

finally FRANK

F.A. Tallerine

FRANK

Growing up an Italian American in 1970's Texas, Frank takes us on an engaging journey from childhood to manhood. He navigates us through the perils of catholic education, young love, substance abuse, business success and soul searching, with a sense of humor and reality that will have you asking the bigger questions.

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Thanks to Peter Bellingham for his criticism, critiquing and sincerely caring for my work.

SOUL WARS

I pulled into the drive. It was an attractive house close to downtown. Smart, convenient and perfect for a young couple with careers to look after and no kids. It was midday, unusual for a workaholic. But I needed some time; the pressures from my sales position along with starting my own company were beginning to show. I walked along the deck that crisscrossed the front porch and turned the key to the front door.

This was the part I usually enjoyed; walking into my home, my space. I had worked hard for it and I deserved it. Not bad for a twenty—two year old without a college degree. But today there was no pride in my step.

I just wanted to hide, to get away from the pressure. No, not the pressure - in fact as a rule I did well under pressure. This was a burden, a weight I'd been unable to shift. As if I was being followed, I began to close all the drapes. I wanted, I needed to be completely alone. Maybe a hot bath would help me relax. It was a cold and bright December day, the kind you get in Texas when a northern wind blows in. Of course by the time it gets to Texas, cold is a relative description, but it usually has enough punch left to clear out Houston's smog and produce a stunning day. A cool Texas winter's day is what a lot of the country calls spring, but to us there is nothing sweeter. Summer's unrelenting heat and humidity seem ages away. From the security of my

soak I could look out of my bathroom window on just such a day. Yet it all stood in such remarkable disparity to the turmoil inside of me. How did I arrive at this juncture? I was young and successful, had a nice home, a new car and a beautiful wife. Yet on the inside I was old, haggard, and angry. Something had to give; and give it would, but in ways I could never have imagined.

HIS INITIALS ARE FAT

The nurse entered the room, or should I say nun, or Sister. She was qualified to give care and spiritual advice, a kind of two-for-one medical service you could get at St. Joseph's hospital in the early 1950's. Josephine was resting, having just given birth to a son, her third on her way to seven. "What's the little one's name?" Sister-come-nurse Something asked. "His name is Frank, named after my father. Frank Anthony Tallerine to be exact" Josephine replied. "His initials are FAT and he will be prosperous in the Lord" the nun responded, as if making some kind of prediction.

Josephine pondered these words and kept them in her heart. I was taken home to Elser Street on the North side; an older neighborhood close to downtown Houston. Of course I remember none of this; the circumcision, the ride home, the subsequent infant baptism. All wonderfully blocked out by infant memory loss, one of God's little blessings.

Real memories began about five or so. By then brothers number four and five had arrived. I'd settled into life with Buddy and Sis, Mom and Dad to me. Buddy and Sis were not real names of course, but nicknames picked up so early that many people never knew them by anything else. I actually thought those were their names well into my teens. Leonard Tallerine and Josephine

Coselli were their real givens. Both Italians, their fathers had come over from Italy in the Italian-Irish immigration invasion of the 1890's. The Coselli's were from a little village in Northern Italy that still bears their name. I've seen a number of photos taken by aunts and uncles who have traveled over and have photos of them proudly standing next to the little village sign.

Grandpa Frank, my namesake, was only nine when they were processed through Ellis Island in New York, so the story is somewhat sketchy, but they somehow made their way south and settled on Galveston Island, 50 miles east of Houston. Grandpa Frank was a quiet, stern man with a shock of hair that had gone from blond to white prematurely. Intense and focused as you might expect from an Italian, he was just as distant and cold, a trait many Northern Italians possess, being more akin to their Swiss and Germanic neighbors than their southern cousins. He commanded respect, but love was something he just did not do. It wasn't that he didn't care, but hugging the grandkids was out of the question. Business was in his blood. His father owned a bar in Galveston; from there he got the retail bug and an aversion to drunkenness. Wine was always served with meals, but I never saw anyone overindulge. His first endeavor was part ownership of a Dr. Pepper bottling company, but youth and inexperience along with an unscrupulous partner ended it. He moved the family to Houston and started a grocery store, the first steps on the ladder to a successful livelihood

Charles Tallerine, my paternal grandfather, was from the opposite end of Italy; Sicily to be exact, and opposite in every way. He too was a mere fourteen or fifteen when his family migrated to America. After the civil war the south, in particular Louisiana, began to lose their staple supply of plantation workers as freed slaves moved off the farms and towards the north. To supplement the worker shortage potential immigrants from Europe were sought, particularly from Sicily, a poor region with a hungry population. One such immigrant was my great grandfather, who had opted for a better life in America in 1901. He settled in Louisiana and began farming. Louisiana hardly conjures up

visions of the Promised Land. The American dream started off slow and hard for them. However subsequent generations would prosper from our forefathers' hardships.

My paternal great-grandfather was killed in a dispute over one of his daughters. I don't know the full story. In fact I wouldn't know it at all had I not one day as a grown man pressed my father about events in Louisiana. The conversation went something like this.

"So Dad, I know grandpa moved to Houston after his dad died, but exactly what did he die from?" "Well, he just died." "Yes Dad, everyone dies, but how?" I persisted. "Oh, he got killed."

I could tell this was not going to be a narrative, but a question and measured response. "What do you mean, he 'got killed'?" I said, shocked by the revelation that murder was in our family history. "Apparently," Dad continued rather nonchalantly, "someone insulted his daughter, an argument ensued and great-grandpa was shot." "What happened to the shooter?" I asked. "Well they" - taking them to be the family- "went and shot him." "So what did the law do about all that?" I asked. "They spent a night in jail. They figured he shot him, and then they shot him. All was even, I suppose" he concluded.

Turn of the century Louisiana Justice.

After the shooting Grandpa moved the family, of which he was now the head, to Houston. He took a job at the bus company as a mechanic and with his meager wage supported his mother, sisters and new bride Rosa. He was to live in the same small house for many years. It was always kept spotless by Rosa, and was always filled with the most wonderful aromas. Heaven was walking into maw maw's house and being stunned by the smell of her pasta sauce simmering on the stove top. It was an old house built high off the ground with tall sash windows, and ceiling-fans in all the rooms to try to combat the Texas heat before the advent of air conditioning. Oh yes, and a fig tree in the backyard, which no Italian home should be without.

This was the house Dad was born into; he was preceded by three sisters. They say that there's a special bond between Italian boys and their mothers, whose love and a "he canna do no wrong" philosophy builds a certain self-confidence producing both priests and mafia dons with equal effectiveness.

Their simple life and meager means kept Dad from pride and over-confidence, but his mother and sisters' doting on the only boy produced a quiet stubbornness that confirmed his Sicilian heritage. His family stood in stark contrast to Mom's. Where his was affectionate and demonstrative, hers was cold and emotionally subdued. Dad's olive skin seemed permanently tanned, even in winter. He had black hair that remained so even at sixty-eight with just shades of gray about his temples. As skinny as a rail when young, he was everything you'd expect an Italian lad to look like. By contrast Mom's brothers were blond with hazel or blue eyes and fair skinned, not unusual for northern Italians. Hence some of my brothers are dark with coal black eyes, for example John; while Leonard, the oldest and Anthony, the youngest are fair with hazel eyes.

I was the exception: neither tall, dark, or handsome; nor blueeyed and blond. I'm not complaining. A few visually-challenged individuals may even say I was handsome in a rough sort of way. I seemed to get genes from both sides. Neither wholly my dad nor wholly my mother, I was a kind of internal half-breed. There where times growing up when I was convinced I was schizophrenic. I could be emotional and tender at times while at other times seem hard, desiring to be alone. I did inherit my love of music (I play several instruments) from my maternal grandmother's side of the family. A gift that would serve me well all my life. Such diversity may seem like a blessing; and with maturity it has become such. Nevertheless, while growing up I was left feeling out of place. It was not until years later on a trip that took me to both Northern Italy and Toronto, at Italy's most southern tip, that I began to understand the contrast made by my parents' union.

EDUCATING FRANK

By the time I was ready to start school there were five boys in the two bedroom house on Elser Street, so going off to kindergarten didn't seem like a bad idea. Kindergarten as it was known then was for five-year-olds and my first introduction into the world of Catholic education. Holy Name School was run by the Order of the Sacred Heart. I know it sounds a bit like a secret spy organization, but it was in reality an order of nuns who devoted themselves to the church and educating Catholic children. The school was not far from where we lived, a neighborhood slowly being abandoned for the suburbs and replaced with the influx of Hispanics. It sat on a couple of acres of asphalt next to Holy Name Church. At the time they seemed like large imposing structures but were in fact a modest sized school in the shadows of a church that seemed to be plucked right from middle Europe and imposed on the Houston landscape.

I approached these structures for the first time with some trepidation. I remember a few tears, but these were to be expected as the security of mama was severed for the first time. The little charges were under the care of Mrs. Luna, an older woman with a purple rinse and kindly nature. She was friendly and more than qualified; rumor had it that she had been teaching kindergarten since the beginning of time. Nothing of real notoriety happened

here. It was half-days of naps and coloring. We did learn to tie our shoes, which was of paramount importance before the advent of Velcro. It ranked right up there after toilet training, especially for large families. Having to tie fourteen shoes before leaving the house just would not do.

Oh yes, and we had to practice bomb drills. These were the cold war days of 1962 and the time of the Cuban missile crisis. So every Friday we had to practice sitting in the hall with our little heads between our knees waiting for utter annihilation. With those fond memories and my gold star for shoe tying I was ready to graduate to first-grade Catholic education.

To say I was unprepared for the world I was about to enter would be an acute understatement. From my parents' point of view, especially my mother's, there were no alternatives. A Catholic education was the best for her boys. She was a devout woman, who feared God. Not the kind of Catholic woman who spoke of angels and crossed herself at every small emergency. Just a morally upright woman who trusted her Church, and trusted her kids to that Church. She deposited me in my classroom on the first day of school and hurried on to secure my brothers into their classes. I was left in the charge of Sister Someone. I don't remember her name, but I can still see her face. In fact that was all I could see. She was completely covered by her habit, except the front of her face and her delicate hands. She must have been a young woman, although at the time I'm not sure that I even perceived her as a real person. I had never seen anyone like this before; where was the security of Mrs. Luna of the purple rinse?

Sister's habit was a white dress; more of a gown as it was long sleeved and ran to her ankles. This was covered by a red smock that slipped over the head and ran down the front and back, with the sacred heart of Jesus embroidered on the front. This was a heart with a sword thrust through it. I'm sure it had religious significance to them, but to me it was plain scary. Under this smock a leather strap wrapped around the waist, serving as a kind of belt with a very large rosary attached that hung down the side, and an equally large crucifix on the end. Upon her head she

wore a veil of black and white that covered her head completely and fell down to her shoulders. Holding it in place above her forehead, and down her temples was a kind of starched white material, the effect being that all that seemed to peer out at you was her face. A face that seemed young, perhaps kindly, yet I as a six-year-old was unable to get beyond the costume to any real person.

This habit was worn year-round regardless of weather. As far as I could tell she was neither cold in winter nor hot in summer. I distinctly remember standing on the tarmac at recess with an equally amazed companion; the sun beating down on our little heads melting the butch wax that once held our crew cuts in place. We stood staring up at Sister waiting for a bead of sweat to form on her cheek. None showed, in fact she seemed impervious to the heat. Apparently nuns were not allowed to sweat.

The Sisters of the Sacred Heart were called to teach; and this they did with zeal and discipline. We launched right into the alphabet, counting and Catechism. For the uninitiated, Catechism is the study of Catholic doctrine, holy days, saints, and different degrees of sin. Mortal sins and Venial sins. Venial was for infractions such as cursing and fighting, while Mortal was reserved for murder or missing mass.

Sister placed a poster on the wall that listed each of her charges with a subject next to it: writing, reading, catechism and so on. Next to each subject was space for the coveted gold star. These were awarded for giving a correct answer on each subject. I have always had a knack for memorization, so in our morning catechism drill I always managed to remember the right feast day or who the patron saint of pets was. I received so many stars for religion that a small piece of paper was added to the poster to accommodate them. This should have been a source of pride, especially as I equated this achievement with pleasing God Himself. However while religion was star-studded, the rest of my subjects were not. This was due in part to the fact that I always felt a pull towards God. These people seemed to have answers, at least to their Catechism questions; but the other

subjects were not yet of interest to me, and unfortunately would not be for some time as my school experience was soon to take a damning turn.

Going to Catholic school in the early 1960's was more akin to a ritual than your typical school day's experience. Every morning we awoke and stumbled stupidly into the kitchen to find mother busily preparing breakfast while directing other smaller operations at the same time. On the counter standing like soldiers at attention were seven brown bags each with our names written on the front in mom's impeccable handwriting. No matter when I went to bed my mother was still up ironing or doing some other late night domestic chores. I never remember waking up, no matter how early, without her already being in the kitchen with breakfast under way and brown bags at the ready. I began to suspect that mothers did not need sleep like normal people. We would assemble at the table in different stages of alertness and dress and eat breakfast. Not much was said, and I was always amazed at the amount my two older brothers consumed at every meal. I never was a big eater, and was sure they would one day explode. Dad was usually present and silent. There were often bits of toilet paper stuck to his face. His tough beard and tough hours made shaving a daily hazard. I was not quite sure about this man at our table when I was six. I saw him only at breakfast time and on weekend nights as my bedtime preceded his arrival back home after work. It would be a few years before I would enter his world of long hours at Buddy's Food Market. With his ritual kiss on Mom's cheek he was gone to his world in Fifth Ward and we were off to ours at Holy Name School.

A.D.D: ATTENTION DEFICIT DISASTER

School began at eight o'clock with the registry. Then with military precision all eight grades filed out of their class rooms and across the parking lot to the church for mass every morning. The church itself was not large, however, seen through sixyear-old eyes, it appeared enormous. It was always cold and dark, even in summer. The heavy stained glass windows let in little natural light, making it dark on cloudy days and strangely illuminated on sunny ones. With its multicolored statues of the various saints and burning candles of every size it had the feel of a mausoleum. One statue in particular that frightened and fascinated me was positioned at the back of the church. I do not know the saint's name, but I will never forget her. Along with the rest of the statues she was in living color. Unlike many figures cast in stone, these had their attire and skin painted. The eyes were glass, and appeared as marbles set in the stone face. Except for this saint. Her eyes were in a small bowl which she held in an extended hand for all to see. Apparently she didn't want to see any evil and therefore put out her own eyes, and was canonized for her zeal. Catholic folklore, perhaps, but effective in scaring the sin out of me, at least while attending mass.

This was pre Vatican II, and the mass was still in Latin so none of us had a clue as to what was being said. It was eerie and

fascinating at the same time, there was so much to look at and ponder. Even at such an early age I felt God wanted something from me so I followed along as best as I could. However whatever he really wanted seemed masked by all the vestments and ritual. Mass lasted all of 45 minutes and then we filed back to our class rooms under the ever-watchful eyes of the Sisters. Now the fun really began.

Communion is a vital part of mass and a rule still existed back then that if one was going to communion in the morning he or she must not have any food after midnight the night before. Water or juice was fine, but nothing else until after communion. A form of fasting I suppose, with the result that all the children who went to communion that morning must now have some sustenance before classes began. The 7th and 8th graders went to the cafeteria for milk and donuts while the younger classes had their orders brought to them. We had a choice of chocolate or plain donuts, orange juice and plain or chocolate milk. This was considered a healthy breakfast, back in the days before people had panic attacks about what to eat. A Catholic family owned a local donut shop; so donuts for breakfast it was. I have always had more energy than was good for me, fueled by an active mind that is five steps ahead of now. So there I was, waiting until nine o'clock before eating then consuming donuts and chocolate milk

I ordered the same thing every morning: a plain glazed donut and a chocolate one, washed down with a carton of chocolate milk. It was a sugar-coated dietary disaster. My blood was full of sugar and my imagination ready to race away to faraway places. I wanted to reenact the Western I had seen the previous Saturday; not sit very still and listen to Sister pronounce the alphabet, or add two and two for the hundredth time. It was expected of us of while in class to sit still, very still. Fidgeting was not tolerated, and no talking. This was a classroom mind you, and discipline was the order of the day. All well and good, but I was just beginning to peak. For me, sitting still was not an option. It was like one of those old Hitchcock films where they cut quickly

from scene to scene in a flashback scenario. The boy behind me was tapping his pencil, the chalk in Sister's hand seemed to scratch the blackboard in slow motion while making that tormenting screech that I was convinced she was professionally coached to produce. I could hear the large industrial clock on the back wall ticking as the second hand lurched forward at each interval. All this swirled around in my head at once and I found myself standing up beside my desk almost as an involuntary action. This was disruptive to Sister's class and a clear violation. Her response was simple. "Mr. Tallerine, go straight to the Principal's office this minute!"

Her words chilled me to the bone. I wasn't even sure where the Principal's office was, and had only a vague idea of who she was, having only seen her on the playground as she oversaw her Realm. Sister Juliana was tall, very tall. At least six feet. Like all the nuns, she was covered head to toe with the habit. Her outstanding feature was her nose. Now, I know a thing or two about noses, my own being of striking proportions. My Italian relatives have afforded me the opportunity of contemplating noses of every size and shape (one uncle could provide shade if you stood at his feet.) Sister Juliana had a winning appendage not only in size but also in the way it hooked down and out in a peak-like fashion. Height, habit, and hook; and now I had to go down the hall, find her, and announce my crime.

Mustering what little courage I had, I ventured into the hall. The Principal's office was set at the end of the hall opposite the cafeteria and just before the restrooms. It was no more than sixty feet, yet I felt like Dorothy taking that elongated walk to the Wizard's door. Aesthetics were not in the thought design of the school. Plain tile floors, glazed cinder block walls, and windowless classroom doors gave it a cold prison feel. Somehow my little feet kept moving and were all too soon standing at the school office.

THE GODS ARE ANGRY

It was a small efficient room with a desk for a secretary of sorts who was not present. Just to the left another room, her room. The door was open but before I could step inside the Principal came out to see who was there

"Yes Mr. Tallerine," she said, as if this six-year-old would respond like a junior officer in the army. I suppose at this point I was to announce my crime. I wasn't sure what my infraction was, so I simply stated that I'd been ejected from the classroom and sent to the Principal's Office. "Take off your belt Mr. Tallerine and hand it to me," she demanded. I obeyed and continued to stare up at her expecting the worst, although unaware what that was to be. "Now turn around," she said coldly, and proceeded to give me a pitiless beating. When finished she handed my belt back to me and sent me back to my classroom without another word. I'm not sure which was worse, the beating or the shame of reentering the class with tears in my eyes and the stares of all the other children on me.

This was to be played out again many more times. Whenever I was disruptive, off I went to the Principal's office and a beating. Why did I not protest my innocence, not run away from school? Why did I not at least go home and tell my parents what was happening to me? I suppose for the same reason that all those

poor boys who were abused by their priest never said a word until years later. Although what I was going through was bad and would get worse, it didn't compare to their ordeal. But the reasons for silence were the same. In my adolescent mind, it was not Sister Juliana that was punishing me. Like the statues in the church she represented more than an individual. She was the Catholic Church's representative; and we had been taught that the Church was God's Authority and that God's Authority supersedes that of parents. So, if God said I needed a beating to make me a good boy, than I deserved a beating. Consequently I never said a word to them until I was twenty-one years old. When a loving authority and loving discipline is not present then shame takes their place, and shame is a great silencer.

The trips to the Principal's office eventually stopped as Sister found other ways to punish me for my lack of attention. My desk was placed in the front corner of the room to separate me from the rest of the class. A bit of reverse psychology was even employed. It seems I was still inattentive even while in my new position in the corner; so I was asked to come forward. Sister stood, yardstick in hand, the preferred instrument for rapping knuckles. "Take this yardstick," she said. I obeyed, not knowing what to expect. A lesson in discipline was about to be taught to the class and I was to be the object of the lesson. I stood holding the yardstick. "Now, Mr. Tallerine, I want you to strike me," she said, while holding out her hand. I stared at her delicate white hand and shook in confusion. Surely I could not strike a nun, a Mortal sin if there ever was one. I suppose if I were truly a bad boy I could have swung the yardstick like a Samurai warrior. Instead I was hurt and ashamed; the results, I am sure, that the lesson was meant to produce. Throwing the weapon to the ground, I charged to my desk and fell into it in tears.

On another occasion, I was told to report to the 7th grade class my oldest brother Leonard was in, and tell his class I could not obey. Out the door and down the hall I went, just happy that I didn't have to go to the Principal's office. When I arrived and

told his teacher why I was there, she had me stand in the waste bin for the remainder of the day.

All this and I had not made it out of 1st grade. Somehow through the punishments and masses I actually began to learn to count. It was a bad day when I was able to calculate that I would be eighteen before I was released from school.

One day as I stared at the clock, willing it to say 10:15 and hear the bell for recess, Sister interrupted my thoughts to reprimand me for not concentrating on the front board and said "Leave the room." "Yes, Sister; shall I go to the Principal's office?" I replied, shocked into the real world. "No, I don't care where you go. Just leave" she said, and returned to her lesson. I headed for the door, relieved that I was spared a beating, yet not knowing where I would go.

I found myself standing in the silence of the hall and feeling strangely happy to be alone. I headed out of the school doors and into the Texas sunshine that always seems blinding when one has been indoors. I was headed for the church, it was always open in those days; and if God lived in there, as we were always being told, then surely I would find some answers within its walls. Opening the heavy wooden door on the side entrance I stepped inside. It was much cooler than outside, and much darker, as the only light was coming through the large stained glass windows that lined the walls. The light rained through the scenes depicted in the glass and fell on the pews in an array of shapes and colors. I was free to wander the aisles; just the statues and I. As long as I didn't stare at them too long, my temporary exile was not too bad. Eventually, I went back to the school, and peering through the door asked Sister if I was permitted back in. "Yes," she said, barely acknowledging my presence.

Things began to settle into a routine. As long as I was somewhat quiet and attentive at my desk in the corner, all was well. If not I was usually asked to leave and I would make my way to the church for a while. No more trips to the Principal's office, and less corporal punishment. I began to almost enjoy my trips

to the church; no one knew where I was and the solitude was refreshing. I would climb up into the choir loft and hide from the world. Occasionally an old lady or two would come in to light a candle or crawl on bended knees from the back of the church to the altar in prayer as an act of penance. Catholics are big on the "No pain, no gain" rule when it comes to penance. The more the pain, the more the shame; and the more shame the better. The thought being that the more ashamed an individual feels about a particular action the less likely he is to repeat it. If only that were true.

CONFESSIONS OF A SEVEN YEAR-OLD

Now that I was adequately subdued things moved on and I entered the 2nd grade. There I made my first communion and my first confession, as one is not allowed to receive communion without first confessing. Now what terrible sins a seven-year-old has to confess is a matter for pondering.

I would confess the same sins over and over: "I fought with my brothers, talked in class, and did not obey my mother." Surely hell was full of little boys. The confessionals stood at the back of the church and were the only modern alteration the church possessed. The old confessionals whose compartments resembled large closets, separated by heavy purple curtains had been replaced by wooden cubicles. The new structure housed three compartments: two on each end for the confessees to enter, and a door in the middle that housed the priest. Confession was not to be taken lightly, and classroom time was devoted to the proper procedures one was to follow upon entering the confessional. When Sister was convinced we could perform our duties we were marched over to the church and lined up in pews to await our turn. The whole process seemed shrouded in mystery, and I was terrified that I would get it all wrong, miss forgiveness and wind up spending extra time in purgatory for a Venial sin I couldn't properly pronounce or confess.

Suddenly I was up. Closing the door of the confessional behind me I found myself in total darkness. As I knelt down I heard a slight click as a light over the door outside came on to alert others that my cubical was occupied. Kneeling there in the darkness I could hear the faint voices of the confessor on the other side and the priest's response. Abruptly the screen in front of me was opened. I could faintly make out a man's face. The screen was constructed of heavy black material to give anonymity to the confessor and priest. In my innocence, I believed all was clandestine; not realizing most adults would still recognize the priest and he his parishioners. Nor the sad fact that these men, while sincerely believing they were washing away sins, were being subjected to much more sordid confessions on a daily basis than the sins my classmates and I were capable of committing.

"Forgive me father for I have sinned," I blurted out as I crossed myself just as I had been taught. I must have confessed my sins and recited the closing prayer properly, for Father answered with his prayer forgiving my sins. Before leaving he gave me my penance. This was a number of prayers to be said at the altar. For example: one Our Father, two Hail Marys, and one Glory Be. Once at the altar we usually whispered to our fellow classmates to find what penance they had received, then raced them to see who could pray the fastest. One did not want to linger at the altar as this meant you had received a large number of prayers and therefore must have committed a heinous sin. There would always be some poor kid still up there after everyone else, who most probably just couldn't recite his prayers very fast. I'm sure most children were quite unaffected by such rituals and couldn't care less about them, although a few were serious and conscientious. It all seemed a big mystery to me. If God was real, why all the cloak and dagger secrecy? Still I wanted to please him so I became a confessional regular.

I would remain at Holy Name until the 4th grade, receiving equal amounts of reading, writing, religion, and arithmetic. Very little sunk in, except reading, for which I developed a love early on, and which was the only thing that salvaged my education.

Before moving on there are two more characters who bear mentioning, Sister Michael and Monsignor Cassatta. A Monsignor is a rank in the Church. Priest first, then Monsignor, followed by Bishop, Cardinal, and finally the Pope. And Cassatta was of course an Italian name. Naturally I was unaware of all this. One day after fighting with another boy on the playground we were sent the rectory to see Monsignor Cassatta. I heard it all as one title "Monsignorcassatta." Just what a Monsignorcassatta was and what it would do to us I had no idea! We made our way to the rectory; this is where the parish priests lived. The house was attached to the back of the church and approached through a large iron gate that opened to a small garden. Simultaneously frightened and awed to be about to enter a domain few school children ever see, we knocked on the door. Minutes before, we were foes on the playground; now we'd become comrades in crime. The housekeeper answered the door, surprised to find such small visitors. We were politely asked to come in. As she went off to get the Monsignor we were asked to wait in the front room. Like two captured agents in a spy film who are treated with class before being executed, we surveyed our surroundings. They stood in sharp contrast to the poverty that is portrayed in the church. Every thing was meticulously kept, and the furnishings were nicer than anything I would grow up with. Our awe was interrupted by the arrival of Mr. Cassatta. He was dressed in a black robe that had small cloth buttons from the collar to the hem. It ended at the floor, concealing all of his shoes except for the toes. Two red stripes on each sleeve were the only embellishment to break the black, giving the whole uniform the appearance of some kind of military rank.

Needless to say we were duly impressed and convinced we were about to die. All for fighting with another boy. With six Italian brothers this was something as natural to me as playing baseball is to another child.

But Monsignor did not seem at all interested in our crime or our explanations. He simply walked over to a draw and drew out a white paddle. I remember it being white (funny how you recall things in those near death experiences.) "Bend over: you first" he said, pointing his weapon at me. POP, POP. Short and quick and it was all over. "Now go back and obey Sister," he ordered as he hurried off, somewhat annoyed to be interrupted over such a minor infraction. I was relieved to get off so lightly; the punishment was nothing like the beatings I got across the yard. I suppose that as a man, even if he did wear a robe, Monsignor had nothing to prove; unlike the nuns, who tried to walk in an authority they must have known they didn't really possess.

With butts stinging and minds racing we were sent back to class with tales to tell of actually being in the rectory. heroes for a day. Sister Michael on the other hand definitely had something to prove. She was a nun on a mission. It seems the 7th grade class was rather unruly. The Sister in charge, a slight, older woman, was unable to control the class, being reduced to tears on a regular basis. Something had to be done, so Sister Michael was recruited to Holy Name to take over her class, while the older Sister was retired. My cousin Peggy was a 7th grader at the time, and most of her classmates were proud of the fact that they had actually put a nun on the run. These feelings of victory were to be short lived, as Sister 'take no prisoners' Michael was about to restore order. Where she came from I do not know; perhaps there were convents that had special training for such occasions, a kind of special forces nunnery. She too was covered in habit, but unlike her small timid predecessor Sister Michael was wide; not fat, but wide. She looked as if someone had draped a large blanket over a brick wall, and topped it with a veiled head. Striking terror into not only the 7th graders but also the whole establishment, she would place herself at the end of the hall outside her class room at the beginning of the day with arms folded and subdue the entire school. Where there was once chatter and horseplay before the morning bell there was now silence; the only sound being the scurrying of students to class and the whispers of "It's Sister Michael." Tales of what went on in her class were the stuff of legends; corporal punishment was the first and only response. How I thanked God I didn't have her as a teacher. Yet we were destined to meet again.

I somehow survived to the 4th grade at Holy Name, apparently enjoying it so much I was asked to repeat it; making me a full year older than the other students. Childhood was turning out to be a real blast. Second time at 4th grade I was relieved to discover that I did not have a nun for a teacher. My relief however was short lived. Our teacher, a large Hispanic woman, seemed to have no teaching skills whatsoever. She would spend most days reading books to the class as a substitute for teaching. Few lay-people sought work at inner city Catholic schools as the pay was so bad, unless they were unable even to find work in the Houston school district, or were on the run. I'm sure she fell into the latter category. The patron saint of childhood memories must have been having mercy on me as I don't remember much about her, except that she was short and stocky; her stockings stopping abruptly just above her knees where she simply rolled them up, one of those images I have fought to repress for years. Then there was the day a beer can rolled out of her purse.

Enough of the joys of my early Catholic education. I could go on, but few would take it as non-fiction. Besides, all was about to change as I discovered that we were about to move. I knew this as on Sunday afternoons we would sometimes go for drives in strange neighborhoods. The houses were newer than ours and most much larger; we actually stopped and looked through some of the homes being built in a new neighborhood. Walking through one with five bedrooms I wondered what it would be like to actually share a room with only one other person.

In the end Buddy and Sis settled for something they felt they could afford; an older home with large rooms on half an acre of land with plenty of trees for us to fall out of. The house was set back from the street and the back yard seemed enormous compared to our old one. Houston has always been a city on the move, with ever-expanding suburbs. While we had not made it to the suburbs we did make it out of the rapidly declining neighborhood we were in. The problem was there were only two bedrooms, a master bedroom with a bath and another large bedroom. Mom and Dad planned to add on a third as soon as we

moved in. This meant there would be seven boys in one room for two months while the new room was constructed. Three bunk beds and one rollout bed accommodated the boys. It was a little like the army, without the discipline. Dad was forever barking threats at the door in his boxer shorts to get us to settle down at night, all to no avail; the temptation to pop someone in the dark was all-too-tempting with so many bodies around.

My one consolation was Anthony, the baby of the family. I was nine when he was born and it fell to me to look after him. By the time we moved into the new house he was almost two and we were inseparable. It was my roll-out bed he slept in every night and it was a comfort to have someone to love. An undying bond was formed between us that remains to this day.

LATE FOR THE REVOLUTION

New house, new school, same old me. But the move was good and I escaped the strict Catholicism of Holy Name. Being slightly further from downtown Dad had to drive a little longer to work; however we got out of the old neighborhood just as it began to decline into another inner-city quarter.

At twelve years old I was now about to enter junior high. The year was 1968, a time of tremendous upheaval. The pill supposedly set women free; drugs migrated to middle America. Civil rights had the inner cites burning for equality, and in some cases literally on fire. Men went to the moon and eighteen-year-old boys went to Vietnam. I felt I had been born out of time, a few years too late for the revolution. Kids were storming university offices and having sit-ins. Woodstock was raging, rock gave voice to the passion and rebellion gripping a generation. I wanted to join in, rally the troops, storm the Principal's office, right the wrongs, end the war, fight injustice, and make the school day thirty minutes long.

Alas I was twelve not twenty so there I sat in science class with bum and brain numb. Who cared about photosynthesis while boys died fighting in jungles and I could not let hair go past my collar. So junior high it was; a fairly uneventful time. There was the obligatory fighting and I begin to notice girls; having grown

up with six brothers at home and nuns at school I knew very little about them. Now they seemed to be everywhere. With the onset of puberty, I stared out of the classroom window less and less and focused on other things during class-time.

It seemed no-one and no institution was free from the sweeping changes of the 60's. This included the Catholic Church. While the age-old laws of the church were not to change, many of the outer vestiges were. The mass was no longer in Latin, and priests and nuns could now use their real names where previously they'd changed them when ordained. Habits in many orders were now much more modern: simple dresses and a small veil were all that was required. And nuns, I believed, were now allowed to sweat. During this time many priests and nuns actually left their vocations. Everything seemed freer, bar me. But I determined to find a portion of the freedom everyone was talking about.

There I sat in science class, waiting with the rest of the students for our new science teacher to arrive. When she entered the room there was something vaguely familiar about her. She walked in with a smile on her face and a General Patton determination in her eyes. As I said, the restrictions on habits had changed. She wore a blue dress with a small simple veil. It was her size that struck you, she was only five foot six or so and must have been close to two hundred pounds, yet she was not really fat; more cubeular. She walked over to her desk, which was a large structure, solid from the top to the floor with a small sink built in. The structure's great height meant she had to hop up into her chair. From this vantage point, she was now ready to assume command. "I will tolerate no misbehaving in my class," she declared.

Then she proceeded to tell us what she expected in terms of behavior and what the punishment for each infraction would be. She did this in such a jovial and casual way as to produce giggles and amusement all round. One boy was instructed to stop tapping his fingers as this was not tolerated and any one caught doing so would have their fingers placed in her desk drawer and the drawer slammed shut. Of course everyone laughed thinking

our new teacher was exaggerating and joshing. Everyone bar me. I sat there in shock and terror as déjà vu began to settle in. I knew this person. The voice, the build; it was the same Sister Michael who brought fear and order to Holy Name. Only the habit was missing. Now she was here and I was in her science class. After class I did my best to warn the others but to no avail; they did not believe their fingers would be placed in a drawer or that she would walk behind each student with a large dictionary and use it to strike anyone who failed to bring their homework.

I once witnessed her take two football players by the hair and bang their heads together repeatedly as she instructed them not to talk in her class. When we next entered her class I was quiet and attentive, determined to live to be thirteen years old. My class mates noisily came in unaware of their fate. I felt like an old testament prophet whose warnings go unheeded, and helplessly watches as his predictions fall on the unsuspecting.

Science class was a double lesson and quite long. After forty minutes of the lesson, Sister Michael arose from her desk and continued to instruct us from the blackboard. As she did so, a little boy climbed out from under her desk where he had been since the beginning of our lesson, or perhaps from the start of his own. We of course had not seen him as the desk was completely enclosed. He sheepishly walked over and pleaded, "May I please get out from under the desk now Sister?" "No! Get back under there!" she commanded. He turned and walked back to the desk with the look of a man on his way to the gallows. When Sister finished at the blackboard she returned to her desk, pulled her chair up, stuffing her legs under the desk with its captive and continued teaching. I remember feeling faint. He may still be there for all I know.

The class now knew what I had tried to warn them of. The thought of someone being under there was too much for us; my classmates got the message and now took everything Sister Michael said as a prophetic threat.

Happily I did make it to my 13th birthday. It's not to say that Sister Michael was some kind of monster. In fact, if you met her outside of class she was quite cheery. She was a good teacher who instructed her classes well. It's just that when it came to punishment she was thorough. Nothing personal; more like an executioner doing their job in a professional manner.

FIFTH WARD: MY FATHER'S WORLD

At thirteen I was ready to enter my father's world. Buddy's Food Market was located east of downtown Houston; in an inner city slum, called Fifth Ward. So named from the days when Houston was founded and divided into six wards. As Houston grew the concept of wards was dropped, yet the inner-city areas kept the names. The wards had not always been ghettos. Large American cities are like living organisms that spread out conquering everything in their wake.

Back in the 1930's the area was considered the suburbs even though it bordered downtown. At that time it was a white middle-class area in which my Grandfather owned two grocery stores. He had worked hard and come a long way for a nine-year-old immigrant boy. With the onset of World War II supplies tightened, prices went up and most American businessmen made money. While European economies were devastated, America's economy prospered and positioned itself to be the next economic super power. By the early 1950's, with some choice investments, my Grandfather was ready to retire. Having sold one store, he now offered the other store to his new son-in-law, who must have felt like he won the lottery; with his pretty new wife and business it looked like he was leaving the poverty of his youth behind.

For the next 25 years the store would provide not only food, but also trials and lessons in life few white boys would have opportunity to experience. We never had an abundance, though with the store we knew we would never go hungry. By the time Cosselli's became Buddy's Food Market, the urban exodus had taken the white middle-class inhabitants further out to the suburbs; and with it their businesses, wealth, and educators. What were left were rent houses still owned by the migrants with little interest in their upkeep. Urban rot set in and by the 1960's a full blown ghetto had taken shape. In fact Fifth Ward came to be described by Texas Monthly Magazine as "Texas' toughest, proudest, baddest ghetto."

Buddy's was not a large concern: bigger than a convenience store, a lot smaller than a supermarket. It had its own meat market, and a small vegetable stand. There were two checkouts at the front of the store and the whole place had the feel of something right out of the 1930's. Patrons still signed for their purchases and many had them delivered, settling their accounts at the end of the month when they received their wages. While the era of the supermarket had begun, we were stuck firmly in the past. For the most part this was alright as the larger stores no longer operated in the Ward. Buddy's became the poor man's supermarket. My older brothers Leonard and Larry were already working there after school and on Saturdays. By the time I was ready to start my tenure there, Fifth Ward looked like something out of a Shaft movie.

Some cultures observe the rite of passage to manhood with circumcision or lion-killing. In our family it was leaving Mom to begin work at Buddy's. No more after school activities or sport. Being a normal American teenager was not an option. Real men work and work hard. Now, Dad owning a grocery store sounds fun, and it was when we were little. We would go down on Sunday afternoons when the store was closed and Dad made up his orders. We were safe from the outside world and had the run of the store. We became experts at stealing candy, stuffing it in our socks and shorts; determined to see just how

many candy bars we could get home without Dad discovering them. But working down there during business hours was a different thing altogether. This was 1970's Texas; while there was less discrimination in Texas than other southern states, race boundaries were noted and rarely violated. Once you arrived at the store there was nowhere else to go. On Saturdays we often worked 8am to 8pm. Unless you made a delivery or went to the bank you never left the store - white folks just did not go walking around the neighborhood. I felt as if I'd been given a prison sentence, knowing I wouldn't be released until I was at least nineteen and either went to college, Vietnam or entered the real work force with real wages. I remember standing among the rows of boxes in the stock room vowing to not let Buddy's and Fifth Ward conquer me. In the end I lost and surrendered to the inevitable.

As I have looked back over the years I have no regrets, as Buddy's set the stage for much that would follow in my life. I was assigned to the bottle room; apparently this was where the road from boy to man began. We were still in the era of return bottles. Soft drinks were purchased, then the bottles returned and the customer received their deposit back. All these bottles had to then be sorted and placed in wooden cartons to be picked up by the soft drinks company and reused. The returns were all stored (dumped would be a more appropriate word) in the "bottle room.' My first assignment - sort out the returns. It was a dirty job stacking sticky coke bottles and avoiding the large cockroaches the bottles seemed to draw by the hundreds. Once I mastered that task I graduated to trash burning. Eco-freaks cringe; before air quality control we did it the old fashioned way. We had a large furnace made from pig iron, meaning it was built from scrap, with a long smoke stack that shot 30 feet into the air for maximum pollution. It stood like a rusting dinosaur on our back parking lot twenty-five feet from the back entrance. The task? Burn all the empty cardboard boxes in the store room. My first encounter with The Beast was in summertime. Believe me, there is no place hotter than an asphalt parking lot in Texas in summer. I now know what the three Hebrew children felt before

entering the fiery furnace. I stripped off my shirt and put on the one-size-fits- all white apron, and fed the monster.

"GETTING HIGH" SCHOOL

Saint Pius X High School was a short five minute walk from our new house, and the tuition was much less expensive than the other Catholic Highs; so St. Pius was the place for my higher education. Emphasis on 'high.' St. Pius X was a Pope before Popemobiles, back in the days when all Popes were Italian and rarely left Italy. Now he was simply a statue in the foyer of a high school on Sheppard Drive.

I entered my freshman year with an unusual amount of optimism. My best friend David who had just moved from our old neighborhood was enrolled in the school; we were both excited about embarking on new adventures together. My grades held up for a while and I even ran for class president and won with ease. I don't remember doing any campaigning, but I've always had the gift of the gab. I remember giving an impromptu speech in which I promised to promise nothing and won a sweeping victory.

The first part of my freshman year was one of those times when the light shone through the window of my personality just enough to give a glimpse of who I really was. Unfortunately, there always seemed to be shadows lurking, ready to step in front of the glass and block out that light. I spent the first half of my day at Pius, where the golden rule was expounded if not always practiced, along with clichés about Love and Peace. The second half was spent in the 'hood at Buddy's where our neighbors wanted to steal us blind, and the cycle of perpetual poverty made me dizzy. All this produced questions with no answers and made me fight ever harder against the rules that simply shouted all the louder that I was a failure and could never live up to them.

To this day I'm not sure why I made the request, perhaps I just wanted to be accepted by the group that seemed cool; perhaps it was curiosity or daring. Or perhaps I was looking for answers to those questions that had always plagued me. I knew that my friend Gary smoked dope so one day I asked him to buy me a match box of marijuana. A match box cost \$5 and carried a 10 to 30 year sentence, a federal offence then. Hard to believe in a day now where half the population is said to have tried it, even if they did not all inhale...

On Friday Gary made good and our adolescent drug deal was complete. "Let's try it!" Gary said, so we set off for some bushes above a large ditch where we would be well concealed, to commit our federal offence. As I had already begun to smoke cigarettes getting the smoke down and holding it was no problem; the effects seemed to be pleasant and agreeable right from the start. Marijuana was to be my mistress for the next seven years. It had a calming effect on me. I could hide in its shadows, and many times it just simply made me laugh, usually at nothing at all. I had found an escape, a portal from reality. Marijuana is called a soft drug, yet it would eventually fall hard on me. True it's not as overtly dangerous as other narcotics and its impeding effects are not as pronounced, but therein lies the danger. It opens doors to places in us we are incapable of maintaining on our own and it marries us to a physiological addiction that is hard to live without. If you have ever met anyone who has been a pot user for years, and there are plenty around these days, (Woodstock relics who have puffed for twenty years,) the case for keeping it

illegal would close itself. I of course did not feel this way at the time; while high I could function much better than any drunk.

Behind the wheel I was never as dangerous as the drunk driver, although there was the danger of sitting through a green light while mesmerized by the pretty colors of the traffic lights, or burning your crotch from reefer ash while laughing uncontrollably. Stupid but not exactly hazardous. Besides, why was it alright for Johnny Executive to polish off a martini at lunch then a few bourbons and sodas at the end of the day, and I was a felon for smoking a joint on the way home from work? It was a plant, vegetation from Mother Nature; surely it's good for you. The hypocrisies of the day fueled my justifications.

They say that marijuana leads to harder drugs and in my case it did, yet for the time being it was mostly pot. School, which I had always hated, took on a new dimension; family gatherings, and even Buddy's were now bearable. A quick doobie, a breath mint, a few eye drops and I became an illusory observer while no-one was the wiser. I enjoyed observing things this way, having a surreal window on a world that was just kidding itself. However the dope was simply masking the hurt. Drugs are great for pain reduction; if I am about to be operated on and vital organs removed or repaired, please hit me with the strong stuff! However if it is a broken heart or wounded spirit then no dope, no matter how potent, will cure; it will only mask the pain allowing the infection to grow.

Thomas Aquinas, "TA" for short. At least that's what we called her. Never mind she had a bloke's name for a first name. She too was tall, a prerequisite for Principals I suppose. St. Pius was her domain and she seemed to enjoy running it. As she glided down the halls clearing the stragglers into their class rooms she always had a smile on her face. I'm sure she was a nice lady who was dedicated to her vocation. But as I started my sophomore year, who or what was nice was becoming harder to ascertain as my own heart was slowly turning to stone.

She was innovative and, as the times dictated, implemented changes in our education. As Pius was a college preparatory school a new schedule called the "mod system" was introduced. Instead of classes all day long there would be a few classes each day with the reminder of the time spent in study halls for the different subjects. The thought being that a more college-style approach would better prepare the students. A kind of closed college campus where students studied at their own pace yet they stayed on campus; at least that was the premise. My new schedule was classes from 9:00am to 10:00am and from 2:00pm till 3:00pm with time to study in-between. I simply walked out the doors from 10:00am to 2:00pm. I couldn't believe the benefits of higher education. I now had some quality free time from school and work. Of course over time the faculty discovered some students were not as trustworthy as our patron saint, so I was forced to sneak out of school. My days now went something like this: science class, pool hall, back for P.E. home at 3:30pm then off to Buddy's till the store closed at 8:00pm.

OUR BUDDY'S

It was at Buddy's that the real education began. The neighborhood was entering an exceptionally disturbed time. On the corner across from us there was a drug store, whose dubious proprietor had begun to sell a potent prescription cough medicine under the counter. This provided a quick, effective, and most importantly cheap high for the 'hood. Next door to us was Vatanos Shoe Store; another Italian proprietor. Vincent had been there when Grandpa owned the store and had never left. He was one of those ageless Italian men who seemed to possess the same muscle he had when he was twenty. I was sure he was three times that age now. He came in at least once a day to have a Coke and chat (that's Italian for brag.) But he was a nice man who was able to smile and still give the impression he could break both legs with ease. A trait that I am sure kept him safe all those years in the 'hood

Next to him was a cleaners, run by yet another white man, Mr. Warnake. Unlike Vincent he was slight of build and always smoked. He always had his pistol at the ready. All store owners possessed firearms; we kept a .38 concealed under the counter in Dad's checkout and another in the back room. Mr. Warnake always let you know he had his and was not afraid to use it. An adequate muscle substitute. Adjacent to the Cleaners was an old

clothing store struggling to survive. Then the blood bank, which was not a clean clinical building receiving consensus clients who wanted to donate blood. This was when blood was still purchased to supplement the supply. \$5 for red blood, \$20 for plasma; easy money for the winos and hookers who needed a quick buck. Many were the times a wino came in the store fresh from the bank clutching his \$5 ready to purchase something to eat or perhaps a bottle of cheap wine. Weak from the exchange, it was not unusual find a wino passed out in the cereal aisle. I often wondered how the middle class suburbanite would have reacted to the knowledge that the recent transfusion for his gall bladder operation was provided by a Fifth Ward wino at 17% alcohol proof...

To curb the number of winos in the store and keep the cereal aisles clear, we kept our selected "wines" in the cooler. When a privileged customer stumbled in he would have to see Mister Buddy, who would give one of us the high sign; we would then retrieve the selection from the cooler, place it in a brown paper bag and slip it to the customer. This discouraged the bad elements from frequenting the store and kept the regulars supplied. Our selection included MD 20-20 and Thunderbird wine; both guaranteed immediate and instant intoxication and could also remove stains or ignite waterlogged wood.

Just across from the blood bank were two houses typical to the area, with the exception that there were always ladies in scantily clad outfits lounging on the porches, giving waves and shouts as the cars drove by. I would always speed by on the way to the bank for Dad when one of the girls would shout "Hey little white boy, how about a good time?" Of course I never took up the offer. I just knew if I stopped the van I would never be heard from again. However, white businessmen seemed to discover this neighborhood on Friday afternoons, a place I was sure they looked on with scorn the rest of the week. A slightly bolder hooker once propositioned my oldest brother Leonard in front of the store, not knowing who he was. He told her he would have go into the store to ask his Dad.

Across the street from the whore houses and directly across from Buddy's stood, or more appropriately leaned, Briscoe's Pool Hall. A dark dingy den of iniquity of Biblical scale. Of all that was transacted in there, pool was the least. The whole place could not have been much bigger than a large garage, yet it was a hub of activity, with people coming and going constantly. Mr. Briscoe the big man himself, and he was large, often came in the store to buy his cigarettes. A small purchase for which he would produce an enormous wad of bills all held together by a rubber band. He would then peel off a one dollar bill for his 75 cent purchase. This little ritual was performed every time he came in.

One could not help noticing that the initial layers of the bills were all ones, making the wad as impressive as possible. Along with gold rings on every digit, a few gold teeth, and the Cadillac out front, Mr. Briscoe confirmed his place in 'hood royalty.

It was always entertaining and educational to watch Briscoe's from the security of our plate glass front window on Friday or Saturday night after we closed, as Dad and Leonard or Larry checked out the registers. I once saw two men firing at each other from opposite ends of a car. Amazed at the sheer inadequacy of aim as neither man was hit, I wondered where all those rounds would eventually end up.

One day while I was sleepily bagging groceries for our check-out lady Daisy, a known prostitute came in with her head wrapped in a cloth to cover her hair. When Daisy inquired why the unusual head dress, she said that her pimp, Cowboy, so named for the flashy boots he always wore, had poured acid on her head during an argument. 'I am going out now to shoot him" she said as calmly as someone about to run a household errand. That night as we entered the entrance ramp of the old Eastex freeway to head home, there was a body covered with a sheet on the grassy verge with boots sticking out from beneath it.

Another evening I watched Junior, a large junkie, take five shots to the chest from a small caliber pistol then proceed to beat the bejabbers out of the guy who shot him. He was eventually pulled off the shooter and collapsed. Amazingly, Junior survived to fight another day, take drugs and frequent Buddy's. Before long he was back buying his cigarettes from us, with a scary scar starting from his neck to who knows where. He would stand talking to you with eyes so bloodshot you could hear the bang, and then his pupils would roll up into his head 'till only the whites of his eyes started at you. Just one of the many colorful characters known simply as our customers.

Directly across from Buddy's and just next to Briscoe's was a tire store that dealt more in stolen goods than tires. It was owned by a white family who employed their children, of whom there seemed to be no end. And the children of all ages and sexes were forever covered in black tire grease. Ironically, this was one of the more crooked and dirtier families in the 'hood.

MARY AND MARIJUANA

I ended my freshman year as class president; from there it was a spectacular hurtle into freakdom. The questions kept piling up; and with them ever-increasing anger. With nowhere for them to go every rejection and hurt was filed away in the closet of my psyche. As I was not a naturally mean person I fought to keep the door jammed shut. Unfortunately this proved impossible and from time to time the contents would spill out, resulting in a fight with class-mates or one of my brothers. With that many boys in the house, sibling violence was a given. Most of the tension was between my oldest brother Leonard and me. There were six years and a lot of muscle separating us. I never won a fight against Leonard, but I never gave up, my mouth still going even if my body was beaten. In fact it was my mouth that kept me forever in trouble with nearly everyone. Injustice angered me and I felt a need to stand up for what was true, though most times I ended up on the ground. Yet through it all I learned to take pain and shame, so when I did find myself in a fight I just kept going. I knew I could run on hate, an unforgiving and unreliable ally. I was the definitive angry young man.

I made it through my sophomore year, my grades declining with the rest of my character. My descent did not go unnoticed at home or by my teachers, some of whom I know genuinely cared. A few tried to help but with little response from me. One such teacher was Miss Golasinski; we all called her Miss G for obvious reasons. At the end of my sophomore year she urged me to sign up for Drama class in my junior year, believing I would do well, and that the class would do me well. I'm not sure how it was left but I was less than enthusiastic. When I showed up for the start of my junior year, Drama class was on my schedule. I was none too pleased, yet decided this class had to be easier than most. After all, faking things had to be easier than studying.

I successfully faked my way through the first part of the class, even bluffing my way through a talk we had to give on an indigenous people. One day Miss G. announced that we were to put on our yearly production, the play "Up the Down Staircase." The male lead was to be played by myself and the female lead by a Mary Wissing; a girl I considered the teacher's pet. I didn't take the whole thing very seriously; however Miss G. put me in the part and as I had a knack for memorizing, I decided to enjoy myself. We practiced in class and in the evenings. I would often be high during rehearsals and would mess with the teacher's pet's head, many times reading my lines while cross-eyed.

Mary would giggle or tell Miss G. that I was acting strange again. My co-star seemed far too conservative; while she was attractive with yards of wavy auburn hair and a nice figure I took little notice of her at the time. The play progressed and before long it was production night. All went well and I seemed to stream through my part as did my co-star. Afterwards Mary was presented with flowers from her father and everyone seemed genuinely pleased. I couldn't seem to enter into the fanfare, however a cast party was rumored to be held at Miss. G's house and I decided to go along. The party was a little too sophisticated for me so I retreated to a car with some friends from the drama crew and we smoked dope from an old pipe. When it was time to leave I found myself playing taxi as I was older than most of the kids and had my own car. I drove and listened to the chatter, the guys trying desperately to be cool and the girls giggling. One

by one they were dropped off and the car got quieter until my only passenger was Mary.

We talked as I drove and it seemed I had never spoken to anyone that way before. I was relaxed and amazed at how open I was. Upon arrival in front of her house we sat and continued our conversation as if we were the only two people on the planet. All those classes and nights of rehearsal, yet I had never really noticed her until now It was getting late by then and she finally said she had to go in. I took a chance and kissed her; then she shot into the house with a wave. I drove home that night higher than I had ever been.

Next morning at work I was absolutely worthless. I stumbled around in a daze unable to concentrate on anything except Mary. My brother Larry even noticed and asked what was wrong with me. Now, I had been to Buddy's stoned before and was still able to work, (I mean how hard is it to stack cans?) and no one noticed. This was something altogether different. Could I be in love? I even enjoyed talking to her as much as kissing her... Surely something was happening. I couldn't wait to get home and call her. I didn't even know how old she was.

When I called that night I discovered it was her birthday and she was just turning sixteen. If any of my children happen to read this book, remember we were stupid, I repeat stuuupppid. Ah, but ain't love grand. Mary and I soon became a permanent pair spending hours on the phone and every spare moment we could catch at school. It was not long of course before Mary suspected that my strange behavior was due to more than eccentricities. I'm ashamed to say that before long she was getting stoned with me.

While I knew she felt the same about me, she was scared to voice it; she was young and her older sister had married young to the distress of her parents. Still the fact that someone really cared for me did me good; her love touched my heart profoundly. Yet even this potent therapy failed to effect a real cure for my ever-hardening heart. For the next three years we were together

whenever possible. I was insufferable at times and more than once Mary determined to break up with me. Yet I always seemed to convince (the manly synonym for 'beg') her not to.

SCHOOL DAZE

My senior year at Pius was to be short lived. The majority of my class was of Polish or Czech descent, mostly good Catholic boys who loved country music and football. As you can gather I had little in common with the majority of my fellow classmates. In fact a subliminal antagonism was ever-present. The second week of school I headed out the doors to skip a pep rally. Upon arrival at my car I found it covered in bumper stickers. Most of these were advertising local country music stations, with dim-witted phases such as "Proud to be a Kikker" or "I love my truck." Now I am sure that no permanent damage was done to the car, a small Opel station wagon with curtains. Sitting amongst the pick-up trucks and muscle cars I suppose it was asking for abuse. Yet something snapped inside me and I stormed back into school and confronted the individual I believed was responsible, a short stocky boy with yellow hair, cowboy boots, and a death wish.

I begin threatening him when a few of his friends came to his rescue, all with names ending in 'ski.' Clearly I was outnumbered; and one or two of the lads were muscle-bound football players. Yet my quest for vengeance had to be satisfied. Motivated more by rage than courage I returned their smirks with "I'll be back." I turned to head home, retrieve a baseball bat and put the fight on a level playing-field. As I headed for the door a

boy, a cool wannabe who had harassed me before, challenged me. From somewhere behind him someone sarcastically warned "Careful, he knows karate!" Exactly why this set me off I'm not sure; perhaps it was the sheer stupidity of the statement or the over-the-top cockiness. Next thing I knew I was on top of karate kid choking him with all my might while banging his head against the floor. The ferocity of my anger frightened even me, as girls screamed and the procession into the gym for the pep rally disintegrated. A coach appeared and pulled me off, still swinging, sticking him in the stomach in the process.

This began to bring some reality to my actions. I knew I had crossed a line. Next day I sat in the Principal's office with my disconcerted mother. We all agreed it would be better for all concerned if I left. I did want to finish high school and I wanted to finish it at Waltrip High, a large inner-city school where some of my friends had found refuge after being expelled from St. Pius. Waltrip was enormous in comparison; my senior class was about the size of the whole of Pius' student body. I was finally free from the confines of Catholic education, but was I exchanging one form of bondage for another?

Freedom certainly described Waltrip High. It was now 1975. The revolutionary pendulum of 1968 had maxed out. I was about to go from rules to riot. Waltrip had no dress code, girls wore halter tops and shorts, while boys sported long hair and those who could wore what facial hair they had.

I'm sure there were students there who were serious about their education, but none seemed to be in the crowd that I knew. Most of the student body used a large parking lot in the front of the school; there was also a smaller parking lot in the back, a kind of no man's land, where the faculty never ventured and turned a blind eye to whatever went on there.

To say that drugs were prevalent would be an understatement. The mornings were like a scene from a provincial market gone mad. Instead of shouts of tomatoes, melons, and other produce from vendors one heard cries of quads, speed and hashish. It

wasn't unusual for there to be a drug-bust before class; you'd be sitting in the car in a cloud of blue smoke staring through the windshield when you'd spot a classmate, whose greatest physical exertion at PE was getting dressed, streaking across the track field with Olympic skill, a narcotics agent in hot pursuit. You'd always know who the victims of the bust were as they would show up at school in a few days with a regulation military haircut all ready for their court date. As time went on we came to recognize the narcotic officers. True, when they drove into the parking lot they sported long hair and moustaches, trying to look as hip as possible. Problem was their unmarked cars were the same Dodges that the police used, minus lights and black and white paint job...

Most of the back parking lot got too stoned to even make it into class, but I was determined that I was going to finish my high school education. Coming from St. Pius I only needed a few credits and had very few classes. The faculty was almost begging kids to stay in school and pass. It was not unusual for a teacher to give the answer to Friday's quiz out on Thursday in the hopes that most of the class would at least show up the next day with a chance to pass. I distinctly remember taking an English test where the teacher actually gave marks for getting your name right. For the first time in my scholastic career, I was actually making A's and B's. I was eighteen years old; older than most of my class mates, legally considered an adult. Therefore I could go home any time I wanted. I was enjoying my new found freedom, the whole time sinking deeper and deeper into a mire of moral malaise. Between the back parking lot and Buddy's Food Market, I was certainly getting an education, but to prepare me for exactly what, I didn't know.

DON'T SHOOT, I JUST STARTED SHAVING!

My senior year was filled with getting high then getting to school, getting high then getting to Buddy's, and getting high after work. As it was mostly marijuana at this time, I was able to carry out my duties and still maintain my escapism. If school was a circus, then Buddy's was a zoo. Sometimes tediously boring on slow days, sometimes entertaining as when we had to lock the front doors to keep customers out, as a fight between two prostitutes took over our store. Brenda, the older madam, was out to teach the younger sixteen-year-old hooker just who was Queen of Fifth Ward.

Sometimes it was terrifying, as when my grandfather and I were hijacked behind the store at gunpoint. He had supposedly been retired for years but could still never break the habit of coming down to the store and using the back office. Whenever he would leave in the afternoons my father would always ask me to walk him to his car. As if I, the long haired zit faced teenager, was going to offer some protection!

On such a day, my grandfather and I exited the back door. I remember being hit by the sun's glare as it was an exceptionally bright day. The back door opened up into an alcove of approximately eight feet. Our van was parked just to the right and at the entrance of the alcove, offering perfect protection for

our assailants. We were only out of the door seconds when two men seemed to come from nowhere and placed guns up against our heads. They said something about not really wanting to have to shoot us, which didn't sound very convincing, and demanded we turn over all our money and valuable possessions, which was easy enough for me as I quickly emptied my wallet of two dollars and fifty cents and a package of cigarette papers. The assailant who was covering me seemed to be all of sixteen years old. I found myself trying to reassure him that they would get everything they wanted, as he appeared to be more nervous than me at that moment. His hand was shaking as he held the gun to my head and I feared that the weapon would discharge from his sheer inexperience.

The assailant who was covering my grandfather was the more mature of the two and definitely in charge. He seemed to be at least twenty-one years old, did all the talking, and had the bigger gun. My grandfather was less compliant and refused to release his briefcase. Gunman number one proceeded to take it away from him and a small tug-o-war was developing. He demanded my Grandfather release the briefcase and kept saying, "I do not want to shoot you, old man." Surprisingly I was not gripped by fear, but was caught up in the rapid events being played out before me, as if I was watching one of those reality cop shows. More out of a desire for survival than heroism I reached over and jerked the briefcase away from my grandfather, and gave it to the gunman. Satisfied with their proceeds they began to back away. Now clear from the concealment of the alcove they had to cross thirty yards or so of parking lot before they would reach the street and the safety of the neighborhood. Instead of turning and running across the parking lot, they both began to back up slowly keeping their guns trained upon us. At this point I was convinced we were about to be shot, as witnesses would be a definite liability to their budding criminal career. Amazingly, my mind was still not gripped by fear. Instead, I distinctly remember thinking about how I would fall once shot. Would I fall backwards, would I be able to brace myself for the fall? It is funny how the mind fires off thoughts in a crisis.

It seemed to take forever for them to cross that small parking lot. Once at the street, they broke and ran to the right, concealed by a neighboring building. Now, I felt afraid. In fact, I felt sick to my stomach as I ran into the store and told Dad we had just been robbed. He seemed to take it rather calmly and called the police, who were downright blasé. They took a few details as routinely as a traffic cop would write a ticket in another neighborhood. We all knew that nothing would ever come of any of it. I found out later that my Grandfather's briefcase had \$900 in it and his credit cards, hence the reluctance to let go of it, although hardly worth being shot for. I am sure our criminals, the dynamic duo, felt that they had hit the jackpot.

A few weeks later during a lull in customers as I lazily stared out the front glass window I spotted gunman number one, wearing the same hat that he wore on that day, walking into Briscoe's Pool Hall. Excitedly I ran and reported this to my Dad, expecting some kind of justice to follow. My dad said, "Forget it son. If you can identify him, surely he can identify you. If we call the police now, you'll never be safe." I was disappointed, but realized my father was right, of course. It was one of those early "life ain't fair' lessons.

FREEDUMB

Mercifully, the summer of 1975 arrived and with it the end of high school and the end of my formal education. This was to be my libertine year. School which had always caused me so much pain was finally over and I was determined that at the end of the summer, I too was going to be free from Buddy's Food Market. It didn't matter what kind of employment I found, I was sure it would be better than Buddy's. Especially the pay, as my father had never discovered minimum wage. Freedom from my parents too as I was going to get an apartment with my best friend Dave as soon as possible.

I longed to be self-sufficient, to be on my own. I had no doubts about my ability to provide for myself; work was in my genes. I was already capable of working through exhaustion, hangovers, and the residuals of drugs from the night before. Craving an elusive liberty that I could not quite describe, I felt restrictions that must have gone deeper than those which school teachers, parents, and social authorities could impose. In the long term, throwing off the powers-that-be produced no lasting relief, but I was glad for the temporary illusion.

David and I quickly found an apartment to move into. He was working in a lumber yard while I'd told my father that I would finish the summer out at Buddy's Food Market. I'd known

David Orlando since he was five and I was four. We'd grown up together on the same street, full of Italians where everyone's name ended in "O" or "I". David and I became fast friends and were inseparable. In many ways we were opposites. Perhaps that's what kept our friendship going. I was small and thin and David was taller and had always been fairly large, even as a young boy. I loved music and the arts; while David was athletic and loved sports. Deep down he was a good natured young man, but life had recently dealt him some blows that, like me, had turned him onto roads that were none-too good. A few years earlier his father was diagnosed with cancer of the esophagus; cancer treatment not being what it is today he was basically sent home to die. After his passing, David's mother found it increasingly difficult to cope and the family began to disintegrate. While David never really spoke of these things, it seemed to produce an anger and resentment that only seemed to surface when primed with drugs or alcohol. It was not unusual for a Friday night to end in a fight if something lit Dave's fuse. When this happened I tried to stay close to Dave; he had been taking up for me since 1st grade, however these fights were no longer juvenile.

Some nights he would suggest we go to a Cowboy Club. He said he liked Country music and there were always girls to dance with. I think he just wanted a good fight. This was before Country was cool; when Rock and Roll and Country did not share the same street. So when the likes of us went into one of those Billy Bob's ballrooms, a fight was sure to follow.

That first year of so-called freedom in that apartment is best left unexplored with the exception of a few events. To say it was a dark time would beggar the description; drugs prevailed and in the end almost ended me. On one particular night we took some kind of cocaine cross that went up the nose and into the blood stream with devastating effect, good or bad depending on your perspective. Today when we say kids experiment with drugs we mean they are taking drugs. In my day the meaning was literal. Unlike today where we warn people of all the precise effects of

certain drugs, we were willing guinea pigs. Half the time when we took the stuff we didn't know where it came from, or exactly what it was, or what it would do to us. We would call the drug hot line and describe the drug. If they said it would not kill us we would proceed, or give it to the most daring or gullible in the group. If they begin to see green elephants, laugh, or cry at the lamp we knew we had a winner. Such was the case with our mystery drug. I believe someone said something about stealing it from a veterinarian... It was most likely horse tranquilizer. We all had a snort, and the horse race was on. I had experienced highs before, but this trip, to use an outdated term, was more like the voyage of the damned. From the departure I was detached from reality and I lost control of my vision; things were doubled and my visual perception was distorted. Looking down, instead of seeing the floor under my feet, it looked as if the floor was a thousand feet below. I begin asking my friends to please take me to the hospital. They just laughed as I panicked.

Somehow I survived the night and decided no more bad drugs for me; just marijuana, the occasional amphetamine, and a snort of coke; and that only when I could afford it. Not exactly turning over a new leaf, but a real fear had reached me that night; enough that I knew some things had to change. I also realized that the people I hung around, with the exception of David, were definitely not my friends.

Thankfully we were only in that apartment a short time before we moved to a quieter apartment complex. We settled down, as did our drug consumption. It reverted back to marijuana again, most of which I grew myself in a large walk-in closet fitted with florescent lights. I had quite the green thumb in those days. It was not unusual for the closet to be filled with six-foot-plus plants of the most potent THC. I justified this criminal activity as I used the drugs for my own consumption. Even before I became a homegrown herb grower I only sold to my friends; and that just to keep me in free weed. Ironic reasoning I know. That's why they call it dope.

"THAT'S ONE."

My small distributions led to one of the dopiest and most ironic incidents of my short criminal career, a true "Cheech and Chong" moment. I was leaving the south of Houston having just scored a kilo of weed with a sometime friend Steve, and was heading for home. A kilo of marijuana is called a brick, so named because it's so tightly packed it resembles one of those vacuum packages coffee comes in. As we entered the freeway I sat with the brick on my lap. Steve was driving and I suggested we test our purchase as we had been assured of its potency. Patience was not an early virtue. If our purchase was as good as we were told then I would sell most of it in one ounce sandwich bags called lids (no clue for the stupid name) and keep the rest for myself. Again, I was self-justifying; I was no drug dealer I rationalized, just an entrepreneur user.

As Steve negotiated the traffic I preceded to unwrap our package. Wrapped in newspaper and compressed tightly, it began to mutate back into a large bundle of stalks and luscious buds as I pulled it apart.. I quickly rolled up a doobie from some of the choicest buds and we drifted into dumbsville. "Oh no!" Steve shouted "There's a cop car coming up behind with his lights on." I glanced back to see the police screaming up behind, siren

blaring. Panic attack does not do justice to the terror that gripped me.

I had many close calls with the law but this looked like a definite bust. There was no way to dispose of this much weed; and eating it all was out of the question, though I was contemplating it. If it were humanly possible to consume that much weed that fast, which it was not, at least I would be too high for days to know my life was ruined. The police car was right on our tails now and there I sat covered in evidence. We were on the inside lane and the traffic was heavy, moving fast and had us boxed in, so we couldn't even pull over. By now the cops were right on our bumper. "Just pull over right here on the inside lane. We're done for," I shouted.

Steve slowed the car down and begin to pull over to the inside rail. This gave the cops just enough room to maneuver up alongside us. I couldn't understand what they were doing. We were both doing about 50 miles an hour now, side by side. The policeman in the driver's seat rolled down his window as if he wanted to say something to me. He was just inches away as I rolled down my window. "Get out of the !*#^#! way!" he spewed out in anger; then they sped off to whatever real emergency they had. They'd obviously been responding to a call at high speed when they came up behind us. In our stoned stupor we'd slowed and blocked their progress. I was too shaken to be relieved, and too hardhearted to be grateful to whomever it was that had spared me yet again. I can look back now and see the humor of it all. Still, a conviction such as that in the 1970's would have been no laughing matter, altering my life for years to come. There were many other such incidents where tragedy or arrest were narrowly averted. I began to feel I was on a countdown and slowly running out of time.

One particular Friday night I met David after work for a drink on the way home. I'd smoked a joint on the way over and after a few drinks was feeling pretty good. We left to head towards the apartment. I followed David in my work truck. Traffic was heavy as always on a Friday afternoon and David just managed to cross a particularly heavy intersection. I waited at the stop sign for any kind of hope; this was Houston traffic where guts as well as gears are required. I took off feeling like James Bond while in reality I drove like Mad Max. Not surprisingly the next few seconds were filled with the sound of metal crashing and sparks flying as my small truck was catapulted across the intersection and landed atop a stop sign. The passenger side of the truck had taken the brunt of the damage and I'd been spared. There was just a moment of absolute quiet and stillness before the traffic sounds and sirens invaded my consciousness.

In that instant I heard someone say "That's one," as in "One, two, three, you're out." I am no mystic and I knew it was not the dope talking, as the message or warning was clear: keep living like this and you may get another chance or even two; but time will surely run out. The moment passed and the reality of my situation rushed in on me. I was unable to open my door and so climbed out of the window. As I did I saw a large pick-up lying on its side in the middle of the road. As I pulled out he'd broadsided me and flipped his truck. "My God, I have killed someone?" the thought screamed in my head. Then to my relief a man climbed out of the window of the truck and miraculously seemed for the most part unharmed. His truck was lying across the road blocking all the traffic on our side of the boulevard, and the rubberneckers on the other side completed a major traffic jam. There I stood in the middle of the road, just begging to be arrested

Meanwhile David had made it to the apartment just moments before. It was close by and he still thought I was right behind him. Once inside he became concerned and something or someone told him he must go back for me. We certainly weren't used to obeying voices and David was not prone to intuitional responses. Nevertheless he grabbed his keys and set off. He found me standing in the middle of the road just as the police arrived. As he walked up I began to babble on about what a miss I made. He shoved me up against the car and told me to shut up, get a grip and not say a word to anyone about anything. The

police surveyed the damage with the jaded air of officers who view wrecks in Houston as commonly as most other city cops view parking violations. They spoke briefly to me, with David at my side. My words were few and measured as I was sure if I messed up I would not have to worry about jail, as David would have killed me on the spot.

To my everlasting astonishment they issued me a ticket and walked off. The wrecker drivers began to circle like metallic vultures and the other truck driver, who I heard tell the police and the ambulance crew he was fine, suddenly had second thoughts when he saw the officers issue me with the ticket and asked to be taken to the hospital just in case. Once again I was spared from consequences that would have altered my life's course for the worse. Instead of a DWI or DUI charge, I was free to go and let the insurance companies finish the fight. I wish I could say that my life was altered by the mysterious voices and unusual rescue. Sadly it was not.

MOVIN' ON UP

I had found it in the attic when I was twelve or thirteen. It was a Gibson semi-hollow body guitar; red, sleek and beautiful with a lovely tone. My parents had purchased it for Leonard a few years earlier and like many young people he quickly lost interest so the guitar was stored away. I went to the local department store and bought a book with an accompanying 45 vinyl record on how to play the guitar. So began a love affair with music, in particular the guitar, that would last to this very day. I found great comfort in playing and writing songs; it gave me an outlet for expressing myself. I was actually involved with a band called The Sun at one time. With the exception of myself the other band members were Vietnam vets. They were a group of musicians who had played together as teenagers before Nam and had got back together on their return. Along with combat and death they'd also discovered drugs on their tour of duty.

A couple of the guys were still jumpy; slam a car door and one of them would spin around ready to attack. At practice these guys still smoked dope as if they were about to face death. Needless to say we never did perform much; still I was holding out that music would play a role in my life.

As promised I served out my last summer at Buddy's. To my father's disappointment college had never been a serious

consideration; I set out to find employment. Any would do for the moment; the main objective was to be free from Fifth Ward and hopefully still have time to play some music

A friend had told me about a company hiring sub-contractors to work on construction sites. Houston was in one of its boom cycles. While the rest of the nation struggled in the late 70's and early 80's the South, particularly Texas, was growing and Yankees were moving down in droves as the union jobs up north froze. At one time they were pouring two thousand home foundations a week. There was simply more work than hands. It was not long before I was back to working six days a week; up at 4:30am and on site by 6:00am. The difference now was that I was my own boss and finally making real money. It was a simple enough equation: the harder and faster I worked, the more I made. Music, Mary, and Marijuana, and now a new love entered my life: Money.

As my paychecks grew, so too did my appreciation for what money could do for me. I became more self-disciplined. No more getting high during the day, and I began to take care of myself. My work was very physical and before long I was in the best shape I had been or may ever be in. The near overdose experience had already distanced me from a lot of drug use and from the old crowd.

As the work increased I took on a helper called Jesse; he was a hard worker whose drive was equal to mine. After a year of intense work and high pay checks I was ready to move on. Mary and I were still together and I wanted it to stay that way, forever. To her that meant marriage. She wanted a home, kids, security, and I wanted... That was the problem. I didn't know what I really wanted. I knew I wanted her and marriage meant we would be together.

I was twenty-one and she was nineteen when we married. Not long after, I bought a house and we settled in to what was hopefully to be a quieter life. Mary had been working in her Dad's office since she was fifteen. He was an Independent geologist who had just started a company to supply oil companies with seismographic maps. By the time we were married the company had grown from a two man operation with a secretary, to a large company with Mary as office manager. With two incomes and no kids money sure seemed to be my new key to freedom.

Sadly that key would not unlock the freedom and peace that always seemed just outside of my grasp.

It was not long before I began to tire of the construction sites. The money was ridiculous, yet I longed for clean hands and a little respect. For that to happen I needed to get on the other side of the work orders, and that meant sales. My opportunity came when the salesman who provided us with our work moved up in management. I went in to see the head of operations and explained that while we did not look like salesman material we knew the customers and the product. He laughed a little and said, "You boys are making loads of money right where you are, why move on?" What he meant was "You boys are making us loads of money and you will be hard to replace." As I turned to walk out of the office I knew he had made a mistake in laughing at us. The next day I put a call in to the sales manager of our largest competitor. When he called back I told him who I was and that I could possibly swing some customers over. With that he set up an appointment. I got a hair cut and sorted out a new wardrobe, and so went from sun-baked sub-contractor to salesman

I took Jesse on as a sales partner and together we worked hard to secure our clients and to procure new ones. The money got better, as did my cars and clothes. For the most part I felt no different on the inside; however I hoped that too would change in time. I worked ever harder and even took some night classes to get my real-estate license. Mary also was as busy as ever. While the play we did in high school was my first and last performance, Mary pursued her acting right into college. She was a member of the University mine troupe, and continued on as their business manager and to perform after she left University, producing more income and little time for anything else.

The transition from post-hippie to yuppie was complete. Two incomes and no kids. Mary wanted children at some point; however it was a non-discussion starter with me. Growing up sharing a room with that many brothers I was now determined to share as little as possible. It was my house, my space, my life and I wanted it to stay that way. Besides, Mary and I had things to accomplish and money was the stimulus for our self-realization. I was no longer relying on my physical stamina for income; my hands were clean; my new car was even cleaner, as was my house as we now had a maid to clean and cook. All this satisfied for six months or so. Then my old friend Misery showed up again. If I could just really be my own boss, answerable to noone, totally in charge and therefore, I reasoned, totally free, then whatever it was that I was after I was sure I would find it.

REQUIEM RESPECT

As Mary and I both had decent salaries we saved one and lived on the other. This is how we purchased our first home and how I now found myself with twenty-thousand-plus dollars in the bank, just a year later. It was with these funds and those of my partner Jesse I planned my entry into the world of real business and what I hoped was total independence.

Ronald Reagan had just been elected president and what was later to be termed Reaganomics was being instituted. This meant a tightening of the money supply to bring runaway inflation under control, and curb the recession most of the country was laboring under. Interest rates were high; rates of 18 and 19 percent which seem farfetched these days were common, slowing even the new construction boom of Houston. So while there was money still to be made in the new home market, home renovation was increasing as more and more people hung on to their properties.

Replacing a floor or an entry way was one means to enhance a property and increase its value. I decided to go into business for myself and while I would take some clients with me and continue to supply builders, I would also supply custom doors and entry ways to home owners in a unique way. At the time most consumers who wanted a new front door of leaded, beveled or stained glass, made of oak, mahogany or some other hard wood

would first have to have the door built and then find someone to make the glass, then find a capable carpenter to install it, and finally a painter to stain it. I would put the whole operation under one roof, called The Door Store, and hopefully get rich.

I located a piece of property in the Heights, an older neighborhood close to downtown that was slowly being invaded and renovated by yuppies. It had a store front that after some renovation would be perfect for offices and a show room, and behind that was a large warehouse ready for manufacturing. To acquire the needed finances to purchase the property I went to see my oldest brother Leonard. I looked up to him and wanted to follow the 'greenback trail' he was on. Leonard agreed to work the bank in our favor for a portion of ownership in the property. The funds to start the operation would come from me and my partner Jesse. Once we had purchased the buildings we got to work renovating the showroom, the whole while maintaining our sales positions at the old firm. In this way we would be able to keep our clients supplied right up until the time we opened our business, hopefully bringing them on board. Our commissions kept funds coming in right up until we left, which we would do without prior notification so as to keep a jump on our competition. All quite unethical, yet necessary for survival. It was a dog-eat-dog world out there, I told myself.

If Charles Darwin was right, and I believed at the time he was, then "Only the strong survive" was more than a theory; it was a fact and my new slogan. Just as with my drug taking, I was somehow able to justify my actions albeit it with less and less conviction. Needless to say I was busier than ever, working sales during the day and getting the business ready to open by night.

I suspected the other salesman knew what we were up to and I could feel the tension when I went into the office. I was the young hot shot and therefore resented for my success, I reasoned. I was pushing myself hard, yet there was more than drive at work here. I had something to prove. "Bad boy makes good," my

success would say to all those who had scorned me. Resentment is a malicious motivator.

Things were intensifying at home as well. Mary's work for her father kept her busy during the day and her work with the mime troupe was consuming more and more of the rest of her time. Every year there was a major production along with numerous other smaller jobs, which sometimes took her out of town. I had no qualms with the money she was making, yet I still wanted a wife. Basically I wanted it all, and like everyone else who wants it all, I wanted it all my way. I communicated this to Mary in my own subtle Italian way. Mary, who has never been very confrontational, usually listened in silence as I ranted on for her to cut back on her acting, so as to be at home in the evenings for me. She was, after all, my wife.

"Me" and "My" were figuring more and more in my life as I was carrying selfishness to new levels. Mary did manage to suggest that I get a hobby once. "You know," she said, "Get a boat like other men". "Get boat; get a boat!" I shouted, "If I wanted a boat I would have married a schooner." At this point the argument ended as they usually did with tears swelling up in Mary's eyes. These were no feminine induced tears for emotional effect. They were real, just as real as all the mean things I said to her, and deep down I knew it, so when I saw the tears I'd stop, 'till the next time. Like most addictions, anger was hard to break. Oh, we were in love, passionately in love, and just as passionate about what we each wanted.

I remember wondering when I married her if the feelings of love would remain when we were an old and decrepit couple in our forties. What assurance was there of love lasting to a twenty-one year old, when twenty years was a long way off? When we were together on the odd weekend we usually spent our time and money going out to eat at expensive restaurants, smoking pot and catching up on sleep on Sunday mornings. We had few friends left, in our upward climb we had left most behind; and most of them were spiraling ever downward in a directionless

pit. While they just wanted the party to never end I wanted more, an elusive purpose that was always just outside my grasp.

However we did retain a few friends. David had gone to work for me as a sub-contractor while I was in sales and now was going to run my warehouse in the new business. There was also a couple, Jonnie and Lynette. I had met Jonnie when I sold him a house while dabbling in real-estate. They were young and fun and like us had careers and no kids. We would sometimes spend a weekend together: we would take some black mollies (amphetamines), the ones Johnny Cash has since made famous, or if we could score some coke, all the better. Cocaine was the new drug of the yuppie crowd; it was expensive and its stimulating effects made one feel fantastic. It seemed to sharpen the wits and enhance what everyone was experiencing. At the time there didn't seem to be any immediate adverse effects. The perfect drug for the cool crowd. I had survived the unacceptable drugs and was now part of the middle class, with middle class drugs. Of course the real effects of cocaine would soon begin to tell as many began falling victim to its addictive characteristics, and it spawned its sinister offspring, crack.

Our weekends with Jonnie and Lynette were fun. We were careful in our drug-taking and spent our time in fine restaurants and going to arty foreign films. Then one day Lynette showed up without Jonnie. She wanted to talk to Mary and I.

She and Jonnie were getting a divorce. After just a few years they were calling it quits; she said they would remain friends, but it was just not working out. Mary and I were shocked, up to this point no-one close to us had ever been divorced; in fact I could not recall any divorce in my immediate family. This may sound strange when compared to my life style, yet the family I came from was good; Dad-loved-Mom, of that there was no doubt. I remember once as a teenager calling my mother a witch during an argument which was overheard by my father. He came into the room. "That is not just your mother boy; that happens to be the woman I love. If you want to speak to her like some man on the street let's step outside and I'll treat you like that man."

Obviously I didn't take him up on his offer. My father who had never struck out in anger at any of us had made his point. My respect for both my parents grew that day.

This was all part of the dichotomy I existed in: if my parents were so good why was I so bad? It was this very goodness I was rebelling against; the Church always taught us to be good, and yet such bad things had happened there. There were good people in good neighborhoods and bad people in bad ones, and yet even in Fifth Ward at Buddy's I saw less hypocrisy than I did in many of the white middle-class people I knew.

I was rebelling against the awful goodness that was not good enough to satisfy my questions. It was a goodness that simply mirrored how bad I was, and never went any deeper. I am in no way justifying my rebellion. I was wrong, dead wrong, in my actions and in my heart. Yet my questions were not wrong. Today there are few seekers and fewer asking the painful questions. My generation turned rebellion into part of American culture and now consists of forty and fifty year olds who have never really grown up. Siring a generation of kids who have nothing to rebel against, except the nothingness of their parents. A whole generation that started out seeking peace, love, and protesting against war quickly became disillusioned, settling into money, 'morality,' and misfiring marriages. As they grew older they grew ever more cynical, with clinical cynics for offspring. And that was the precise direction I was headed.

A few nights later Jonnie and I went to dinner and he gave his explanation. The more drinks we ordered, the more his rationalizations, and the more my advice became befuddled. In the end we decided to drown our sorrows and justify our large bar tab.

17

KEEP TRYING. YOU'RE ONLY DYING

"Live fast, die young." That was the advice taken by many, at least in the entertainment world, at the time: Janis Joplin, Jimmie Hendrix, Keith Moon. Of course I was neither famous nor infamous, but living fast and dying young sometimes seemed a better alternative to living in a world that never seemed to answer back. The road in front just seemed to get darker and darker the harder I stared it down.

It was not the future itself I feared, it was the not knowing. Fear, real fear, a "hair standing up on the nape of the neck" fear is the only way to describe it. Fear was no stranger to me at the time; I had known the fear of the police car in the rear view mirror, the drug overdose, and the pistol put to the head.

Yet this was something altogether different. I was sitting on the couch in my living room. Mary was busy in the kitchen and I was inattentively watching some television. I believe it was some kind of documentary that got me thinking about time, eternal time to be exact. That's when the fear gripped me. Completely inexplicable; yet real.

I realized that despite all my asking, I had no real answers. There I was; twenty-one years old, yet I felt more like seventy-one. My grandfather, who was in his seventies at the time, had achieved

a lot for an Italian immigrant, retiring early to a house specially designed for him by his architect son, and still serving on the board of a bank. Yet for all his opinions on politics and business, I knew he had no real lasting answers. Was this what was ahead for me, the fruit of my years of toil and of one-upmanship on the next guy: to arrive at the end of a purposeless journey? If that was indeed the case, and if in the end we all end up as nothing more than worm-fodder, then why the entire pretence of morality and immortality? If I was in fact just an evolved mammal, an accidental compound of DNA with a computer for a brain, existing in a world where the survival of the fittest determines the evolutionary process, then I should live my life accordingly. Climb to the top of the pecuniary pile and wait for the end. On the other hand if there was another side, a spiritual dimension of some kind with eternal consequences, then I wanted know who or what was out there, if anyone.

Hence began my most imperative and perilous search for answers so far. It was not a search for some spiritual experience, or for a god or gods, I just wanted the truth. I'd recently seen the movie "The Amityville Horror "a popular film at the time supposedly based on a true story. While I certainly didn't believe in ghosts, I was intrigued by aspects of the "other side." I read the book and others that dealt with the occult. I was no mystic and had always prided myself on the fact that I was in reality. Nonetheless I'd always sensed that there was more than just what we could see. Drugs had highlighted these feelings, in particular marijuana. It was a subtle key to unlocking the COM link to another facet of reality. This is the very reason I feel so strongly today about the dangers of marijuana; while many point to the lack of evidence of any lasting physical health dangers, its damage to one's mental and spiritual condition is alarming. When Timothy Leary and other early pioneers of hallucinogenics used LSD and similar drugs, they believed they were freeing their minds and broadening their souls. In reality they were opening up uncharted avenues in their souls for which neither they nor their fellow users had maps, and in many cases no way back home.

We were definitely a generation of seekers wanting to explore our garden; trouble was the lights had gone out and we were stumping around in the dark. And stumble forward I did, reading about a number of Spiritualists. While interesting, they simply seemed to pose more mysteries to navigate. If indeed there were many roads to the truth, they surely seemed to have all got lost in the traffic jam of life.

I even dabbled in meditation. This was before you could pop into a bookstore and pick up the "Idiots Guide to Transcendental Meditation" so I had to read what I could. I got so far as having my own mantra, that's a word that is meaningless, like "stuu." You then sit cross legged (a position supposedly of great comfort, at least for jelly-legged women.) Once in this position, you close your eyes and meditate on the meaningless word while locking out all other interference, and hopefully enter a state of total relaxation.

I assumed the position, closed my eyes, breathed deeply and began to concentrate on my mantra. "I must close everything out and hum my word: Stuu – Stuuu – Stuuu – Stuuuupid." This was just not going to work. I didn't want to block things out anymore; drugs could do that, albeit temporarily. "No," I told myself as I struggled to unlock from the lotus position; "I'll just have to find another way to deal with the increasing stress." Maybe I was weak or tired, but the stress was building. I'd even developed pains in my chest; at twenty-one they had to be something other than heart problems. Nevertheless at my mother's insistence I went for a physical with my father's heart doctor. The irony of me on the running machine with sticky tape monitors on my hairless chest was not lost. The diagnosis was an inflammation in my chest, most probably due to stress that would heal itself as I calmed down some.

As I stood outside the Doctors office willing the elevators to hurry, I almost laughed out loud. Calm down, while opening a new business and trying to maintain my sales office with the help of amphetamines and the occasional cocaine lift? Not a chance.

The pressure itself was not the real problem; it was the purposelessness that was wearing me out, and that was set to just get worse.

18

SINKING SUCCESS

I had been at it all day. The building was built in the 1930's; it had loads of character and loads of layers of old paint. Renovating it was hard work, yet it would make a perfect showroom with its impressive tin ceilings and stucco walls. It was almost complete and we would soon be having our grand opening. It was late afternoon when I left for home. As I did I pulled into the parking lot of the large neighborhood bank directly across the street from our new venture.

I wanted to view our work, to get a sense of its curb appeal. We'd done a good job, yet I really wanted more. I was expecting a euphoric drop, some sustaining satisfaction, a pat on the back, a "well-done" that would be there next morning and the next. Nothing happened. Just me, staring at a building that had been renovated while I was not.

Instead of driving home bolstered by my achievements, I was once again left disillusioned. Success, it seems, does not satisfy. Yet I pressed ahead. Perhaps I just did not have enough of it yet.

If my days were filled with striving, so too were my nights. Ever since my foray into the spiritual, I'd been plagued by strange dreams and sleepless nights. I would wake with the sense that someone was in my room, a presence of some kind. I'd come to

entertain the idea that after we die we continue to exist as some kind of energy, some force or power. While I wasn't convinced that I believed in some kind of afterlife, I was sure there was more than just the physical. All my life I knew that there was "the more", especially as a child. Even as my heart grew harder through my adolescence and teens, deep down I knew. Now I felt I was on the cusp of finding out who or what that "more" really was. Or perhaps they were about to find me. As I lay awake those nights I felt as if someone or something was trying to reach out to me.

Looking back I thank God that I never initiated anything with who or whatever was there. As curious as I was, there was a foreboding about it all, a sense of evil that was more perilous than I realized at the time. Whatever doors I had cracked open through my readings, drugs, or music were now opening wider and there seemed no way of shutting them now. It seems there was a battle raging, albeit it behind the scenes, a spiritual covert operation that somehow involved me, and yet I was in the dark as to what was really happening. Nonetheless, I pressed ahead preparing the business and going into the sales office in the mornings. But I was growing weary. The resentment and anger I carried were wearing me down. I felt old and tired, carrying burdens, and baggage that were far beyond my years.

19

REALITY FALLS

I made my phone calls that morning and looked at my messages. There were lots of things to do but I was in no mood for getting them done.

Leaving the office mid-morning I headed for home; not sure why, I just wanted to get away for a while. I remember it being a cold December day, with blue skies and clean crisp air, yet when I arrived at the house I proceeded to draw all the curtains.

I wanted; I needed to be alone, to shut out the world. Yet I could not shut myself out, nor shift the burden from my shoulders, there was in fact no place to hide. My sin had found me out. I went into the bathroom and drew a bath; a hot bath was a favorite way to relax and gather my thoughts. As I endeavored to relax, I found myself saying these words, "Jesus if you are real and if you are everything everyone says you are, then baptize me in your love." Exactly why I had said these words I was not sure, it certainly was not the type of thing I had ever voiced. Jesus was not someone I had really thought about for years and baptism I never contemplated. Yet no sooner had I spoken these words than a warmth went through me, from my head right through to my feet. A feeling I can only describe as liquid fire.

It brought with it a peace and clean feeling that was completely other than anything I had ever experienced. It also brought a knowing, an assurance that Jesus was indeed real, not in a historic way but in reality, in the now. Why I prayed that exact prayer, for that is what it was, I'm not entirely sure. Why God would choose to answer someone like me, and respond to an "if," ("if you are real") in such I way I do not know. Nevertheless in that instant I realized that I'd breached the other side, the other realm, the spiritual side.

It was not just filled with energy, although energy there was, nor spirits of the dead, though spirits there were. There was the kingdom of God with Jesus as King, and there was evil, but an evil that had been defeated and had lost its power over my life on that day.

I was not sure as to what all was happening to me, but I was sure that Jesus was real and that I had met him, not in a handshake "how do you do" way, but in the depths of my soul I now knew he was real and that he loved me completely and unconditionally. The next day when I went to the office everything seemed new; the sky seemed bluer and the grass greener; it was as if I had removed dark sunglasses. As I rode to work I spoke to him, asking him to be with me today. I also said two verses of the scriptures I had read in a book on positive thinking while searching. I don't believe the book had much to do with Jesus, yet I remembered the words. They were from Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." And Psalm 118:24, "This is the day the Lord has made; I will rejoice and be glad in it." I said these along with the prayers I remembered from when I was a little boy: the Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory Be. The latter meant very little, yet the scriptures seemed to possess a power all of their own

Of course I was not quite sure what scriptures were and did not even own a Bible, yet I derived great peace from saying these words I suppose there are many clichés one could use to describe what was happening to me: saved, born again, converted. However, none of these terms entered my mind as what I was experiencing had little to do with what most call church or religion. I of course told no-one of my encounter. I could just picture myself telling Mary how while in the bath the other day, I met Jesus; confirming what she had always suspected that her husband was indeed mad. I would keep the encounter to myself for the time being, although that would prove to be impossible.

The next few days I went about my ordinary routines, yet I felt anything but ordinary. I can't begin to describe the joy I felt inside, the sense of being clean, forgiven all, and the reality of freedom. The freedom I had searched for, for so long in vain, was now mine. Real freedom, not in the sense that I was free to do anything I wanted; that was previously the kind of freedom that had been so damning. This was not a freedom to something, but from something; from the guilt, the shame, and the anxiety it conveys. Then there was the love, real love. I knew that I was in love with my wife from the first time we met, yet this was something altogether different.

For the first time I knew that there was someone who knew me, really knew me, as only an omnipotent being can: every sin, every flaw, every insincerity laid bare, and yet love was all I felt from him. Unconditional? No, this was a step beyond. This was not akin to the love a man has for a woman, a brother for another brother, nor what the closest of friends possess. This was the love one has for his enemy. This was a love that just does not make sense, at least in man's economy. I began to realize that much of the religion I had been exposed to growing up was just that - religion, lacking power and a real relationship with Jesus. All those years as a child staring up at the large crucifix hanging in the church I never imagined that he was alive, risen and wanting a relationship with me. Not that I felt the slightest resentment, in fact just the opposite. I realized that all that went on before was more than mere circumstance; a battle had been going on for my soul for years.

In the end Jesus won and that was all that mattered on that day when His Spirit entered my soul. The bitterness that had followed me around like an unwanted relative was swept away like a malignant growth.

I now knew that not everyone that said they knew of God necessarily knew Him in reality. So I said to Him, "Jesus I realize that not everyone who goes to a church knows you; so if you don't want me to go that's fine, however if you do, please show me where." This was late December, and New Year's Eve found Mary and me at home. It is not that I was told that I must not drink, or go out and party. The desire just wasn't there, and I was celebrating a new life not a new year.

Early that evening there was a knock on the door; David was dropping off some invoices from work. Our relationship had become somewhat strained of late as I was David's boss, yet that was to be expected I suppose. What was not expected was David's response to my question about his plans for New Years Eve. "So Dave, what are your plans for this evening?" I asked. Knowing David's history I expected an evening of Herculean drinking. "I'm going to church tonight and I'd like you to join me on Sunday morning" he stated with a confidence I had not detected in him before.

If this conversation had transpired a month before I would have laughed myself silly or asked David just what he was on and asked for some. However with the events of the last couple of weeks it all seemed to make sense in a weird and wonderful way.

This was drink'em dry David, who could not speak without the aid of four letter words, and he was offering to take me to church on Sunday. "Sure Dave I'll go, I've been interested in God myself the last few weeks." Even as the words tumbled out they sounded strange to my ears, yet my response seemed so natural and so right. I believe David was expecting some resistance; he had no of way of knowing what events had been taking place the last few days.

Sunday morning came, and with it David, right on time to pick us up for the meeting. The meeting was in a large church; I was later to find out that it had been part of a large denomination which had been revived when scores of young people had come in during the early 70's, in what was known as the 'Jesus People' movement. During all the turmoil of the 1960's and 70's while many sought answers in politics, protest, and pot, many it seems found the answer in Jesus.

We entered through a side door, and there must have been two thousand people there. I still had no concept of Christianity and thought to myself, this is where all the people that have had similar encounters converged, like that Richard Dreyfuss movie "Close Encounters" where everyone who has had an encounter was drawn to the same place. That of course was not the case, however people certainly had come from a myriad of backgrounds, young people with an exciting new life, older people who had had a fresh encounter with God and walked out of religion. Then there was Mary and I. We should have felt uncomfortable; instead we felt loved, and right at home. The meeting was unadulterated simplicity; a large choir stood and began to sing like Jesus was coming back any moment, in fact the whole place was singing. As they did people streamed to the front and prayed with men who seemed to have all the time in the world. After the singing a short message from the Bible was brought; at the end of the meeting an invitation was given for those who wanted to know Christ Jesus to stand and ask him to forgive their sins and come into their lives. In reality I had done this in my home.

Nevertheless I stood, as did Mary, and together we started a journey that would take us in ways we could have never imagined.

EPILOGUE

AND SO THE STORY GOES

I turned from the boulevard onto the street of tree-shaded houses. I was still struggling with the feelings that I just did not belong here. Professionals lived in these houses, while I had just spent sixteen years in England in an 18th century town house that spilled right out onto the street when you opened the door and had a 10x12 patio for a back yard. Sounds quaint, I know, except for the fact that we had raised eight children in that house. Sixteen years out of Texas, sixteen years spent in one of the most godless societies in Western Europe. Years fraught with difficulties, persecution and loss; and beyond doubt some of the best years of my life. And now I had been called back to Texas like a soldier who did not want to leave the front line. Yet if I'd learned anything over the years it was obedience.

I pulled into the drive. It was a nice enough house in a nice enough neighborhood I suppose; I had long since quit valuing the exteriors of life. It was what was inside the house that was of real value.

A wife of thirty years that I loved more now than I did when we were kids together; and my children, some who were now grown and still living overseas and others who were still little enough to hit me at the knees and greet me with a kiss when I walked through that door. Most precious of all was what was inside me

- Jesus. The reality of his person has remained a constant for over twenty-six years now. That is not to say that life has always been kind or fair, yet I have never been truly alone since that day. Jesus saw us through business, our work on the streets, concerts in the parks and prisons, trips overseas and our eventual move to Europe. But all this is another story for another day, and another, and another; as the journey, or rather the adventure, never really ends. Salvation, the surrendering of one's life to Christ is just the beginning; the touchstone to the true life God has for each one of us.

As a child all those years before in church there was a large cross on the front wall, with Jesus hanging on it. Red paint marked his hands, feet, and side. He appeared as deathly and frightening as any depiction on paper or movie screen. I always felt he was looking down on me with scorn, and that I was somehow responsible for his death. On the one hand I was responsible for his death, for his father had asked him to pay the price for my and every other person's sins. On the other hand my perceptions were totally wrong. Jesus is no longer dead or dying, and I am certain he resembles nothing like the figure that hung in the church. He is alive, victorious and looks on us all with love and compassion, longing for us to know him.

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