the next hour I was processed, photographed, fingerprinted, and briefed. Piece by piece my life had unraveled (health, family, career, estate, freedom, and respect). It has been said, to overcome life's pitfalls: *"Some need a gentle nudge, while others need smacked with a Two-by-four."*

Chapter 11 County Jail

The newest felons were placed in a holding cell, thirty or more of us. Scarlet stenciled letters on the wall read, "16 MAXIMUM." Humanity everywhere. Some stretched out, others scrunched together. No bail this time. I was on unfamiliar turf with no immediate solution. The unknown is difficult to accept when wishing for a recourse. You learn to suppress your wants and needs while incarcerated.

Some criminals acted like they attended a dysfunctional camp or reform school reunion. I heard one after another brag about their latest escapades. I noticed various gang handshakes. One concluded with fingers forming the letter "o" or the number zero. It represents a gang affiliation for area code 210, San Antonio's. One didn't see much of that on the north side of town. Unbelievably, I saw a baggie of white powder passed about. A few hard heads hadn't learned.

As time passed, we were profiled for cell assignments. I would learn the jail's methods in time, anticipating our next steps kept my mind busy. It was rumored in the cage, "You'll spend close to six months in the county."

I questioned things early on. "How do you know that?" A certain look answers doubt. They'd been down this road, which was the first of many declarations from the all-knowing inmates. How serious might one consider their input? Was it wise to trust those headed for prison?

Most convicted felons await "chain." More than a process, "catching chain" is a dreaded day. Particularly for those making their first trips down. Chain describes one's transport to the penitentiary. The seasoned cons preferred this term for a prison. At the appointed time, you'd be chained to another and shuttled off to the pen. First, I would experience a lengthy confinement in the Bexar County Adult Detention Center. Lucky me.

Ironically, the jail I had access to as a county technology employee housed me as a felon. A string of IBM 3174 Communications Controllers provided connectivity to the data center's mainframe. Those units had fallen under my responsibility. I recall the smell of jailhouse food while debugging network issues in the early 90s. It wasn't an enticing aroma, drifting from the bowels of the kitchen. In those days, I contemplated a savory lunch on the free streets of San Antonio. I was glad to go my way freely then.

I had gotten to know the jail administrators and law enforcement personnel from thirteen years of county employment. They sure treated me differently as an inmate. Like they didn't notice me and were all the sudden better. I couldn't blame them. IT people tend to wield their power over others. We were paid significantly more than those who put their lives on the line.

Offenders are locked up in the main building's single cells or in mass at the jail annex. The annex contains dorm-like pods. Because I wasn't a hardened criminal, nor one who possessed an aggravated charge, the annex was my destination. A pod supports fifty bunks and a few amenities. Not that large, considering it is a powder-keg for misfits.

The back section of the pod was separated by a chest-high wall, comprising the latrine area. A concrete slab outlined the day

room. Shiny metal tables gave us a place to eat and assemble. Card playing was surprisingly allowed. Spades tournaments were common, along with coupled disagreements and bloody fights.

A guard monitored the shift's activities from a desk. Some were real buttheads. Certain guards seemed proud of their occupation. Others put in their time, remaining detached until shift change. The elite guards made up CERT, which is the acronym for Community Emergency Response Team and somewhat analogous to SWAT. Having a peculiar set of prima donna egos, one of them maintained a demented sense of jocularity.

We saw CERT when fights broke out, fully geared, toting shields and Billy clubs. Guards who doubled as CERT took the least lip from inmates. We didn't recognize them as regular guards because of helmet shields with dark visors. But their arrogance caused most to fess up. They wore their uniforms in a manner that gave them away, tailored fit and starched.

Officers were supposed to be smarter than criminals. I'm not positive, but it seemed their requirements hadn't been weighted toward the cerebral. I knew inmates who would have scored well on aptitude tests. I wondered what may have caused them to go awry. A percentage of guards did not comprehend, nor had they withstood the well-oiled speak of a con.

Most guards had something to prove. Others seemed to float in obscurity, put out by everything. One guard was known by all pods as A-hole. He fulfilled that classification every single shift. The man was deeply disturbed. I couldn't break through to him for the life of me. I tried, which only caused retribution. It didn't make me very popular. Disgruntled, he had the worst disposition and was mad at the world. I gave up seeing a light in him when he denied our worship time.

"You inmates don't deserve the privilege," he barked.

I asked myself, "Was he saying, God didn't deserve our praise?"

With a final touch of irony, he'd be the guard on duty when I caught chain to prison. Fast forward. I said to him upon departure, "Farewell sir." He ignored me as if I wasn't there.

Rewind. There were some older guards in the county jail. One was paternally memorable, a strait-laced and dedicated black lady. Her voice sounded like Louise Jefferson's. She wore her hair back in a tight little pony. She never tolerated disrespect.

With modest discernment, one could glean whom not to annoy. I didn't tangle with her; she looked fit and capable.

Most inmates discounted her maternal nature, but we got along. Felt I should honor her seasoned status. She gave sage advice to the young gangbangers. Sadly, most had fallen on deaf ears. Some mocked her until she caught them in stupidity, then they became a spectacle and comic relief. She mentioned family in a loving context. I saw it honorable, extending the olive branch. If she liked you, the shift was passable. Louise requested grace to be said over meals, which often fell to you know who.

There was a Mexican American guard, he read and taught the Bible consistently on his shift. He knew it well and was astute teaching Apologetics (defense of the Christian faith). I admired his courage. He was probably breaking an administrative guideline, yet it hadn't affected his unquenchable spirit. "Why are you doing this?" I asked.

"As long as inmates care enough to listen," he said warmly, "I'll continue to serve the Lord."

He wasn't appreciated by many but was respected by all. The officer usually worked weekends, somewhat slackened in comparison to weekdays. While much depended on a guard's attitude it was vital to sustain their dominance. Some guards were in their twenties or thirties. Who they are and how they manage can make or break certain inmates?

The psyche of an inmate is fragile anyway. The ability of a rookie guard to maintain peace challenged their capabilities. Some guards were young and temperamental. It was highly unpredictable to anticipate the next guard's arrival and the methods they chose to employ. There's a high turnover rate for corrections officers. We never knew who might show up every eight hours.

A couple of young female guards just knew they were it. Not. Some states are desperate due to correctional officer shortages, so they have lowered minimum age requirements to eighteen. The young female officers received plenty of attention. Certain foolish inmates tried to put the move on them. Yes, they surely had done so. I was like, what are you thinking?

One female officer stood out. I'm sure she had enticed some inmates, sporting tattoos and unnaturally tinted hair. A teal butterfly image protruded above her frontal neckline. Another

tat lined the underside of a wrist, appearing vine-like. I don't have anything against tats. "Ivy" would unfasten her hair and toy with a brush and other accessories. Then she would pin it back in a teasing manner. She sashayed around seductively. Her body language was more clubbing than correctional conducive. Most inmates knew of repeated sex offenders among us. Scary thought. Ivy had the constant need for attention, receiving more than she deserved.

You didn't get to choose who invaded your space, which made some inmates constantly annoying. There were oblivious ones to those seeking solace. Their idea of tranquility was chatter and jabbering. Senseless gas. I may have looked at it differently had I been in a single cell for two years. It's all perspective so I get how some are institutionalized. Glad I wasn't in there long enough. On most days, the same drudgery. I woke every day to the same realization, another day behind bars. It was enough to drain the hope and life out of any person anywhere.

Each pod contained an attached, twenty-by-twenty, recreation area. The same dimensions as our court on Park Avenue. This space was fed by fresh air through vents in the upper ceiling. The vents allowed sounds of freedom from our west side of town. We were allowed in this area during rec time and for worship prior to lights out. A glass wall and secured door separated a pod from the recreation area. Inner concrete and outer brick walls stood between us and the outside.

The recreation area held my attention. There were two rectangular windows at the top of the outer wall. A piece of the sky and partial tree limbs were visible across the way, where I could see branches that yielded fruit (peach or orange varieties). I focused on the vibrancy, soothing tension during challenging times. A focus elsewhere is vital. I hadn't yet associated the symbolism: the tree, the branches, and the fruit. I felt God wanted my attention to reveal what he had in store for me through his Word.

I relished the basketball hoop's potential for an escape. There was a problem. One needed to adjust the trajectory of their jump shot to accommodate a low ceiling in there, which was the least of my worries.

In the quiet, I thought about family and how I had let them down, and how I might make it up to them. Those first weeks in the annex were long and filled with regret. It produced anxiety through a variety of ways. Some good and some not so good. A

paperback *Good News Bible* helped me to cope, though it was tattered and had missing pages.

The food in the county was nasty and accurately called slop. They used a variety of processed substances. The "meat" swam amid a gravy looking ooze. You may have detected veggie-like morsels. I got excited by the sight of peas and normal looking potatoes. Our trays came with stale bread and soggy cookies. We got skim-milk or a carton of syrupy orange drink. Repeat offenders chimed, "The food is better in prison."

Really. "Gee, I can hardly wait."

The best meals to hope for were the chicken legs or cheeseburgers. How bad can one screw up a meat patty? I was fearful of the chicken, considering the imaginative and low-life lore. Bet you don't want to know what that means. Some inmates bargained their burgers for favors. You don't wanna hear about favors, not really.

Okay, I'll mention a favor. The weirdest thing I saw was not in prison, it was right there in the good old county jail. I had gone into the restroom one night to use the facilities. What I saw in the corner stall was unbelievable. There were two small inmates with their drawers down. One perched on the toilet seat in a normal fashion, the other sat on top of him. Some favor.

The fruit was rarely provided because wine could be adapted through fermentation. For breakfast, we typically received a well-ripened banana and dry cereal. Some mornings they served slimy oatmeal with pancakes. It wasn't moms, but it was the best meal of the day. Did I mention, breakfast was served at 4:30 in the morning? No sweat, you had ten minutes to swallow it down.

There wasn't much to do all day unless you played Spades or Dominoes, then you were cool. I was pretty much done with the cool thing. The non-cool inmates read, wrote, and/or drew things. Otherwise, you just sat on your bunk and lamented. We did have a television but focusing on the picture was a challenge.

I was thankful for a Bible and other devotionals. I never had such a hunger for the Word. The Bible was my constant friend, a new period in my life had begun. In ways, a spiritual awakening. Some inmates accused religious types, "Quit hiding behind those Bibles." I thought, are you talking to me? They never said it directly, hiding. So, I wondered, did they know I had been

sealed with something genuine? The devil tends to recognize ones from the Lord's side, fearfully acknowledging the Spirit inside of them.

I looked forward to chapel on Tuesdays and Saturdays. Pastors, lay people, missionaries, and gospel singers. They all ministered. Some were former inmates; the others were long-time businessmen. All were welcome, the jail ministry is such an important service.

There was one former inmate, Mr. Steve. His name heightened my interest and his message held it. He was an ex-heroin addict from the west side of San Antonio. I could tell his life had been transformed. He was spirit-led and full of love. He never wavered in his testimony. A wonderful verse he recited stuck with me.

Philippians 4:19 (NLT) The Life Recovery Bible: *"And this same God who takes care of me will supply all your needs from his glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus."*

Mr. Steve conveyed devotion with conviction. He stirred something deep within my soul. It caused me to consider a future when I might do something similar. Whenever he mentioned his daughter, I barely maintained. I thought about Christi, Ricky, and Jay. It caused me to weep.

Others involved in the jail ministry were professionals throughout the community. The rest were concerned citizens. It didn't matter, we soaked it up like sponges. I felt the Lord dealing with my life and knew he wanted me to help others. With God's power, and my limited ability, He would accomplish purpose through me.

I gained an awesome opportunity to lead Bible studies. I attempted to encourage others without hope. The Lord blessed us with His presence. I was only the messenger, yet I recalled more scripture than I had realized. My memory came from God's storehouse of riches. God's riches are often misunderstood.

Most inmates loved the Old Testament's stories. They were familiar with bits and pieces of the OT. The miracles were certainly popular. As the Lord allowed me to express, I was amazed when their faces lit up. I began to formulate somewhat of a plan. A provision of grace and faith guided me day to day.

God blessed those times. He directed our closing prayers each

evening. I felt the Lord's lead for petitions to offer. I'll never forget the spirit-filled times under starry skies. I could hear other dorms singing the gospel through upper vents to outdoors.

Worship was a rare quiet time. Ironically, those minutes were respected. Even by those putting on heirs, not joining. Some poked fun through the plexus-glass wall. Others watched in wonder, joining us a night or two. My life changed for the better without knowing the future. I felt responsible in spiritual matters. I just did, plain and simple.

My example was not always a good testimony. We all have troubled times, allowing desires to dictate our motives and actions (immorality/sin). I was reminded of my hypocrisy, and rightly so. There was an inmate who became a friend through the game of basketball. What a competitor. There were other things we had in common, regret and anger. Those things cause a bevy of emotions to swirl. Sports are good outlets for such demons.

I hoped the Lord would heal my friend from his volatile impediments. I seemed to be doing a lousy job. I'll refer to my friend as Lefty. You know who you are buddy. I love you, man. Lefty had been a good athlete at Winston Churchill High School, a school on San Antonio's sprawling north side. He knew my kids had attended Converse Judson High School. Ricky, my son, played basketball there. Churchill and Judson were fierce rivals over the years. Judson has won six 5A State Championships in football from 1983-2002. I've been known to brag.

Churchill was good in sports and known for enrolling rich kids in San Antonio. Whenever Churchill and Clark play football these days it is called the Gucci Bowl. Judson fields gifted military brats, farm boys, and others. Lefty and I were sorta different too, yet some alike. We had difficulties in the love department, bad blood from past romance. He hadn't said much, but he shared enough to exhibit a familiar pain.

I had several years on Lefty but was no less energetic on the court. We were teammates against the best black dudes in the dorm. Our psyche was wired high. He was very solid in the post and I scored mainly from the outside. We sometimes dominated games. As I mentioned earlier, the inmates bet on every contest, raising the intensity level. When we lost there was plenty of blame to go around. Oh boy it got ugly. Lefty got heated.

When Lefty's anger reached a pinnacle, I saw ugliness from my

past. Not pretty. I've come to abhor attitudes that drive wedges. But you know something? That wasn't the whole story. I had portrayed negativity by not objecting to indecent displays of several kinds. Honestly, I did things seen as a poor example. God only knows the ones I have affected. In Bible studies and other worship opportunities, I tried to make a difference. But my witness reflected inconsistencies, primarily in Lefty's eyes. I was supposed to be different, set apart. My bad to all.

Each week many were blessed to "make store," a reference to order and purchase items from the commissary. The privilege depended on generosity from outside entities (family/friends), who put money on your books. Your books were accounts held for deposit and maintained by the state. Commissary was highly coveted. A time for greed and malice. More division occurred from this privilege than any other. A time of happiness and heartache.

The commissary sold snack items, writing supplies, and toiletries. An inmate fills out an order for the county's representative workers. They bring in stuff and distribute it to inmates, one-by-one. Everyone sees who gets what and who gets zilch.

Commonly purchased items: soup [Top Ramen-like], meat packs (tuna, beef, chicken), rice, refried beans, and tortilla chips. The most sought-after items: coffee, soda, Little Debbie treats, and candy. The dorms contained a hot pot, a normal sink with a heating element. It is widely used to make an assortment of dishes. All from adding boiling water to the mix. I was amazed by a con's ingenuity. Some stuff they concocted was decent, certainly better than dreaded slop.

Commissary is a great substitute. Some inmates had zero money on their books. It broke my heart to see them without. I would typically share. The Lord continued to bless me, so it was the least I could do. Gang members receiving commissary took care of their own, to an extent. Ones who owed paid up. Bets were paid off lickety-split. If not, trouble brewed.

It pleased me to provide treats, watching faces shine. One inmate looked shocked. "Why are you doing this?" he asked.

"The Lord would have me share." And it made me feel better. I was regularly convicted to examine my motives. A good practice, examining things. That was a huge step for me. It still is.

We could receive approved visitors twice a week. My friend Rick H. was faithful. It was good to talk with someone on the outside, surely with those having contact with your family. All visits at county were through plexus-glass. The conversations were via telephones. I don't know if they were recorded; I was on the level.

Inmates got into trouble during visits. They'd make crude suggestions at their wives or girlfriends. Some saw it as a time to pass contraband. All public interaction was an opportunity for gangs to communicate. They used all sorts of secret signs, sending and receiving. Some discernable, the rest were foreign.

Gang activity is alive and well. Inmates found weak or non-affiliated are often targets for infiltration. The weak are offered protection in exchange for backing. Nothing was free. This sounds strange, but pride kept me from their consideration. I didn't like people, telling me what to do.

A mental health visit called. I became aware of the potential for a chemical easement. Meds seemed appropriate. Imagine that, wanting or needing a drug. I wanted to see if they would start me on an antidepressant. Something to better cope. With a mental health doc for hundreds, it would take a considerable time to score. Oops, I mean obtain. I eventually secured a script for Remeron.

Inmates regularly spiked their coffee, some with Remeron and Seroquel. A meth head with no teeth goaded me.

"Try it, dude."

"Nah, I'll pass."

Okay, one time I did. But I didn't let Snaggle know that Tony had turned me onto his already.

Anthony was a young Mexican American from San Antonio's west side. He was a trusted friend. Tony convinced me to ask for Remeron when it was time to see the doc. I became sorta dependent since he had sold me his. When I obtained it legally, I did mine and his a few times. Mostly to zonk out early from bad days. He and I got acquainted through writing poetry. Tony was a gifted young lad. There was a gentleness about him. His attitude was different than most, quiet and serene like a lazy river.

Anthony's crime was addiction (Heroin and OxyContin). No

lightweights. He hadn't done pain well on the free side of life. Other drugs disinterested him, thus my inheritance. But he had no money on his books, so he sold whatever he could to obtain his writing supplies.

I was mindful of Tony's kindness when I caught chain. Willingly, I handed my commissary to him upon departure. I was thankful for his friendship. And yes, I coaxed him out to worship several times. I'm not sure if it registered spiritually. He was guarded, and we are only responsible for sowing seeds.

The rec area, where basketball was mostly played, shared time as a handball court. Lefty became accomplished at handball after we had grown distant. Same old temper, so I wasn't fully responsible. Others used the court to walk in circles at random. Some concerned me, bantering solo. Chiefly, when they answered themselves. I took out my frustration on the court. Competing.

I've played in rough basketball games, but none were like those incarcerated. I'd learned the game with physicality, so I needed to watch out on such a smallish court. Criminals who knew the game were okay with rough play, adapting to the flow of the contest. Those who picked up the game inside were unpredictable. A hard foul on a wrong day spelled chaos, breakage. Blood. Some inmates considered hard play as a personal attack.

I gained allies on the court. Inmates came and left, the nature of lockups. The participating cons took a shine to me, having played basketball most of my life. Inmates have motives, gambling dividends. Yeppers. They'll gamble on the time of a setting sun. All forms of betting were paid at commissary time. Unless you had no funds, then look out. With cons payment is always due. I helped offenders win some bonanzas on the court. My body had become supple again. Somehow, I hadn't lost my shot and quickness. My high-arching jumper became a bullet-like shot in there.

One day, however, I spent the entire afternoon at the Brady Clinic. The same place a nurse drew blood after my accident in 2005. This time, I was X-rayed and fitted for a cast. The mishap occurred as I was helped into a concrete wall, scrambling for a loose ball. I reacted by extending an open palm for a stoppage. The sound quieted everyone. It was my primary shooting wrist, so I received attention after the game. My pals had seen to it with the guards. You have heard, "The inmates are running the asylum."

It was good to see the outside, even from the county clinic. My orange jumpsuit and shackles did little to impress the nurses. I wasn't aware you could get into trouble, incurring a fracture. You aren't supposed to get injured while incarcerated. Doesn't matter whose fault. You caused or highlighted a security risk.

The doc instructed, "Leave the cast on for six weeks." After the first week I cut a slit in it, which allowed me to take it on and off randomly. The cast made writing and showering difficult, and there was cash to be won on the court. My pals were appreciative of the gesture. "You ready?" a teammate asked. We won again was my answer.

A Pentecostal preacher and his wife ministered to us on Tuesdays. She sang beautifully. I mean, she had perfect pitch singing A cappella. Afterward, her young husband rose to preach. He pastored a church in Marion, TX. This saint started off gently. I didn't think he was Pentecostal until he became intent. "Men, we are going to worship in the spirit."

No one thought he would project so thunderously. If you didn't get the spirit, you got something. God blessed, regardless. Thunder knew scripture and preached the gospel with conviction, yet he could be tender and personable.

He once said, "Close us out in prayer, Mr. Robinson." Quickly, I asked the Lord to pray through me. After one of the services, Thunder asked, "How did you end up here?"

After a short silence, "It's a long story pastor." He acknowledged me with a moderate smile. I quit asking myself that question after a year in prison.

After chapel, it was back to the cell for a reality check. Some inmates you had just worshiped with considered sticking you with a shank. Frequent shakedowns limited the number of deadly weapons, but some cons were forever creative. Fights were common. Those of significant duration were rare. Most of the time fights were gang related and initiation/punishment motivated.

I witnessed a fight in the latrine where a guard had ignored a brawl for five minutes. Two Mexican Americans bludgeoned themselves. I hadn't seen the blood of that magnitude in some time. Then I saw one of those inmates at the big house (prison). He proudly shouted, "Yo man, I almost killed that fool in county."

Chapter 12 PRISON

This chapter will likely hold appeal. I'm surprised how people are continually intrigued by foreboding towers, rolled razor wire, cell walls, and iron bars. Something innate likes to vicariously travel nightmarish halls. People want to know, just how wicked is it? I must admit; I was interested. Until I received a front row seat. We best get on with your vehement enthusiasm.

The date was August 2, 2007. A Thursday. We settled in after

making store at the county jail. Lights out occurred at eleven. I was in my rack early. My antidepressant zapped me into Stupor Ville, having chased it with an allergy med. I had gone to sleep like every night, in prayer.

A single name from our unit made the list. On various nights, a certified list came down from the state. The name on the list would be released or headed to prison. The latter was called, catch chain. Or simply chain. I should have expected it, having entered my sixth month in county. It still delivers a shock, to know your next night will be spent in the penitentiary.

Friday at 4:55 a.m. A white Blue Bird bus idled from the sally port. My first look at the state prison guards. Time to shed all preconceived notions, a reality check indeed. The states finest had a weathered mien. They were durable looking and didn't use arrogance to intimidate like the county guards. The more tenured transported convicts to and fro, packing lots of heat. They were calm and fearless, tested looking. Shotguns were their trusty companions. I expected to see automatic weapons. Guess I'd seen too many locks them up films.

We boarded the bus two-by-two, wrist and ankle bound. You became intimate with a con for a three-hour trip to prison. No, not like that. Yet. It was difficult to tell at first, but some were making repeated trips down. A certain look schools you and is confirmed by portentous tattoos, displaying years served on etched tombstones. It was not a good time for idle chatter. Or to stare and speculate. Few spoke for the first hour. I recognized some from the county jail, having encountered them at the clinic or chapel. None appeared churchgoing on the bus.

We headed southeast from San Antonio. For miles, nothing but silence and speculation. Daylight painted a familiar Texas overcast. I imagined family vacations on South Padre Island as we neared the coast. Where gulls glided carelessly, and life slowed down, reminding of better days. My mood wasn't serene. I deflected, determining our route. I had expected we'd zip down I-37, the navigator in me. Prison buses travel on major highways when necessary. Yet it presents a potential security risk.

We were normally transported via straight, two-lane state highways. Farm roads in Texas. Country roads in West Virginia. I'll never forget the prison bus rides, which seemed to lead nowhere. Those miles reminded me how bad I had screwed up. I asked internally, does anyone care?

Our lunches had been packed, compliments of the state. In "Johnny sacks," penitentiary speak for bagged meals. A brown greasy sack of sustenance, which regularly consisted of salami or bologna sandwiches. Maybe a peanut-butter & jelly. Not like moms, nor any relatives. And with no chips or cookies. A cooler next to the toilet held pathogenic water. The cup dispenser may have been stocked; likely it was not. I imagined what grew inside of those Igloos.

It was rare to see the bus toilet occupied. You didn't want your shackle-mate, getting an urge to "push" (ala Stephen King's usage for a number-two excretion). If he needed to poop, you went along. Everyone in the back observed because the crapper was smack in the middle of the vehicle. Surely it could wait. Nope. I saw a con in a movement while his shackle-mate honked on a pork chop sandwich. A rare treat so guess he couldn't wait.

Most Texas prison farms are in the boonies. Our destination was signaled by the repeat offenders aboard. They boasted of worn out yarns. It was as though they returned to Disney World. No kidding. For first timers, watching and waiting defined our simple truths. The bus zipped onto a divided highway and the sun broke free, where we skirted inland nothingness. The animals grew restless. The guards, unflappable. It was getting hotter by the mile. A few clicks away, the dreaded signpost. It read something like: ***"TDCJ Correctional Facilities, Next Exit."***

The patterns in my brain were inexplicable. You don't know what to expect, not really. I saw another prison across the way, east of our location. We processed at the western unit. Texas convicts enter state prison at a handful of facilities. Ours, the Garza West Unit. Welcome to Beeville, Texas.

Our bus stopped in front of the first of two gates. All gates and fences were lined with rolled razor wire. The rifle towers accurately depicted by the media. They lie staked out at each corner of the yard. An onboard officer offloaded weapons to a guard in the closest tower. While a guard with a long-handled mirror checked for explosives or foreign objects within the undercarriage.

The last gate secured the bus in an open-air sally port. We sat there for a considerable time. Finally, the bus moved slowly ahead. I turned to look back at the sign on the exit gate. ***"No Hostages Taken Beyond This Point, Alive!"***

My thoughts were incomprehensible. The bus navigated a well-

traveled road and stopped by a large gray building with blue trim. Some felons perked up, bouncing from their seats like Christmas morning. For the rest of us, like livestock being led to the slaughterhouse. The guards came out in force. It was time for new arrivals. Fresh meat.

We lined a fence and were unshackled. Then a guard ordered us to strip naked. Grrr.... Most everyone seemed sort of calm until then. One was like, "You're crazy, I ain't strippin." A guard waited, clutching his club. "Oh yeah?"

Such tension, marching into the processing building. By that time sweat had beaded my entire skin. Sunny South Texas, sweltering before noon. I expected the very worst. A guard handed us a safety razor and a small piece of soap. Tiny enough for a spotty cleansing.

My theory in retrospect. Its size was to negate cost, the squares of tiny blue soap. Maybe it was. Many things issued are fashioned by inmates in Texas prisons. The miniscule cleanser is a state trademark. It prevented someone from jamming regular sized bars down throats. Or using it in a sock as a weapon. One doesn't wish to think of those things doing time. Pain, orifices, and such.

We were shuttled through a quick and scalding shower. Then we were handed prison whites, slip-on tennis shoes, two pair of suspect boxers, and a ratty towel. I expected delousing, typically shown on movie screens. It didn't happen. Next, we were herded into large holding cells. An angry guard shouted, "Wait until your freaking name is called."

The forward holding cells lined an entrance to the processing building, administration. An area well-lit and surprisingly clean, likely the warden's pride and joy. So, I had a notion and mentioned it to the con nearby. "This ain't so bad." I waited for his reply, something positive. He just stared at the floor, hanging his head. With zero more to say, I joined the deafening silence.

It was too quiet for my sensibilities. Usually I cherished quiet, but to tell the truth, I was scared. The unknown, not my bailiwick. While waiting for the next step, I thought about Nancy and the kids. I missed them more than ever.

My name was eventually hollered in a group of five. Another guard waited to direct the line. Along the wall were stacks of

blue plastic mattresses. Oh wow; I had surmised, the state's color scheme must be blue. Were we to pick our own? Yes, but a guard said, "Hurry up worthless trash."

I learned the importance of picking a good mattress. At the next station, a guard was flinging sheets at us. Some were badly torn and semi-cleaned. Found out later, the holes had practical uses. Joining a line outside, we hauled our stuff to the site scribbled on our shirt. We weren't issued jumpsuits. Two sets of tops and bottoms, all white apparel. The good thing about colorless garb, heat isn't absorbed readily. Prison theory two. Those working in Texas fields would pass out otherwise. The Hoe Squad, particularly. YouTube it to see them in action.

Our first destination, the "chicken coop." The name for a place where Garza West inmates does early time. If lucky, you'd only spend a night or two in such a reprehensible hole. Those were some of the worst days inside. Awful, but a veteran con provided hope. "We'll be out in a few days."

A coop was made of four chain-linked cages (holding cells), which housed thirty-two inmates. Eight cons roosted in a cage. The bunks were claustrophobic, submarine-like, with absolutely no air conditioning. A humid reminder of August in the South. Various birds flew freely, depositing all over. Cockroaches and spiders enjoyed free reign.

"It has got to get better than this," I said.

"Shut up whitey," his retort.

I hadn't learned to keep my trap shut.

Oh. I learned the purpose for holes in the dingy sheets, a clever application. The perforations at each corner, and in the center on each side, were for securing the sheet to the blue plastic mattress. The tighter one tugged the firmer one's bedding. The middle holes required an additional crosstie, fashioned on your own. Hence, a more pleasurable sleeping experience. You bet. It took practice, perfecting the bed making skill. Some cons mastered things in minutes, engineered perfectly. Such a waste of splendid talent.

Some solid advice for the unfortunate souls headed down. Maintain a healthy sense of humor. If you don't have one, invent it on the fly. It's so necessary, staying on an even and light-hearted keel. But use caution with humor and to whom you direct it toward.

The coop was a temporary living space, like it or not. We first timers were exasperated. I understood the setup, to see which inmates cracked or became too violent. It gave administrators time to determine housing and working assignments. The major conducted a two-minute interview with each inmate. No one survived a coop long term. I won't learn what Hell is like. But if that place is any indication, look out.

The first hours were uneventful and well-appreciated. It was so hot, breathing became difficult. Felt like I had transformed into an asthmatic. Like everything else, you learned to adapt. The smells became putrid by sundown. We didn't shower regularly. Small consolation, a few minutes after showering it was as though you'd never refreshed. Like living in a perpetual sauna.

The first two nights were dreadful. A sense of evil shrouded that place. Imagined I was somewhere else. If lucky you slept or passed out from exhaustion. Extended rest, impossible. With seven others in close quarters you heard and smelled it all.

Of the eight in our cage, most were gangbangers. I heard them plotting things that would become routine. Some dude had twenty-two tats. "All are indicative of something I've achieved," he claimed. Right. He seemed overly supercilious, fashioning the word indicative. Basically, he had one tat for each year of his life. I sensed he was running from something. Found out later, he'd cut up his girlfriend.

Our cage included several Hispanics from Corpus Christi. All were acquainted in some manner or another. Two blacks were from Houston, Ward's so-and-so. We hadn't gotten around to discussing the Texans or the Astros.

Chow at lunch and supper was particularly suspect. I made sure to eat a lot of breakfast. The eggs looked suspiciously decomposed. Scrambled eggs can be disgusting anyway. Pancakes seemed safest, opposed to the slimy oatmeal. Canned peaches sufficed when available, providing a syrupy rush.

Surviving, I picked at meals with discretion. We only came from the coop to eat. Was thankful for those minutes away. They shuttled us through a line in the hallway, where inmates (cooks & servers) perspired freely down the line. No one wanted sweat drops. Though salt was scarce at times.

There was absolutely nothing to do for twenty-four hours in the coop, except to dread the next moment at the mercy of every

caged rascal in Texas. Some were highly disturbed, acting barbaric. Animalistic and ignorant otherwise. That place brought out the worst or inwardness of us all.

One inmate lost it for an extended period. He wailed away for hours. His screams annoyed, but we found relief when they dragged him to the clinic. Psych Boy described his experience later. "Dude, they put me in a shark cage." Sure, they did fella. We would see his confinement space down the road. When having appointments at the clinic, inmates were locked in a waiting room cage. Outside of our large enclosure, by the guard's desk, was a rectangular shaped cage. Hence the shark tank, standing on end. Maybe Psych Boy was saner than supposed. The clinic was air conditioned.

Cons. I met some decent fellows inside, some with more compassion than ones from the outside. Stay tuned. Inside, you're forced to look more than skin deep.

Back to the coop, there was one shower stall per cage. The fortunate ones rinsed during a morning gap allotted, in clear view of others. By gang priority, of course. A single toilet was a bit more secluded than the shower stall. My first experience with the metal contraptions. Those things are strong enough to suck down a dozen golf balls. If you care to, google it. Or not. They still had porcelain stools in the county annex, but with no hinged seats like on conventional toilets. You just plopped down on a cold rim. When you gotta go, you gotta go. TP was a premium staple. We were issued one roll a week and learned to make it last. One guarded TP closely.

The most hateful inmates controlled a big fan in the coop. There wasn't a way to direct the fan to cover all four cages. Hierarchy controlled the roost with few questions asked. I have never been as miserable. The fan blew stale nasty air and dust anyway.

Constant bickering went on day and night. Disturbed personalities dictated the roost with delusional banter. I wasn't out to develop lasting kinships. The end of coop-hell was near. After four anguishing nights we would hatch with glee. Well, maybe not gleefully. I was ready for anything else on the farm. Another name for a prison. I felt liberated for a moment or two. A different locale was scribbled on our shirt. The old one, X-ed out.

Our new destination, a wing. Each wing contained dorms, a loose

definition. These lockups are large hanger like structures, made of concrete, steel, iron, glass, and tin. Each wing contains eight dorms.

Inmates enter a half-wing through a secured door. A long hallway leads to another steel door. The guard station is secured behind it. Their enclosure is elevated in the middle of a circular walkway. The guards sit secluded within tinted plexus-glass and concrete, with a refreshing quarantine of air conditioning.

Around the circular walkway are four reinforced doors. Each door, the entrance to dorm housing fifty-four inmates, and without a vapor of air conditioning. I wasn't accustomed to such conditions in Texas, with no a/c. That element was a constant struggle. A more than anything reminder of how bad I'd screwed up.

For those thinking prisons are too lax in Texas, go on down. The strain from heat punishes, posing an inhumane condition. For what humanity is left to be discerned. Besides my TDCJ SID number, I became known as e.g. B1-23. B wing, dorm one, bunk twenty-three.

The day room is lined and apportioned by a concrete slab in the center of the area. Several metal tables fill its space in staggered fashion. Two televisions are wire-encased, mounted and hanging from adjacent walls. They're powered at a guard's discretion. Two rows of park-like benches sit under the televisions. Okay if you watched soap operas, game shows, or selective sporting events. And were brave enough to deal with unruly inhabitants and their control tendencies. One might be temporarily amused by a telecast or be roughed up when betting outcomes sour. I watched the Mountaineers, Longhorns, Cowboys, and Texans.

Dorm politics are tied to television channel selection. To viewing positions from the benches. Politics are tied to everything, gang intensive in nature. More than county this place breathed danger. There were no guards staked out in the dorm. They came in to take count every few hours. To perform other menial duties. For the most part we were unsupervised. The guards viewed our space from video screens in their station. I often coveted the thought of a single cell, contending with only myself.

I found it best to read and write from my bunk. The bunks are in rows of up and downs racks, surrounding the day room in a semi-

circle. My bunk provided security, not caring if it defined me in the eyes of a troubled con. One's sanity and safety are contingent upon your immediate neighbors (cellies). What an experience, getting to know them through the revolving process of a transit unit. Every week, new individuals to adapt to and look out for.

If fortunate your cellies aren't gabbers, cretins, sex fiends, or psychos. Good luck on all counts. When not working at a job, I found it best to stay in my bunk as privately as possible. Mainly for staying cool and keeping from jams. Fifty-four cons have various ideas, wants, and needs. There's no such thing as keeping to yourself in there.

My technology experience landed me a relatively cushy position in the G Building. A gem of a job, maintaining administrative server applications. I won't go into specifics. I'll bet you're glad. Anyway, eight hours in an air-conditioned office. Aah. I added this from a recent draft, so you wouldn't wonder, what job did he have? It wasn't all wine and roses.

My boss was a tenured guard, and pretty much unanimously disliked. I'd say hated categorized it well. Strangely, I found him quite interesting. Even though his personality was unusually suspect, he had guts. But he was generally thought of as obtuse yet was not slow-witted at all. He possessed a dark and sometimes evil sense of humor. Inmates presumed Guard Hated was dumb. Nope. He was shrewd, and a fitting name would have been Teflon. Little came back on him, heading up an integral branch of the prison.

The inmate who trained me started off kind, a normal sort. He was somewhat of an exception, considering most cons have blue-collar backgrounds. But he had a whale of an ego, filled with pride. Primarily, concerning his over-exaggerated computer skills. I mean, we weren't launching rockets in there.

The state ran basic computer programs. It's not like we were up for job promotions. Yet we clashed in the office environment. Not right away. I needed to pick up some things, finding my way around the domain. In the beginning, he was quite helpful. Diplomatic. Then later, when he realized I was computer savvy, the green-eyed thing evolved.

From that point on it was one controversy after another. Guard Hated wanted the job completed. He didn't care how, nor by whom. He wasn't interested in our relationship issues. Well, my

trainer got other folks involved. I understood he'd been there for a while and had built alliances. No biggie. It wasn't corporate. A state employee became one of his pawns, a female.

To shorten the story, we developed a working relationship. She was better looking than state prison averages. Her husband was friends with someone I knew from the San Antonio area. My kids knew his friend from high school, another strange coincidence. No more clues. For whatever reason, things went south in the office. Mainly due to someone's displeasure, which turned into conflict. Manipulation.

My days working in the G Building were numbered. I didn't know it, but my job had been reclassified. I ended up in the prison Shower Squad for the remainder of my sentence. One of the most despised duties, working on the squad. The only bright spot, I was randomly selected to clean from a large pool of misfortunate inmates, only one week a month. Someone in the G Building had pull, placing my name in the Shower Squad mix. Hmm.

Back to much headier stuff. Speaking of showers, the latrine comprised the remaining space at the rear of the dorm. A concrete wall divided the latrine into halves. Each side had three sinks, two toilets, and two showers. The facilities were visible by all, for security. One must become acquainted with pushing in public. Let's not elaborate.

The shower stalls often displayed hanging bedsheets that served as makeshift shower curtains, allowing inmates to masturbate in semi-privacy. Which was preferred over them in the act next to your bunk. If one was caught by a guard in that fashion it resulted in a case. A sex case, no-no's inside.

Cases in general range from minor to major and a bunch of politics in between. Too much crap for this edition. A major case could negate parole, conceivably adding time to a sentence. Cases are used to administer punishment of various types, such as no commissary privileges. Some guards use case threats to manipulate weaker inmates. What a circus.

A picture of the remaining years came into focus. Inmates were a mixture of young, middle-aged, and old. The majority were Hispanic and African American. There were four other whites in my longest standing dorm. A couple were old codgers. One was from Houston and the other from Beaumont, TX. In their seventies, I was afraid to know their crimes, so I never asked directly. Turned out, one was a pedophile. The other was too

familiar with inner workings of the Klu Klux Klan.

The military prepared me for some aspects of prison. Thanks Uncle Sam, the ability to get along with various folks. The criminal element let you know a different breed exists. All kinds of deception were employed. One learned to think as they had because it kept you from harm's way. And watchful for a psychopath or gangbanger. There might be a difference. Then again, one never knows who they are dealing with.

Much of prison is gang laced. Getting along was no easy proposition. Daunting, the gang intangible made it unpredictable. Your cellies may be one or more of the following: murderer, rapist, child molester, wife beater, armed-robber, assaulter, arsonist, porn-king, drug-dealer, meth-maker, user, three-time loser, parole violator, or you name it. I was surprised at the number of sex offenders. The scary part, they aren't easily recognized. The veteran cons knew them. They know practically everything.

My first visit to the dining hall was a real downer. Same food as the coop, yet it passed less hands. Dining hall was a tremendous stretch. Picture a ghetto cafeteria or third-rate greasy spoon. Downgrade your expectation from there. Just waiting to go to chow was challenging. We prepped for meals at the same time each shift. A dorm may have gone within the first ten minutes or waited two hours and ten minutes. It was that way for two years.

If you hadn't learned patience, you were headed for difficulties. I learned fast. Certain folks on the outside could benefit from patience. It's an obtainable virtue, an acquisition for peace. I learned about time as well...it crawled. If you slept for five hours, it went by like thirty minutes. Then you were in for a long, long day. Then another.

One of my sisters, and someone from the media, formed independent alliances. They made my time pass easier. In this regard, I owe thanks to my sister, Jo Ann, and to a former editor/reporter, Jamie. Jo arranged for me to receive the Sunday edition of the *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*. It was mailed to the Garza prison facilities. The newspaper, and Jamie's *LifeStyles* column, kept me abreast of the news and local happenings. Words can touch deeply if they are from the familiarity of home.

I wanted to recognize Jo Ann and Jamie for contributions to my sanity, and for providing me with hope in darkness. Thank you,

ladies. You may think your life doesn't affect others, but simple notions make a difference. By the way, Jo Ann lives in the walkable vicinity. I've read Jamie's guest editorials in *LifeStyles* and her articles from *Prerogative* magazine these days.

Back to the dining hall. Chow potentially creates volatility. In general population, the chance for danger increases. Cons used chow time to communicate gang activity. Transfer contraband. Others, to see fellow inmates from previous prisons, jails, and the outside. Some relish the daylight, a regular opportunity to escape the stench. It's hard to admit I sometimes went to chow for certain types of cuisine. One could go to chow and never return. No prison food is worth a body bag.

In two years, the deaths of a few occurred. One was during chow. The other may have been suicidal or medically interconnected. Others happen because someone is scheduled to die. We witnessed the body bags as they were ushered out of a gate. One may be marked for a hit and unaware. The reality of prison, anyone could die on a given day. Sad, thinking of dying in there. Morbid.

Prisons in Texas grow vegetables. Some of that fare, the best grunts around. Most meats, poultry, and fish were state processed. No cafeteria food is as despicable. I became partial to meatloaf. At times it wasn't half bad, but not like you'd find at a church potluck. I considered chili-dog day acceptable. The dogs were a boiled variety (reddish purple). The chili was decent, comparably.

One was supposed to have twenty minutes to ingest. The guards equated it to five, maybe ten. Rarely was food served at the right temperature. It often presented a challenge. Hot it scalded throats, enough to skip your next meal. Most times it was coldish. I thought some didn't chew because of missing teeth. They gulped for the sake of not tasting.

Did I mention the common sight of mice? Some black brothers called them rats, but they were field mice. I'm afraid the presence of rats would have given the chili a gamey taste. I met few blacks, even hardened murderers, who weren't fearful of rodents or reptiles.

Mice forever invaded lockers and gnawed snacks, which made them mortal enemies. Late at night, we heard them crawling the rails. It didn't bother me as much as the gurgling and snoring.

Tooting. Sounded like hospice.

Days and weeks went on forever. You'd often hear, "Will I ever get out of here?" If certain cons heard it, they'd say, "You best silence that noise."

One turkey regularly said, "Another day in paradise." We all wanted to axe murder him after several months. It was hard to find anyone to trust. The warden might decide to move around inmates for the heck of it. A precarious time indeed.

One didn't know what to expect in a new lockup. You were better off staying put. Each move meant new politics. And whom to, and more importantly, whom not to associate with. One move turned into a real blessing.

I met Randy and Tom from another wing, two white guys from San Antonio and San Marcos. At first, it was like everyone else, meeting a convict with skepticism. But they read their Bible's and loved the Lord, truly Heaven-sent convicts at Garza East. Yes, I got moved to the eastern unit. I'm certain the Lord's hand engineered it, allowing us three to unite. Or this was the strangest coincidence of all. There had been a few, but this one was extremely notable.

Do you know the strange feeling you get, when you see someone you know yet can't place them? When I saw Randy, I knew he was familiar and quite possibly an old friend. The expectation of confirming this perplexed and excited me. It made life brighter, providing a worthy distraction. So important in there. The days spent figuring Randy's identity became exasperating. A week or so passed. Time had lapsed since freedom, and I'd done some mind bending. Who was this and what the heck was going on?

"Do you know him?" I asked Tom. "His background?"

Like a sensible felon, he said, "No. I try to respect everyone's privacy." Tom was slightly rigid, but not when the Lord got a hold of him. What little I knew about him was familiar. Drugs.

Back to the mystery, Randy. Most cons have their hair cut short, a number one (a number one is basically a buzz-cut). A style making it harder to recognize people, especially if they'd worn it long on the outside. The notion provided a clue, but it drove me farther nuts. I finally blew it off, having more important matters, like honing creative talents. I hadn't written as often, so I needed to get going. Most of my writing resulted in

journals, poems, and letters. I spent years preparing for this time to write books.

Time went by, a snail's pace. Each day I gathered clues displayed by Randy's persona. The greatest familiarity came from our Bible studies. There was some type of connection. I would eventually figure it out, a matter of time. I alluded to gospel music during one of our conversations. He kept quiet as a church mouse. Spiritual matters, gospel music. Hmm?

One unsuspecting morning, I was shaving and softly singing an old hymn, *"Wonderful Grace of Jesus."* Guess who popped in and joined in an impromptu duet? Randy harmonized sensationally.

"Hey, your voice is trained," I said.

Then I noticed something about his face, having seen that expression in song. That's when it hit me. POW!

I knew that voice. "Randy -----!" Can't reveal his last name. Randy had been in a ministry position at a San Antonio area church. Nancy knew him as well. The first verse ended. "What a small world brother," I said.

"Amen brother Stevie," Randy said. He'd called me Stevie in the past. What a blessing in disguise. I was honored. Strange I said honored, and by a criminal no less. The grace glimpses were occurring in earnest. My whole attitude shifted. What an incredible change!

I wondered about the chances and weighed the odds, like I had from past coincidences. There's upwards of two million people in San Antonio's metro. Not to mention all of Texas. How could this happen? Why was this happening?

As we finished that tremendous song, tears rolled from my eyes. Randy was equally moved. We weren't interrupted by other inmates, which occurred often. I can't tell you the joy his presence brought. Prison wouldn't destroy me. In reflection, a word of caution. Inside things can change rapidly. It's never wise to get attached, expecting good things to last. Prison 201.

I'm not sure if Randy had previously recognized me. He may have yet chosen to avoid detection. That's wise inside. Then again, I looked strange with a buzz-cut myself. Some skulls are shaped more conducive for baldness than others.

Amazing, I kept thinking. Randy just grinned. He did acknowledge our ties. It would have been strange if he hadn't. His smile welcomed me for months. It was his absence of hair that threw me, wearing it long before at shoulder length. We shared recollections of the choir, church, and things held dear. Now you tell me, was that merely a coincidence?

To explain how prison life is mundane would be redundant. Time goes on and on. I won't bore you. Besides, who could surpass Morgan Freeman in Stephen King's, "*The Shawshank Redemption*?" Prison gets old in a hurry. The same drudgery every blasted day, yet the Lord works remarkably. He can turn pity into paradise. Who else can?

My reunion with Randy would be a witness, particularly to our friend Tom. We were like the Three Musketeer's. There may have been twenty white dudes in our entire wing. Segregation thrives in Texas prisons. Sad but true. Most inmates hung out with their own and seldom deviated. I befriended minorities, saved and unsaved. I have wished to alter the old bigotry standard. If you love Jesus, we are extra tight.

Approaching blacks and Latinos never intimidates me, nor would any race. In God's eyes we are one. Though I needed to be guarded, becoming distracted by certain beliefs in prison is possible. Many blacks shared the Muslim faith. Some knew the Quran (Koran) well, and in regimented fashion. They were knowledgeable about the Bible too. Some knew it better than Christians.

Muslims believe the Quran was revealed through the angel Gabriel, from God to Muhammad. The ones in prison challenged my faith every day. It was done nonviolently, yet with intense passion. I probably threatened their beliefs as much as they had mine. Muslims are people too. From that perspective, I was able to understand their position. I tell you Christians, be ready to defend your faith. The Muslim faith is thriving and it's not going away soon.

Because I understand and speak some Spanish, I became friends with Mexican Americans in the pen. They were largely Catholic, big on liturgy and rituals. Dirge-like. My familiarity with Tex-Mex helped to facilitate our ecumenical exchange. Some of it was derogatory, so I steered our talks toward the spiritual realm.

I also communicated with Mexican Nationals. Some awaited deportation. They freaked on my Spanish, leaving them skeptical.

One said, "Who's the country person speaking our language?" I told them about my former Bexar County jefe (boss) from Mexico City, Carlos. With only two social classes in Mexico, they didn't relate to the upper crust. Carlos was an affluent national. These inmates were on the other end of the spectrum. Some of my Latino friends were filled with ideas of mediums and taboos.

Life seemed to improve every day. Randy, Tom, and I would help and pray for one another. Tom grew up Catholic. Randy and I, lifelong Baptists. We had fun with Tom, sharing comedy with our doctrinal differences. All in all, it was wonderful. The Lord's power helps to break barriers. There were still trials to endure. It was the penitentiary. The three of us shared burdens, then we offered them to the Lord. He lifted our despair, not motivated by self and pride.

Randy and I led Bible studies. So, we needed to be mindful of our witnesses, careful to match lives with testimonies. Particularly, with an impetus toward one inmate, a black brother from the Big Easy (New Orleans). For some reason, N.O. wanted to dedicate our Bible studies to the book of Leviticus. All the Word is good, divinely inspired. I hadn't read Leviticus for daily inspiration often.

I attempted to give the "do not's" from the Levitical priesthood a fair shot. You talk about religious law. To be truthful, we didn't want to study the book much. Yet we would have become a stumbling block to our brother from New Orleans. Not a good thing in Christendom, stumbling blocks. We turned it over to the Lord. All was handled gratuitously with no harm to alliances. Gratuitously...hmm. Sounds like graciously, grace segues.

Randy held special affection for the books of Romans and Hebrews, which caused me to explore them deeply. And Galatians and Ephesians. It was from the Lord's sovereign hand and Biblical references, came my renewal to the gospel. It begins and ends with the concept of grace. God's grace. The gospel of grace is needed in all our lives. Can you imagine a world without it? Or on a planet void of mercy and love? Grace is free man.

I had been accustomed to the fire and brimstone messages that focused on slavery to sin. It was a tall order, thinking I could achieve righteousness on my own. That's impossible. I understood that part to an extent, but I did not comprehend the simplicity and beauty of grace.

The Law, under the old covenant, pertained to the external (religious approval by one's works). Whereas, the new covenant pertains to the internal spirit (righteousness by grace through faith in the hearts and minds of believers). The latter is bestowed for unmerited favor. GRACE.

The Law made impressions growing up in West Virginia, and for a time, in Texas. I couldn't live up to such a standard, so I rebelled for many years. I needed to get better acquainted with the faith, hope, and love truths. I'm not talking about health and wealth gospels. I choose not to be distracted. I won't pass judgment in this thread. I will say, sugar-coated messages went over well with many inmates.

The Old Testament stories were the ones inmates related to best. The ones fulfilled in the New Testament, by Jesus Christ, were less obvious. Yet it was foretold in the Old Testament by Jeremiah 31:31-33 (NIV): *"The time is coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant though I was a husband to them," declares the Lord. "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people."*

Those of Muslim faith put little stock in the New Testament, and in Jesus the Messiah. Their words from prison, "Paul's writings are not valid." Paul wrote a significant chunk (approximately 60%) of the New Testament. Muslims spoke of him as a renegade. They did acknowledge that Jesus was a prophet, a Muslim one.

We tried to explain Christianity from their frame of reference, the Old Testament. Starring Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We were careful to include stories of Noah, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, and Elijah. The New Testament states it plainly in John 1:17 (NIV): *"For the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."*

Here's how the Lord, I believe, helped me to explain Christianity in our prison Bible study: "When Jesus came to earth as a man, as recorded in the New Testament, no longer was it simply adhering to the Ten Commandments. As you know, the tablets were hauled down from Mount Sinai by Moses. With the new covenant, it's more about obedience from the heart that

harmoniously evolves by grace and through faith in Jesus. Christ died on the cross for our sins, then rose to Heaven. And... He will return in judgment of the world for eternity one day. These are the things that save us and sustain us."

The previous quote is not textbook theology, but it spewed out of me. The black Muslims and some Latinos simply stared. Appearing to think hard about what I said. I was merely planting the seed. What an experience and tremendous opportunity. I know the Lord used my inabilities for His glory.

Randy's dad was in the ministry. I knew of his fellowship from the annual choir festivals held at First Baptist Church, San Antonio. Randy needed to rediscover the Lord through the message of grace and faith. My awakening was like a dream, inviting. A direct invitation from the Lord. He was calling me through Randy's testimony.

I'm writing this book because of those caged up glimpses, which began in 2008. The proof, however, was yet to be determined. I needed to live out my faith on the streets of freedom. Bound for survival, placing confidence in the Lord. Not in Steve. I am a work in progress. We all are.

I surely hope Randy gets to read this someday. The coincidence of him in my cellblock was uncanny. The Lord is truly overall. God is always in control, no matter what we're going through. Randy and I experienced similar trials through life. We struggled with good and evil. The Lord used him to open the eyes of my heart. I can't say enough about that critical juncture. We even joked about starting a church and calling it, Grace: The New Covenant Church.

We all live under God's mercy. If we didn't, think how dark the world would be. The gospel of grace means we can't earn God's favor. Serving Jesus Christ from the position of faith changes everything. Becoming eager to trust God out of love and hope, not from lawful necessity and legalistic works. The Law remains perfect and good, however. Its purpose is to highlight sin and separation from God.

In prison, it's a period of deep contemplation. So much time to think. All the, what if I would have? If only I could have? And the why didn't I's? You spend an enormous amount of time beating yourself up, repeatedly.

Despite the peaks, there's always valleys. On a day following, I

found myself in a particularly dark mood. The same regret and pity consumed me. Fear abounded. I was in a state of hopeless agony. Was it because I had looked within? Sleep would have provided temporary relief.

Here's my August 2008 journal entry prior to the following story: "Inexplicable dread grips souls in Beeville, Texas. Lights out signals a respite. A deafening silence shrouds the institution. Some relish the night, others fear the torment. The heat, stifling. On cue, rodents scratch along concrete floors and steel railings. Sweat falls in a concert of droplets. Not a puff of air moves about. The same rotten odors begin their pervasive waft. You learn to cough without inhaling. As senses settle, the lights pop on. Scores of bugs scurry and some wing for cover. The silhouettes of TDCJ Correctional Officer's arrive for headcount. A chorus of groans echoes through the walls. Life at its worst."

I found myself awake through the long night, unable to sleep. Out of nowhere, I received a moving sense.

PRAY.

My heart and mind filled. These words came out like a release of a toxin. "I can't do this on my own Lord." I pleaded, "I need you!"

A strange stillness lasted several moments. There were always assorted sounds at night. It was dead quiet. More words came out, "Please take control of my life dear God."

Quieter and still. "I surrender my heart to you!" I cried.

I sat there, believing I was the only one awake. Then I felt an overwhelming presence of the Lord. Something was radically different, without a doubt. Lasting change occurred from the inside. I was born under the curse of sin in the Garden of Eden, but I wasn't doomed. I paged through my Bible to the eighth chapter of John. There it was, in red letters (the very words of Jesus), John 8:31-32 (NIV): **"...If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."**

I continued waiting for morning. A light shined through, enough to read the Bible easier. I turned to John 15: 4-5 (NIV): **"Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you**

bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."

I noticed the number of "remain(s)" in those verses. The Lord spoke to my heart through His Word. God released me from fear and removed my desire to drink and drug. He started teaching me, not to look within. When the Lord convicts and you trust Him, He will do the rest.

The Lord reveals truth. Yes, I doubted my salvation in 1967, because I had never allowed the Lord to reign. You must remain connected to the vine (Christ Jesus), and live your life through faith with eternal hope. Not out there on prideful adventures, living for self-glorification...and fruitless without character.

That night I confronted all my darkness in the glorious light of grace. I found out how great God is. He's the ultimate Forgiver. It doesn't matter about yesterday. What matters is today.

It would be months until the Lord unpacked more, knowing there'd be a purpose for me. In the meantime, I learned something about faith. It's not, "Please give me more faith." It's trusting in the God of Faith, Jesus Christ. I'm not Steve the ex-con; I'm a child of The King.

Nothing sums up that time better. *"The Purpose Driven Life,"* by Rick Warren, *"The Bible says, The Lord is close to the brokenhearted; he rescues those who are crushed in spirit."*

"Your most profound and intimate experiences of worship will likely be in your darkest days, when your heart is broken, when you feel abandoned, when you're out of options, when the pain is great, and you turn to God alone. It is during suffering that we learn to pray our most authentic, heartfelt, honest-to-God prayers. When we're in pain, we don't have the energy for superficial prayers."

Thanks for your ministry and its missionary focus, Rick Warren. Thanks for *"The Purpose Driven Life."* I'm writing these words because of the Lord, His Word, family, and the message of your free book in prison. It was no coincidence; I had picked it up to read. Thank you, Lord.

I must admit something. You may think this is insignificant, considering my plight. In prison, there were regular opportunities to smoke tobacco. I sometimes get cravings for a

cigarette, even these days. It's when I smell one, see a person smoking, or have anxiety. I believe it is a little test for me. Smoking tobacco was a vice from my earliest rebellion. It happened to be the last vice I gave up. Before the desire was removed, I'd break down and smoke, giving in. I relate smoking cigarettes and such to "that time in my life." A time of ruin. They say a leopard can't change its spots. Jesus can change anything. He can change you.

I was coming up on my second parole hearing. My first hearing came after seven months. At the time a veteran convict counseled. "Don't get your hopes up." He was right, no parole. "Having a five-year sentence means you'll do two years minimum," he said.

Right before my second parole hearing another con advised. "You'll get an FI-2." An FI-2 designates conditional parole, with an arbitrary release date. The con was spot on. My date was set for 02/2009. If I made it, then I'd only do two on a five. Leaving three years on paper (on parole). Not ideal, but better than previously imagined.

My nerves were shaky at the parole board. Everyone back in the cell knew the score. There were few secrets inside. They waited for other's outcomes. If I had received parole, it might give them hope. The old schools weren't interested in parole. You better not discuss it with ones having a long stretch. Much of prison was common sense. In retrospect, life is much the same.

Prison can rehabilitate a person with half a brain. After a change of their heart. I read an article about the Texas recidivism rate. It hovered above sixty percent. A convict's ego must take a back seat to stay clean. Free, and to make it on the outside without a return.

Some are truly ready for pride reductions through an early release. Regretfully, all parole decisions aren't based on what's sensible. Obvious to cons, parole is a number's game. I witnessed cons in bloody fights and others caught with serious contraband. Some would get additional time and be transferred to real units (higher security prisons). Others got paroled within months. I'm sure there's a logical discretion, but a government entity has red tape.

I'd get my chance for release in six-months. Those last months spelled trouble. I heard more pearls of wisdom from a veteran con. "Watch out when you have an FI-2. Some might trip you up,"

he said. "They certainly know about your release date."

I hate to say it; the cons were correct. I noticed a difference in the way I was treated. It left me in a precarious situation, and I was getting paranoid. If someone had it out for you, then it wouldn't be broadcasted.

When trouble came it struck at once. As I stretched out on my bunk with a newspaper one evening, I felt a powerful sneeze coming on. I did have the wherewithal to cover with the ads. One needs to be mindful of cellies, not disrespecting them. Some inmates kept their areas spotless and were over-protective of germs. Paranoid. Or they simply looked for reasons to lash out.

My celly, having a forty-four-year stretch and a choleric disposition, wanted a piece of me. My corner bunk was beyond the guard's video range. Details are important to a wily con. He braced himself in a "Karate Kid" fashion, using the railing for support. Which enabled him to kick my face with a snap of his leg. My head jarred against the iron railing, splitting open like a watermelon.

I recoiled and stood up woozy. Blood sprayed, leaving a crimson trail behind. When fights broke out you sustained a low-profile. Everyone knew to stay clear of another's blood due to Staph and Hep-C infections. By remaining detached, you'd refute involvement later. You didn't want an assault charge at the interrogation. Additional time could be appended to your sentence, a major case. Bad news.

Everyone knew blood resulted in silent lambs. It was common practice to refute involvement. "I didn't see a thing man." Scuffles meant chaos and reams of paperwork. My celly was prison-wise in other ways. He knew not to use his fists, providing scarring evidence. I had no recourse but to head toward the outer door. I hadn't considered my injury as dangerously close to the brain stem.

The guards intervened and escorted me to Ad-Seg (Administrative Segregation). The night sergeant met me with a scowl, but he treated me with unusual kindness. A guard showing compassion spelled caution. They needed diplomacy for getting to "truth." While cleaning my wound he attempted to grill me.

"Will this mess up my parole?"

No immediate answer.

"I'll ask the questions," he said.

My gash was worse than perceived. I needed transport to the McConnell Unit, a prison a few minutes away. Medium to high-security units handles twenty-four-hour emergencies. Bernie Tiede, from the movie "Bernie," was an inmate at McConnell. It is somewhat of a dark comedy, starring Matthew McConaughey. Don't know if Tiede still calls McConnell home. Hope not.

I had seen McConnell's fortress months prior while being transported back to Garza East via the Darrington Unit near Houston. I stayed at Darrington a night or two, returning from an outpatient clinic at the state hospital in Galveston, TX. Where a dermatologist removed a basal cell carcinoma. My prior pass through had been close enough to the intimidating McConnell Unit. Our bus had dropped off some inmates before reaching our destination at Garza.

This is a good place to record the Darrington Unit, so let's take a brief detour. Darrington was known as a real unit, having individual cells and additional facilities. These units look more like the ones on television. They housed some heavy-duty cons. Lifers. I felt more depressed there. It was filthy. Roaches crawled through the cells in daylight. Security is tighter at those places.

Darrington is a busy prison, an old Texas prison farm that also served as a pass-through facility. Many of the prison guards at Darrington were Nigerian. Some were okay and sorta reasonable. Nigerian female guards showed a little more compassion. They were distinctive looking, with golden-colored eyes. Spooky. I thought they were from the tropical isles. Very few of those guards conversed, and most hadn't uttered a word of English. To us, anyway.

I did some difficult time at Darrington. There was no sense of urgency because many inmates passed through every day. The guards had their hands full with the transition. You were lucky to get a single sheet of bedding. Showers were possibly available, other times not. That place makes sense now, the way it was managed.

We all would pass through Darrington on the way to "The Walls" in Huntsville, Texas. Huntsville is the state's release facility. Some of my worst days and nights were spent at the Darrington Unit. So, I dreaded going there. I went through there several times and looked forward to my final stay, bound for The Walls.

Back to my busted head at the McConnell Unit. The medical care was decent, but my case wasn't unordinary. I expected a CT and MRI, at least, a simple x-ray. They left me on an operating table for a long time. The guards off to the side bs-ed away. After a doctor examined my wound, I was cleaned and prepped by a nurse. Nine staples were applied to the back of my head. I was transported back to Garza East as if nothing happened.

Administrative segregation was my return destination. When fights occurred, inmates got moved. Staying in my dorm was preferred. You don't get what you want in prison. It's probably a good idea to change wings after an incident, in hindsight.

Ad-Seg is really isolation, a strangely acceptable change. One gets their own cell, sink, and toilet. Yet it is anything but quiet, housing troublemakers and such. The food came in colder than usual. Otherwise, it was the same slop. Certain inmates delivered our trays. We weren't allowed in the general population, nor permitted to leave the cell.

Every hour was soul-searching time. My concern, parole. I wrote an accident report. In an elongated version, I leaned on my most persuasive skills. You need to ensure additional charges aren't filed from a scrape with another inmate.

By the third night in Ad-Seg, I had been prepared for a move. The warden would not allow a return to the same wing. I said adios to Randy and Tom. Then I started thinking, put me anywhere but E-Wing. The misfits lived in there. My short experience in E-Wing, a difficult two weeks. I'd stayed there when first arriving at Garza East. "There's no other room yet, convict," the administrator said. "This ain't the Hyatt."

There were some real characters in E-Wing, principally the whacked-out meth heads and assorted crazies. I wasn't sure of survival in there. One dude took a liking to me. He often alluded to a certain chapter from the Bible, inserted his own prophetic timeline. Out there, man.

Where were we? Oh. I was leaving Ad-Seg. The mercy of the Lord moved me to D-Wing, my final lockup leading to parole. In a month or so I was back to a routine. I'd sorely missed the Word. John 15: "...*Remain connected to the vine.*" Not easily forgotten. The vine (Jesus), the branches (believers), and the fruit (character).

I also missed Randy and Tom, but life goes on. The good thing, only three months left. I walked ever closer to the Lord. The end of prison was in sight. I tried to keep from getting overly excited. Inside, I was ecstatic. The last months were not without distress.

It just so happened, there was a huge plumbing problem outside. The prison's water supply was in jeopardy, cut off. When that occurs, the farm goes on lockdown. Which meant no dining hall, no library, no classes, and no visits. We could live with that, but it got appreciably worse.

The extent of our lockdown meals: dry cereal, raisins, hard-boiled eggs, sandwiches, or burritos. The food was delivered by the guards, three times in a twenty-four-hour period. Who wanted to eat prison food in the middle of the night? The sandwiches were peanut-butter-jelly or salami and cheese. Potable water or powdered milk to drink. No coffee unless you liked it cold, in rancid water. I tried it once, then lived with caffeine withdrawal.

You might be thinking; the food doesn't sound bad. It was prison variety. The hard-boiled eggs were nearest to normal, but they smelled aged. The peanut-butter was state-processed. A handball-sized glob infused with grape jam and smashed between stale bread slices. The lunch meat, I seldom ingested. The discolored bologna was desired over fatted salami. I wondered if the fatty pieces were maggots. I shuddered.

You may have wondered, what were they doing about hygiene? Did you think about flushing toilets? Maybe you didn't. Imagine this: fifty-four felon's excrements, piling up to the rim of four toilets, and the chances for ripening were good. You can't imagine the stench. Unlucky inmates shoveled those loads away. Certain trustees skipped some of the dorms on purpose. We all survived, and I was getting out soon. Yippee!

I stayed focused to avoid trouble. Seldom had I seen Randy and Tom along the "bowling-alley." The bowling-alley was the name for a concrete walkway, running end-to-end between the yards. The guards and other staff strolled down the center of the alley. Inmates walked in the lanes on either side. These lanes defined restricted access points, to and from the dining hall, library, parole office, visitation area, classrooms, chapel, and places of work.

The closer to parole, the slower time ticked. Had trouble

sleeping those last weeks, still learning the wisdom of one-day-at-a-time. I dreamed of seeing Nancy and the kids. How I had wished for a miracle to reunite us.

I spent my remaining time in the Bible and praying more often. It wasn't because I was getting out. It was for communion with the Lord. Reports of many getting out renounced God. I heard support for this regarding Huntsville Prison (The Walls). An old con said, "On your last day, as you walk out, take notice of the Bibles in that dumpster."

It was down to a week before my release. I slept considerably less yet was hopeful for a future. I nodded during the day and skipped chow to catch a few winks. It grew cold in late January. Though there existed a heater, the guards controlled its influx. A single sheet and scratchy blanket to provide warmth. When the temperature dipped below forty, I chose to sleep with my coat. We did have a state issued, parka-like jacket. I wondered how many inmates had worn it. Some choose vagrancy. Squalor. Most of the jackets smelled suspect, a molded quality.

It was necessary to stay occupied, keeping the mind busy. The cold and winter allergies made it difficult to concentrate. When not actively seeking the Lord's will through the Word and prayer, I wrote to fill the time. Without realizing, I was doing one in the same. In those final days, I conceived some of this manuscript. I imagined the book's theme, style, and character inclusion. I also wrote letters to family and friends.

I had the undeserved pleasure to correspond with someone, just a friend. She was one of those beauties who I'd mentioned previously from Princeton High. Elegant inside and out. This individual wrote me for some time. I'll refer to her as Caring. She made my time brighter. It's these people you seldom forget. I'm sure her time would have been better served than to pen with a convict. From our teens, I recalled her sweet nature. Caring is a professional, managing people in critical occupations today. Her soothing words helped me through very tough times.

I just wanted to recognize her kindness and charity. I wonder if she knows what her encouragement meant to me. Caring, you know who you are. Thank you! I know you will be rewarded one day. God is gracious and faithful. He never fails when we act out of selfless love. You performed a great service to one with little hope. I'll never forget your compassion. I wish you life's very best.

The time awaiting my last transport, to catch chain, was one of the longest days to endure. Again, the veteran cons supplied helpful details. They proved very reliable.

"You'll catch chain a few days early because you'll go through the Darrington Unit," a con said.

"Darrington," I frowned.

"Shut up man," his eyes said. I could tell by his expression; he was thinking, you're a lucky sucker. Instead, he humbly said, "It depends on your release date and its conjunction with the weekend." Cons, a different breed.

Inmates were transported on certain days. Meaning, I would spend the weekend at Darrington. I dreaded the possibility but accepted it as prison finality.

Cons supplying information expected payment. When getting out many wanted handouts. The prized stuff, left over commissary items such as fried pies, candy, squeeze cheese, and meat packs. Some inmates wanted your paper, envelopes, and stamps. Others opted for your toiletries, books, and commissary bags. Not many wanted your Bible and such.

Inmates receive a sign when they are up for soon departure. Around 8:00 p.m. the guards enter the dorm with red bags, vented ones. Sacks originally designed for produce such as fruits and vegetables. Those sacks are distributed in prisons across Texas to store belongings. Red bags mean travel, release, and opportunity. When cons are scheduled for departure, everyone knows who the bags are for.

Suddenly, I had so many friends. I prepped for release, yet another challenge loomed. One wants to simply pack their belongings and get out of Dodge. Inmates could care less; they want your stuff. Your mind is on loved ones, theirs are on themselves. Some went away empty handed, bad-mouthing. One needs to remain cautious. Some might put a release in jeopardy at the very last minute.

There were genuine inmates, friends. They didn't expect anything, except for a handshake or words of encouragement. I had no gang affiliations, so I gave to the needy. They were grateful, and it brought out the tears. I don't know how some of them survived. They had no one, inside or out. Some burned bridges many times over. Perhaps a wife or child once loved

them. Trust had been abandoned. I understood and sympathized.

I didn't sleep a wink that night. Some inmates slept anytime, anywhere. It was finally two in the morning. Time to line up at the gymnasium. From there, transport to the Darrington Unit. The bus arrived before 5:00 a.m. I walked out of the back gate with much lighter feet, knowing I'd never go back to Garza. I tried to guess the number of felons who had taken the same steps, hundreds of thousands. How did they fair, and had they stayed clean?

I began to look ahead, pondering my future. Maybe I'll minister to them one day, I thought. I hope they have a chance to read my story. Please make it possible Lord. You get the glory!

I did have to endure the weekend at Darrington. I knew what to expect; I vowed to hang low. It didn't matter, having no mattress the first night. So lumpy it scarcely mattered. The first time through Darrington, my mattress had holes. When I had put it up on the railing, roaches poured out. The next time it smelled like upchuck. I told you it didn't matter. My last gross prison remark.

The day arrived (February 02, 2009). My final prison ride was to Huntsville, Texas. A release would come later in the day. First, we needed to out process. The main step, finalizing parole. But the most favored activity, receiving fifty dollars and a bus ticket home.

Staff gave us civilian clothes, which were donated by various community fellowships. An expressionless guard guessed my waistline, then tossed a pair of trousers at me. They were an old pair of black Dockers (with a tear on the left thigh). My shirt gave the impression of a tourist, printed with palms and an elaborate macaw. Oh well, so much for going home GQ.

I vividly remember exiting the prison. A huge burden was lifted. Light as a feather, my headache had vanished. I didn't forget to look in the dumpster. There it was, filled with Bibles. One last time, I thought aloud, "The cons were right again."

A few cars waited by the curb, giving luckier parolees a ride home. Crying mothers with their children affected me deeply. The little ones were well-behaved, considering the circumstances. I felt good for them. Yet at the same time, I experienced recurring sadness.

I was free at last and inside the local bus station. All of us ordered burgers and fries, a tradition for those released. It wasn't the best in the world, but it tasted like it. Many of the guys were buying cigarettes or snuff. You talk about a craving. I was dying to have a drag, watching them inhale.

Instead, I talked to the Lord. "Lord, this is my first test." Looking skyward, "Will you please help me?"

In a few seconds, a man tapped me on the shoulder. "Do you know how far it is to Houston son?"

I took his as the hand of the Lord's. "I believe its forty-five miles from here, sir."

"Thanks, son."

A temptation had fled. I thanked my gracious Lord. I enjoyed the Greyhound bus ride to Houston, and then on to San Antonio. One thing happened worth mentioning. The bus contained several ex-cons/parolees, so I couldn't escape them yet. I wasn't much interested in the company or to chat much. I sat alone in a front seat, opposite the driver.

On I-45 South, we stopped for gas outside of Houston. "Ten-minute stop," the driver said. Then he turned to the rear of the bus. "And don't be late." Guess who didn't make it back? An ex-con. The driver departed without him.

Our tickets were non-refundable to our home or a halfway house. "He's in trouble already," I said to the lady behind me.

The bus ride was smooth in contrast to the state's Blue Birds. Gone were the shackles and Johnny sacks. The skyline of San Antonio appeared from a distance via I-10 West, the Tower of the Americas. I breathed a little easier. We pulled into the San Antonio terminal at two o'clock in the morning. Rick H. was waiting with a smile. Thanks, my friend!

In hindsight, here's the best advice for doing the time. Keep your trap shut and your eyes open, at least during the first few weeks. Learn to sleep lightly. Resist the urge to be extra-friendly to everyone. Be cautious, welcoming unsolicited advice.

Seek wisdom from God by reading the Bible. Pray. Prepare your heart and mind for YOUR mission in life. Dedicate yourself to it, no turning back. Commit your decision to the Lord, and to a

person on the outside for accountability. Then swallow your PRIDE every day that follows.

There is helpful power in Apostle Paul's letters from the Bible (Philippians comes to mind). It causes me to focus on the truth. I still need to pray it persistently, otherwise, pride will try to win. Paul's letter from his imprisonment speaks well. I'm humbled by Philippians 2:3 (NIV): *"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves."*

Chapter two of Philippians is a fine example of Christ and the model for us. Here are the beautiful verses of five through eleven (NIV): *"Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death on a cross! Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name above every name, that the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."*

My personal plea to those in prison is serious and from the heart. It is a message of HOPE. You are where you are for breaking the law. There are percentages who get wrongly convicted, but it is a very small number. If I were still a bettor, I'd wager the crime incarcerating you was not your first scrape with the justice system. I get there are exceptions, yet I've been there. I know what it is to be a convict.

Now is the time to change your life. It's time to prove it to the doubters, you are more than a SID number (a state id number/tracking number). To do so, you must say no to your pride. You know the score. Are you willing to step up to the plate and be real? It is easier to hide behind other things. To change you must deny self and take the first step of humility. If the power of God woos you, convicts your heart of sin, I promise you this: ***If you are truly sorry and ask Jesus Christ into your heart, He will save you and set you free!***

By taking this step of faith you are placing an ongoing trust in Him, not in other things. If you do, don't make the mistake I had made. Remain connected to Jesus through the day. End your day with Him, He will do the rest. That's the power of grace and

faith, my friends. Your life will never be the same. I'm praying for YOU.

Souls long endlessly. Thomas Aquinas said, "*There is a God-shaped void in all of us.*" It's not just convicts. Christians use substitutes to fill their ravenous holes. The results can be gradual; however, and snowball into mountains of grief.

Here's my desire, whoever you are. I hope you'll find meaning, regardless of your circumstances. May this story impact those teetering in similar stead. That would make my effort worthwhile. Please, try not to incur similar pitfalls. The crafty nature of pride led me into a bizarre life and near-paralyzing regret. Once you learn of pride's nuances, the chains can be broken.

Chapter 13 Depression

I wasn't sure where to include this chapter. Thirteen sounded apropos. As I consider depression it helps to think I may have been afflicted for a scientific reason, like a chemical imbalance. It comforted me to learn that all those years self-medicating were not attributable to my lot in life.

Prior to a diagnosis of my severe form (clinical depression), I'd just detoxed from cocaine, liquor, speed, weed, and tobacco. I had lost my marriage, job, house, money, car, and reputation. Who wouldn't be depressed? But don't run out to your psychiatrist just yet. Depression, the mental health disease, is very real. The definition varies across the board. I can relate what it means to me, but it may be something entirely different for you. I'll try not to be flippant nor cavalier. No. This is a serious matter.

Being in the driver's seat for a life of abuse lends credence to a common theory. Self-medicating is being your own doctor and pharmacist, but it mainly applies to the abuse of alcohol and/or drugs. I know it's possible to abuse food, gambling, sex, etc. I'm sticking with alcohol and drugs for this discussion.

Some folks just aren't right, they need to alter the thoughts in their heads. One might have their neurotransmitters and hormones out of whack (serotonin and norepinephrine imbalances). They could benefit from legal meds. There are those who make it with counseling, so I've heard.

Figure I'll be stepping on sacred ground here, so look out. Some Christians believe God alone can heal mental health issues, such as depression and schizophrenia. Perhaps he can, but why is going to the doctor for a tumor any different than going to the doctor for a mental illness disorder? I've never understood this. God is the answer to many ills. Mental health is a legitimate concern and should be addressed by a professional in the medical industry. If you have a chemical imbalance it's not your fault. You need to get "in balance," seeking qualified help.

People can live quality lives with proper succor. On the other hand, some people want a pill for just about anything. Their head hurts, their body aches, their spouse nags, their job sucks, and their dog's tail won't wag. They want something to cope with unhappy existences. Something to completely ameliorate, not temporarily alleviate. Forgive the complex verbiage. Words rock!

Anyway, some people could benefit from a dose of reason. I'm not talking about human reason. Some needs may surely be spiritual. Did I contradict myself here? I don't think so. Lives might be at stake.

This is a tragic April 9, 2013, insertion. Written well after this chapter had first been penned. I never planned to supplement this thread, but I hadn't anticipated the suicidal death of twenty-seven-year-old Matthew Warren. Because I admire Rick Warren and the impact he has on lives, I feel compelled. Mental health issues must be addressed openly by our society. The stigma placed on mental disorders is best countered by open, raw, and fearless conversations. Then possibly more earnest solutions will be devised, encompassing the darkening shadows of pain and loss.

My depression seems overwhelming at times; I've witnessed others far worse. It's sad, relating to the loneliness and horror of an agonizing pit. I hesitate to think deeply about this issue at times. I'm simply afraid, seeing it up close and personal. I understand the stigmatic and blinded side of the issue. It's scary in the abyss of uncertainty. My heart goes out to all with mental illnesses. As I try to imagine the pain of those who have faced the suicide of loved ones, I pray we will take mental illness seriously.

One's spiritual faith is vital, but we live on an imperfect planet. The world where depression and other ills are commonplace. Evil abounds. I don't know what else to say about the apparent senseless death of Matthew Warren. Rick Warren's open response, soon after the loss of his son, causes me to reflect deeply. I admire his courage, so I just want to say how sorry I am to the family. And prayers for all, knowing such difficulties.

Now back to the previous thread. I contemplated worthy topics for this discussion after editing previous chapters. Certain things solidified in my mind. Now that's scary, but here goes. God, nor antidepressants, will solve your everyday trivial

issues. I believe the primary ingredient for a long haul is trust in the God of Christianity for eternity. JESUS. The One who will carry you through the trials and sufferings of today and tomorrow. The staunchest people on earth cannot escape struggle. Some may need chemical balancing to operate adequately in society. My belief, they are not mutually exclusive. Confused?

As humans, we vacillate in the realm of spirituality. No one is holy every moment, a far cry. One's thinking they are fully developed in character are in denial. By remaining connected to the Author of Faith you will overcome the inconsistencies of the world, with or without depression. Such inconsistency includes your limitations.

Without nourishment from food and water, our bodies will die. Apart from God, we can do nothing. Read the Gospel of John, Chapter 15, in your Bible. It will explain the concept of remaining connected to the Vine. The fullness of my life abides in that wondrous application. It reminds me of faith's ultimate design. Faith in Jesus Christ saves you, but it also sustains you by developing fruit in your life (character). Which changes how one views depression in a nonclinical sense. Though it's possible your brain needs balanced to better sense and execute this principle. A layman's opinion.

I knew inmates who snorted several antidepressants on a regular basis for no obvious reasons. They did grind them up first. They weren't the depression patients I had seen at mental health. Now that's plain senseless. The veteran drug abuser, which I'm not proud to be identified, has issues with such nonsense. Anxiety and panic disorders are enormous issues out there. Some are better off attended clinically. Some meds may even cause anxiety. I had some of that back when. In these cases, you might need an alternate medication or reduced dosage.

I've seen the results from long lives of substance abuse, having done irreversible harm. Those folks used an excessive amount of LSD, angel dust, crank, methamphetamine, pills, hashish, marijuana, peyote, mushrooms, alcohol, etc. They seemed to have induced/triggered manic episodes that were schizophrenia-like. Other than heavy psych meds, I wasn't sure what they needed. Sadly, some have incurred permanent damage.

Having depression in prison really sucked, as if things weren't bad enough. There were days when I would've been better off dead. Thanks to the Lord and modern chemistry, I was wrong. I

can't tell you how many times the Lord brought peace from my valleys. During the worst days of depression, the Bible ably rescued while under the influence of antidepressants. Let me smooth over a misconception. Typical antidepressants do not provide a euphoric state. No buzz, unless you consider lethargy as an escape. Antidepressants alleviate turbulence, but you still must endure the flight.

It wasn't easy getting antidepressants in prison. It didn't matter if you took them on the outside. Inmates were required to see the prison's mental health staff. I had it all figured out. The first person I saw, a young ex-Navy officer on staff. Just knew he'd hear my sad story and boom, my meds. "Not so fast," he cautioned.

I was required to see him twice more prior to psychologist escalation. In the meantime, I had lost twenty pounds. It wasn't just the slop in the dining hall. Many cons gained a substantial amount of weight. Fairly down, I cared little for food. A dire state and in a deep, dark, abyss of a funk. It wasn't simply my plight.

In a week or so, I was at mental health and eager to plead my case to the higher ups. I received plenty of advice from an old con artist. "Now here's what you do, tell them: yadda, yadda, and more yaddas." Sure man, I gotcha.

It's sort of dumb, attempting to fast-talk a psychotherapist. Convicts are called cons for a reason. They have probably conned people their entire lives. Inmates I met who weren't rookies knew everything there was to know. Which made it a twenty-four-seven annoyance. Talk about crazy forms of pride. Holy mackerel.

If you questioned some cons, concerning things such as psych issues, you stood a chance of getting hurt. Especially when dealing with a doltish gang member. In prison your chances of that were sixty-forty. If one got caught up in the wrong speak with a banger or a rival, he'd find himself in an inescapable jam. It was required to save face, never getting punked. So before heading down to the clinic, I listened to advice and acknowledged with appropriate feedback.

When I saw the attending psychologist, she showed a fair amount of compassion. I hadn't anticipated such kindness and was convinced she would be a tough sell. She asked me five questions, then declared, "You can check pill window in a few days."

I wondered about that term, "pill window," such a nice ring. I had heard them calling it over the PA around 2:30 p.m. If you were asleep or didn't hear the announcement it was your bad.

Pill window was a familiar stop along the "bowling alley," and next to the medical clinic. It was a small pane attended by a nurse or medical assistant where we lined up in rows of three, merging into a single line near the window. If you had a valid script your pill(s) would be waiting, with the appropriate identification.

Pill window is the distribution center for all medical conditions, from athlete's foot to a myocardial infarction (heart attack). And it was a melting pot for minds. Disturbed ones. A busy place, pill window. It doubled as a meeting location for gangs and unauthorized activity. A fair amount of contraband was passed there, which is off the record.

Some cons were out there, no doubt. They needed definite clinical assistance. A couple of guards, who monitored the pill window lines, became self-divested with power. If you talked or acted stupid, you got zero dope. I went through a couple of variations of antidepressants. I ended up with Prozac and Trazodone. It wasn't as though you were seeing primary care in suburbia. One took what he was issued. Trazodone was an all-purpose zonker for things.

There were other levels of need, serious ones. Some dudes took high doses of Thorazine and Lithium. Those inmates were out there. Way, way out here. Shh, I obtained a high dose of Thorazine once. Whoa...talk about weird and scary dreams. Though I wanted, I couldn't wake up from chaotic REM. Never took one again, no way.

We were required to swallow our meds at the pill window, using a nearby water fountain. It contained an abundance of capsules and phlegm. Swallowing was the rule in case you had notions of selling your stuff. The nurse and guards were supposed to watch. A few cared less. The veteran cons knew how to get over, hiding pills under their tongue or somewhere on their person. I never saw a thing until a suspected con became the day's spectacle. Wizards I tell you. Some guards weren't wholly concerned with anything while others perpetuated evil.

Prison is awfully depressing. If looking for compassion, then go someplace else. Some guards allowed me to hold my meds until

nighttime if I was extra diplomatic. I'd tell them the truth with an appeal. "If I take those now, I'll be out until morning sir. I won't even make it to chow."

Some guards were relatively cool and consented. "Okay, but don't get caught with that in the dorm." Other guards made you take it out of spite. If you hacked them off, they remembered it down the line. On the other hand, some guards rewarded consistent behavior. That's just the way of prison. Some days were more depressing than others.

I'm unsure of the meds approach for every patient, in my humble opinion. Antidepressants are widely used in the world. Counseling was not my quick fix. Let me restate this with a caveat, the counsel of a common man wasn't helpful. One with less than a psych prefix seemed useless. I was certain my issues required an MD and some meds. I still take fifteen milligrams of Mirtazapine at bedtime, and I can't evaluate another's need. I'm doing so well, I'm hesitant to stop taking it regularly.

It's easier to write about depression these days, understanding it may have attributed to past issues. And how I was angry and overbearing at times, with uncontrolled rage during certain periods. Had depression distorted the perception of my wife and kids? I reasoned it was stress on the grumpiest of days. I'm not excusing the way I acted. Yet I'm hoping they understand, my angst wasn't their fault. Unfortunately, they were the recipients thereof. I'm sorry dear loved ones.

Moving on to my depression of late. There are isolated days that begin with an overwhelming desire to stay in bed. Not just stay in bed, cover my head and stay in bed. I've been there and done that. The only hope and cure are tomorrow or the next day. I'm not sure of handling a significant string of bed-ridden days. Ooo and ugh.

There's no way to predict when the next ugly comes. You've heard people say: "It follows good days, or it comes after a mountaintop experience." I don't recall many of those in the throes of bad.

At depression's worst, I bare it physically before my eyelids open. I'll have a dull yet a paralyzing headache. My body feels flu-like. It's plain, I won't get much done those days. I can't concentrate, and it is difficult to read or write. I just feel out of it and can't perform manual labor.

My worst ugliness attacks in every conceivable fashion. Many counselors suggest physical activity, such as working out or running. Which is not at the top of my list when I'm down in loungewear. Maybe it's a good precursor. If I could only predict an upcoming pit.

I've found a temporary cure for the semi-worst days, preparing a meal. There's something about cutting up things, adding spices, and cooking it up. I don't follow recipes well, so reading is optional. It's weird, but preparing feasts works. It is worse to stay in bed and dwell on Pharmacology. Try crafting something. It beats feeling sorry for yourself, and you may feel better with the results. Maybe a cure for depression is to think of others. To serve.

The last time I had one of those days, Momma was worried. I tried to explain, but it is hard to let the family know how dire you feel. You don't want them hearing about the darkness in your soul, a terrible host of mixed feelings. I don't want to place extra worry on loved ones. They seem to exhibit the worry gene at times. Another factor concerning the illness, I'm not good at covering up my sickness. Some people can put on the same face day after day, regardless of their circumstances. I'm not one of them. My mother-in-law was.

Back to having a bad day. My dark days are evident. I wear them well. I'm likely to wallow in the pit, from the unkempt to the near skid-row look. I prefer to shower daily. Yet sometimes my mood is so drearily shaded, why bother? I'm not always the overly fastidious type, but I like to appear presentable.

I have been known to snap out of the doldrums through a focus on something tangible. Reading may work, except when it's difficult to comprehend what Jane is doing to John. That's why I love to write. It's easier to craft things and writing is a wonderful outlet. There's no better time to create than fresh from the perspective of despair.

Yesterday was one of those dreaded days. I knew better to take aspirin or other pain relievers, which tends to make matters worse. If under any doubt, my mood is confirmed through an inability to complete the crossword puzzle. I can usually finish the Thomas Joseph *CROSSWORD* within ten minutes or so of my morning coffee. Another indicator, my blend of hazelnut or caramel cream will taste sorta funny.

An attempt at normalcy found me checking email and Facebook

accounts. I deviated, starting with the latter. A chat window popped up, "BLOOP." It was a friend checking in. I didn't involve this person with the downer I was having. Our text outlined the previous day's activities. A bit was personal, so I won't divulge. I will say, we strengthened our resolve for the Lord. It was the highpoint of my day. There wouldn't be another until dawn.

When having a super bad day, I need to lie down. The door shut, and head mostly covered. I've tried different things. It was a non-cooking day, so no comfort through creating. I was in for a long, long day. A usual headache throbbed. Knew I would have to endure the bleakness and duration from the longish shadows. Some of you can relate and know what it's like down there.

At times, my depression won't abate for two days. But near one in the afternoon yesterday, I forced down an apple and some yogurt. The apple made my jaw ache, so I tossed it out for the wildlife. Several glasses of water helped to elevate my mood. Try it, I prefer to think simple when I'm nuts. Having considered known fixes, I went to my room and collapsed. Tried to read a National Geographic, but the photos were too loud. The picture of a glacier caused my thoughts to avalanche and my body to shiver.

Out of nowhere, my Bible whispered from the bed stand. I didn't tell my friend, but it opened to Psalm 37. The chapter happens to be very praiseworthy. I noticed a bookmark entry, etched in the column. I had sent Nancy's mom the same passage in 2009. That is not the weirdest part.

My friend who sent the email, a scripture passage had been attached. I couldn't read it the night before because our messaging exceeded my ability to assimilate. I noticed this person had highlighted a verse. I glanced down. *"Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart."* Wow...that's Psalm 37! Mysterious ways; indeed, I'd say that qualified.

Now it's bedtime after an extended bad, I've made it. I thank the Lord for seeing me through. I was able to eat some leftovers, feeling human again. Once out of the pit, you don't wanna think about another too soon. I just did. Dagon-it.

Often, I think, I'll pull it together one day and take the difficult steps to shake it off, removing a stranglehold on my life. It doesn't always work that way, at least for me. It's a

one day at a time thing. In my judgment it's those who look back or too far ahead, they are the ones who fizzle and possibly flame out.

Through life, I have taken shortcuts, yet I'm reminded of the toll busy had taken. Working two jobs, going to college and helping to raise a family. How had I done that? Not very well.

A leading factor for my worsening depression came from the struggle of a divided life. In retrospect, it took a tremendous toll, long periods of strife compounded by a nutty lifestyle. Throw in substances and I was off to the races. It's hard to start at square one when you're in your late fifties. Each morning I attempt to focus on the positive, God in my life. There is more to life than one's self. There are others and love. Isn't that in line with God's commandment?

During depressed days, I am led to the book of Psalms and Proverbs. David and Solomon are credited as primary contributors. Solomon was the wise son of David. Yes, he and pop were famous kings of Israel. The one who'd slain Goliath, David, had also conspired in murder to cover up his infidelity with Bathsheba. Psalm 51 is known as King David's prayer of forgiveness and is referenced in today's popular song by Leonard Cohen, "*Hallelujah*."

Solomon was no saint either. All Christians are considered saints, according to the Bible. We have been reminded of Solomon's full, yet seemingly futile life in the book of Ecclesiastes. He had experienced every success and pleasure available and still came up empty. Living for oneself leads to disenchantment and possible eradication. Being accountable to an approachable God leads to righteousness and humility. When I remember that, I'm not nearly as depressed. Nor as proud.

Writing is a fine cure when I'm able and not way down. Journaling is certainly cheaper than counseling. This effort is teaching me, pain is relative. Sitting at a computer for twelve hours is a considerable chore for this broken-down vessel.

Interesting word, vessel. According to Merriam-Webster Online, a vessel is defined: "*a container (as a cask, bottle, kettle, cup, or bowl) for holding something. b: a person into whom some quality (as grace) is infused <a child of light, a true....>*"

In conclusion, try to maintain a healthy diet and get some exercise. I appreciate the satisfaction from comfort. Don't let

anything become an addiction. Self-medicating is not the answer. Don't ever start if you are susceptible. I've heard about social users, partaking without developing issues. I was not one of them.

Try not to allow your past to take you lower, nor to dictate your future. When you feel a bad one coming, choose not to wallow. Which is an easy out, excusing yourself from meaningful participation. Attempt to engage in something purposeful. This may sound trite but write about your feelings. If you can't do much, then go ahead and lie down. While you're at it, try praying.

Chapter 14 AA/NA, Parole, Life after Prison

My life after prison was a new dawning, a shot at real freedom. I needed to start anew. Most things on the outside seemed strange, facing them sober. I had caused some terrible things to happen through the previous years. It is refreshing to have a clear mind for a change. It would be insanity to get high, attempting to forget my troubles. But challenges are around every corner, no matter one's life.

I was free to an extent. Parole means doing things required by the state, contrary to one's pride. Parole outlines a mandatory to do list. By violating an agreement, you can land back in prison. Many have chosen that route. It's hard to relate, returning to imprisonment. One of my parole conditions was to attend Alcohol and Substance Abuse Counseling.

I'd already been to AA at Garza East for fourteen months. My parole obligation required additional time. In AA, we learned: *"Insanity is defined as doing the same thing over and expecting a different result."* Which stuck with me more than anything from AA/NA. Thank you Bill and Bob (AA's founders). NA stands for Narcotics Anonymous. I needed both A's.

I didn't mind going to AA in prison. That's where the air conditioning pumped freely. Much of this story leans on those days from prison. Who said it's not educational up in there? We went to the same classroom for two hours, twice a week for AA. Our facilitator was an eighty-year-old, Joe. His mind was sharp. He rarely wore a diamond stud in an earlobe. Somehow it worked for him. Hey, Joe, I'm still sober in 2018. I related to him well, but I'm not sure why. Former boozers. He grew up on the rough docks of Long Island, New York.

"West Virginia is a sorry excuse for a state," he declared. Then

he grinned like a little boy. Joe referred to me as rugged. "You look like a truck ran over you today," he'd say.

"Why thank you, sir," my clever comeback, "and you appear as peachy as ever." He shyly smiled.

Joe treated all inmates with witty sarcasm, but we admired him anyway. He was my kind of an alcoholic. Not enthusiastic for beer, but vigorous with the hard stuff. Joe had a sharp attitude. What New Yorker doesn't? Maybe that's why I appreciate his kind, to the point. Most addicts have snippy tudes. Joe was typical, full of spit, yet a real creampuff. But he was dedicated and moving. Joe cared seriously for us, relating well on many levels. It's not everyone who would volunteer to help drunks and druggies. Moreover, convicts.

From his home, Joe would regularly call parolees to see if they'd remained dry. Some disappointed him on a regular basis. Then we'd see it on his face and hear it in his voice. Who would do as much for a parolee? Joe often cried over an ex-con's relapse. You can call me at home Joe, you won't be disappointed. I want you to know, your time was worth it. Thanks, big lug.

If you've been to AA there's a groupie feel, which was particularly true of Club 21 on San Pedro in San Antonio. I often smelled the odor of booze in those meetings. I wondered, why would anyone go to an AA meeting lit up? Whatever works! *"It works if you keep on working it,"* a time-honored AA adage.

Another AA/NA observation. Its members come from all walks of life. Here are occupations for which I can attest: skid-row bums, construction workers, teachers, students, authors, politicians, lawyers, nurses, doctors, dentists, candlestick makers, IT people, CEO's, professional sports owners, and even pastors. I threw in candle-stick makers. There's an alcoholic one out there. As an AA by-law, we claimed anonymity. No last names, please.

AA/NA works for a variety of people, there are many success stories. When one hears a retired doctor speak of his fifty-year sobriety it's humbling. This guy was at every meeting and had often facilitated. He encouraged me and others regularly. The fact that he'd come from a proud profession, and was decimated by drink, made his message effective.

There was another older gentleman, one seen sporadically at Club 21. He approached me one day. "Son, I can tell you are

struggling." I was, but not necessarily with drinking. I'd been desperately seeking employment. He went on, "I still practice law once in a while, to stay sharp in the working world." I listened attentively. "It's important to keep your mind busy," he reiterated.

I hadn't seen him for months. At one of my final meetings, he had arrived late. I wanted to speak with him after; I waited around in the coffee shop. When I caught up with him, I said, "Sir, I was concerned about you."

He looked at me sheepishly. "I was receiving a long-awaited liver transplant." I looked at him. He looked at me. Acknowledgment received.

Some unbelievable things happened at AA meetings. I saw guys attempting to pick up girls, salesmen seeking clients, and drug deals going down. Most visible were the scores of hurting people. Their struggles, ever present, regardless of speak. One lady came decked out as though she was going clubbing or had been cranking from the night before. She slipped in late, toting a thirty-two-ounce cup with a lid and wide straw. I had wondered what she slurped so intently. Ms. Clubber never said a solitary word at those meetings.

I never had an actual sponsor. Huge factors in the AA world. A few individuals handed me telephone numbers. Most of them seemed sincere, but I've never felt comfortable calling strangers, not in such fashion. They say a sponsor is vital for avoiding relapse, a safety net. Many AA-ers swore by them. They were tied at the hip. Before, during, and after meetings. Their stories made me feel guilty at times, without a sponsor of my own.

I've never fit a cookie cutter mold. I had Rick H, should there be an instance of a willful relapse. No more relapses my friend. None. I didn't relish his lectures, so he served as my unofficial sponsor. Thanks, man. Rick seemed to enjoy the AA meetings and he wasn't required to go. The people were an interesting bunch. Bananas. Occasionally, I would see a familiar face from the day. Ones from bars, etcetera, etc. There was never a dull moment at Club 21.

We normally went for Mexican or Chinese food afterward. I do miss certain parole associations. The Shanghai staff in Universal City were friendly. I ordered Hunan Pork or General Tso's Chicken. Rick always ordered the Sesame Chicken. The sweet-and-sour soup was enticing. Many prefer the wonton soup,

my family in Texas loved it. In retrospect, my life was sort of sweet-and-sour, which was my point with all of that. Regularly, we stopped for Shipley's donuts after AA. My goodness. I miss the iced coconut ones. I'm hoping for a franchise in West Virginia. They say, when alcoholics kick it, then sweets are decent substitutes.

I told my Texas parole officer. "The only time I felt like taking a drink was after an AA meeting."

"That's tough," he'd say, "You still have to go."

I needed to show proof of attendance at each parole meeting. After more than two years of staying dry, and attending every week, I could stop going. My parole obligation for substance abuse was finally over. I thanked God and AA. I can't imagine life without faith in Jesus Christ. AA works for many. I have a suspicion; their higher power is the same as mine.

My parole first started in San Antonio. During the first year, I was required to meet twice a month. Once downtown, at the office on Guadalupe Street, and a monthly home visit at Rick H's. My first parole officer was cool. Jason was a young fellow who liked college football. We hit it off. He was a Notre Dame fan, I still considered him cool.

Jason needed to play the role of his office, so I obliged him as a good parolee. I never missed a meeting or required appointment. In addition, I never missed the eighteen-dollar monthly supervision fee. I passed all substance tests while on parole in Texas. How about them Irish, making it to the dance in 2013, Jason? I'll bet you were excited. I was glad for you man. Sorry, the Tide rolled again.

While on parole in San Antonio, I'd often see guys I knew from prison. I wasn't interested in glorifying the good old days, but some loyal were. Forced to sit there, I listened to them brag about this and that. This and that amounted to no good for a parolee. Those guys hadn't learned the lessons of prison. I'm certain some don't mind incarceration, strangely enough.

I took a certain amount of pleasure from the chorizo-and-egg and bean-and-bacon tacos across from the parole office, at La Azteca. Homemade flour tortillas, yum. I can't find those in the hills. Darn it. No point here, I really miss those tacos in West Virginia. When not having tacos, my back pocket contained the bread of life (a pocket-sized New Testament). I found it

beneficial for dealing with the ennui and gloom of the parole office zoo.

When parole followed me to West Virginia, via an Interstate Compact Agreement, I had nearly two years left. The parole office in Princeton was different. It was smaller and held quicker meetings. Thank you, Mountain Mama. The downside to parole in West Virginia, a forty-dollar monthly supervision fee. Otherwise, it's about the same as Texas parole.

I passed every drug screen and alcohol test. One parole visit was in question. Something must have registered awry. Honest. It could have been my attitude that day, with Officer S. I had gotten rather proud again. Guess who lost the disagreement? I was no longer persuasive enough to escape the hand of the law. Officer S. had me retake the test to ensure my system was untainted. I passed with no incrimination, i.e., a positive drug test yields an indicator on the litmus-lined container.

My parole officer was by the book. It wasn't cool to call a PO by their first name in West Virginia. I found out quickly, the very first day. Officer S. was commendable at her job. I never minded her discipline because I hadn't planned on violating any guidelines. She was always fair, and I appreciated her commitment to offenders. Theirs is a difficult task to administer.

One should think twice about questioning Officer S's judgment. She might cloud up and rain on your disrespect. I quickly ducked into her parole office, escaping speculation from the hometown folks by courthouse circle. I've never stopped caring what people think. I wasn't proud of those visits, a block from where I'd been born, the old Princeton Hospital. After my final parole meeting, I hadn't experienced the relief expected. I still need to overcome much. Before I forget, a shout out to Stephanie and Adam with KISRA. Thanks for your encouragement and helping ex-cons to reenter society.

A renewed faith in God sustains me, trusting in the Lord of all. I no longer have the desire to drink or drug. For the first time in years, I'm not a slave to alcohol, illegal drugs, or tobacco. There's something extremely satisfying about that. If I sound like I'm gushing, I am. If you can't gush for the truth, what can you? The truth makes life better. My personal, financial, and other issues remain. But for the first time in a long time, I believe anything is possible. Except for maybe, a clean record.

We humans are limited in heavenly understanding. We don't necessarily emanate grace, mercy, love, service, and humility. God provides unconditional love freely. Only he can love so purely. Your spouse, child, parent, friend, or dog cannot. With God, you don't need to clean yourself up first. You may come as you are. He loves you, regardless of your shortcomings.

I want to challenge those of you married. Attempt to think twice before you seek a Godly type of unconditional love from your spouse. I believe it is conditional in that sense, even among the pillars of the institution. You are welcome to disagree. Please continue to aspire, achieving unconditional love on the human level.

Do attempt to cultivate your relationship every day. Stay committed and trust. Love each other as much as humanly possible. Incorporate each other's strengths. Allow for certain weaknesses. If the Lord unites you in marriage, stay married. I echo the words of the Prophet Malachi in 2:16 (NIV). His words say, *"I hate divorce, says the Lord God of Israel!"*

While drafting and editing again, I realized my last comments weren't conclusive. In certain marriages, where there are patterns of physical or verbal abuse, the best solution may be divorce. Never settle for being abused. According to the Bible, adultery is a just cause. It may not always be the best answer.

Thank you for allowing me to speak from my heart. Back to parole reflections. I've never regretted moving my parole to West Virginia. It allowed me to be with family, which were in better positions to help. I needed to find the way back, and I relished helping my parents enjoy their golden years. I have received emotional support from family and sibs. I'm getting to know them better, soberly.

I had no idea this memoir would be launched from my parent's home. The passion for writing has consumed me. Yet there is more to it than that. I understand how people are concerned about me, spending most of my time writing. And that I need to "get out." Believe me, no one has examined my motivation more. Weighing the circumstances, the odds of succeeding. I'm on a mission, not all by choice. I love it.

I enjoy opportunities to serve in our local church. I certainly love singing in the church choir and accounting for offerings with Jean D, John S, Nancy S, Rita B, and Vivian P.

Not long after returning to West Virginia, I met with our senior pastor at Johnston Chapel Baptist Church. I had enrolled in a new member's class, so Pastor John wanted to hear my testimony. After sharing bits of my story, I said, "I want to learn God's will for my life."

My pastor gently assured me. "Steve, when the time comes, the Lord will reveal it to you."

Those words drove me, and they still do. I pondered Pastor John's sentiment for days. It was a positive guide. Imagine with me for a moment. What if the power that raised Jesus from the dead was available to all who believe? How might that power be manifested in your life? The potential is inexpressibly grand.

Those thoughts still resonate. After all I'd been through, hope was music to my soul. Learn how you must, but the uncompromising truth is real freedom. God's grace frees every day, with Him in control. If you haven't guessed, I believe the Lord wanted me to finish this book.

Still on parole, the end was in sight. We all experience degrees of suffering. Some suffer, then move on. Others wander hopelessly to the grave. You can overcome the pain of splintered dreams. They won't shatter with the Lord at the helm. There will "always" be mountains to climb. I'm climbing them from a platform of simplicity. Simple doesn't mean easy. One day, I'll be on top of the highest mountain, with my brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus.

There is much to overcome these days. My plans still need to be on worldly matters. Writing is hard, but it has simplified my life. Writing this sentence is all I know to do at times. Besides, the job offers aren't pouring in. The ones that do need to be measured against the will of God.

My dreams weren't the same as God's. Yet his grace overshadowed my selfish faults and limited vision. The prophet Isaiah, in 55:8-9 (NIV) says, *"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."*

The Lord's desire is that all should be saved. It says so in the Bible. Being saved is only the beginning. If you want to survive, make each day count. Remain connected. Love, grow, and

serve. The whole notion of being a child of the King is to live your life in accordance with his. His life is love and the eternal destiny of all.

Recall the miraculous catch from the Bible. It was morning, by the Sea of Galilee/Kinneret. Also known as the Sea of Tiberius or Lake Gennesaret. Jesus had appeared to the disciples, after his resurrection, in John 21. He stood unrecognized on the shore, calling to his followers from a hundred yards away. *"Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some,"* Jesus said.

The fishermen/disciples had caught nothing all night. Did the Lord's suggestion make sense? Probably not. But what happened? When they trusted in Jesus and in His power, it was accomplished. The catch was so large (153), they needed to haul it ashore.

Jesus had chosen the same men three years earlier, urging them to be "fishers of men." At that time, he called them to leave their nets and follow him. His plan never changes. Jesus showed: the "catch" is left to Him. He showed how expectations are exceeded through faith. That moment reaffirmed their commission, changing the disciples forever. It still changes people the world over.

Jesus does the impossible in the lives of his children. Once I was done with Steve, He began his work through me. I haven't arrived and won't on this earth. I'm not suggesting that you must go through similar trials. He was always there; I chose my will. That's how dreams can shatter.

I'm forever amazed. Christ's arms are stretched out wide, no longer from the cross, but from his home in Heaven. The Lord wants us to receive his plan for our lives. I get excited as the Holy Spirit allows growth. Such power won't fail you, submitting to something greater than yourself.

Before the Lord ascended to Heaven, he promised the Comforter (the Holy Spirit) to guide us. Be available, putting your trust in his oath. God speaks to us through his Word, I promise. If you belong to him, find out what he's saying in your Bible.

I'm excited to see what's in store. The Lord's will for our lives was written long ago. Most of us prefer to know in a hurry. There's no doubt, the Lord is teaching my pride a lengthy lesson. It's a tremendous undertaking, but the Lord's grace is

forever sufficient. Some days are easier than others. You may not feel his presence every day. It happens to the worthiest of saints, but He is there and always faithful. If you trust him, wait...wait...wait....

The holidays haven't been my best time of year. Nevertheless, God touches hearts in season and out. Thank you, Lord. It happened to be Christmas week when I first scribed this portion. What better time to reflect than when Jesus humbled himself, coming to earth as a man? The closer I walk with the Lord; the commercial appeal of Christmas dwindles. He is the greatest gift. Priceless to receive, obligating us to share. My worldly desires are for Christmas with Nancy, the kids, and the grandkids. Which still draws me. I don't know if that will ever change. It's up to the Lord.

Do you remember the San Antonio Riverwalk, when I was with Lisa at the end of basic training? My mind drifts to past Christmas's with Nancy. We strolled the same walkways and viewed holiday lights as husband and wife. We weren't at the Navarro Street Bridge, but it didn't matter. I was destined to be there, yet I made fateful choices.

In those moments, I was certain of love. I miss Nancy and the kids so much! My heart has been greatly shaken, but not completely shattered. Regardless, I have the Lord. He watches overall. I'm suspending my writing to prepare for Christmas with my parents and sibs in West Virginia. Thank you for family everywhere. This will be one of the most joyful years of late.

Well, another Christmas has come and gone. It's New Year's Eve. I have no typical resolutions. My life is a resolve. I'm hungry for an optimistic future. My birthday draws near, which ceased to excite me after the age of twenty-one. I don't particularly enjoy birthdays. To me it's another day, yet a time like none other.

So, I'm praying for the Lord's will to be accomplished, not mine. I'm attempting to obey the tugs on my heart strings. He wants us all to serve in some capacity. I've asked God, "Should I give my life to missions or in a counseling capacity?"

Then a prayer came upon my heart. "Am I doing what you planned for me, dear God?"

I meditated and waited on the Lord, then prayed again:
"I get lost in my writing and seldom tire, losing track of time.

I'm passionate about it, that's for sure. I'll continue to trust you, Lord, if that's okay with you. In Jesus name, Amen."

I'm reminded of a passage from a book, yet I'm unsure of the specific title. The following was the Biblical context for the book. *1 Chronicles 4:10* (NIV): "*Jabez cried out to the God of Israel, "Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain," and God granted his request.*"

I have no doubt that the Lord answers prayers. I pray that he will reveal his plan for you. Never lose hope. It's okay to dream. I've been a dreamer for a half-century or so. Without dreamers where would we be? But dreams are achieved through determination and hard work. With focus, and likely some tears. Dreams won't deliver without commitment and trust. Never give up. That's my hope for YOU and yours.

I'm thankful for my church family. I find myself paying attention to the pastoral staff, and the deacons. I'm inspired by their leadership. As I witness their ministry to the fellowship and community, I'm in awe. What a tremendous calling. So vital, their love and sacrifice.

Not everyone can be a pastor. My pastors: John K, Jim N, Jim S, Dan T (taking Kevin's slot), and James W (taking Brian's place). These men have some tremendous responsibilities. I've seen the directions in which they are guided. I've tried to imagine the different types of issues, services, and ceremonies they'll endure. Those saints are underappreciated and underpaid. Their stress levels are near the top of professions. Pray for your pastors every chance you get. Encourage them.

Chapter 15 Reading, Writing, Contemplating

I haven't mentioned my hunger to read, during the last decade. Certainly, it's a worthy pursuit for gaining knowledge in one's leisure time. It's truly a wonderful escape. Nancy had encouraged me to read, mostly fiction. I wasn't inclined at the time, yet I noticed her fascination with certain novels. My excuse would have been the career ladder or other obligatory diversions. She was correct about finding satisfaction through reading. I have discovered the pure enjoyment of digesting prose.

People certainly have the potential for change. When needing a distraction from routine, I'll read ardently these days. It helps when life bears down too hard. When there is an extra penchant for worry that can't be solved by futile fretting. Rather than relying on past substances, I've been known to binge on novels and other works.

It's not unusual for me to deny any literary genre. It's a cyclical need. Instead of claiming writer's block, I'll read concerns away. Then I'm ready to resume normal activities. I've developed an unbiased interest of how stories are recounted. A style may not hold my attention, but it might. I've reread some classics from school, which I once skimmed as a disinterested student. The classics are more meaningful since I've endured stretches. I was a late bloomer intellectually. I'm sure that's the case.

For pure escape, I'll read Stephen King and Michael Connelly. I've read King's, "11/22/63." The honest exchanges between Jake (George) and Sadie are fabulous. The way King spins a love story through one of America's biggest mysteries. It's a fantastic read. I feel drawn to his literary devices, humor primarily. I've tried to remain original, not treading on anyone's style. But when King's prolific voice whispers it's hard not to be moved.

But foremost is the impression I have received from King's nonfiction project. His "*On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*" helped to inspire the fourth draft of this project. King suggests three drafts with respect to works of fiction. If he needs three drafts, I need nine. Mostly for the drivel I'm about to scribble.

I found King's memoir entertaining. I've gained a deeper appreciation for his overall craft. My toolbox is a few nuts shy of a bolt, sir. I have much room for improvement, per your sage advice. You've taught me plenty. Thank you. Oh, I almost forgot. I've been tempted to use the word obdurate. It's so in line with my character, but I'll always credit it to your well-seasoned usage.

Regarding Michael Connelly, I can relate to his criminal justice system narratives. The courtroom drama is realistic from my experiences. I've enjoyed *The Lincoln Lawyer* series. I was most pleased with "*The Reversal*," an awesome read. Mickey Haller's character is so well portrayed. When I read Mickey's dialogue, I see and feel the persona of Matthew McConaughey come alive.

I liked the novel more than the movie. Sorry Mr. McConaughey, not a jab at your craft. I do appreciate your acting ability and flamboyant appeal. Your panache reminds me of someone, another gloater. Just kidding, you are a bonafide star.

I'm sure West Virginians, the Herd fans, appreciate your role in "*We Are Marshall*." I saw McConaughey when the Mountaineers beat his Longhorns in Austin of 2012. What a game (48-45). I hope to see Matthew on the Texas sidelines from Morgantown soon. I'm sure he'll have no trouble getting venue credentials at WVU's Milan Puskar Stadium.

Since I'd written the previous paragraph some time ago, I've read two more Connelly novels. I'm enjoying the third from a list of three. "*The Poet*, *The Scarecrow*, and *The Narrows*." I'm

pleased with Connelly's projects. His novels have refueled interest, stimulating my passion to write.

I'm partial to the protagonist, Jack McEvoy, and to his sidekick, Rachel Walling. Or should I say his passion. McEvoy holds my interest because of his journalistic profession. Though it seems he is well suited for undercover homicide. I have a hardbound copy of Mr. Connelly's, "*The Drop*." It's waiting in the wings.

I need to acknowledge Lee Strobel's first major work of fiction, "*The Ambition*." Strobel, a former atheist, was an award-winning legal editor of the *Chicago Tribune*. He is a *New York Times* bestselling author of nonfiction. The most eye-catching part of his bio to me, he served as pastor at a megachurch.

The Ambition's storyline drew me in for hours of interest. I had received it as a birthday present from my sister, Deborah. I was not disappointed in the tale that highlighted the fictional, yet realistic lives of Eric Snow and Gary Strider. Having read Strobel's nonfiction, I would like to read more of his work.

I have found consistent pleasure from reading James Patterson, the money king. Have several of his novels lined up, but I'm busy polishing this project. There's much to learn from professionals. I'm currently relieving this page of its extraneous text.

As authors have accurately stated, one must be an avid reader to write well. Not to recite the obvious but reading and writing go together. A sense ingrained subliminally from Stephen King's haunting echoes. I've noticed humility seeping through his videos on the net. Along with the guy in the next paragraph, King has invariably influenced. My goals have certainly varied since beginning this project. I've found I thoroughly enjoy writing, simply to write.

I have read loads of non-fiction, mainly the spiritual genre. I've read all of Max Lucado's books. His style is engaging. Lucado's storytelling hooked me, compelling a deeper spirituality on the level it's due. Please continue to write for our enjoyment. Suppose I had been drawn to Lucado by his residency and ministry in San Antonio. And to his more recent book, "*GRACE*."

You talk about humility, Lucado is the epitome of elegant prose. You may be scratching your head about now. This guy is inspired

by Stephen King and Max Lucado. Hmm? Antithesis indeed. Oh well, never said I was perfect. It's amazing to examine life to see how God's plan providentially unfolds. Even when we screw it up so darn well. I knew when I'd read Mr. Lucado's book, "*Fearless*," God wanted to replace my fear with faith. Thanks for the affirmation sir.

The authors I've included shaped me on the road to recovery and peace. They are important to my life and cause. Which is why I've taken the time to mention them. Reading and writing can heal with far reaching and indelible power.

I felt necessitated to read the "*City of God*," by St. Augustine. A commanding treatise, Augustine's book reflects his philosophical and theological roots. Yet there's no comparison to the faith of Christianity and to whom we worship. Jesus Christ is the centerpiece of the religion. A much greater treatise is the book of Romans in the Bible. I can't overemphasize the importance of Romans. It teaches us how to live.

Having pondered the word religion, a few sentences ago, I can't help to think it's not the best connotation these days. When Jesus walked the earth, he had issues with certain religious types, the Pharisees in particular. As I learn more about the life of Christ, he really is a friend of sinners. I hope that shines through in this story. I've tried to think of ways to fill the otherwise dead ends of religiosity.

Regarding Romans, what greater Pharisee was there than the Apostle Paul? He is the writer of Romans and was originally named Saul. God found it necessary to blind Saul, beginning one of the most amazing transformations in the world. Without Paul's Epistles, where would Christianity be?

I have also read these authors lately: Spurgeon, Moody, Murray, C.S. Lewis, Chambers, Bonhoeffer, Graham (Billy & Franklin), Swindoll, Dobson, Stanley, Yancey, Colson, Strobel, Hybels, McDonald, Crabb, Ortberg, Maxwell, Moore, Warren, Jeremiah, Tchividjian, and Zacharias. What a list! The most important nonfiction book that will forever be is the Holy Bible.

The following is borrowed from Rick Warren's, "*The Purpose Driven Life*." It is about the bestselling book ever: "*The Bible is far more than a doctrinal guidebook. God's Word generates life, creates faith, produces change, frightens the Devil, causes miracles, heals hurts, builds character, transforms*

circumstances, imparts joy, overcomes adversity, defeats temptation, infuses hope, releases power, cleanses our minds, brings things into being, and guarantees our future forever."

Who doesn't need those things? If you're recovering from any type of addiction or abuse, I suggest The Life Recovery Bible. It breaks down the text with commentary, making it easier to understand. It's applicable to what many go through in terms of hurt.

Some other reads have included, "*Fresh Faith*" and "*Fresh Power*" by Jim Cymbala. The trials facing his members at Brooklyn Tabernacle are relevant to my life. From what I've been able to gather, Cymbala was not seminary trained. You'd never know from his theology. I don't see gaping holes in his preaching or testimony.

A writer notices style. One can't help from being influenced by the authors we read. How they pace a story so well. The way they can surprise with unusual twists and neck-snapping turns. I have found myself saying, "These authors have insight into my brain." I've asked myself; do they really write for a living and maintain normal existences?

There's the normal reference again. What is normal? Never mind. I'm not so naive, thinking writing is simple. In fact, it's not. I may not appreciate the deadline pressures it brings: conceiving, outlining, drafting, narrating, editing, proofing, honing, polishing, copy editing, polishing again, practicing a pitch, querying, proposing, webbing, blogging, promoting, copywriting, adapting, contracting, and publishing. SELLING. Oh, my! What have I gotten myself into?

An IT geek, I was an author of sorts. I had outlined, imagined, and created. Cranking out computer programs isn't far removed from delivering a manuscript. There's a form of intricate detail, reminding me of coding. The pressure was always great as a programmer, as in, "Is that program ready yet, Steve?"

I sometimes whisper alone. "Might these lines be published some day?" What a dream! It helps to have one of your own because we often get stuck in ruts. I've heard about writer's block. There must be merit and I'm sure I'll process it down the line. I prefer to write when my heart speaks. Perhaps it's performed as my mind overflows. Some things are easier to write about than others. Write on. Humor...gotta love it in writing.

It's important to be accurate when writing. I understand the amount of research involved. Editing is a necessary pain unless you have money to give to a professional. I'm editing this page again. It's not fun, but someone must do it. I struggle with grammar a bit. I'm sure there are other issues obvious to trained eyes. I can't tell you the number of times I have entered commas, removed commas, put them back, then, took them out, again, again, and again. See, such a battle. I think I'm comma phobic. LOL!

I'm quite interested in an author's bio. Aren't you, regarding various works? We all come from diverse backgrounds. Just thinking, maybe we should read the Bible with such motivation. To better know the Author. Just saying.

More important than reading and writing are the ultimate questions facing us all. There will be times in life when you question your very core. Particularly, when things aren't going so well. Will you be able to put your trust in Jesus Christ and believe by faith instead of sight? Accepting what the Bible teaches as truth, using its tenets to govern your life, no matter what?

Our senior pastor is a wonderful Bible preacher and teacher. He explains the context, theme, and application extremely well. Dr. King delivers it with appropriate passion. It is important to know the historical period, intended audience, and cultural nuances. Pastor John's detailed sermons paint vivid portraits. His applications become very personal. He always concludes the message with a challenge. The Holy Spirit urges me through his appeals. I'm thankful for you Pastor.

I haven't written in nearly three weeks. I've been reading, so there's been little time. Such as *"Just a Walk Across the Room"* by Bill Hybels. We are implored to share the gospel, going about our lives. I pray the Lord will open doors. I hope my story will set souls free. I want to help someone, like YOU, to find your way home.

Books I've read focus on spiritual maturity. Gaining God's wisdom is my heart's desire. It is no secret; the Lord is working on my pride. Pride can have many obligatory meanings: conceit, vanity, self-love, self-glorifying, and self-exalting. Pride is sin. God hates pride. Countless stories in the Bible are filled with pride, the crushing blows, and paralyzing defeats. Yet now, look no further than to politicians, business leaders, neighbors, and your family.

I've read over the chapters. They are laced with self. Since I've allowed this story to marinate, I can't help from wondering, can pride be a form of insecurity? It seems to be a paradox. Pride displays arrogance, a false self-confidence. Insecurity conceals uncertainty, a true self-doubt. Hmm....

There's no doubt, God had seen enough of my repugnant life. The ax fell, the pendulum swung, and the two-by-four smacked me down. There were foreshadowing mishaps, yet I escaped impending danger, if only for a season. I hate to be cliché, but one day you must "Pay the Piper." I'm fortunate to be around. God's plan never changes, even when the warning signs are ignored.

Trial and suffering are parts of an ordinary life. In *"The Faith"* by Charles Colson, he states: *"So the real question is not whether we will suffer, but how will we react to adversity when it comes? We can see it as a miserable experience to be endured, or we can offer it to God for His redemptive purposes. This is the great truth Christians should know: God will always use what we suffer for Christ's work of redemption if we let Him."*

That hit home in a big, big way. I'd read it, said it, and everything else. It is now a guiding truth. By the way, Colson was one of the Watergate felons. He spent time in chains as well.

In Charles Stanley's book, *"How to Handle Adversity,"* he says: *"We should give thanks and rejoice in suffering."* He cites examples from the lives of Joseph, Job, David, and Paul from the Bible. Most folks find it hard to thank God for their troubles. For a long time, I surely had. I'm sorry I don't say thank you enough. Thank you, Lord!

I praise God for what he is doing. I'm to continue in his will, no matter what. I hadn't gotten into trouble overnight and I'm not being released quickly. My job is to remain connected; He cannot fail. As soon as my faith shifts, I'm sent a subtle reminder. God tried to remind me before. I was busy with Steve.

Faith is everything to a Christian. For a person of significant pride, it is a tougher proposition. I still get urges to do things on my own. You must be willing to risk something to experience the magic of faith. So, it comes down to this. Faith is not a feeling, highs or lows. It is trust, regardless.

What else is faith? Is there really a big God up there in Heaven? One known as the Lion and the Lamb. So powerful and gentle you can't wrap your mind around it sufficiently. Faith. Is the God of your faith omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient?

Aren't these the ultimate questions in life? Not who will win the Super Bowl and might Iran or North Korea nuke us until we glow. Faith means you never give up on GOD. You rely on the One up there. Consider putting your faith in Him. He will never give up on you. Never.

The difference in my life is the object of my faith. My faith used to be in me, myself, and I. Look how that turned out. Wham! Yet today, my faith is in the Trinity: God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Victories don't necessarily occur overnight. Faith is a continuous test to endure. What is the alternative? I've wondered myself. Could the Lord be waiting to see if I revert to the old Steve? Whenever I get puffed up about my spiritual growth, I'm soon tested. That's not likely to end. FAITH IS ENDLESS TRUST IN GOD, even when there are no answers.

It bothers me, seeing Christians negative. It is not a good example for our faith. Non-believers see it. Thusly, it's conceived as skeptical. Life is no bed of roses. By putting on a happy face, you may turn the tide for one drifting or sinking. I know it's possible to go through life in continual struggle. That's why our hope is eternal. The best definition of faith comes from the Holy Bible. Hebrews 11:1, (NIV): *"Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."*

Come on ladies and gentlemen. It's the only thing that makes sense in today's world. Everyone says, "What on earth is going on?" Isn't it possible, we have no control over what is going on? We can put our faith in the One who does. I don't want to sound preachy, but I'm afraid I have. Pardon me, though, I care about you. Honestly.

Reading provides the opportunity to decide what we think and what we believe. I've just finished reading, *"Let God Be God"* by Ray C. Stedman. His book asks the question, "Why does God allow affliction in my life?" Stedman goes on to relate a story: *"What are the toughest, hardiest plants in times of drought? The ones that put down the deepest roots. In fact, farmers sometimes*

stress certain varieties of trees, depriving them of water for weeks, after they are planted, to force these trees to put down roots deep into the soil. When those trees are mature, and times of drought and hardship come, they will survive while trees with shallow root systems are scorched to death by the heat and drought. Hardship in our lives forces us to put our roots down deep into the soil of God's love whenever we are tested by trials, pain, and loss, it's helpful to look beyond our momentary suffering and see the eternal implications of this test."

That is the truth we can all understand. Onto another topic. Have you ever contemplated what hinders you from attempting or completing things? What about those ideas, lying outside your comfort zone? It may be an abandoned notion. A career left unexplored.

The Lord allowed me to record this story. I must tell you; I could have been deterred. It would've been easy to give up. Quit. "No one wants to read this stuff," I've told myself and family members. There were few obstacles, but certain powers tried to prevent me. I grew weary at times yet kept pressing on. It matters little now; I am nearly done. I'm keeping my fingers crossed, a fifth draft may be in the making. Did I mention, I'm somewhat of a perfectionist?

Back to you. Do you not try things because of fear? Before you get too scared, what's holding you back? Is it your faith? Perhaps we need to be more receptive. God will teach us to push back fear. His prodding may be gentle. We could use the power he provides. God wants to accomplish purpose through it. The best solution to fear is spelled out in the Bible. 1 John 4:18 (NIV): *"There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear."*

That answers the fear question. What's holding you back? Well? Don't be afraid. Try placing your faith and trust in Jesus. He promises to be with you. ALWAYS.

Some may be waiting for the voice of God, aloud. A popular belief today is that God speaks audibly. He did speak to the prophets in the Old Testament. There was Jeremiah in 626 B.C. God's wonders, from Genesis to Revelation in the Bible, lead to the Son, Jesus Christ. Hebrews 1:1-2 (NIV): *"In the past **God** spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his **Son**, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe."*

Can there be any doubt how God communicates in 2018? I urge you to read your Bible. By the way, the "last days" refers to the Church Age. It is the time of Jesus's resurrection until the Great Tribulation, which is today my friend.

It all doesn't end with the Church Age. John 3:16 (NIV): *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."* The power of this passage never diminishes. It never will. I'm so thankful for the truth.

I'm not as wired on eschatology these days, defined in general times as the final events in history. My interest waned before the year turned to 2012. To tell you the truth, I had grown weary of the Mayan calendar and other annihilation prophecies. It's not productive to be consumed with that stuff. Do not fret doomsayers, someone will come up with another date soon.

Nevertheless, if you've studied Bible prophecy and aren't blind to world events, one must think we are living in the last days. But mere humans have no idea. Jesus already told us, *"Only the Father knows."* Can certain sectors of the media, scientists, philosophers, or the evolutionist know more than God? I wonder. Would these same groups admit they have thought, what if the Bible is true?

I do have an interest in Christian Eschatology, chiefly in terms of eternity. Our pastor spoke of Heaven's splendor in a series. I won't attempt to describe Heaven. No way. Pastor John's closing remarks regarding the End Times were sage. This is something I had taken from his message: *"Be concerned about your relationship with Jesus Christ and his purpose for your life right now."*

Written words are potentially powerful. Writing opens your mind to wonder. I underestimated the capacity of our long-term memory. The database of our mind is extraordinary. Our visual and audible senses have maintained minute detail. They have recorded an array of accounts for recollection. All one must do is to paint upon a canvas. Bringing memories alive in a coherent manner is splendid and fun.

People like to read about history. It helps to understand the past and to seek improvement in the future. I encourage you to leave your legacy in words. It will prevent your peeps from wondering, unless you prefer to remain aloof. Have you thought

about fiction versus nonfiction? Is there a clear and detectable difference? Maybe. How many novels come disguised as partial truths? People say, "Write what you know."

If you choose to write about your life, you may discover who you are. You may even like the person behind the pen. Does writing change the past? Not hardly. It may heal old wounds. But don't expect to write about a hurt from yesterday, seeing fantastic fruit right away. Such things take time.

Writing is as unique as the writers themselves. It is hard to imagine the world without thoughts written down. There are many different levels.

An elementary level: *"If you like me, check Yes or No."*

An adolescent level: *"I've met someone else. Please try to understand. We can still be friends."*

A poetic level:

Whom but each of us
Really knows
What's in the heart
How do we love

Once a clear
And shiny pane
Through time a speck
A broken dream

Doing the expected
What's deemed as right
Bring along others
On the trip of life

An age of learning
The knowledge of things
Bypassing wisdom
Filled up on esteem

Rolling along
With busy events
Mere bumps in the road
A speck is a dent

It's how you face it

That's important now
A testing of strength
For character's vow

What must you then?
Trust and rely
On a vice or another
Right choices slip by

Survival seems
A struggle now
You think for yourself
And depend on some style

Answers lie distant
Unless you confide
In He who knows
A question's supply

On an unsuspected
Ordinary day
Deep potholes rise
So, escape them or die

The speck runs cracked
A hollow ravine
The purpose of waiting
An answer for things

Finally, a look
Up then within
It was in Him
All the time

A modestly seasoned level:

I yearn for lasting love. Through willing acceptance, it will flourish unselfishly, and from the abundant wells of our hearts. To one precious, may our lives transform until we are forever joined. Love eternally.

The greatest gift imaginable level:

The Life Recovery Bible Psalm 40: 1-4 (NLT): "I waited patiently for the Lord to help me, and he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the pit of despair, out of the mud and the mire. He set my feet on solid ground and steadied me as I walked

along. He has given me a new song to sing, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see what he has done and be astounded. They will put their trust in the Lord. Oh, the joys of those who trust the Lord, who have no confidence in the proud, or in those who worship idols."

If words can sum up my heart, it's those from the previous paragraph. They are simple enough and supremely magnificent. They are but words, yet the Lord wants them for a heart like yours.

On to a far different topic. We'll be coming up on another anniversary of the Casey Anthony acquittal. By the amazement of most everyone, she was found not guilty of murdering her two-year-old daughter. The justice system had spoken, rightly or wrongly. She could still make millions. It doesn't matter what I think. I've noticed there's a cable movie out there. I didn't watch it, just the previews. A judge now contemplates a ruling, whether her story can be sold.

Now there's the Jodi Arias story and the Zimmerman trial. No comment, another place, and time. I thought about the justice system in my backgrounds context. As you know, I was found guilty and sentenced to a nickel in prison. I became marked for life without much chance to redeem myself, in the world's eyes. I lost things that may not be recovered. I still wonder about day-to-day needs.

I'm sure my situation pleases some. That's okay. Sometimes, though, people need a second chance. It's called grace. There are people who stand to benefit from personal debacles. It's the American way, sadly. Tragedy in life seems to sell. Who knows what can happen? It matters what you think if you want to share it. I am realizing, more and more, the need for purpose.

I have a beef with ones who do not believe in second chances, but I'll attempt to restrain from such vitriol. I've read how fine citizens respond from editorial pages regarding criminals, convicts, prisons, and such. *"They should lock the door and throw away the key."* I've seen this cited more than once: *"They deserve to rot in Hell!"*

To read similar rhetoric is depressing. If you have an ounce of compassion, where is your sense of mercy? Some hearts have been deemed rotten or have been written off completely. Might some of those hearts be golden? I've seen it, and a whole bunch of potential. There is a fundamental problem in our society, a lack

of mercy and forgiveness. People can truly change. To me it's Pharisaical in disguise, people's stubborn views.

We all mess up. I'm not condoning criminal behavior, yet our prisons are full of substance abusers. I'm not talking about the dealers or gangbangers, but what's wrong with our overall picture? *"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."* Taken from Romans 3:23 (NIV). Consider trusting a convict who shows the propensity for change. Enough to think about hiring them. You may be totally surprised by their transformation. And by their gratitude.

While about perceived injustice, the media influences many innocent people. The television and the Internet are not finite resources, which makes reading and fact checking important. I have a distaste for certain twenty-four-hour television stations. They put spins on "truth." What good results from distorting the news for political reasons? To gain listeners. My sense of grace needs more latitude in this regard. For sure.

I am frustrated by politics. Every time I try to see certain sides of an issue, I'm painted as a liberal. I haven't been called a conservative lately. I'm neither from what I've seen and heard. I don't like the term moderate, but it feels better than hatred from one side or the other. For the record, I've voted for both parties based on issues. As I age, there's a tendency to lean toward conservatism. I avoid ultra-extremes. Anyway, both Democrats and Republicans are responsible for the mess we are in.

Until both sides join to justly resolve the problems we face, I have little faith in either party. I do have faith in God and country, which I dearly love. Isn't it better to build up than to tear down? Too much opinion can poison lives. Good still exists. Pray for our leaders. We've come a long way in the USA. But I have witnessed injustices and prejudices in 2018 that I had seen in 1963. Come on man.

As we contemplate the positive, God has something special planned. Dr. David Jeremiah, in his book, *"Slaying the Giants in Your Life,"* shares these thoughts: *"You may see nothing but drudgery in your life: you need to see what he is doing in you, with you, and for you. You need to hold on to that hope! It will help you prevail in the darkest of times."*

If you believe you are made for a purpose you won't fail. I don't know what's wrong in your life, but the Lord can help you

overcome it. I know it for sure. When he does, get ready to see His plan unveil.

Are you skeptical that my life could change so drastically? Am I merely spouting religion or touting feel good material? My life has dramatically changed. Don't take my word for it. Find out yourself. Allow the Lord to be Master. Believe it through faith. Then stay connected. Why wouldn't you try something that works? I'm living proof, not simply words. Please think about it.

My favorite scripture reflects an optimistic outlook for believers. II Corinthians 4:16-18 (NIV): *"Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So, we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."*

On February twenty-sixth of 2012, my debt to society had been paid. I have certified proof from Austin, Texas. In the form of a Sentence and Parole Discharge document. Five long years were over. I'm still seeking employment for plausible positions. The latest, a Programmer Analyst 3. Those feelings from the working world returned, experiencing the interview process again.

It's a little discouraging, not hearing back. The job market isn't great. Throw in a felony conviction, my age, and a gap in employment. It is dismal. On the other hand, doors have closed for a reason. If so, others will surely open. When a door is opened by the Lord, walk in. He will carry you through.

Since this chapter was originally penned, I've turned it up a notch. My time is largely spent writing, editing, and polishing. Which is normally from 9:00 a.m. until sometimes 10:00 or 11:00 p.m. I take breaks to eat, making myself useful in other ways. Helping around the house: mowing, raking, handy-work, dusting, vacuuming, cleaning, cooking, dishes, and miscellaneous. All the fun stuff. I relieve the strain on mom and dad when at all possible. We all have our ways of coping. And surviving.

My other time is spent with sister, Debbie. We'll go to lunch weekly, the grocery store, tag-team dinner, and spend time with Deb's husband, David. Which allows me to hang with their sons, John and Brian. I often see my sons in them. We regularly take trips to Beckley, WV or Christiansburg, VA. Same routine. Shop, eat, drive home, and watch a Blu-Ray movie. I'll periodically

print a draft of this manuscript at Staples. Then I'll get busy with a microscopic critique. Oh no, not again.

I'm satisfied when afforded the opportunity to write. It's hard to explain how I feel these days. The way writing allows me to breath. To live again. Writing supplies hope. I've learned that writing styles are not necessarily taught, nor should they be emulated. Writing may season from sprinkles of imposed insight. I'm not sure you're born with the creative instincts to write, thinking outside of the box. A certain flavor of prose is dispensed through both prideful and humbling experiences.

How does one obtain enough humility? My pride led to every ounce of humility I've been shown grace to obtain. All made possible through God's tender loving mercy. Power can't be weighed in terms of personal strength, but through a larger lens than one's self. There is room to grow if there is grace. There's plenty of grace left for you. Please do not take it lightly, as a reason for doing wrong and making excuses, which falls short of accepting personal responsibility.

I'm optimistic about the future, with or without writing, because I've accepted God's provision of mercy that exceeds man's pride by light years. I have learned the importance of a daily walk with the Lord, trusting in faith. I know something well is on the way. So, I am finding myself more at ease with life and circumstances. It's certainly more peaceful.

Chapter 16 WONDERFUL GRACE

Do you have a favorite word? Mine is grace. The literal and implied meanings are pleasant ones. As nouns: *simple elegance* or *free unmerited favor*. As a verb: *do honor to*. GRACE saved my life.

I wonder about a return to normalcy. To reclaim my career or venture anew in the corporate world. And to love again. Yes, I still believe in those things. They are not necessarily must-haves. I'm not nearly as needy in certain respects. To be truthful, at times I feel paralyzed by worldly matters. Then I'm hopeful and optimistic because of grace.

I've thought deeply about Job's life from the wisdom portion of the Bible. He lost everything, including the lives of his children. I can't imagine such painful devastation. It is told how Job was restored twofold. Granted, he was upright and far from deterioration like mine. Yet wasn't his issue a form of pride?

What I find in common with Job is questioning God. Why...why? Ultimately one must play the cards they have been dealt. The Lord invites to be at the center of our lives. I'm not leaving Him out of the equation this time. But success is typically measured by worldly standards. I still struggle with that. Then I ask myself, why?

It seems God tends to use uncommon vessels as instruments in his hand. Have you ever wondered why? I believe it's a matter of grace. Not apart from faith, allowing for Spirit-led character development. Hence, seeing God's purpose blossom in one's life. Humbly and graciously.

The Lord's followers were considered lowly people in Biblical times. One of them, Matthew, was quite despised. A tax collector, he overtaxed and lined his pockets with whatever the debtor could withstand. The Lord changed his heart and life for good. Matthew was credited by early historians to have written the first book of the New Testament.

Acceptance of sinners, reaching out to the hated and redeeming the proud. It must have plenty to do with grace. Ephesians 2:8 (NIV): *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God."*

I can't tell you the number of times I've prayed this simple prayer: "Lord, please show me your will, allowing me to fulfill your plan." I have some debt. With the way the economy is, I'm not alone. Life's lessons are tough in financial straits. I often wrestle with the future. With that said, I've found the Lord wants my thoughts on him, not necessarily on excessive matters.

God's grace provides opportunities to be justified through faith. The rest of his plan is to become holy, sanctified. Sanctification is an ongoing process for a Christian, allowing the Holy Spirit to produce fruit that is consistent with God's character. Are you willing to become set apart for His perfect work, and not your own? God's answer to my simple prayer was to

be sanctified.

I made an important decision affecting my health. I'd just visited a VA doctor in West Virginia and was ready to halt my depression medicine. He suggested a reduced dosage. "Would you be able to tell if you needed the higher dose?" he asked.

"Yes, I believe I would." Then I reflected on my life and how I'd self-medicated for years. A mistake for a mercurial temperament such as mine.

After the appointment, I felt disheartened and unworthy. A little time with the Lord straightened it out. I realized something. What if I've needed meds for a long, long time? I agreed with my doctor's reasonable plan. Some people don't have a choice. Time tells. Meanwhile, the sense I get from writing is a great prescription. My mental acuity has never been better, modestly speaking.

My heart is full, leaving me replenished to revise this project. I've read: "Some writers make the mistake of releasing their work before it's finely tuned." Which makes sense, having a hardy stance toward perfectionism. I have felt a proclivity toward an OCD regarding this workmanship.

It has been suggested I'm hiding these days. Nah, maybe deflecting. Transforming. My struggle has caused plenty of reflection. I'll probably never be labeled as typical. I've never felt comfortable, being classified as normal. I can be overbearing, a pain in the posterior. If forced to characterize, I would say I'm unusual. Uniquely paradoxical, yet "fearfully made." I do have a healthy fear of God, which is a good thing in case you are wondering.

I have changed. No longer must I prove everything to every single human. The Lord is showing me gradual peace in this area, with His fullness in place of my determination. Age provides timely wisdom. I have enough concerns to drive some over the edge, but it's all perspective. I'm thankful to the Master. He's the real difference in my life. I'm the same Steve in ways, but with far different priorities. And I'm sober.

As you know, I've been fascinated with the idea of love. It's not as easily recognized and begs to be understood. I'll admit to an interest in romance; clearly, within a comedic motif. The suspenseful type is overrated. It's safer to read or view such a genre than it is to actively pursue. Love and romance are not

practical right now, so I'm a virtual wannabe. Never guessed I would consider romance in a practical sense. Such are the dynamics of love.

A precious opportunity may slip by, but I'm not being led into a relationship currently. The old Steve would have likely ventured. Need I say more? I'll wish for love, but I've found a passion through writing. I am earnest for both, yet I'm focused on prose. It's good to have a purpose, to be freshly endeavored. My immediate goal is to complete this book, but I'm still human. Concerning love, if she's out there, it will work together for good.

Some time ago, I had a phone screen for a project manager position. It resulted in a conference call interview. I had made it to the list of three finalists. Woo-hoo! The following week, I was on the road to Charleston, West Virginia for a live interview to meet with four project managers from the Office of Technology. The morning was beautiful in Princeton. Sunshine lifted me higher. Along the turnpike, walls of gold, tangerine, and red ushered me northward. Such natural beauty bolsters confidence. "Let's do this," I said.

Dark clouds gathered on the horizon as I entered the capital city from the southeast. Symbolic? Too early to tell. I took the elevator to the tenth floor of Building 7. Poised and alert, yet slightly nervous. The good kind, making one astutely aware. I waited next to the conference room to forge peaceful thoughts. I considered humming "*Amazing Grace*," then I reasoned, better not.

Several ideas raced through my head. I avoided the stiffness of memorization, not wanting to appear scripted or too anxious. I remembered rehearsing for interviews in the 80s and 90s. I was much younger, but had I been wiser? My thoughts and a nothing-to-lose attitude calmed me. I said a little prayer. "Lord, have your will here today."

Three of the four interviewers were present. Uncomfortable small talk ensued. After what seemed like too long, the last interviewer arrived. She was the Sr. Project Manager. I could tell she'd been through the fire. I knew what that takes, the ability to endure and to complete tasks and milestones.

"I wanted to meet you."

Her declaration surprised me. "Why thank you."

"Welcome and good luck. Thanks for considering us," she said.

She wasn't staying, I suddenly realized.

"I need to run," she declared.

"Oh, okay, nice to meet you."

I tried not to show disappointment.

I wanted to impress her with my accomplishments. It confused me for a moment, but I didn't allow it to deter my enthusiasm. The opportunity was for a governmental position. Then I pondered, they'll likely opt for the internal candidate. Darn, negativity. Not like me to doubt at this stage of the game.

The interview began. As the first question was punctuated, the fire alarm sounded. Remember the dark clouds? It poured. We needed to descend ten floors through the stairwell. Random notions rushed into my brain, so I tried to filter them down the stairs. I felt as strange as ever.

I knew my umbrella would protect the suit jacket. But I was more concerned with maintaining focus and a speedy return to the conference room. I caught my breath at street level, then we gathered at the evacuation point. A couple of interviewers lit up. Nope, not my brand. I did have an urge. I watched them inhale and coveted for a second or two. It felt like a contact high. Never mind.

It took several minutes to clear the fire alarms. The Chief Technology Officer gathered us into the service elevator. Finally, a good omen. The group showed kindness on the way up. It made me feel good, wanted. Yet I wondered if they had seen the thunderstorm and the alarm as signs.

It may have been fall, but it was humid as heck. The espresso latte from earlier approached the back of my throat. Why had I downed caffeine? My heart raced like an Indy car. We finally reached the tenth floor, allowing for a few minutes to freshen. I doused my face and stared into the restroom mirror. A confident grin loosened me up. I winked; it had always worked before. Back to the conference room.

I ignored some tension, shuffling notes and breathing deeply. I reflected on my potential to perform at a superior level and what that might be like, sober. Everything felt right. The interview went darn well. Surprisingly, I was sharp at randomly fired questions. Except for that one, causing a slight stumble. More a hesitation thing than bumbling. Not exhibiting confidence places doubt. Still, it wasn't enough to cook my goose. I hadn't

received the overwhelming, "I did it" sense. At the same time there was peace. The Lord was with me.

I knew time would be allotted for reaching a prudent decision, regardless of their preference. I left the decision up to God, but I'm human. A touch of anxiety seemed acceptable in the days to follow. Three weeks passed. The anticipated letter arrived on a dazzling afternoon. While contemplating its message, I discerned the outcome. I tossed it on the bed and logged on to the computer.

In former days, there would have been rejoicing. Any job I'd seriously pursued, I subsequently received. I didn't need their rejection, so I worked on this manuscript. My thoughts drifted to the unopened letter, yet I was still in a conversation with my computer. "It was far less money than I was used to. Blah, blah, blah." There went my pride again. It never gives up.

I retrieved the letter, then noticed it had been rerouted and looked stepped on. The text was in a standard format, not expertly written. *We regret to inform you. Yadda, yadda.* My solo chat halted. "I guess that's it," I whispered. The mind reasoned, but my heart knew liberty. It wasn't meant to be. Maybe I'd grown wiser. I realized, my days in IT could be over.

That led me to write about things that can't be adequately described. The first concerns a calm intensity. It must be from God. Trusting beyond comprehension. It's comparable to a beloved song or a feel-good movie. The instant when everything is right; you know it's true, and good always wins. Faith.

While getting the next sense, I thank the Lord for his marvelous blessings. I have welled-up. The significance of the moment swells deep within. The only one knowing its depth is my Lord. I attempt to choke it back, then swallow a breath of air in retreat. Often enough...the tears trickle. Hope.

I have experienced unspeakable thoughts and feelings for loved ones. With instances reserved for those extra-special. Nancy and the kids bring me joy that cannot be denied. I'm grateful God allowed me to be a part of their lives. I can only imagine them having similar senses. They are purely vital. Love.

I often experience this sense in the church choir loft. We recently sang an incredible hymn, "*Wonderful Grace of Jesus.*" I couldn't mouth the words. But I remembered the song's significance and associated its message with my friend Randy

from prison. And support from the ones who stand by me, forgiving all I've done in the past. I get heavenly urges near the end of my pastor's sermons, swept up in the Spirit's arms. There aren't adequate words. It's indescribable. Grace.

While emotion can be a positive thing it can fade. The real battles are fought in the trenches where good is nowhere found. I encourage you to read your Bible during these times. See if it gets you through when you feel undeserving. I lean on Psalms. It's all good and perfect. If you don't have a Bible just talk with the Lord. He'll listen when no one else will. Mercy.

I'm editing every day. I haven't visited this page in a while. I don't mind telling stories. It is easier to narrate than to achieve writing perfection. It's hard not being wordy. I toiled over this story extensively. Some material flowed smoothly. Other parts were painstakingly cathartic. The Lord stays with me through it all. Patience and endurance.

I'm excited about new opportunities. I'm still becoming familiar with who I am. Having the realization, I was using some type of escape mechanism from the 1970s through 2006. There were periods without, but not for long. It's hard to realize it has been eight years. Gratitude.

To be totally forthright, there was one drinking slip-up in 2009. One I've surely regretted. I'm quite certain, my daughter Christi wasn't pleased. I had called her under the influence. But that was it, no more returns to the sty. Glory, honor, and praise.

There were times I stopped using due to guilt. I felt guilty for the wrong reasons. My sincerest apologies to all I've hurt, betrayed, offended, or embarrassed. I never intended to harm the ones I love. I chose my will and lost. I lost plenty.

The Lord laid more on my heart, so I'm inserting a reflection here. Progressing along, I tend to take my eyes off God. I think about worldly possibilities. To expand my vision and explore other projects. Which is entirely possible, but that is looking too far ahead. I'm attempting to keep my eyes on the prize, the high calling of Christ Jesus.

It's wonderful to be free, living peacefully in my own skin. My esteem has improved, but I'm careful not to give pride a foothold. Pride can be the worst in us. It's quite evil. Did you know that Satan's great sin is pride? We know where he's headed.

It's easy to slip into pride. How could I forget? Pride is really an illusion of power. It deceptively creeps into my attitude. Having gone through much, I believe I'm deserving and wise. Privileged. I'm fooled into thinking...whatever I'm involved in is ultra-important.

I know that's pride again. It evolves, rearing another mask of disguise. It's dangerous to think you have arrived. I've asked the Lord to show me sins I'm not keenly aware of. When you ask something similar expect God to answer. I won't disclose a recent one, but the victory tasted sweet. Parts of this book make me proud, not prideful. I'm proud of who made it possible. Jesus my God. I pray the Lord will transform your life by renewing your mind, giving you the grace to glorify Him.

Pride is prevalent and the most insidious of traits. Whereas, humility is rare and a less sought-after virtue. From early ages, we are taught to love ourselves. Throughout the teens, a lot is mentioned about self-esteem. The ascent to adulthood is laced with asserting self. Let's face it. The world preaches pride.

Chains of Pride addresses my time in physical chains, but pride kept me bound more than prison. It is okay to be proud of your heritage, your team, your loved ones, and your accomplishments. Watch out, pride can destroy.

Humility is how peace and joy are found. It places hearts of others above your own. Life is not peaceful when striving to please yourself. Shifting the focus allows the discovery of hope and joy in others. The most stable people I know are serving others. We know what's right and well, but the ways of the world seem paramount. It's easier to grasp the essence of humility looking back. Humility is often imposed through shattered dreams.

Please read the Bible's book of Romans for your soul, not mine. Romans 5:1-4 (NIV): *"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance, character; and character, hope."*

In the Prologue I recorded: this story is inspirational, "Not because of me." It inspires because of Him. He happens to be the

great I AM. Recall the voice, who had spoken to Moses from the burning bush. Exodus 3:14 (NIV): *"I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you."*

Many centuries later, Jesus confirmed His identity to the Israelites of the New Testament. John 8:58 (NIV): *"I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!"* Can there be any doubt that Jesus is God? Who is your God?

The Christ of Christianity came to earth, to save us from the curse, by becoming the curse for us. Had you forgotten the curse? Jesus redeems, so by faith we can live and serve Him forever. Christianity is not merely a religion. It's an everyday relationship with Jesus, the Messiah. You know who He is, do you know who you are? If you believe in Him, you are in Christ. Now that's something to be PROUD of. Being a child of God is a grown-up thing to do. It might not be cool to some, but its super cool with the Lord of Lords.

The Christian life means you follow Christ, NO ONE ELSE. It's not concerning religion. It's not through legalism (the Law & good works). It's not about church. But don't abandon your Bible believing church fellowship.

Since the book's conception, I planned to include the following narrative:

"Here is a man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a Jewish peasant woman. He grew up in another obscure village. He worked in a carpenter shop until He was 30, and then for three years He was an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never owned a home. He never had a family. He never went to college. He never put His foot inside a big city. He never traveled 200 miles from the place where He was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but Himself.

While still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against Him. His friends ran away. One of them denied Him. He was turned over to His enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. His executioners gambled for the only piece of property He had on earth while He was dying - and that was His coat. When He was dead, He was taken down and laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.

Nineteen wide centuries have come and gone, and today He is the

centerpiece of humans and the leader of the column of progress. I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, and all the navies that were ever built, and all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned, put together have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as has the one solitary life."

--Author Unknown

This story was a search for truth. The truth was, I screwed up. I didn't just screw up all the sudden, I rebelled early on. I may have excused it as adventure or rebellion. It was sin. The truth was, I let pride reign. I did not want to lose control of my life. I didn't feel nor comprehend the totality of grace, a daily walk through faith. And remaining connected to the vine (Jesus). The truth was, I did everything on my own. That's the trouble with pride.

Oh yes, I was supposed to tell what truth is. The truth is, we have a merciful God. No matter what you have done. The Truth is, God can forgive all your sins (PAST, PRESENT, and FUTURE). There's nothing you can do to earn salvation. It is absolutely FREE!

If God is drawing you unto himself, you need only to recognize your sin and be sorry enough to repent. Repenting means to turn away from your sin and toward God. Confess it, asking Jesus into your heart and life. Then walk through faith with the power of the Holy Spirit. You might stumble, but you won't fall. Don't forget to tell someone what he's done for you. Become actively involved in a Bible-believing fellowship. Serve Him by loving and growing every day. You will not regret it. If you aren't sure, please make it right this very moment. God bless you!

I'm nearly done. Are you one who has said, "There must be more to life?" Well, there is my dear friend. It is an eternity for those believing in Jesus. Until such a time, you were created for a design here on earth. Find what it is, then do it for the glory of God. Your life will be meaningful and joyful. We who are in Jesus Christ are no longer doomed by sin. We are FREE from all bondage.

The New Testament records greatness in Matthew 22:37-39 (NIV):
"Love the Lord your God with all of your heart and with all of your soul and with all of your mind. Love your neighbor as yourself." And the Spirit led life will produce evidence, fruit:
"self-control, gentleness, faithfulness, goodness, kindness,

patience, peace, joy, and love." Galatians 5:22-23 (NIV).

You can experience tranquility through the storms of life. Had I not gone through certain struggles; I may not have known the truth. I pray you will find it peacefully.

JESUS is the **WAY**, the **TRUTH**, and the **LIFE**.

Epilogue

"Whoa, now Horsey...let's have a graceful trot through these woods of piney wisdom." Horsey nods and neighs gently in recognition of his master's voice. Not many beasts exhibit a blend of physical magnificence and reserved power, with a flowing mane and distended nostrils under a full gallop. A creature with ears pricked by the wind above the sound of thundering hooves. Moreover, a horse maintains a quiet intelligence and peaceful nature, sort of the opposite of a prideful person.

Pride is certainly a challenging subject to communicate. Yet there is tremendous evidence of pride through the pervasive tentacles of the media. I've gained understanding through reflection and writing, so it is nice to explore a forest of revealing trees together. And it is good to share fairly, allowing you to know me better. I enjoy relating in a jocose manner, with no intent to be catty and cast aspersions.

I realize these truths may not be yours. I'm sure some will intensely be opposed. Others will agree to disagree or disagree to disagree. A few will shun this completely, thinking I'm a mule's patootie. I've been called much worse; I can be worse! Say it isn't so? Yep. But if there's anything I've learned, I got to be me. You can be yourself as well...if you understand you aren't God and there are consequences for thinking/acting otherwise. I wish someone would have poured this into my brain with a sieve. So, I'm passing this along for you to consider its usefulness.

This is told from a Christian viewpoint, yet from no denominational perspective. It is based on the teachings of the Bible and my front-row seat with the main topic, PRIDE. Ugh. Here we go, another polemic sermon. Nah... I'm not a preacher, and I'm no JFK. Threw the last one in for free, due to the political debate pundits spinning what we'd heard ourselves live. Hopefully, I won't get side-tracked. I'm intrigued by Trump (talk about the "P" word). Oh, my.

My three points are taken from the text in [I John 2:16] and revert to the crafty serpent and Adam & Eve in the Garden of Eden. There's an analogous teaching in the book of Matthew where Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness. I'll refrain from overusing the word, sin. Instead, I'll focus on the following in just a bit: LUST OF THE EYES, LUST OF THE FLESH, and the PRIDE OF LIFE. I won't serve it up like a steak dinner. But go ahead and grab a snack, an apple might be relevant. A big red, alluring one.

Whether you believe in Biblical teachings and parables is your choice. A parable is a story used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson. What I'm hoping, you'll leave space to consider ==> from Genesis (the first book) through Revelation (the last book) ==> it begins, progresses, and ends with the Son of God, Jesus Christ the Messiah [a Christian's Savior and Lord]. That's a lot of capital letters, I know. Yet Jesus died for our transgressions and ascended, promising to return one

day. If you believe this, by grace through faith, then you'll spend eternity in Heaven, according to the Bible. Not Steve.

I know enough about pride to have filled this book, yet it is a drop in the bucket on Proud Street. But I'm still here to impart things. Pride eventually tumbles and falls. It's pretty much guaranteed. Hopefully, it doesn't crumble lives into hopeless oblivion.

LUST OF THE EYES: anything that delights the eye. Stuff, the material bullet. That which we see to own and possess. If you have a Ferrari and I have a bicycle, who is more content? Another angle. I've never driven an overly exotic car, but I've paid premiums on five decent vehicles at once, costing more a month than some folk's mortgages. I did the Jones's thing for a time. Perspective. If a family lives in a mansion and owns a summer estate in the Hampton's, but the other lives in assisted housing with a rabbit-eared TV, who is happier? It really depends. Doesn't it? There's nothing wrong with having things.

LUST OF THE FLESH: that which desires and satisfies physical need. Goodies: foods, alcohol, drugs, sex, etc. Those things can't fill ravenous holes that could otherwise be satisfied with love, peace, and joy. I know about this bullet and so do you. No need to stir the proverbial stink. A person must eat at some point.

PRIDE OF LIFE: "Of the world," according to the Word. Hmm, not a terrible sounding thing. Pride is anything that leads to arrogance, ostentation, pride in self (ahem), presumption, boasting, and on and on. Who needs God it screams? I'm wise enough anyway. Pride is anything that exalts us above ourselves with the illusion of a God-like quality. I'm exhausted from PRIDE!

In the Garden, Eve was tempted by the serpent to disobey God and eat the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. It pleased her and she desired wisdom. Adam swallowed the bait from Eve, basically. That's what it says in the good book. Was either person worse than the other? Nope. This would be a sad planet without the tender and gracious presence of most women. Thank you, Lord, we need such sweet companions. I can only think of a few rotten apples.

On to the wilderness analogy. Jesus wandered and hadn't eaten in forty days. Science has proven this is possible. Same three temptations for Christ in the tundra that day: Lust of the

Flesh: Satan tempted Jesus through bread for his hunger. Lust of the Eyes: Satan tempted Jesus through seeing/offering all the kingdoms of the world. Pride of Life: Satan tempted Jesus through suggesting he throw himself down, and to command the angels save him. Friends, JESUS did not bite. He used the Word for a shield.

Now that wasn't so bad. You're intelligent people. Friends, I won't beat a proverbial horse any longer. You can piece this stuff together, so I'm handing you the reins. I was/am a prideful professional, and I still struggle. We all do. It's not about us anyway. Right? When we learn to accept things bigger than ourselves, we will see a difference.

I've only scratched the surface. God could have taken my life. I was near destruction many times. "Steve was so lucky," you might say.

No. The Lord chose differently. "Why did you let me live?" I asked God more than once. That question was answered on a glorious night in prison. He touched my heart, changing me forever. The chains remain broken.

Since I'm finished with this manuscript, I can focus on my debut novel. I'm finding it's easier to create than to expound on personal situations. Though there are threads of reality in novels. At the least inferences.

I was reunited with some relatives recently. Hadn't seen them in forty-five years. They are from Momma's side of the family. Her late sister Bea's and Virgil's kids (Emily, Betty, and Jim & wife). They came to the house on Park Avenue. We later had lunch at the local Cracker Barrel. It was good to see them again. Family.

Speaking of family, I recently experienced a somber moment. Dismal thoughts cascaded into agonizing sorrow. My soul flooded with the hurt I'd caused so many. Through a result of my selfish existence, I have destroyed the hopes and dreams of others. To an extent, affecting future generations. For such devastation, I am so apologetic and sorry. The Lord's Spirit intervenes. He shields us from murky waters low, where dread ushers defeat, hopelessness. We don't deserve it, but praise is to God for his merciful grace and forgiveness. He will rescue you.

Through God's infinite love, I've learned that the key to life is surrender. A huge step forward from pride. If you truly seek

a relationship with Jesus Christ and allow Him to live through you, then He will fill the void in YOUR LIFE FOREVER!

Dad and Mom sold the house on Park Avenue, moving to Garden Oaks in the same town of Princeton, West Virginia. It hasn't sunk in for them, leaving their home after fifty-nine years of ownership. Eventually...things such as these must end.

The answers to many of life's questions do not come when we expect them. Often, we must wait with more patience than before. Sometimes waiting is the most difficult thing to do. It wasn't my intention to suggest there are quick and simple solutions to complicated lives. We all have needs and wants as well as hurts and hang-ups of varying degrees, requiring understanding and sensitivity. Furthermore...there is always hope, which I'm learning to combine with patience. According to Wikipedia: *"Patience (or forbearing) is the state of endurance under difficult circumstances, which can mean persevering in the face of delay or provocation without acting on negative annoyance/anger; or exhibiting forbearance when under strain, especially when faced with longer-term difficulties."*

I'm grateful for your patience and for reading my book. I leave you with the words of John Ruskin: *"The first test of a truly great man is his humility. By humility, I don't mean doubt of his powers or hesitation in speaking his opinion, but merely an understanding of the relationship between what he can say and what he can do."*

Author Information

West Virginia native. Princeton High School graduate (1974). Honorably discharged Vietnam Era Veteran, United States Air Force (1975-1980). BA Degree in Computer Systems Management,

Texas Lutheran University 1988. A career in Information Technology spanned twenty-seven years: USAF, Bexar County Information Services, The Capital Group Companies Inc., and Saturn Staffing Solutions. Held the following titles: Computer Operator, Data Center Supervisor, Applications Programmer Analyst I-III. RACF Security Administrator, Sr. Systems Programmer, Sr. Network Analyst, Project Manager, and Sales Director.

Before 2005, I hadn't contemplated pride versus humility. Finding perspective from the tumultuous years was daunting. In 2002, my oldest son's fiancée had been apparently raped, set ablaze, and left dead at her off-campus apartment. The murderers were never found. In 2003, the husband of my wife's best friend/administrative assistant, and one of my good friends and neighbors, committed carbon monoxide suicide from his Jaguar next door. Bryan and I shared a passion for music, alcohol, and drugs.

During this morose period, I lost my VP and manager to cancer. The VP was a close friend and ally. As time passed, my personal demons revved up. Struggling, my substance abuse increased. At the height of addiction, I had been managing global IT projects while my personal life fell apart. I resigned from The Capital Group Companies Inc. A situation where I had received six figures in annual compensation. Out of work, for the first time in thirty years, I fell deeper into despair. My wife and I separated for six months, divorcing in 2005. My biggest regret is the demise of our family. Sons: Jay 40, Ricky 37, and daughter Christi 36. I hope this account helps them to understand their father better.

Six months later, I was involved in a tragic accident. The victim was critically injured, remaining in a coma for some time. Cocaine and alcohol were detected in my system. While out of jail on bond, I checked into the hospital for detoxing in 2006. I was further diagnosed with severe depression. I was eventually tried, and plea bargained to an Intoxication Assault charge, in 2007, and sentenced to five years in the penitentiary. I was released on parole after two agonizing years. Anyone who has served hard time in prison knows the fear and loneliness. I was paroled from "The Walls," in Huntsville, Texas in 2009.

I spent the next year at my best friend's house in San Antonio, TX. There I requested an Interstate Compact Agreement to live with my parents in West Virginia. In author Larry Crabb's book

"*Shattered Dreams*," he writes: "*Through pain we discover our desire for God.*" By that time, I knew plenty of pain. I completed the first draft of this manuscript from the house where I was raised. This project is one of the most fulfilling things I've ever done. I hope it sets someone free.