

an IMMOVABLE object
UNSTOPPABLE forces

an IMMOVABLE object

UNSTOPPABLE forces

**– a memoir by–
terry BUG lilly**

Copyright © 2025 by Terry Lilly

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the author, except where permitted by law.

First release August 24, 2025

Print **ISBN:** 978-1-0880-9665-9

E-book **ISBN:** 978-1-0880-9706-9

With gratitude for publishing support provided by:
Patrick Stephens and Michelle Coffman

www.TerryBugLilly.com

www.BuggedOutDesigns.com

Table of Contents

Preface	5
Epigraph	8
Chapter One: Making Choices	9
Chapter Two: The Human Cannonball	24
Chapter Three: The Goody Mob	47
Chapter Four: My-Friend-Patrick-From-New-York	63
Chapter Five: Death of a Friend	76
Song I: Coming Home Tonight	94
Chapter Six: A Low Bar	96
Chapter Seven: The Faggot Strikes Back	108
Chapter Eight: Winning	116
Song II: Hold On	129
Chapter Nine: Super Costumes	131
Chapter Ten: Rejection	146
Song III: Eye of the Beholder	157
Chapter 11: Drugs	159
Chapter 12: Coping Mechanisms	171
Chapter 13: The Four Horsemen	178
Chapter 14: Recovery Point of Huntington	190
Chapter 15: Wrecked	207
Chapter 16: Almost Famous	221
Chapter 17: Threatening Spaces	233
Chapter 18: Armageddon	254
Song IV: (Maybe) It's All Up To You	275
Chapter 19: Conquest	277

Preface

As a memoir, this book is focused on a specific thread of my life story, so some people and events have been left out to keep the message clear and the narrative true to its purpose.

Forty-three years are covered in just under 300 pages. So, to anyone who might feel slighted or left out, please don't take your absence as a sign that you aren't important to me.

I reviewed old social media messages, photographs, emails, and other records to ensure that everything in this book is as true and accurate as possible. Nothing has been dramatized or intentionally altered.

Whether someone loves me, or hates me, I hope that they do so based upon something that has transpired between us. I can't control how people feel, but I care that those feelings are based on truth, rather than assumptions, half truths, or gossip.

This memoir is honest, if nothing else.

Some events may be uncomfortable for the people involved, directly or indirectly. However, it is not my intention to vilify or embarrass anyone; I'm simply telling my own story. We can't presume to know what others were thinking or feeling beyond what I experienced. Furthermore, my perspective and memory are limited, and I acknowledge that they are inherently fallible.

To err is human.

Where I may have wronged anyone, I am open to making amends. And if anyone from my past wishes to

repair a broken relationship, I can at least promise to try
to be open-minded and willing to listen.

I'm beginning to understand why they say to forgive is
Divine.

In this memoir, I'll share how and why I clung to a shield
made of fear, faith, and trust in the love of those I
looked up to, *an immovable object*, even as it crashed
against the *unstoppable forces* of time, nature, and truths
that can not be denied.

The devastating collision was inevitable.

It was an apocalyptic battle I couldn't imagine surviving.

I hope that by sharing my story someone else might
also experience the honesty, acceptance, and freedom I
found on the other side.

1. At the same time I saw the Lamb open the first of the seven seals, I heard one of the four living creatures shout with a voice like thunder. It said, "**Come out!**"

2. Then I saw a white horse. Its rider carried a bow and was given a crown. He had already won some victories, and he went out to win more.

3.

4. – Revelation 6:1-2

Chapter One - **Making Choices**

My life had spectacularly gone off the rails and I was in bad shape when I started waiting tables to have cash for more heroin.

I had always thought it would be interesting and fun to work in a restaurant. It's just unfortunate that I only got to try it during a series of bad decisions I had been making as my way to both handle and not handle the private existential crisis I had been secretly harboring and building upon for as long as I could remember.

Overall, waiting tables was pretty much what I expected it to be, and I did enjoy it for the most part. But, let me be honest, with all apologies to the five restaurants who thought at some point I was their employee, the whole time I was waiting tables, my actual occupation, or overwhelming preoccupation anyway, was getting and slamming as much heroin as possible.

I guess I was something like a meal ambassador with a pharmacological special interest focus; a food and drug administration representative, you could say.

But of the things I can remember about waiting tables, the thing that I disliked the most, was waiting on tables of families with kids and in particular the way those kids always seemed to be running the show.

Now, in case you might miss the irony of me, a heroin junkie, passing judgment against these parents who I believed were setting their children up for failure by giving them too much power to make their own decisions, allow me to point it out. I wasn't in any position to be offering advice on the path to success.

An active heroin addict has two extreme states of being and slides back and forth at various incremental stages in between; one is obliterated, feeling nothing, nodding in and out of consciousness, the other being the worst kind of sick you can imagine, equal parts physical and psychological, sweaty yet freezing, shaking, nauseous and dangerously desperate for a hit. So, to paint a scene, I am uncomfortably tilted towards the withdrawal side of that scale when I approach a table with 15 guests, and while

working my way around it to write down everyone's order, I come to a little kid.

"What do you want? Tell the waiter." The mother, or father, prods. I'm too sick to care about or notice the details of the hazy world I am existing in.

"I want fish sticks!" The kid wails.

"I'm sorry, we don't have fish sticks." I say, trying my best to project, "I'm fine, this is fine, everything is fine."

At the same time my mind is racing with other thoughts; if the last table leaves me \$8.00, I will have \$20.00, and then I can call my guy and ask him to bring me a stamp, and maybe he will. But, I've got to get back to them with those to-go cups they asked for, so this kid really needs to pick something we actually have. Now.

"I WANT FISH STICKS!" The kid insists.

"I can come back if you need some more time." I try to say with a smile.

"No, that's okay, we are ordering now. Honey, you have to pick something they have."

"I WANT FISH STICKS WITH CHOCOLATE MILK IN A PURPLE BOWL."

For a brief moment I test the idea of killing that snotty faced kid right then and there in front of its slack jawed parents. If I thought it would quiet the screaming of my veins for the opiates I craved, I might've done it.

I should be disgusted with myself but instead I am judging the parents.

I want to smack them.

I think, "Who is in charge here? This is no way to raise a child."

* * *

That scene was actually repeated nearly beat for beat, more than once, in my time waiting tables.

I can't imagine why those parents wouldn't ask their sweaty and shaking 6' tall 100 lb waiter how he thought they should raise their kids?

It's been said that whatever bothers you about other people is a projection of something that is wrong with yourself. But, that's like adults telling you when you are a kid that the other kids are only picking on you because they are jealous of you.

It sounds stupid. It feels like it can't be right.

Then, you get a few years on you and. . . Oh shit! A lightbulb comes on and you can suddenly see it; you are finally able to understand the depth of truth hiding within a few simple words.

But, I hadn't realized what my take on those parents allowing their children to make decisions for themselves was saying about me, neither back then nor in the years since; not until now.

When I was a kid, decisions or options were a luxury we could rarely afford. Certainly, we never would have had the money to eat at any of the restaurants where I slightly waited tables for a while. When we did dine out, usually a Sunday lunch at Taco Bell, my brothers, sister, Mom, and I would all share one beverage. So, we definitely weren't wasting a waiter's time with our whims of fancy. You were thankful for whatever you got, or you got nothing,

which I don't think is necessarily a terrible mindset to instill in your offspring.

With that context in mind, no wonder this would be an uncomfortable spectacle for me to behold! A toddler thumbing through a menu and ordering *à la carte*? Ridiculous.

And yet, as I said, I was actually blind to all of this self-awareness until very recently.

I arrived at this embarrassingly obvious revelation by thinking about the significance of a seemingly inconsequential anecdote from my preschool years. Maybe "inconsequential" isn't the right word. It just wasn't consequential to me in the way one might immediately assume it to have been.

I had brought it up in a letter to my family about a year prior. Now, as I sat thinking about the deafening silence that had been their unified response to my soul bearing correspondence, this referenced memory moved to the forefront of my mind.

As you may have gathered, we were not well off financially. We lived deep in a narrow valley, accessible

only by a single-lane dirt road, with the only neighbors, if you could call them that, being relatives. My world was very small, and exposure to anyone outside of the family was very limited.

Of the things that we didn't have to worry about choosing for ourselves, the clothes we wore topped the list. This is understandable if you consider there were four rapidly growing children with a negligible or non-existent budget for fashion. So, I'm not complaining about our circumstances back then, just providing context for the first decision I can remember making for myself and the fallout that would result from it.

A cousin had given my sister a garbage bag full of hand-me-down clothes.

I looked inside that thin and noisy black bag. It smelled like our aunt's house, both foreign and yet familiar. From within its mysterious contents, I made a choice and pulled out something for myself to wear; a long blue cotton skirt.

It was covered in tiny white flowers with an elastic waistband that I would wear over my pants and shirt, pulled up to under my armpits so that the bottom edge

was just off the floor, and it was tiered, so that every few inches it was segmented with a band of soft lace.

It was very bohemian; serving homeless hippy flower child.

It had nothing to do with any gender dysphoria or statement of sexual identity; I had no concept of either at the time. So, it wasn't significant in the way you might think it could be for a boy that would grow up to be gay to want to wear a skirt. It



had absolutely no relevance for me as a male and it being an article of clothing for a female. Because of its lack of importance in that realm, I suppose I had assumed it to be entirely meaningless, but that wasn't true.

Rather, only now do I understand that its noteworthiness lies in it being one of the first decisions I had made autonomously; an assertion of a budding identity.

To select an article of clothing and claim it for myself was a novel concept.

I wore it for a while; Weeks? Months? I'm not exactly sure how long, but enough time for it to have been written into the collective family lore. By all accounts, if ever that skirt is mentioned by anyone in the family, it is always paired with a declaration of how much I loved that thing.

I remember trying to comprehend why I couldn't wear it anymore after it suddenly became forbidden and thinking, "but, it's blue, and boys are allowed to wear blue." Because, when it was taken away, despite it being something unique for how much I prized it, and probably not as an unrelated consequence of that very fact, I was only told, "people up the road might see you wearing it and talk about you."

I didn't have the courage to ask the questions I didn't have answers for; Who were those people? What were they going to say about me?

That was the end of the discussion and the end of my blue skirt wearing days. But what it really was, I now recognize, is the beginning of a lonely internal world that I would begin building for my unspeakable thoughts.

I had tested out an identity that was my own and been cut off, without any way to understand why this was not acceptable. I didn't have anyone to talk to about it, or to help me understand, or to share my feelings with. I had tried to assert my individuality and make a decision for myself. I was proud of it. I loved that skirt and that it was mine. But, it was taken away, and I had a sense of having done something wrong or that I was bad.

Now, looking back, having nearly four decades of life since then and knowing what I have felt and experienced, I recognize it is both a beginning to and a demonstrative case study for the vantage point through which I have observed and felt the world; singular, confused, chastened, embarrassed, solitary, without anyone to help me understand my feelings or to empathize with them.

I feel a lot of compassion and sadness for that sweet little guy. That was only the beginning of much more and far worse that he would face alone.

Two summers later when I was sexually assaulted in a public restroom I cemented the lessons I had taken away from the brief time I had owned that flowered garment; that there was no place in the world for anything potentially embarrassing or revealing about myself, and I

didn't speak a word of it to anyone. I took the pain, shame, and embarrassment of that encounter and tried to hide it in that void of wherever that blue cotton part of myself had gone. I suppose you could say I skirted it away?

I hadn't consented to, invited, or deserved that man touching me, but he couldn't have asked for a better accomplice to his crime. It would be 20 years or so before I let another person know what had happened to me for a few brief moments one afternoon when I was eight years old. It didn't feel cathartic when I finally did share it because it wasn't something I had spent a lot of time thinking about or was aware of having any strong feelings about. It was just something that had happened, and that was all.

Having finally told someone else about that incident, it would take even longer before I would come to appreciate the sad reality for that little boy and that he had been correct to think he had no one to hear what he had been through at the time, no one to help him understand or to empathize with his experience.

This was crystalized as the objective reality when I attempted to broach these truths with my mother at

nearly forty years of age. My worst fears had been fully justified as they were now realized in her obstinate refusal to even consider the reality of my experience. I tried to open the topic and was bombarded with rage, accusations, and condemnation.

After a whirlwind of successes and failures, ups and downs, milestones passed in my life, and I had become what could rightfully be labeled a disaster, I overheard one of my brothers speaking with our mom. I think he was trying to convince her to give up on me, or just console her that she had no liability for the mess I had turned out to be.

"He had a good childhood. You raised him right," he said.

But, he never asked me what I might think or feel or have to say on the topic, nor would it occur to him to allow for the possibility of an experience any different from his own. Unfortunately, he has become an arrogant asshole that I have barely heard from or spoken to in over a decade. Without ever having a conversation with me about what my personal experience was or how it affected me, he declares it to have been "good."

And even though he is wrong, for the most part, at least on the surface level, I would almost agree with him. I had believed there was very little, if anything, to complain about during our childhood. I loved my family, and in particular, I was a momma's-boy, adoring and idolizing our hardworking mother. But, I have come to wonder how my living with such a dark and damaged inner world for so many years was totally unnoticed by those closest to me?

I was masking a deep well of conflict and despair and my mother either knew or did not know. To this day I still don't know if the impossible situation I found myself in had been fostered by a mother's heedless indifference to her own child, or the direct machinations of a misguided, even if well intentioned, guardian. I don't know which is true or if I would even prefer one over the other. Either that my mother was so unaware and detached from her own child as to be blissfully ignorant of his tragic and traumatizing situation, or that she did know and reacted by imposing a prison of silence on that child by never acknowledging it or speaking of it to him or allowing him to express it or seek help.

So, if I ever hear from my brother again, I will ask him; "Which of those scenarios do you believe qualifies as 'good'?"

* * *

I have vowed that I will never wait tables again and specifically because I can't stand dealing with the customers that bring their kids.

The indulgent parents that are so eager to nurture a child's sense of self, so willing to hear their tiny voice and ready to make allowance for their feelings and thoughts? Nope. No, thank you. Not on my time, folks.

"I WANT FISH STICKS WITH CHOCOLATE MILK IN A PURPLE BOWL!"

I shift my weight on my feet, trying to hide the fact that I am shaking. I feel the sweat running down my back and I am freezing and nauseous. I want to die.

"What if I have the kitchen do a fried fish sandwich without the bun?" I offer, and they agree to order that.

A short while later, I head to the cooler to make the chocolate milk for the kid.

From inside its icy air I get a text message from my guy,
and he is bringing me a stamp; a wave of relief washes
over me that a small amount of oblivion is on the way.

My mind then returns to the job I'm meant to be doing and
I let out a heavy sigh at the thought of the dramatic scene
I am certain I will have to face first, when the food I hope I
have the strength to carry out, unfortunately, will not be in
a purple bowl.

Chapter Two - **The Human Cannonball**

Although I may not have always had the latitude to select what I wanted to wear or to eat as a kid, the power of choice was far from being a foreign concept.

I had consistently been taught that being gay was a choice and that anyone who would decide to be gay was following after the devil. This was presented as a particularly egregious willful sin because only properly married men and women are allowed to have sex, so if you were to want to have sex before or outside of wedlock that was bad enough. If you wanted the wrong kind? Well, that was unthinkable. Certainly it was unmentionable; so, that was the entirety of the depth of discussion on the subject I ever was offered.

Growing up on a farm your life is dictated by the reproductive desires and activities of all other things, both plant and animal. But this is never acknowledged as being an equally powerful force within ourselves. This

preoccupation that all life is programmed to perform was otherwise shadowed in mystery and presented as a forbidden fruit to be shamefully ignored.

A chicken may only be an egg's way to make another egg, but it would seem that the associated biological urges are a shell of a different color when it comes to humans.

Well, needless to say, many "Christians" are dishonest and/or under-informed about this topic, and it has resulted in disastrous consequences for many people, not just me.

You see, when a little bit of ignorance comes together with a seed of shame, placed deep inside someone, (out of love, mind you), they can germinate and grow into an ugly, deformed, and voracious beast that can rip lives and families apart as it claws its way out and into the world. Because as sex advice columnist Dan Savage succinctly said at a Mindvalley Talk on "Three Things We Get Wrong About Love",

"When we are young we are told that when we grow up one day we will have sex, but what we should realize is that as we grow up, one day, sex will have us. It is stronger than us, older than us, five hundred million years of sexual reproduction has built us by random mutation

and natural selection, and has its own ideas about why we are here and who is in charge."

But, it would be some time before this would become an issue for me.

That shameful mindset divorced from reality about sex and the other pillars of conservative evangelical religion were a central part of our life though, and I was always an eager student that wanted to do well.

We attended religious services three times a week, always having studied in advance, and on Saturday mornings we engaged in evangelical work.

I attended school for the first time at the age of seven. My birthday falling late in August meant that I hadn't technically been old enough to attend the year before, but I would soon be pulled out of kindergarten and placed in first grade, because thanks to all of the Bible reading I had been doing, *The Cat In The Hat* was a breeze.

I had taken to heart what I had been taught within the religious doctrine I was immersed in and so I tried to avoid the other kids at all cost. They didn't believe like us and so they were not acceptable as friends. They were dangerous. I said 1 Cor 15:33 over and over, like a

Catholic rosary, in my mind, *"Do not be misled! Bad associations spoil useful habits."*

My first grade teacher, Mrs. Alderson, who I thought was brilliant and beautiful, saw my standoffishness and tried to intervene.

There was another boy that had trouble making friends, his name was Calvin but he went by his initials C.L. They thought we would be good for each other to partner with. We even looked alike; both of us being thin and pale with heads that were heavy with straight blonde hair. He was very ill though due to the cystic fibrosis that clouded his lungs. So, in addition to the "us vs. them" teaching at odds with that relationship succeeding was the added terror for me of his medical condition that I did not fully understand.

I have mourned the kindness I might have shown him in his very short and painful life, but regrettably I was determined to be faithful. Like Daniel and his Hebrew companions marched into Babylon, I was not going to be corrupted by the unbelieving.

Eventually though, despite my best intentions, my nature would win out as if a portent of future things to come. I was so hungry to be noticed and to be recognized as my

own person that any attention I was shown elicited such a broad and honest smile from me that I was given the nickname of "Smiley" at school.

In time I would eventually find a friend there.

* * *

Back at home, where the outside world felt safely and impossibly far away, with my older sister, younger twin brothers, and cousins next door we had everything we needed and there was never a dull moment.

Whether we were working in the garden, painting the house, picking blackberries, stacking firewood, or taking on any other job, we might have complained a little, but it would be completed before we played. You probably aren't imagining grade school aged children climbing ladders with buckets of paint, without any supervision, and yet that was our life.

The work fell mainly to only the three of us boys in the family and in play we weren't often joined by our older sister either. She was usually inside and busy building up an encyclopedic knowledge of classic cinema. As the next oldest then, and even when our cousins Amanda and

Travis joined us, I often was the one to decide what we were going to do.

Our repertoire of fun activities was never ending; throwing ourselves off of the porch whenever anyone yelled "red alert," riding bicycles, playing in the creek, building a fort in the woods, writing and drawing our own comic books, etc. But, one of the things I was able to get the four of them to do that I doubt they would have otherwise pursued on their own, was putting on . . . Shows? Productions? Usually to a grand audience of our mom, aunt and sister. These took the form of plays, puppet shows and at least once, the odd circus.

Even now I am perplexed by why I, or indeed any of us, thought that we were capable of performing something that could in any legitimate way be called a "circus" as none of us possessed any athleticism or skills that would be found under any scale of big top. And, yet, I will never forget one moment of unparalleled showmanship that I am only thankful didn't kill my cousin in her commitment to what was undoubtedly the greatest show, if not on earth, at least it was for one night only, in our little valley.

Center Ring for that show was a second hand swing set someone had donated to us that had monkey bars, (a

horizontal ladder that you could traverse by hand if you had the upper body strength to support your own weight with one arm while you reached ahead to grab the the next bar with the other), Olympic style rings dangling at the end of chains, and swings of course, but the pièce de résistance was a tall and steep metal slide flanking the end of the monstrosity.

Somehow we also were in possession of a helmet that beneath a clear lacquer was entirely coated in sparking metallic blue glitter. It was like a motorcycle helmet, but for kids, and as to its actual safety or protection value, I have no idea. But it did look quite spectacular and Amanda strapped it on for her act, the grand finale, which we called "The Human Cannonball."

I feel like I should say that while to this day, she tends to be very meek and reserved, she is also very much her own person and always has been. She might have seemed shy or anxious as a kid with large brown, exceptionally expressive eyes, but at the same time she didn't have the slightest reservation or umbrage about wearing her thick dark hair in three ponytails (one shooting from each side of her head and one in the back) or taking her favorite sandwich, onion and mustard between two slices of

bread, as lunch to school regardless of what other kids said or thought.

With the sun just beginning to set, our audience arrived for the performance. Everyone took their places, and I, as the ringmaster, started the show.

After an opening number featuring the entire cast, each kid in turn then did some solo buffoonery, that was to constitute their "act."

When everyone else had gone, Amanda came from our back-stage area, around the corner of the house, sporting the dazzling blue helmet and a blanket cape. With a stoic determination on her little face, she marched with seriousness and purpose to the slide and climbed the ladder to the towering platform. At the top, her face never changing in expression, she raised her arms from her sides to straight above her and stiff as a board threw herself head first down the slide.

It was incredible.

I looked from the slide where she had just taken flight and to the faces of our audience; their jaws agape and eyes wide.

Then a sound like a branded calf rang out. Of course Amanda had gotten hurt, fortunately nothing broken or too serious though.

The moment of greatness and her performance as "The Human Cannonball" would live on in infamy.

* * *

Back at school, no one would ever have thought of me as a ringmaster or as any kind of a performer at all.

I was so silent at an age when other kids can't seem to go for as long as a minute without belching forth an observation, shouting some non sequitur, or yelling out the odd question, that for a short while they even placed me in speech therapy.

Of course, when I was taken to the tiny closet sized room, and sequestered inside with the matronly speech therapist, I would come alive and much to her disappointment, didn't have any lisp or problem with my diction. I just was not speaking to any of those heathens as a matter of faith.

Unfortunately, the apostle Paul had warned that weakening faith is the sin that easily entangles us and both then and now I can't help but get wrapped up with anyone that can make me laugh. And so, one odd boy, who was endlessly hilarious to me, became my elementary school friend.

His name is Chris and he had dark hair and thick glasses. He was much smarter than me and he didn't seem to care that I was in an odd religion that was always an issue; setting me apart as different because I didn't salute the flag or participate in any of the holiday activities that so much of the classroom seemed to center on. And even though we never saw or talked to each other outside of school, he was someone I could call a friend for the next few years.

We would sit close together side by side working on one shared piece of paper making elaborate drawings of underground worlds, populated with vehicles, different chambers and a host of characters. On the playground we would imagine we were werewolves or other monsters and had to stay away from the other kids.

On days when he would miss school, sick or otherwise, I was miserable and unmoored, lost and drifting through the day.

In both fifth and sixth grade we would take home prizes from our school for our Science Fair projects and each time that meant I got to spend a whole day with Chris outside of the classroom while we competed as ambassadors at the county level.

At the Civic Center where a long day was spent waiting for your turn to present your project and then waiting to find out if you had won or lost, we were free, and we made the most of it.

By the time we had lost, both times, my entire body was sore all over, from non stop laughing.

In Junior High we were able to somewhat maintain ties, even participating in a Forensics competition together where we performed a dramatic duo staging of the final scene from Neil Simon's play, "The Odd Couple." But, the transition from our tiny rural elementary school to an urban three story middle school was disruptive. We only had one or two periods together throughout the day each

year, which also meant that there were smaller and disjointed blocks of time in which I had a friend.

He was always doing crazy things just to make me laugh, but I will never forget one particular day in our ninth grade Science class where we were once again seated closely side by side and working together on a shared project when he unintentionally became a slapstick legend.

The classroom contained a grid of tall black tables that were each seated with a pair of heavy wooden chairs. Our teacher was a tiny little woman named Mrs. Neenan, who Chris would famously call Knee-High-Neenan, triggering bubbles of my laughter that I was constantly failing to stifle.

It was during a lab experiment in her class that I accidentally spilled the tiniest little drop of a mild acid we were working with on Chris' jeans, just as Knee-High was teetering by with a five gallon bucket full of hot soapy water that she was going to use to wash down the large slate blackboards at the front of the room. The bucket was ridiculously big for the task, but made even more the spectacle, as it was being bear-hug carried by a four foot tall woman with her glasses fogged by the rising steam.

I said to him, "Oh no, I got that acid on you," just as she was in front of our shared lab table. Without even a second passing, no doubt as images of horribly disfigured and charred victims of much stronger acid splashing flashed in her head, Mrs. Neenan immediately dumped the entire four and a half gallons of hot sudsy water on Chris.

"Oh my god, I can't believe I did that, are you okay?" She cried!

He was soaked, but fine.

I, however, had to be lifted off the ground by my fellow classmates. Although not even a drop of water had gotten on me, I rolled there on the dusty floor struggling to find my breath between the honks of my laughter that could be heard echoing down the school's second floor hallway.

A year after Chris had been christened in the science lab, in a basement on the other side of town, I had my own baptism.

Before I could get baptised there had been three different question and answer sessions with Elders from the

congregation that were meant to ensure you know and understand all of the tenants of faith you are committing to by making a public declaration of your dedication by water baptism.

No one pressured me directly to make that move, but it was assumed that I would and when one of my younger brothers announced he was going to be baptized at the upcoming fall convention, I felt as if I couldn't let him, two years my junior, surpass me in this move towards maturity.

That was despite the private hell I was already internally embroiled in, feeling that I was on a conveyor belt moving me inescapably towards a nuclear meltdown when my orientation would inevitably be outed.

Nevertheless, a month after my thirteenth birthday I took the plunge.

In addition to not celebrating birthdays, or any holidays, we didn't receive much individualized praise or attention, but, the one day that you might be allowed to expect a little shine was on the day of your baptism. I had been told it was the most important day in a person's life. It was an accomplishment after all.

I had no trouble with the Q&A sessions of doctrine and scripture, which I passed with flying colors. I have always loved to perform or be challenged. Of course, being able to provide the expected answers, even in your own words, doesn't necessarily mean a 12 year old kid has a full understanding of what he is doing.

You wouldn't let a kid of that age drive a car, or get a face tattoo, or make any other decision that would have a major impact on the rest of its life. Yet, even though it would be unthinkable to my mom, or any other adult I would imagine, to let a child make any other decision with similar or even lesser seriousness, they disregarded that concern when it came to this one decision, simply because they happened to agree with it and in fact strongly encouraged it, expected it even, all the while maintaining, "It's their decision."

If only I could have put the mental gymnastics necessary for that train of thought into my circus back in my ringmaster days, we might have had a longer run than a single matinee showing.

A child should not be making major life impacting decisions primarily due to the lack of a prefrontal cortex

(PFC), the part of the brain where our personality is established and where decision making occurs, which is not fully developed until about the age of twenty five. Add in a lack of life experience, limited context (social, ethical, moral, etc.), the impossibility of true self-awareness, and it is shocking to me that every adult around me thought it was a great idea for me to make a lifelong commitment to a narrow set of beliefs, even if they personally agreed with them, especially when you understand the all-or-nothing stakes on the line, because after baptism you can be subject to excommunication and shunning that are a common practice and strictly enforced within our denomination, and of course all of this under the auspice of the eternal prospects of your post living condition, if you ascribe to such a thing.

Yet, September 13, 1995 I found myself at the foot of a set of steps, in swimming trunks and a white t-shirt, wearing a towel around my shoulders like a cape and about to get into a small pool of water. I was nervous, embarrassed and anxious, so pretty much my natural state, just turned up to eleven.

My brother had gotten changed faster than me and so he was finished before me. After I had been dunked, dried off, and changed back into my suit and tie, I came out to find

my family had already gone, taking my brother and leaving me to find my own way back to the facility where the rest of the day would be spent listening to three or four hours of preaching.

I was crestfallen and shocked in disbelief over how I had been abandoned, or maybe it was just whiplash from what my expectations had been in contrast to what the lived experience of the whole ceremony had turned out to be. There was no voice from heaven, no doves, no flowers or parade, not even a waiting family to embrace me.

Less than a month into my teenage years and I crawled into the back of a van, driven by a man I barely knew at the time, fortunately without incident, to be eventually reunited with my family who had taken my brother to eat at Wendy's and brought back nothing for me.

Had I gotten baptized for the wrong reasons? Arguably. . . Probably. . . Okay, definitely.

However, despite any conflict or doubt I was hiding, I was at the same time entirely sincere and genuine in my wholehearted belief in the authenticity and veracity of the Bible and doing my best to reconcile the pieces of myself that didn't fit into the framework I had been given. It

would take years of working twelve step recovery programs before I would have the thought that ***I had done the best I could with the circumstances I found myself in;*** which was a major revelation and breakthrough for me at the time. Maybe other people would disagree, but how could they ever understand the pressure and conflict I was dealing with from such a young age and so singularly on my own?

It was like trying to live left-handed with a dominant right hand. It required constant mental vigilance fed by ever present fear.

I never accepted for a moment that I had chosen to be gay. That was so obviously false to me and I would have paid any price or gone to any length to not have been what I so clearly was. But I had no one to talk to about, or to help me with, the increasingly weighty burden I was shouldering alone and had no choice but to mask and conceal.

I had so many questions: Why was I like this? What did it mean? Was it reversible? Should I tell someone? What would happen to me if anyone found out? Can everyone tell if I am or not? Am I showing signs? If I say I like that song, movie, or book will it expose me as a deviant? Did I

laugh at the wrong thing? Did I say what a normal person would say?

I was constantly on high alert for the horrifying threat of revealing myself to actually be what the kids at school had long since intuitively known me to be and had been making a point to almost daily call me out on with slurs and names before I even knew what they meant.

I searched for answers through the library of literature available to me from the faith that condemned me and came up with one chapter in one book that addressed the topic and from those pages of Godly wisdom I found the bizarre warning that masturbation could turn a person gay. That was the complete body of information available to me to help me sort out what I was confronting. It seemed suspicious to me even back then that this same publication elsewhere stated a percentage figure of males that admitted to having masturbated and it was quite high, as you might expect. That math did not add up. Not to mention, I was definitely a card carrying homosexual long before I had any Han Solo lightsaber practice.

When I just now attempted to find that publication online to source the exact number it put forth as the percentage of men who had supposedly played gay-Russian-roulette

by taking other matters into their own hands (see also - test firing the protein torpedo, pre-mixing up some baby batter), it has been updated, modernized in a way I would not have believed possible back then. A book by the same name with entirely different contents now has replaced that source for answers I had been handed as the silver bullet to any question I might have. Of course, it still says being one of the gays is wrong, but avoids commenting on the origin of orientation. Still, it is much more nuanced in a way, ultimately landing on a position that it would take me many years to arrive at on my own, one that acknowledges a gay person as being able to exist separate from gay sexual acts.

Although my orientation has been problematic for me, I do not view it as a burden these days any more than I do my eye color or hair texture, and that is despite it turning aggressively curly on me. I guess once puberty hit I was so gay that even my hair couldn't stay straight.

Who I am attracted to is simply a part of the complex collection of things that make me who I am. My singing voice, appreciation for art and beauty, capacity for emotion and empathy are all, decidedly, quite "gay". But, I value those things about myself. Even as a child I intuited the relationship between these truths about my personality

and their inextricable ties to my orientation. So, when I was instructed that being gay was a choice or nothing more than perverted acts between despicable degenerates, this was confusing to me on the best of days, and a damnable crushing objection to my existence on others.

I knew I was gay, whether or not I was sexually active, and that this was something larger about myself that was authentic and intrinsic. How is a child supposed to make sense of that when the people he looks up to for guidance and approval can't or won't entertain that reality?

I felt certain that should I have ever tried to broach or even reveal the matter of my orientation to my family or anyone within the religious organization that comprised our world, I would encounter punitive retaliation and unflappable total rejection. So, I cocooned myself beneath layers and layers of whitewash, camouflaging and barriers that hid and isolated the person I truly am or should be, inside a Russian nesting doll of fear, anxiety, confusion, despair, shame, and hope. I include hope in my camouflage because I started out believing that if I could unlock the inciting incident or underlying problem that had turned me, I might be able to un-turn. If there had been an on

switch, you just had to locate it and turn it back off, I reasoned.

* * *

Just when I needed a friend the most, I was being cleaved from the one friend I had, by increments in Junior High, and then totally once we made the transition to our massive High School with its sprawling courtyard and the many buildings and floors that made up its campus. Unfortunately, at our High School we never had any classes together and so our relationship was reduced to an occasional happenstance passing in a hall where we could only wave or briefly say hello. I couldn't offer the friendship back to him that he had invested in me, because it was incompatible with the religion that was just a fact of life for me then. "Friendship with the world is enmity with God." - James 4:4

I trudged through the last couple of years of my public education much in the way I had begun; once again the mute loner who never ate lunch with anyone else and only spoke in class. My closest friends were the art teacher Mary Smith, and my senior English teacher Mrs. Hall. They encouraged me to go to college, offering to help me get away from my family and its religion, but I couldn't even

entertain the idea at the time. I was so attached to my family and believed without even a shadow of doubt in the faith I had inherited that I never gave their kind suggestions a second thought.

Finally reaching the platform of graduation, now upon reflection, I see myself alone beneath a spotlight as if a performer. The setting is not unlike a circus, only this time it's me who is cast as the human cannonball. My commitment to my role is so intense, that I don't even hesitate before I leap. My life as an adult is about to begin and I have applied and been accepted to become a full time minister. I am airborne, and for the moment, flying.

Chapter Three: **The Goody Mob**

If I have painted a melodramatic picture of my school years, I should reiterate that for the most part, I was a happy kid. Back then my siblings and I were tight. In fact we would later learn that we had been known collectively as "The Goody Mob," by some of our cousins and in surrounding congregations. That reputation says a lot about how we were perceived, but it isn't an unfitting or unearned description of us as kids either.

We were collectively bright, well spoken, well behaved, overachieving and always together. What had no doubt been born as a slur against us for being weird, is a badge of honor to describe the first two decades of my life. I was a member of The Goody Mob.

The two bedrooms that existed for the four of us kids could each just fit a pair of bunk beds, leaving only a narrow section of floor space available for everything else. As I aged out of being able to share a room with my sister, I was relegated to existing in the high traffic shared space

of the living room. That displacement was bruising, but the real blow came later, on another day, when I came home to discover that the bed I used to sleep in had been tossed out on the creek bank to be burned. Already I was masquerading to disguise the secret shame, pain and confusion I was bottling inside, I had no confidant or advocate to help me deal with any of it, and then without any vestige of tangible evidence of belonging anywhere, nor fitting in, nor safe space of my own, something snapped. I remember the echoing hollowness of my desperate loneliness reaching a deafening crescendo, but I only retreated farther inside my cocoon both terrified of, and longing for, the day a butterfly might emerge.

My despair and horror must have been too much for me to contain, because the bed was dragged back in and set up once again, to serve only as a symbolic representation of my place in the family. A shrine to a piece that didn't fit. A member, yes, but also separate and an uncomfortable part of the whole.

A fish doesn't know that it is wet, and I didn't dwell on my circumstances either back then, although I did worry about the future. And still, I am generally a happy natured person. Even when I didn't have friends at school, I didn't mind going much because I have always enjoyed learning

new things and it doesn't take much to keep me occupied if not entertained. I have never believed that boredom is anything more than evidence of a lazy mind. There are always new things to learn, things to do, or books to read, hobbies to practice, etc. Which unfortunately brings me to another tragic facet of my youth. It is a lot, I know. But, on the positive side, if my mom and dad had gotten along better, I probably never would have learned how to play the piano.

When my dad was drunk and mean, and he and my mom were screaming and fighting, one of the ways I would escape from it was by putting headphones into a tiny toy keyboard, and teaching myself the basics of chord theory and how to sight read sheet music from a book for recorder, the plastic wind instrument they give to fourth graders.

While my mother was, and is, very devout and strict in her faith, my father had been excommunicated, or disfellowshipped, from the congregation sometime close to my birth; a burnt bridge he never attempted to repair. So even though my parents remained together, and we all lived in the same small house, my Dad was not really part of our world because he worked five days a week and in the evenings and weekends our mom and the four of us

kids were busy with study, worship, evangelizing or the like.

In a story that was often retold, it is said that at some point after my brothers had started talking, one of them asked, "Mommy, who is that black man that comes here sometimes?" He was referring to our sandy haired blue eyed father, who as a consequence of doing contract electrical work in the coal mines, would come home from the job with his face literally blackened, coated by a fine layer of coal soot.

Our home place was a single wide trailer with only one bathroom and two small bedrooms, one at each end of its narrow length. But after the twins were born, an additional room was built on to the side of the trailer to be the bedroom of our parents and it was where our dad could be found 90% of the time he was home. Our Dad's work day began extremely early, and so when he would come home ten to twelve hours later, he would shower, eat and then retire to his room for the rest of the evening, sometimes even eating his meal there.

That was the best case scenario description of our home life, but the more common reality was the evenings when our Dad would quickly down a case of beer after a hard

days work, often exposed to the elements, despite sweltering heat or frost biting cold, before coming inside and in an instant everything would be suddenly transformed by intense pandemonium and terrifying fights for an hour or two, while everything else in the world seemed frozen in time, until eventually he would pass out, and then the world would resume spinning once again, as if nothing had even happened.

I saw him as evil. The devil in the flesh. Conversely, I saw my mom as pure and infallible, on par with anything holy or righteous. He; the wicked villain. She; the fairy tale princess who even animals of the forest, recognizing her beauty and charm, were healed by her hands and tamed by her affection. This perspective was accurate in a small way and yet still not a complete or comprehensively objective view. Imagine my surprise to grow up and find myself understanding my father so well, despite never having as much as a single heart to heart, or even one real conversation with him, ever, actually, by virtually becoming a clone of him. More surprisingly still is that I could grow completely detached from the woman who I once had so admired, and who had the strength to keep us afloat on such turbulent waters by tireless work and exemplary faith that never wavered even under indescribable pressures, the woman that managed to

accomplish a superhuman feat in living the way she believed and miraculously produced, from nothing, four complex human beings that have navigated this challenging existence, and she should be celebrated for all she was able to do and provide for us.

Sadly though, she has chipped away at the high regard I once held for her so completely that nearly none of it remains.

It's funny how perspective and context can make such a difference in how we understand what is real or true, and what matters in the end.

My mother had sold us, her children, on a narrative of how our mean and alcoholic father had deceived her as to his wickedness until they had been married, and then, after tricking her to be his bride, he had then suddenly unmasked himself like a Scooby-Doo poltergeist, revealing that he was actually a mean and horrible man, before their honeymoon had even ended.

This narrative was confirmed by all available evidence to a child living inside of that story. And, because it neatly explained our life and situation, and was a justification in my mind for the extremes we experienced, as normal and

acceptable; there was no reason to question it, or think about it too much.

I was deeply affected by their distressing arguments that only very rarely became physically violent, and, I believe my sister was similarly impacted, but somehow our brothers seem to have been less aware of, or otherwise were less traumatized by, it all.

But I began to suspect there was more to the story than she would have had us to believe as I got some life experience under my belt. Even as a child, I would occasionally have to dismiss the seed of a nagging question starting to develop in my mind; Doesn't it take two to argue? Who is stoking the fires of confrontation and violence that affected everything else in our lives?

Could one person be blameless and the other a monstrous abomination when they both engaged in this war and relentlessly subjected us to it?

Was this the will of a God of love for two people to be miserable and to have them then inflict that combative unhappiness upon their children as proscribed by the wisdom of the scriptures, to stay together regardless of the collateral damage?

When our mom had been single she was a shy but beautiful young woman who had plenty of men interested in her, so it hadn't been out of desperation or necessity that she had chosen our father, but desire. Also, if it were true that he had hidden the truth about himself or his nature, at least a portion of the blame fell to her for her haste and imprudence in making her vows to him without fully investigating these matters first, which still lies unclaimed by her down to this day.

So, right from the start, it was true that our Dad drank too much, that our Mom was overworked and not given support or the love she deserved. But, she had a childish view of her situation which also made impeccable sense to a child; it was us versus him, and we were on the good side.

Our Dad was the tenth child out of eleven, and his sister Patty showered us with gifts and experiences we never would have had otherwise. In their large family, their names were only used formally, and each had a nickname that was more commonly how they were identified. After I was given my dad's name on my birth certificate, I also inherited his nickname, which I still go by with most people even now. I don't think there is much substance as

to why it was his nickname, but it was less confusing in our home that my dad went by Terry, and I went by Bug.

I mentioned before that in elementary school I was called "Smiley." Somehow, I have managed to virtually never go by my actual legal name. Later on, during my first stay in long term rehab I would be nicknamed, along with three other guys, "The four horsemen of the apocalypse."

My grandfather on my mom's side of the family was our next door neighbor when I was a kid and he called me Buggalouey until he eventually shortened it and took to calling me Louey, or would it be spelled Louis? Either way, I have been called by several different names, which begs the question, was this a symptom of, or in contribution to, my fractured identity that was both true and a lie, authentic yet manufactured, a chameleon's camouflage and my avatar for interacting with the world.

Unfortunately, it is only by recognizing the man I used to fear and find incomprehensible, reflected back at me not only in the bathroom mirror but also in my own life course and personality that I am able to entertain what his perspective must have been. With the religious environment that had allowed him and my mother to cross paths telling everyone to wait until marriage to allow

yourself to yield to the successful function of the entire history of biological life that precedes us, he had jumped into marriage before his ability to make rational decisions and personality were even settled (that pesky Prefrontal Cortex once again!)

Without forgiving, excusing or accepting how he has ever interacted with me from birth and up through now, I can at least understand it a little. He was a young, attractive, talented, and funny guy who woke up one day married to a woman singularly dedicated to the religion he had been expelled from, with four small kids to provide for. I don't begrudge him having a few beers, even too many, to cope with that reality. Still, there were other options he and his mismatched wife could have, indeed, should have, entertained.

Admittedly this is only my assumption, but I expect both of my parents understood how pregnancies occur and so, they chose to have children, and I will not give either of them much credit for taking care of the basic needs of the humans they created, especially while psychologically and emotionally scaring them at the same time. The past is what it is. It cannot be undone. But, without any acknowledgment of what he did, or any slightest evidence

of regret for it, each day my father lives, he is freshly guilty for the harm he caused.

But, times were different then, and while I might be able to forgive him for his blunders, and the frustrations fueling his cruelty and wrath he directed at us, he has never made any effort to know me or to course correct the relationship we have never had, so I'm fine having nothing to do with him.

Before you feel that maybe I shouldn't be so cold to my father I will relate one small sample of his less than finest moments, of which there were plenty. Once while I was very young, we had somehow come up with a couple of kittens, and as I was holding one of them, he decided we couldn't keep them and so he took it upon himself to kill them with his bare hands and unceremoniously cast their limp pitiful bodies into the creek while I cried in terror and grief.

So, that sucked.

The fact that I have any sympathy for him at all now is just a matter of me understanding that he was dealing with his own distressing situation and that he has more than one dimension to him, as all of us do.

I was the first to leave the nest, which must have come as a shock to my family, considering that they were aggressively ignorant of the person that inhabited the facade of identity they had demanded I present to them. Especially considering that one authentic aspect of my persona was my adoration for and relationship with my mother. I was probably the most unlikely candidate to spread their wings.

My sister and I were both engaged in full-time unpaid field ministry work, but on top of that commitment I also worked secularly part-time, so I could afford a small apartment.

Regrettably, then, once that freedom was obtained I began to seek out information from any source possible in trying to understand the parts of myself that were incompatible with the doctrine that I was trying to instill in other people at the same time.

I had even taken on increasing amounts of responsibility and prestige within the congregation and beyond, often traveling on Sundays to give a 45 minute talk in another congregation, with my hilarious, yet volatile and emotional sister almost always there to support me, before hurrying

back to work at the job that barely paid for me to have a space of my own. I couldn't have achieved any of the clout and opportunities I enjoyed without her working every bit as hard as I did, if not harder, day in and day out, side by side. Although, in retrospect, she was the much more deserving one of us to have received any of the praise or advancements I garnered for our parallel work, she enjoyed a far lesser portion as a woman.

It wasn't easy or always fun, but there were also plenty of times that it was more than enjoyable; in addition to being very rewarding and fulfilling. We were able to be credited hours towards our monthly/yearly commitment on a volunteer construction crew doing vinyl siding, which was always a blast.

One of the many great guys on our crew was actually a distant relative who was also a very talented musician and hilariously funny; TJ Boley. He died tragically young, and I never even found out what had happened, only that, "he had been known to get a little wild and find trouble."

She and I have a different relationship than what she extends to our brothers. While she is very affectionate with them, showering them with hugs and kisses, that kind of interaction would be awkward and bizarre

between us. This might be a result of the fact she had to help care for them since they had arrived as a package deal, identical twins, while I was just two years old and she was only four. As capable as our mother may be, at the end of the day, she only has two hands. Perhaps tellingly, within the family, "the boys," refers only to the pair of them, despite me ostensibly qualifying for inclusion in the category.

When my brothers graduated from High School in the year 2000 one of them was presented with an award for having received straight A's on every report card his entire scholastic run, his twin only missing the same achievement by the shameful stain of having two B's on his otherwise equally pristine record.

After my fall from the ivory pedestal each of us seemed to have under us, both of my brothers would each have their own falls in time. One was excommunicated for having premarital sex with a girl that had befriended us during our "Mob" days, but he went on to marry her, and they seemed to be well matched and very happy together. The other, having rushed into an ill-advised marriage to an unpleasant California girl, used a female friend from another congregation as a tool to provide grounds for the dissolution of that union. He has since gone on to remarry

and become an insufferable asshole, living in Florida, where he is free to be as fake as he wants to be.

They both have managed in the years since to restore their high tower perches, while I have moved farther and farther away from my own. This provides them an exceptional view and safe distance from which they can look down on me from afar and not muddy themselves with the details or complications of my existence other than to gossip or condemn.

I miss the closeness and purity of The Goody Mob, but if they miss me, there is no evidence to suggest it. I wonder if they might have some memento or tribute to the member who once was. An acknowledgment of the fact they have a sibling who they have had next to no contact with for nearly a decade. Something like that unslept in bed that stayed in my sister's room up until after I moved out. I guess maybe I hope they do as pitiful as that may be. There had been space back at home only for the idea of a person that they wanted me to be, and since I wasn't that, of course I had to be the first to leave.

I was gone long before I ever had the means to go.

Chapter Four: **“My-Friend-Patrick-From-New-York”**

For most of my early life, our loving Aunt Patty had been a source of escape from our powder keg home and the constraints of abject poverty. At some point, however, my mother and she had a falling out over something that was never explained to me, and so that avenue had been seared shut. And yet, despite whatever had caused that distance between us, for my high school graduation, she still generously gave me a gift beyond my wildest dreams; a little blue hatchback Chevy Sprint. She even patiently taught me how to drive it with its clutch and manual transmission.

It was an awesome car, and I loved to drive it, but have you ever heard the expression; "what happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object?" Well, unfortunately one spring day, as I was driving to my former high school to pick up my brothers, I learned its literal meaning.

I saw that the Catholic School Bus I had been following had stopped ahead of me, but I became distracted with changing CD's and misjudged my distance.

Well, with my car unstopped, the bus proved quite unmovable.

The front end of my vehicle collapsed like an accordion, and yet not so much as a scratch was suffered by the bus. Although it was full of screaming children, thankfully none of them were hurt, and none of their parents ever hunted me down and sued me for injuring or traumatizing their Catholic kid.

My papaw was able to repair some of the damage done to the little Sprint, and despite the engine thereafter frequently and randomly just shutting off, it was given to a man who lived at the mouth of our holler who put hundreds of additional miles on that poor thing.

Fortunately, just a little further down the paved road from us was a character of a man named Bill Seabolt with prosthetic legs who was known to get cars, fix them up, and resell them. He had a Chevy Celebrity with a flawless maroon interior that a few weeks later I was able to purchase, because on top of the full time ministry work I

was doing I had a part time job processing child support payments at a banking data center.

At the same time that I was going through my first auto drama, I was also doing my small part in an otherwise unimaginably massive undertaking; our little, and mostly elderly, congregation had elected to take on the total renovation of our meeting facilities ourselves, doing all of the demolition work, and razing our existing brick structure to the ground on the East side of Charleston. My family put in a lot of blood, sweat and tears in the weeks it took to totally remove one large building and then lay a new foundation, prepare for a crew to come in, and over the course of one three day weekend quickly construct another one in its place. It was hard work, but we had a great time doing it.

At such an unlikely and tumultuous time, our congregation was also hosting 20 some volunteers coming down from New York, not to help with our construction project, but to provide support in the field ministry of our territory that was much too large for our congregation to manage on its own. It is ironic then that when the New Yorkers arrived, they came in like a wrecking ball.

Their visit would deeply impact me specifically, transforming me and altering my life, and the reverberations of that crash would send rippling waves of consequence spreading out in all directions from around me. Even other people's entire lives have been affected in serious and permanent ways, families created and families destroyed, all traceable back to when I, an immovable object, was placed in line to be hit by an unstoppable force.

In the group of New York missionaries was a guy just a little younger than me named Patrick with movie star good looks, and exuding that ineffable quality that suggests someone was never picked last for a game of dodgeball. He was charismatic, confident, and funny. The first time I laid eyes on him, he was wearing silver wrap around Oakley sunglasses and he had floppy blond hair, parted in the middle.

In retrospect, it seems obvious that I would find him enthralling, but, you cannot overestimate my naivete and how firmly my walls I had constructed to hide behind were fortified against feeling something that would betray myself. I certainly was too shy and sincere to wish for something that I saw as being harmful to another person or that would damage their faith. My private feelings were

so deeply compartmentalized and sequestered that even I, myself, could be oblivious to them, and so I was. But, I was also desperate for a friend, and that was something he and I could both allow him to be.

If I was worried about leaving an impression on him or some of the other visiting guys in the group, that was swiftly laid to rest. Bill Seabolt had a method for refreshing the interiors of the vehicles he resold, and that was by essentially re-dyeing the fabric. But on this hot summer Sunday, when several of the New Yorkers piled into my new ride for its maiden laden voyage, after a few stops, someone noticed something was wrong. Anyone who had been in the back seat of my car had a red baboon-ass, and their white shirts were now crimson caped.

Even though it had been a process Bill had often used before, and never with any trouble, for whatever reason, this time the dye hadn't adhered to the seat, and in fact it never would. I had to keep seat covers on the couch like front and back benches for the remaining life of the car.

Despite being a prankster who got endless fun out of the fart noise he was able to produce with the suction of his prosthesis, Bill felt terrible about the mess. He offered to

pay for the men's clothes that were ruined, but fortunately, everyone just had a laugh about it.

Patrick and I became fast friends. His mom and stepdad had decided, rather than paying for a hotel while in Charleston, their family would camp in tents out in Kanawha State Forest for the entire week of their visit in order to save money. This was barbaric to me, and so despite not only the fact of the situation with my dad making our home unpredictable and not typically receptive to guests, but also despite the fact that I had neither a room nor bed to share, and he would have to camp out in our living room with me, I invited Patrick to stay with us, and he was eager and gracious to accept.

He instantly and seamlessly integrated into our family. He was charming and impossible not to like. I guess he had experienced enough grit in his own life up to that point that he was able to overlook what he surely saw in ours.

Throughout the week, I made it my personal mission to entertain the New Yorkers any moment of free time their visit afforded. There were a few young girls in the group who probably had hopes of finding a husband on their pilgrimage, but I was clueless as to how my serenading

them on the banks of the Kanawha River with my guitar by moonlight might be interpreted by them.

One was particularly smitten with me, but after accepting that I wasn't going to reciprocate her advances, she eventually married a man from her home town only to later learn he was homosexual, I guess she has a type. But, after their divorce, I hear she has since remarried a man actually interested in women and is very happy. Another girl, very pretty in fact, seemed to have decided, under no uncertain terms and without exception, she would marry a Lilly-boy and she didn't appear to mind much which of us it would be, between my brothers or myself. Eventually one of her sisters that hadn't even been part of the missionary visit to West Virginia married one of my cousins, thanks to the strong ties I ultimately forged between their far away fields and our wild mountain valleys, but that marriage ended in disaster. True to the oath I only imagine that she must have made, she would finally nab herself a Lilly-boy several years later, although not from out of my immediate family; she also settled for a cousin. But, I'm glad to say, I hear they are perfectly happy together.

Before the week's end, I was already planning my first trip to visit Patrick in upstate New York and that winter I took

my first airplane ride to a tiny town by one of the finger lakes that he called home.

Back at home in Charleston, my sleeping in the living room meant I was closest to our sole source of heat, a wood burning stove. Many freezing winter nights, I'd be drenched with sweat and unable to rest due to the stifling heat it radiated in order to warm the far corners of our home. But, the first night I spent in Patrick's room, with the windows rattling against the icy air, I lay on the floor at one end of his room, where the sound of my teeth chattering filled the gaps between the haunting wails of blistering gusts of wind that tambourined while finding their way around thin panes of glass moving in heavy wooden frames, and I happily listened to the steady rise and fall of him slowly snoring at the other end.

In the long dark hours of sleepless shivering, it was as if a beastly creature emerged from somewhere inside of me and filled the black empty space of the room as it stretched and growled. It desired Patrick in a way that frightened and embarrassed me. A fight ensued between that base reptilian animal and the specter of aspirational purity as each side demanded that the other be destroyed.

That night, it was uncertain who would be the victor, but by the morning light, the war was over, and the battle had been decisive.

Here was the one person in the world that I could call my friend. I would not wish for him to be burdened by the challenges I was blindly navigating. Never again, for even a moment, would I have any shadow of doubt or indulged desire for him in a carnal way. In a very real sense, he was my brother, and it was not territory that had room or reason for reconsideration.

In a moment of grace, I had been delivered from the beast that could have destroyed the one friendship I had at the time and so desperately needed. Thankfully, I would be able to love him sincerely and deeply, but narrowly, and not risk damaging or complicating our relationship with unwelcome feelings.

There would be many times that his friendship was the sustaining wind in my sails that pushed me forward through rough waters.

We continued to visit each other over the next few years, both in NY and in WV, and I was honored and proud to have him as a friend. I spoke about him constantly,

always prefacing a story he had told me or an experience we had shared with a quick, "You-know-my-friend-Patrick-from-New-York?" It became a source of slight ribbing tossed my way, sometimes answered with an exasperated and exaggerated, "Yes, we all know 'your-friend-Patrick-from-New-York!'"

I am sure I was probably insufferable and could have gotten far worse. Once I became aware of how often I was saying it, I became self-conscious of it. I imagine worse was said behind my back.

At some point, I met up with him and his family in the big apple; NYC. A young man close to my age had moved from West Virginia to serve there at the world headquarters of the religion we all shared in common and he was able to get us special tour access and we took in a Broadway show while we were there too.

Our now mutual friend proposed that the three of us; he, Patrick and I, could take an international trip together. He planned the logistics and daily itinerary for us to maximize every minute we were there, and for two weeks, we took in the sites, shops, and museums of London, Paris, and Edinburgh. I barely managed to afford it on credit cards and my meager earnings, and my mom had been vocally

opposed to my going. But, I am so thankful that I ignored her admonishments and had the experience of a lifetime.

And yet, if I had seemed unmovable or appeared to be standing firm in the path that was the only life I had ever known, nature is truly an unstoppable force and would eventually have its say.

Trying to fix a problem by ignoring it has precisely the opposite effect; it compounds, ever more unwieldy day by day, and it can eventually consume you entirely.

This huge and deeply significant aspect of my authentic self would not be content to be kept hidden away in some unexplored compartment. Yet every moment of my life had been colored by everyone I had ever loved and trusted, to paint a version of the world for me, the only world I knew, that denied the existence of my reality. I had done all I could do to keep my orientation tucked away and out of sight. I didn't have any other option.

From the stress environment of my mother's womb, where she had carried me as I was being shaped through epigenetic hormonally sensitive developmental stages, at the bedside of her own mother, my grandmother, as she cared for her and helplessly stood by as she suffered an

agonizing death from breast cancer; the cards I had been dealt had contained a Joker, a Rook that I couldn't play. No one around me was even willing to acknowledge its existence, much less give me support or advice on how to handle it. So, what was I supposed to do? The adults I had looked up to in my life back then, down to this very day, have yet to confront the problem that they themselves had imposed upon a scared little kid to solve on his own. I fully accepted and embraced the deck I had been dealt and was doing my best to play by the twisted version of rules I had been taught.

An ancient Chinese philosopher had proposed a scenario in which a man from a distant land had come selling implements of war. He presented a shield that he claimed no weapon could breach. Next, he presented a spear that he boasted was so sharp that nothing in existence could ever stop its thrust. When someone spoke up and asked, "What would happen if your indomitable spear was thrust at your unpierceable shield?" The merchant, realizing the impossibility of the paradox, could not respond.

For an unstoppable force to meet an unmovable object, two things have to be assumed; the first being that each participant is a separate entity, and the second is that both

entities are indestructible. Without these two conditions, the thought experiment would have a trivial resolution.

My entire life up to that point I had been attending the same place of worship. Its brick edifice and stonework appointed dais from which I'd been taught had seemed so strong; permanent, unassailable, eternal. I guess I had assumed it would always be there, and yet, once we had decided as a congregation to replace it, shockingly, it had come down and was unceremoniously carried away by little more than the power of my own two hands.



Chapter Five: **Death of a Friend**

The shoe I had dreaded for nearly my entire existence eventually dropped and I was finally “outed” in my seventh year of full time ministry.

I was extremely naive as I had made regrettable ventures into forbidden territory to attempt to understand myself. That quest led me to bad, even dangerous, and damaging sources and circumstances.

Trying to secretly navigate my social and sexual instincts entirely on my own, a necessary consequence of the path my upbringing had forced upon me, was a vulnerability that was exploited by predatory actors and I made every mistake and bad decision imaginable.

My life was confused and self damning because of how deeply I was immersed in the doctrine that otherwise condemned my existence. I only saw two options;

- Either to continue to try and ignore the forces being bottled up inside me, outwardly obvious, yet otherwise unacknowledged, a path that had kept me totally isolated and solitary for most of my life, holding self actualization and fulfillment along with any integrity completely out of my reach,
- Or the one I had taken, which was to fumble ever deeper into contradictory realities, a journey that was frightening, hazardous and increasingly hard to bear; each step a malinformed consequence of the one before it.

There is a saying in twelve step programs; "you are only as sick as your secrets." And yet, my entire worldview and identity were predicated by layers of shame that I was not allowed to have or share.

Contents under pressure will eventually equalize, often in a destructive explosive release.

The first time my life unraveled began on a night that I had been to a Talent Show about 45 minutes away from home. After it had ended, on the drive back home, I received a call that caused my stomach to drop and quickened my heart until it felt like it might explode out of my chest. I had carpooled down with some others, so

from against the back passenger side window, I answered my cell phone.

"Hello?"

"Hi Bug, this is Francis Petty, we need to clear something up that another congregation is upset about. They have a cassette tape of a conversation recorded from a cell phone voicemail that is about some upsetting things, and they say that one of the voices is you. We all listened to it and it's not very clear, I couldn't tell anything from it. So after the meeting tomorrow, if you can stay after, we will meet together and get that taken care of. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Good then. Okay. Goodnight."

If anyone could have seen my face in the dark, I'm sure it would have been colorless and a reflection of the grim despair, panic, and doom that had instantly overwhelmed me. I knew the conversation he had been talking about, when it had happened, what had been said, and who had been called.

I had, up to that point, experienced two semi-consensual adult encounters, but even just one would have been enough to see me disfellowshipped.

In my covert explorations I had traveled to a town about an hour away to have a conversation with an older man; someone whose brain I could pick about their thoughts, feelings and experiences existing as a gay person. The internet was pretty new back then, and so people still did that kind of thing I guess, or at least, it made sense to me at the time. Anyway, that's all that it had been, just a frank conversation, the kind that I needed to have; nothing physical had occurred. But, I had confessed to details of those previous transgressive encounters, which I could only assume were on that recording. Although, I never actually heard this alleged tape, so who knows if it even really existed.

Regardless, as luck would have it, what I did know was that while I had been spilling my guts to this man I barely knew and had just met, my Nokia brick cell phone had butt-dialed a guy that I sometimes played music with, and that much I knew for sure. He said the call had gone to his voicemail and that he recorded the playback onto a tape and took it to his congregation.

The jig was up, but the following day, I denied that the tape could have been me and offered to get my cell phone records or otherwise insisted there must be some other explanation. We made plans to meet again, but I had no intention of ever keeping that uncomfortable appointment.

I walked into my apartment and sat down at my piano and as fast as my hands could write, a song poured out of me ("Coming Home Tonight" Available on all streaming and sales platforms!). I had researched how many over the counter sleeping pills it would take to end my life, so I went to two, or maybe it was three, different stores and bought more than enough to ensure the job would be done.

I stood in my bathroom and popped each of the pills from their individual card backed bubble housings into a glass bowl. One pill overshot the container and landed behind the toilet. I knew it wasn't necessary, so I left it there for it to be found later when they would try to piece together my last moments.

I had always had the absolute hardest time swallowing any pill. I would have to hold one in my mouth, often until it would dissolve with a horrible taste, screaming at myself inside my own head, "JUST SWALLOW IT! YOU

ARE NOT GOING TO CHOKE! YOU WILL BE FINE! JUST SWALLOW IT!" Sometimes this method would work, and I would get it to go down. Many times, it did not, and my mouth and throat would simply not cooperate. But, just in this one moment, I was either so determined, or so outside of myself, that as soon as the last pill dropped into the bowl, I picked up a handful of the blue tablets, threw them back, and swallowed them down. I didn't even pause to consider the amazing stunt I had just accomplished. Hand over hand, eight or 10 pills at a time, I emptied the bowl without any trouble.

I got into my bed. I had ingested a fatal dose of medicine for a man, my height and weight, and chased it down with 19 extra pills, just in case. I was ready to drift off to sleep and never wake up.

What I was not ready for was to be awake as my body would surely fight and fail. But, fight it did, and not long after my head hit my pillow.

The rapid absorption rate of what I had taken meant that there were consequences of such a massive dose almost immediately. My head was swimming. My arms and legs were jerking uncontrollably, and my breathing was similarly out of my control. I managed to shove a hand in

my mouth, to the back of my thickening tongue, but I might not have even needed to, because the swimming sensation in my mind had quickened and I felt nauseous as I seemed to be tumbling violently down an endless waterfall. My stomach contracted over and over even after I had vomited out its contents. The edges of my vision were dark, and the blackness was overtaking me as my body convulsed, and I continued to fall.

I recognize that I am in a hospital, but my mind is slow and I can't hold a thought for more than a second or two at a time before it is lost.

A woman is asking me if I know who the president is. Why does she . . . no, the thought is gone. What were we talking about just now?

A woman is asking me if I know who the president is. This time, I am able to answer, but my mind is still swimming. I try to ask her, "Am I always going to be stupid now?" But, I am not sure if I say the words or not.

A woman is asking me if I know . . . no, she isn't. She is telling me something. What is she saying? ". . . just wants

to come in and talk to you. It's nothing to be concerned about. She just wants to see how you are doing, okay?"

My mom is there in the room, but when another woman enters the room, I think she is asked to step outside for a few minutes.

"Am I always going to be like this? I can't think!"

"No, it will wear off, but if you had taken any more, you definitely would not be with us today."

I don't tell her about the vomited mass of pills that had briefly been in my stomach.

"Why would you want to hurt yourself?"

Before she can even finish the question, I am trying to unburden my soul by confessing that I am gay, but I can't be, and I try to describe the horrible mess I am in. When my fire hydrant of catharsis begins to slow down, she simply states, "But honey, you have to be who you are, whether other people like it or not."

She hasn't heard me, I think in my still swimming mind.

I am released to go home, and it is already late in the day. When I get home I change into my dress clothes, a black suit and tie, and sit on my bed watching the clock until it is time to go to the previously scheduled meeting with the elders from my congregation.

Earlier that day, I had an interview scheduled for a potential new job. My mom said she had called me because she knew I had been upset, and I answered the phone but was incoherent. She rushed to my apartment to find me attempting to get ready for the interview, but I have no memory of it.

When I drive myself to meet with the elders, my head is still swimming. There are three of them, which is typical for this type of situation, but there is someone else there too. A regional overseer has asked to sit in on my judicial matter. Over the next three hours, I am asked repeatedly for every detail of every lurid situation I had ever been exposed to. They asked me questions about my dad, had he ever touched me sexually, had he ever hit me? They asked me what I had ever even just desired or thought about doing.

They read three scriptures and then asked me to leave the room. A few minutes later I was asked to return and they

informed me I would be Publicly Reproved, meaning, they would announce I had been bad, I would lose my status and responsibilities in the congregation, but I would not be totally kicked out.

I went home, still swimming, and still planning to finish the job I had attempted to do, but for the moment, feeling numb and exhausted, I just needed to sleep.

The next day, I remembered something I hadn't even thought about since the moment the rug had been pulled out from under me on the ride home from the talent show. While I had been there, I was introduced to a guy my age named Nick who had just moved to the area from Michigan. He was aggressively attractive and had an enthusiastic and sincere personality that made him instantly likable.

I had committed myself to showing him around Charleston and introducing him to the area.

This was the last bull shit I wanted or needed in my life.

I found the scrap of paper that had his phone number on it and gave him a call to let him know I was tainted goods, I was going to be Publicly Reproved and he didn't need to

feel bad about canceling plans with me. I understood he wouldn't want to be known to associate with me, so he best steer clear of Charleston.

He was a full-time volunteer minister who had asked to be sent to where he might be of the greatest service and had been pointed to eastern Kentucky. He had worked hard to create a landscaping business back in Michigan that had set him up financially to be able to relocate and not worry about money for a while. He wouldn't want and couldn't afford the reputational damage of hanging out with someone freshly exposed as a sinner, but I cynically thought to myself that at least he could probably take advantage of the social collateral he could win with the scoop on the hot gossip I was giving him about my impending salacious fall. "Goody Mob Takes A Hit" was sure to be a newsworthy headline.

"Let me think for a minute," he said. What was there to think about, I wondered to myself but stayed silent on the line.

I was starting to wonder if he was still there when he finally said, "It sounds like you really need a good friend, I'm coming."

When I got off the phone, I had to call New York next and tell my friend Patrick. He was disappointed and seemed annoyed. He didn't ask what had happened or why I had to be disciplined, and I didn't offer up any details. I didn't know that it would become a competition, but round one had gone to Nick, and Patrick was left sitting on a goose egg.

Nick was the only person in my life ever to ask me if I still wanted to hurt myself after finding out what I had attempted. He always seemed to pick up on the details that mattered and to care about what was important to me. He embodied the full depth and breadth of what it could mean to truly be a friend. When someone asked him what his favorite song was, he named one that I had written. When a girl was interested in dating him, he told her if she ever tried to make him choose between her or me, she would lose.

My mind had been determined before, I was absolutely going to kill myself. I had no intentions of carrying on living, but Nick persuaded me that I could. I didn't have any desire to keep volunteering in the door to door ministry either, but because of Nick, I would continue to put in long days and even find some joy in it again.

One Sunday morning, Nick sat beside me at my congregation as we listened to information being presented from the Bible. He put his arm on the back of my chair, and out of the corner of my eye, my mother caught my attention from another row. Her face was red and drawn into an ugly mask of disgust. She was livid.

"Tell him to take his arm down! Right now!" she mouthed.

I just turned my face forward and nuzzled into him to intentionally provoke her. He was not doing it in a romantic way or even consciously. We could have been fucking if he was so inclined, but he was not. He was a totally independent man, beholden to no one, acting only out of his good and open heart, with a position of authority in the congregation, and she had no business telling him what to do. For that matter, I didn't live under her roof, I was an independent man as well. She had no business making a scene and telling me what to do either. But I would begin to recognize that she has a nasty habit of overstepping her boundaries and doesn't seem to consistently apply to herself the Bible teaching she so vigorously extols.

She eventually coaxed me into the back room, scripturally I was her Christian head, and yet she scolded me there,

still cherry faced and steaming, "After the trouble you have been in, why would you let him do that?! What are people going to think? What are people going to say?"

Regardless of what I might have been thinking or feeling, all that mattered is what someone else might see or gossip about; It was the blue skirt all over again.

Apparently she had been listening at the door when I was spilling my guts in the hospital, I had to assume. Did she forget the reason that I had been there? Seemingly she did and in fact must have totally wiped the incident from her mind, because shortly thereafter I was accompanying her on a visit out in the ministry work and a house holder we called upon related a story about someone she cared about attempting suicide, and my own mother said, right in front of me, "Well, I can't even imagine what that is like."



I was dumbfounded.

On another occasion, Nick, the girl that was sweet on him, and I had taken a trip together to Columbus for a day of shopping. He always dressed sharp with a tendency towards flashy vintage styles. While we were there he

momentarily laid his head in my lap, making a joke of it, and stared up at me with his sparkling blue eyes and I brushed my fingers through his soft blond hair. It was just the briefest moment that lasts a lifetime.

She would be the one to call me when the worst thing imaginable happened.

"Bug, Nick is missing," she said, very carefully and deliberately when I answered.

My heart searched the universe for him and when it couldn't find him I knew before she said anything else that he was gone. I was inconsolable.

She was trying to be optimistic, to hold out hope for a miracle. If anyone was ever capable of pulling one off, or ever was deserving of one, it would be Nick.

He had taken two younger guys from the eastern Kentucky area to explore some caves in the Carter area where he had been hired to weld cages in place to create safe habitats for the bats that inhabited them in the public park. The three of them had been inside a low cave that lay beneath the water table when a beaver dam broke, nearly instantly flooding the tight crawl space. One of the

boys and Nick had made it out, but the youngest boy was still in the cave. Nick dove back in to save him. When the boy that had been trapped in the cave emerged the water was still continuing to rise and Nick wasn't behind him.

Nick sacrificed himself to save another life.

Of course he would.

Years later I was sitting at my desk at work and googled his name. I found an article or paper someone had written about cave safety that contained gruesome details about poor Nick's body when the water had receded enough to retrieve it that I wish I had never read. Like so many days before and since, I cried silently, missing him.

We all had eaten dinner together just the Sunday night before at the Barboursville Olive Garden and I had plans to drive down to see him on the following Tuesday. He had asked me if I wanted to go caving with them on Monday, but I had to work.

On Tuesday, instead of the plans Nick and I had made, I sat in the corner of my small apartment, blinded by grief, as it was filled beyond capacity, hour after agonizing hour, as people came by to check on me when they heard that

he had died. I can't even remember who all stopped by that day, only that it was a surprising array of unexpected guests coming and going. Nor do I have any memory of his funeral where over three hundred people came to pay their respects. Later a friend would tell me that on that day she couldn't bear to even look at me, because of how clearly I embodied the pain and grief that had consumed me.

Patrick had met Nick of course on one of his visits to Charleston during the year that he was in my life. When I called Patrick to tell him that Nick had died, the next sentence out of his mouth was, "I got a new job today."

I instantly hung up the phone on him.

I hadn't known that Patrick felt competitive towards Nick and felt slighted by our closeness. Unlike Nick, I hadn't been thoughtful enough to warn him, "If you try to make me choose, you will lose."

I would keep Nick alive in my heart, but as far as I was concerned, Patrick was dead to me.

Song I: Coming Home Tonight

This room looks familiar
But it don't feel the same
Because I am all alone
I'm going crazy
Just a little every day
Or was I ever sane?

But if you'll hold me and tell me everything's alright
If you'll console me, I guess I'm coming home tonight

I said I'm sorry
About a thousand different ways
But how much can that change?
When waiting for the one thing
That's never here today
Has got me just about to break

But if you'll hold me and tell me everything's alright
If you'll console me, I guess I'm coming home tonight

Original bridge:

Tonight I'm taking 50 pills
To try and ease my pain
Thunderbolts and lightning
crash
Can't wash away my
shame

2023 bridge:

They say what doesn't kill
you
Are the things that make
you strong
But there's a fate that's
worse than dying
And that's to spend life all
alone

And after this is over
And all the air is clear
Will you still want me near?
No matter where I'm living
Still one thing remains
I'm not home unless you're there

So if you'll hold me and tell me everything's alright
If you'll console me, I guess I'm coming home tonight

<https://www.reverbNation.com/buggamile/song/3391911>
5-bug-coming-home-tonight-2023

Chapter Six: **A Low Bar**

After Nick was gone, one of my first concerns was for the two boys he had with him on the day of his accident. I knew he would want me to make sure they were okay. I wanted to help alleviate any survivors' guilt they probably would feel. I also just needed to be with the last people to see him alive.

I connected more with the older of the two boys; Steven. They both were still in school and had two very young baby sisters; their mom and step dad weren't much older than me.

One of the first times I stayed overnight at their house, when I got up the next morning I went into the bathroom with my toothbrush and opened up the medicine cabinet and pulled out a tube of what I thought was toothpaste only to discover too late that I had mistakenly grabbed a tube of diaper cream; realizing my blunder after brushing the sticky paste across my teeth and being blasted with the revolting taste.

Beyond the foundational impetus of our shared tragedy, Steven and I went on to become good friends.

The first time he came with me to Charleston, we laughed ourselves delirious prank calling random telephone numbers. He had a talent for it. He would make his voice deep and gruff and always launched into a random scenario about the same unfortunate character:

"Hey, I'm about to pull up in front of your house, and if Bob isn't ready when I get there, you tell him his ass is fired!"

"I need you to tell Bob I'm coming and taking back my scaffolding tonight whether he likes it or not."

"Where is Bob? I'm sick of him dodging my calls. Unless you get him on the phone right now, there's going to be enough trouble to go around for everyone. You included, by God!"

The confused person on the other end would become invested in trying to convince us we had the wrong number, to try and cover for "Bob," or otherwise diffuse the situation. I laughed so hard that tears ran down my

face, which had become common, only this time it wasn't out of grief.

In fact, the only time I can specifically remember crying for joy in my life was when, after nearly a year of living in Guatemala, where he could only call me on the days he hiked for several miles to the top of a nearby mountain to have cell service, I answered a knock at my door to find Steven standing on my porch. I was overwhelmed by the happy surprise, and tears once again fell from my eyes like raindrops to the stoop where his backpack was resting.

Despite his friendship and that of other good guys from within our shared faith, I still had my unresolved desires and need for open expression that required I hold those relationships at a distance and behind a wall of protection so as not to risk my ostracization and total loss of the level of support they were able to provide.

I needed them in my life, but I couldn't let them in too deeply, or I would lose them entirely.

Friends like Casey and Damien, who some might sneer with disgust towards my relationship with, accuse me of sinister motives, given how objectively attractive they are. I can only assert that both then, and now I consider my

Christian friends with the highest of regard and real respect. I never have had untoward intentions or lascivious fantasies about any of them. I only hope they don't feel betrayed by the closeness we shared despite what I can't expect them to understand or approve of that I didn't disclose.

There may be some unconscious truth to my affection for them being facilitated by their being attractive, but I would hope it is understood that my loyalty to them as individuals and their faith vastly overwhelmed any selfish inclinations that might have taken root in my heart, or other organs, and that even now the very thought is foreign and undesirable to me. It never occurred to me then that they might be vulnerable because I never saw them as prey.

My friends I have had through our common religion were all exceptionally attractive, and yet, never, not even for a second did I ever desire them, even while deeply loving them.

Make of it what you will.

I had to channel my desire somewhere, though, I suppose, and so I did what men have been doing for centuries; I put on a new outfit and went downtown to a bar.

My first night out, I packed up my guitar and headed to a place called the Sound Factory where I had seen a sign out front advertising an open mic night where anyone could perform.

When I walked through the door, scared to death, I had never even tasted alcohol before. There were only a handful of people there, and someone was butchering a cover of a Bob Dylan song on the stage.

I sat down on a stool at the bar and when the friendly bartender asked me what I would have, I didn't want to look like the callow green-horn that I was, so I repeated something I had heard ordered on tv before, a vodka-cranberry.

I hadn't thought through what the combination of my drink order ingredients would look like, though, and so when he placed a pink drink in front of me, I was mortified.

"Are you going to play tonight? I can put you on the sign up sheet."

I nodded yes and took a sip of the Barbie blush beverage, expecting it to be much worse than it actually tasted. It didn't taste good, but I didn't spit it out or choke and cough and further embarrass myself.

"Fuck it, I'm done." The guy on stage said loudly and too close to the microphone. No one clapped.

"You're up noob," the bartender said squarely at me. "Let's hear what you got."

Fortunately, I was no stranger to being on a stage, just not one quite like in this setting. Maybe my first sips of vodka had loosened me up. I did three or four of my best songs, and after each song, people clapped and were giving me attention that they hadn't offered the poor guy that had gone before me.

When I came down off the stage the bartender gave me a fresh drink, "On the house," he said, "I didn't expect that, you aren't that bad."

Thanks? I wasn't sure if that was a compliment or an insult. A complisult. But, apparently the bar had been low, and I had cleared it. Now people were coming up and

talking to me, introducing themselves and asking me questions.

One guy was exceptionally short with an oversized head. He had broad shoulders that rode atop of his tiny child size waist and muscular legs. He didn't have a car, and I did, and so I offered to give him a ride and thus a new friendship was born.

He worked out obsessively at the gym and ate only a strict diet except for the one day a week he called his, "Cheat Day," and for that twenty four hour period all bets were off and if something wasn't nailed down or on a high shelf out of his reach, it was at risk of being eaten.

We were an unlikely duo, but we did occasionally make each other laugh and that was good enough for me.

One day he asked me to go pick up a girl with him and he proposed we would all go to dinner at the Southern Kitchen, a favorite spot of ours that was open 24/7 where you could get anything off the menu, day or night.

When we pulled up in front of the girl's house, she descended the stairs as if the whole world had been conjured into existence only for her, and that she knew

this secret, but had decided to allow everyone else to experience it for her amusement.

I was instantly in love. A gay man can't help but love a diva and here was one supreme in the flesh named Shareena Johnson.

When the three of us were seated at a table in the diner, our friend in common that had arranged our meeting said something so obtuse that Shareena said, "Well, I'm not going to sit here and listen to this bull shit." She stood up and said, "nice meeting you," towards me and walked out into the darkening evening.

I was so shocked and surprised and impressed that it took me a few moments to process what had just happened. He was an asshole a lot of the time, but it would never cross my mind to be so bold. She was cool and confident. I wanted to go with her.

"Are you just going to let her leave and not do anything? How is she supposed to get home?"

"If she wants to be like that, what do I care?"

"Well, order me my regular, I'll be back, but I've got to at least give her a ride home." I had stood up to leave, but felt like I needed to say something more. "You know, you really are rude sometimes," I managed to say and then ran out into the night behind Shareena.

I found her a couple of blocks away, walking back in the direction to her home that was much too far a distance for anyone to traipse, much less in the high heels she was rocking. I asked her to get into the car and said I would take her back home.

When I dropped her off I asked if we could try hanging out together again sometime, without our mutual friend, and I was ecstatic when she said, "yes," and gave me her cell number.

I went back to the restaurant and our sour friend had paid for my dinner, a gesture that I understood to be his apology for the situation of our bizarre evening. We talked through our usual list of benign topics. He knew I was gay. He had made it clear from the beginning of our friendship that he was not. But, he did enjoy attention regardless of the source. To be desired can be intoxicating, even if not reciprocated. Despite his sometimes off-putting grouchiness, he wasn't unattractive; with raven black hair,

flawless ivory white skin, and a meticulously sculpted physique that he liked to show off.

With him I could allow myself to test the waters of feelings and thoughts I had to cauterize around my religious male friends. Knowing that he would not welcome advances, and that there would be no risk of me acting on forbidden feelings with him, provided a buffering layer of safety that made their existence permissible.

By the time he left to join the military and I would never see him again, Shareena was already my better friend. One of our last nights together the three of us had taken a trip to hang out with some of his other friends out in Oak Hill. Shareena had decided to stay at the festivities when I was ready to go. Our short wiry friend had thrown back way too much alcohol and I wanted to get him home.

On the way back he was incoherent but never stopped slur mumbling. Suddenly at one point he became urgent and adamant. This he was able to clearly communicate; he needed a bathroom, NOW!

When I finally found a place that was open I had to carry him in my arms like an infant to the facilities. He was a foot and a half shorter than me but as heavy as bricks.

I was angry.

"I love you Bug" he slurred as I strained against his weight and prayed that whatever was about to come out of him, from whichever end it was coming, would hold until I was clear. I was mad enough to kill him.

I sat him on the commode with his pants still up and said, "You've got 10 minutes. If you're not back in the car by then, I'm leaving you here."

I went out to the car and put my head on the steering wheel. It had been a long day and tomorrow while he'd be sleeping it off at his mom's cozy house I'd be up early and going to Sunday meeting in my suit and tie.

Nine minutes later he emerged from the shop, swaying but he had sobered some.

I got out and helped him into the car.

He was still a mess. I was still annoyed. But when he had professed his love for me, as anyone is likely to do when they are that sloppy drunk, what else could I say except the sober truth?

"I love you too."

Chapter Seven: **The Faggot Strikes Back**

When I had hung up on Patrick after he had been so callously cold and dismissive of Nick's death, I wanted nothing to do with him ever again.

He broke the silence that had stretched between us nearly two years later, with the last thing I would have ever expected; to ask me to be the best man at his wedding.

My initial response was to say no and that I didn't think it would be appropriate but then he had said the things I needed to hear. He had been terrible. He was jealous of Nick and didn't know how to deal with it. He had felt competitive with him and felt he came up short. He was sorry. He wished he had been mature enough to be supportive. That I had been the most influential person in his life and that I meant the most to him.

It still felt weird, but if it was what he wanted, then I would agree to be there. If he hadn't said all of those things; if he had said anything more or less, I don't think I

would have even considered it. Still, at the end of the call, after I had hung up, I furiously paced my apartment like a caged lion asking myself, "What in the hell just happened?"

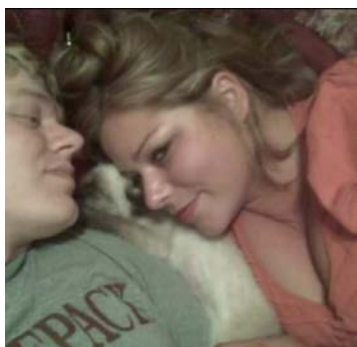
Just like the first cold night I had spent on the floor of his bedroom, Patrick had rend me in two. The ugly beast that had once coveted him looked back at me once again.

"Unbelievable," it spat. "You are really disgusting, you know that? Poor you, having a friend like him, and you just turned your back on him so easily? Just wrote him off after everything you said he meant to you and all the time he spent with you?! You never deserved a friend in the first place. Who do you think you are? You are nothing and nobody. If he knew the truth about you, he would probably vomit. Be thankful he will even speak to you."

This time, there wasn't a battle. It was right.

Patrick wanted me to get to know his fiance before the wedding so he came to Charleston with her, her sister, and a friend they called Taco to chaperone. They were beautiful and lovely girls.

My brother Matthew and I drove up for the wedding. He was between marriages himself at that time and kept me company on the long journey. The whole thing went by in a blur. I just remember feeling weak and embarrassed the whole time.



The only time I ever felt okay again after Nick died was whenever I was with Shareena. She and I talked every single day. Most days, we would just keep the conversation going all throughout the day.

She was working at a small book publisher's office out of the University of Charleston, and I was working from home as a client liaison for Ticketmaster, which afforded us time to take lunches together, and any down time she had, like waiting on the bus for instance, she would give me a call to pass the time. Even if I was busy or it wasn't the best time to talk, I would be glad to see her number and couldn't wait to hear what was on her mind.

We never had a dull moment. We made every day an event and every event an occasion. We would dress on a theme just to go walk around Big Lots for two hours. She had a very quiet boyfriend, but he mostly was eclipsed by the larger than life shenanigans that she and I would deliver as a matter of course anywhere we happened to go.



Her boyfriend had some ties to the owner of a bar on Capital Street, the nightlife hub of Charleston, called the Blue Parrot, so we wound up there on most nights that we went out and the three of us would shoot a few games of pool. Tom, the owner, was always kind to me, and the bartender, Connie, was a ray of sunshine.

The Blue Parrot was our home, so it was particularly upsetting when one evening they were packed to capacity for a costume ball, and someone started picking on me there. Shareena had on a pale blue bubble skirt ball gown

and icicle crown that defied gravity, and I had an impeccable remake of David Bowie's outfit from the movie "The Labyrinth."

Some jerk I had never seen before kept throwing pennies at me.

Bizarre. But, I tried to just ignore it.

At one point, there was going to be a judging of the costumes, and the host asked for the guys who were dressed up to come to the stage area. I headed that direction,



but that same guy who had been donating his Abraham Lincolns to my head got right up to my face and said something nasty about me being a faggot and not qualifying as a man.

I left the stage area and found Shareena by the bar. I was upset, but no matter where we went or who was there, she was obviously the coolest person in the room by far, and as long as she approved of me, it didn't matter what

anyone else thought or said or did. She gave me confidence I never had otherwise.

I was fighting back embarrassed and angry tears when I told her what had happened.

There had been a full pitcher of beer sitting on the bar all night that someone must have bought and forgotten about or otherwise abandoned. I regained my composure and said, "I'd like to smash that pitcher of beer upside that guy's head."

"I think you should."

That was all it took to cement the idea into a course of action. Anything that Shareena thought was a good idea didn't need any more thought from me.

I picked the pitcher up and walked straight back up to the stage, and WHAM! I smacked that asshole right in the side of the face with the top of the container as hard as I could, dumping its contents on him.

The instant that it made contact against his skull, my sanity returned.

"*Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit,*" I thought. "What have I done?"

My feet never stopped walking. I tried to stay steady and confident but was straining against the urge to run. I walked to the back of the bar and sat the empty pitcher and a \$5.00 bill on the counter, grabbed Shareena, and we walked out into the street.

Someone followed us. It was a different guy than the one I had pitcher-blasted. Apparently, he was in one of the bands playing that night.

"Hey, you got beer on my equipment!" he yelled.

I spun around, "And? You gonna hit me for it?"

I have no idea why I said that. It certainly wasn't a response any of us were expecting.

He stammered and shifted his weight back and forth on his feet. "No. But you could say you're sorry."

"I'm sorry." I said flatly and spun back around, gripping Shareena's hand for strength. We speed walked out of there and the rest of the way back to my car.

I felt how I imagine it must feel to jump from an airplane; exuberant, terrified, and grateful that I had cheated death and not been pulverized.

The worst part was having to go back the next day and apologize to Connie and Tom. They didn't deserve me acting a mess in their place of business. I should have told them the guy was picking on me, and they would have handled it.

I have to admit, though, it did feel good to give that guy a sore ear.

He must have had some personal issues that he was uncomfortable seeing reflected back at himself in me. Or maybe he just hated David Bowie or had been traumatized as a kid by The Labyrinth.

As far as I know, we never saw that jerk again, but I can't really be certain. Despite that night being deeply seared into my memory, when I try to remember his face, he is wearing a mask of the beast Patrick had twice now drawn out from within me.

Chapter Eight: **Winning**

Two years after Nick's death I self-released a compact disk entitled "Songs From A Green Guitar." It contained original songs that I had written on my emerald Sammick electric-acoustic, and the one that had poured out of me at the piano on the night that I had tried to end my life.

One of the songs on the disk had been the song Nick had said was his favorite; "Hold On." It's a song I had written from a feeling of helplessness, though I'm not sure it comes across that way. The first and third chorus say:

Hold on
Focus on tomorrow
Don't let go
I have strength for you to borrow
Hold on

And the second says:

Hold on
Tighten up your grip
Don't let go
I will catch you if you slip

Hold on

I had found a singing partner, Jessica, among my Ticketmaster co-workers; stunningly beautiful both inside and out, and with a powerful and rich voice that she had learned to masterfully control by years of singing gospel



music with her father's traveling band.

For a few years, with friends like her, and of course Shareena, I had found the acceptance and support I desperately needed. Still, I struggled with confidence though and the battle within that was back to being unaddressed and unresolved, continued to be a constant

obstacle to my self actualization. I couldn't even entertain the thought that I might be attractive. I had such a distorted self image that at 6' tall and 130 lbs, I believed I was disgustingly obese.

I couldn't separate myself from the congregation and family that I trusted and believed were righteous. I had been traumatically dragged out of the closet, humiliated, and then shoved back inside it with the door slammed shut. At the same time, I had to steal the strength and unconditional love that I desperately needed from those relationships that I had to keep secret and totally compartmentalized away because they were against the rules.

It was often preached from the platform and in the literature of our religion that to lead a double life was wrong and doomed to failure, but what else could I do? If I turned my back on my upbringing and path to God, how could I be happy? But, how could I deny myself the secret life that was allowing me to be authentic, without the constant stress of being on high alert with my guard up and finding the validation and affirmation everyone needs?

I was torn between two paths, each mutually exclusive of the other, each demanding a sacrifice I couldn't make, but

each holding keys to necessary sustenance for my survival.

Being unwilling to move definitively in either direction, I did my best to stay motionless in the center.

Besides, even if it was wrong and exhausting to have two separate lives, damn was I having fun.

In fact, I can't think of a single moment that Shareena and I have ever been together that hasn't been fun.

In my Chevy Celebrity, along with the seat covers, I had upgraded the radio and installed a cd player. One day as Shareena flipped through my massive book of disks, she stopped and pointed at one, asking, "Who is this?"

It was a cd I had burned and labeled in black magic marker, "**#1 Diva.**"

"That's Whitney Houston, of course," I answered.

"Boy, you're not wrong," she said and slid it into the dashboard. We drove around the rest of the night just singing the hits at top volume.

We invented low-carb stakeouts, where you go out people stalking, but you're only looking for the meat. Also, we might go through Wendy's and order a hamburger with no bun on the way.

Her mom made me my first birthday cake that I'd ever had and it was in the shape of a golden trophy. We liked to make random things competitive and winning a trophy was a big deal. Her boyfriend liked to play bar trivia, always signing us up under the team name "My Dixie Wrecked," (say it out loud until you get it) and a few times we took away some pretty good prizes.

We were never serious about anything though. Anywhere we went, regardless of if anyone else was there or not, we made our own fun.

For example, one day, in an attempt to impress Shareena, I approached a random stranger in K-Mart and challenged her to a hula-hoop competition, declaring that whoever went the longest would win an Icee bought by the loser.

I should have been suspicious when the stranger readily accepted the challenge.

When my hula-hoop crashed to the ground moments later and she was still gracefully keeping hers aloft with her gyrating hips, I just bolted for the door.

In the car Shareena said, "You are a mess, you know you would have been collecting on that Icee if you had won!"

"Absolutely I would have!" I confirmed.

And we both howled laughing.

Probably the competition we were most serious about though was the annual hot pepper eating contest at the West Virginia Italian Heritage Festival.

The first year that we attended we arrived way too early in our excitement to participate.

As we walked around the surrounding area to kill time we happened upon a person on a motorized scooter who looked like they needed some help. I thought I would be a good Samaritan and asked if I could give them a hand.

This was a mistake.

I couldn't understand what exactly the problem was that was keeping them immobilized. The rider became annoyed, and then irate, over my inept fumbling and inability to understand the muffled commands that were being slung at me in escalating hostility.

By the time I finally realized that I needed only to unplug the scooter from an extension cord, the rider called me a "moron," and sped off.

Shareena's sister and brother-in-law arrived right on time to join us for the competition.

We were all seated at a long table with around twenty other competitors and a Styrofoam container was placed in front of each of us. At the sound of a starting pistol you could open your container to find eight different varieties of the hottest peppers they could source. One was extremely tiny, maybe half the size of my smallest finger, but one looked to be about the size of a large banana, and the rest covered the gamut in between. Each participant had their own judge, who would give you another identical container if you could eat the bright red, green and yellow contents of the first, until ten minutes elapsed and whoever had eaten the most would be declared the winner.

I love spicy food, usually the hotter the better. But, nothing I had ever eaten before prepared me for the heat that was unleashed in my mouth by those peppers. Shareena had a good strategy which was to chew as little as possible and just swallow down as much as she could. She was in her second box when the time ended, but I had never made it out of the first one. Her brother-in-law actually got second place and won a medal on a ribbon you could wear around your neck, which we were extremely covetous over, and a huge basket of pepper related prizes.

All of us had huge swollen red lips and watery eyes for most of the rest of the day. Shareena vomited the peppers from her stomach onto the grass and it looked like someone had made a colorful coarsely chopped pico de gallo.

But, we had come to win and the day wasn't over yet.

There was a tricycle race that anyone could sign up for and the grand prize was an adult men's mongoose mountain bike. There were a limited number of tricycles, so we each had to sign up for different heats, and it should be noted that they were also adult sized, but once

the races actually began it became clear that all of the other contestants were in the single digit age range.

We smoked the competition in each of our preliminary races, resulting in tears and temper tantrums from the losers. But those children needed to know, we hadn't come to make friends.

The starting line at the final race was me, Shareena, her brother-in-law, and a confident boy who might have been around 10 years old. As I have mentioned before, I've never been particularly athletic or a contender in any physical competition, but this race I was determined to win. I had a fire in my stomach, you might say.

Seriously, I needed a Prilosec or some tums.

Once the race began I pumped the pedals and leaned forward into the wind. I heard a crash behind me, but kept my eyes fixed forward. Only after sailing across the finish line did I



look back to see Shareena and her brother-in-law had somehow managed to wreck into each other and our

young competition slowly approaching a disappointed second place.

At the end of the day we loaded up my first prize mountain bike in the rear seat of my car and we headed back to Charleston. When we got into town it was dark and as we waited at a stop light in an empty intersection, Shareena and I witnessed a man on a motorized mobility scooter drive off the edge of an elevated sidewalk, dumping him into the street and laying his wheelchair on its side.

It couldn't possibly have been the same scooter or rider from our encounter earlier that day, but that thought did cross my mind so I said as much out loud to Shareena and she had been thinking the same thing! Should we get involved in this situation after my earlier attempt to be helpful had gone so poorly? I pulled off to the side of the road and Shareena and I both jumped out and sprinted to the body sprawled in the road.

Wishing I could really help, even when I don't know how, was the reason why I had written "Hold On." It had been my reaction to a suicide I had read about in the news paper. I think the positive urging of the chorus sticks out to

people, but the last verse exposes my feelings of inadequacy and fear:

Maybe it's not me you're lacking
Maybe I can't help
I can feel the same wind blowing
And I'm holding on myself

I righted the scooter and it took Shareena and I both to get the rider back into the seat. They smelled terrible; like piss, alcohol and spoiled garbage. Without even so much as a "thank you," the unfortunate traveler hit the power and with a *hummmmm* continued on their journey into the night.

The synchronicity of the two riders needing assistance in one day and both having unsatisfying resolutions felt like it should, or at least could, have some kind of message or meaning to convey; but if there was a lesson I was supposed to learn, I'm afraid I'm none the wiser for it.

But, looking back, I was winning in so many ways that I just didn't understand or appreciate at the time. It wasn't that I was ungrateful for anything I had, but I had no idea how much someone could stand to lose yet, and that was even after experiencing serious grief and the hit my

reputation and sense of belonging within my family and congregation had suffered.

My life was being handicapped by my sexual orientation. I felt that I had no option but to hide, and even after it had been explosively revealed, I was still trying to ignore. Like a needle stuck in a groove on a record that keeps playing the same phrase over and over again, I was stuck fixating on what made me different by trying to pretend there was nothing there.

So, no matter how much I might have been succeeding in any other realm, the golden prize of finding a partner, enjoying intimacy, or having that kind of love, overshadowed it all.

It's like trying not to think of a pink elephant while carrying one on your back.

I believe I was in a situation without much, if any, chance of succeeding long term, and yet, as Shareena and I raced back to my car with my new bike still in the back seat, having been our uniquely bizarre champions of the people, we were laughing again and at least for the day, I was undeniably a winner.



Song II: Hold On

When the Autumn wind is blowing
And fading peaceful seems
Don't give up, resist the calling
Some trees are evergreen

And if you're hopes are moving downward
And nothing looks the same
These events are not related
And you are not to blame

Hold On
Focus on tomorrow
Don't let go
I have strength for you to borrow
Hold On

If being you mean being lonely
And especially in a crowd
At least up here I'm with you wholly
There's nothing on the ground

But maybe it's not me you're lacking
And maybe I can't help
I can feel the same winds blowing
And I'm holding on myself

Hold on
Tighten up your grip
Don't let go
I will catch you if you slip
Hold On

Hold On
Focus on tomorrow
Don't let go
I have strength for you to borrow
Hold On

<https://www.reverbNation.com/buggamile/song/2547039>

1-hold-on

Chapter Nine: **Super Costumes**

I have always loved superheroes, comic books, and in particular, the Justice League, by way of the Super Friends, was my first obsession. My pantheon of the universe's protectors would expand during my childhood to include Spider-Man, Daredevil, the X-Men, Avengers and even Guardians of the Galaxy long before there was such a thing as the Marvel Cinematic Universe. So, when I saw an ad one day reading:

**Have you ever wanted to
be a SuperHero?**

Are you a male approx.

6' tall and 140 lbs?

We have the dream
job for you!

I couldn't dial the number fast enough!

One of the Toby McGuire Spider-Man movies was about to come out, I can't remember which one, and a company

called Marvel Appearances was holding promotional events at locations across the country to hype the release.

I matched the physical description for the costume and the interview, where I had to channel Spider-Man and answer questions like; "Who is Aunt Mae?" was really easy.

I booked the gig!

A few days later, I received an instructional DVD in the mail, which was unintentionally hilarious. It covered the need for a dancer's belt, to smash your junk into acceptable obscurity under the costume, how to handle overly amorous adults (all depicted as female, btw) and the need to crouch down whenever kids approached you and to preemptively ask for a high-five, lest they come in for a hug and their little faces smash into your . . . dancer's belt.

The company was extremely fussy about protecting the costume, which, to be fair, was a really awesome getup. I would receive it only the night before my gig, and it had to be immediately sealed up afterward to be returned to the company. They were crazily overprotective of that thing. Of course, upon its eagerly awaited arrival, Shareena and I immediately hit the town with me in it.

What had they been worried about?

If you've never worn a spandex bodysuit in public, I'm afraid I can't really recommend it. Even with my brand new dancers belt on, it felt uncomfortably like being naked. Maybe that's your thing, but it wasn't mine. The next day was even worse as I stood in a Walmart's toy section under the fluorescent lights. I found myself stationed beside a long, white plastic table with a sparse selection of Spider-Man themed items. It was awkwardly placed in the main aisle way, conspicuously devoid of any fans eagerly awaiting their opportunity to meet their friendly neighborhood web slinger. The table seemed to mirror my own feelings of self-conscious embarrassment at our shared nakedness and obtuse placement.

But then, the reactions of the few kids that happened, by chance, to encounter Spider-Man in the flesh while shopping was an incredible experience. Some could barely contain their excitement, a few were terrified, and a couple wanted to fight me, but all of them shared an unquestioned conviction that I truly was the one and only Spider-Man.

I'm not sure if whoever said, "The clothes do not make the man," actually knew what they were talking about. For those kids, having the costume meant that I was a



superhero.

I probably had underestimated the power of appearances, even though I had grown up enamored with the Justice League and the iconic mantles of Superman, Wonder

Woman, Batman and the rest, who all lead parallel mundane public lives that were separated from their earth saving hero roles by nothing more than a wardrobe change.

My two personas were unexpectedly once again called before a tribunal, only this time for reasons still not exactly clear to me.

Allow me to acknowledge that what follows, like everything I have written, while accurate to the best of my memory, is only my interpretation of events and speculation about my personal experience from my own limited perspective and should not be viewed as anything other than that. Even if you are sympathetic to my account, you should know I still respect the men that were taking the lead in the congregation and believe them to be well intentioned, even if I disagree with how things transpired.

I surmise that word of me being downtown at night had been whispered around, and although there wasn't anything in particular that I had done that was specifically wrong, I think there had been some who disagreed with

not disfellowshipping me at the previous opportunity and so this time it wasn't really about anything new, I was given the punishment they thought I ought to have received before; on the flimsy, ambiguous and subjective charge of "Loose Conduct".

An announcement was made from the platform one Thursday night to the assembled congregation that I was no longer a member. I had attended the meeting up until that point, but once the announcement was made, I got up from my seat and walked out the back door with tears streaming down my face.

From that moment, no one would be allowed to socialize with me or have any unnecessary contact, lest they too be excommunicated.

It was upsetting, painful, and embarrassing but not nearly as shattering or devastating as it would have been at the previous time it could have happened in my life. In the intervening years, I had found acceptance and support outside of the congregation, and although the distance it forced between me and my family was rough, I was not cut off from everyone I cared about. In fact, if I was being punished for having friends outside the congregation, they

had ironically forced me to lean all the more heavily upon those relationships.

No man is an island. Did they really expect me to live for months without any human conversation or engagement? The punishment of total isolation is reserved in our society for only the worst of the worst criminals, and here it had been meted out to me for the crime of the authentic expression of my personhood, which they had forbidden and denied me the opportunity to know or inhabit. I had not had sex or drank alcohol to excess or done anything scripturally damning and still I was cast out. Meanwhile, multiple women, each weighing easily in excess of 300 lbs, remained within the cozy confines of the congregation, never being called to task for the clearly damnable black and white sin of gluttony. I didn't have even the shadow of a doubt in the existence of God or that he was present in the congregation, and yet it didn't seem fair.

If I was going to be punished for having done nothing, then I was going to do the sinning to deserve it.

Shareena and her boyfriend moved to Cincinnati so that he could further his education. Even though this meant I got to see her less, the Ticketmaster home office I worked out of was also in Cincinnati, and so I was often there, which was a good situation. She would also regularly ride the train back to Charleston for visits, so we had very little trouble staying in touch and on track as besties.

Together, she and I had been described as "the shiniest, happiest people in Charleston," and so we enjoyed an ever widening circle of friends and acquaintances.

Sometimes, we would meet up with a gaggle of unique individuals, I don't think it was ever a formally planned event, for what we called "The Loving Cup." Usually it happened around a street busker named Adrian as he played his accordion on Capitol Street not far from The Blue Parrot and other popular nightlife spots and a tin cup would be passed around with a strong mixture of whatever beverages happened to be on hand. Here, I rubbed elbows with genuine and open people; characters that had been villainized and parodied within the fear mongering propaganda that had constructed my worldview.

Shareena and I would also regularly dine at the Rio Grande Mexican restaurant downtown, where as many as 30 people might join us. But, I think the nights that no one else showed up were probably some of the best times. It was an era in my life that I felt loved and supported.

Even now, years later, I admire and think often about those folks; Nick Shelton, Joe Kormanik, Jeff Cross, Joe Hamsher, Linda and Johnny Compton, Carla Wallace, Carla and Jimmy Hunt, Bobby and his sister Ginnie, Dave Roberts, Casi Null, Raj, Trista Searls, Double-espresso man Kevin, two-eggs-on-the-plate George, and many others, some I will talk about in more detail later, but too many to mention all by name. My apologies to the ones I should have named and failed to by oversight.

I also attached myself to the most beautifully talented visual artist; Jamie Ferguson. I was captivated by his paintings and quirky brilliant mind and decided we had to be friends. He was a homebody, and he had a cartoonishly large dog named Earl, which was his constant companion there. I am more of a cat person myself; I've never been a fan of any dog, but, despite Earl's terrifying size, I would visit Jamie as often as I could. We would play guitar together, talk over any imaginable topic, and just hang out

in the most inert idiomatic sense of the phrase, and I enjoyed every minute of it.

He is classically handsome and naturally I loved him beyond the boundaries of how a hetero friend might, certainly more than he wanted I recognized, but my insistence that he reluctantly give me periodic awkward hugs was as far as that ever progressed, and he is an extremely kind, sympathetic and honorable man. I am fortunate to have had his friendship back then, and I am proud to report that he is still a friend down to this present day.

Before Shareena relocated, we had joined a gym together, which was fun in theory, I suppose. It had gotten me into that Spider-man costume, maybe, but I have never enjoyed lifting heavy things. I always heard about people hating to work out at first, but then eventually coming to love it, with some people even getting addicted to it. Why couldn't that have been my dependence!? For me, it never got any easier, and oftentimes, the attempt made me violently nauseous and weak. That was even with the guidance of a personal trainer, Travis, who I helped put through Med School. I say that jokingly, but it was certainly a luxury I could never afford these days. And, he became another good friend and someone I could confide

in. He and his girlfriend even came and saw me at a showcase gig that was pretty important to me, so needless to say, I thought a lot of him then, and still do. He continues to be someone I look up to and think is as close to perfection in every way that a human could possibly be. I'm sure he has flaws, but I couldn't tell you any. He is brilliant, empathetic, close with his family, hard working, and a triple black belt in Shaolin Kung Fu. I made the most of our sessions together. He was my personal trainer, therapist, life coach, etc.; he probably left our hour sessions more exhausted than me on some days. And there were plenty of times we worked out together that I wasn't paying him to spend time with me. He is truly one in a million.

Back then, I was making decent money, and I loved the work I was doing. I was pretty good at programming events on the esoteric DOS based host system the company had been built on and managing relationships with the clients; Box Office Managers, Promoters, etc. I was able to fly around the country and support other offices and large projects as needed, which was exciting.

The expanding revelation that people outside of the congregation, the ones I had been told were wicked, or otherwise worthy of damnation, weren't the one

dimensional villains they had been portrayed to be, only drove a deeper wedge between the two lives I was inhabiting. Nonetheless, my faith in the veracity and authority of teaching at odds with more and more of my reality remained firmly fixed; unmoved.

The owner of the gym I was a member of eventually kind of flaked on the business. I think she was going through a divorce at the time. But just before it would be closed down for good, Travis had graduated med school and would be moving to Florida to start his career anyway. I had actually gone to the gym on my lunch break to see my trainer and friend for one of our last sessions when I got a call to come to the Ticketmaster call center in Charleston. When I arrived and was told to go to the conference room, my boss from Cincinnati was sitting there, and the national Human Resources manager was already on speaker phone. The company was doing some heavy restructuring, and lots of people were downsized out of a job that day.

I can't imagine that anyone took being let go any harder than me. I was totally blindsided and processed it as a personal rejection and a crisis of identity. I think I went through all five stages of grief in the course of that

meeting; denial, anger, bargaining, sloppy bawling crying (that was my fourth stage anyway), and finally acceptance

It was bad enough that Travis was moving away, and now I was suddenly unemployed. Could the day get any worse!?

Of course it could.

Shareena's dad, who was already somewhat frail, had to be rushed to the hospital that very evening in an ambulance, and his prognosis was not good.

* * *

With respect to all of the actresses who have portrayed Lois Lane on the big or small screens, for me, Margot Kidder is the untouchable best and by a large margin at that. In regards to why Lois never recognizes that Clark Kent is just Superman wearing a pair of glasses, she had an answer that surprised and really impressed me. She said that Lois is essentially two different people when she is with Clark versus when she is with Superman. With Clark, she projects confidence as the more seasoned and experienced reporter. With Superman, she becomes nervous and vulnerable. She can't see them as the same

person because she herself is so different depending upon which image Kal-el is presenting.

Although I had two different personas I inhabited, neither was false or insincere. Several months after being disfellowshipped, I would eventually refocus my efforts and once again qualify to be accepted back as a member of our congregation.

With less transformational effort than a change of my clothes, the people around me saw very different things. I didn't have to act or be someone who wasn't me per se. Just be careful not to present the parts that would challenge expectations.

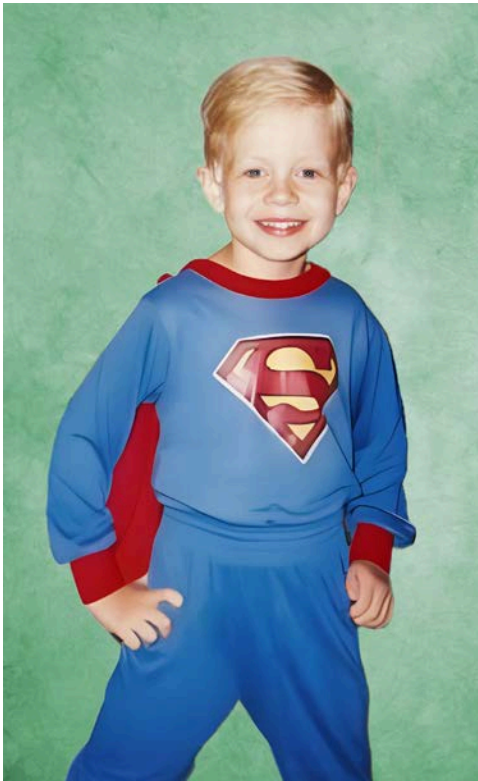
When Clark was at work at the Daily Planet, he still had on his red and blue costume, just hidden beneath his civilian clothes. Sure, it might have been uncomfortable or a constant unseen consideration no one else was aware of being managed, but it was necessary, wasn't it?

I could relate.

The experience of being Spider-Man for a day had been truly unique, and I'm glad that I did it. A few years later, the company called me up out of the blue and asked if I

would still fit in the costume and if I'd be interested in another gig, but once was enough for me. I passed on the chance to don the mantle a second time.

With the change in my job I would soon find myself struggling to maintain, not two, but an exhausting **three** lives; one for a very demanding full-time career, one containing my faith and family, and the one that I chose for myself, and felt most whole in, the one in which Shareena existed.



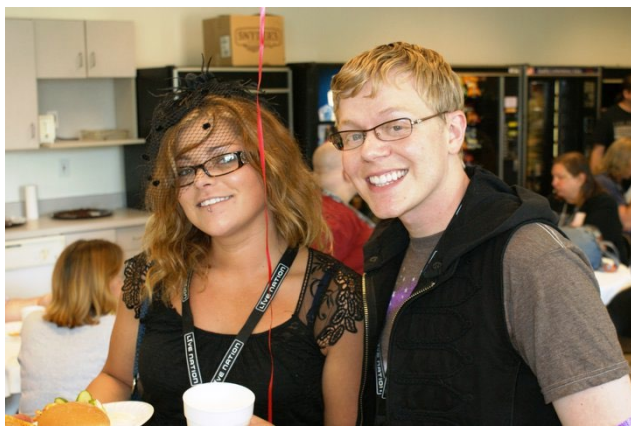
Chapter 10: **Rejection**

It wasn't uncommon for guys to confess their love for Shareena. I would tease her that anyone fortunate enough to be in her orbit would inescapably fall towards that inevitable event, in the same way a blackhole steadily draws all matter towards its center. She would insist I was wrong, but her position was regularly undermined by the ever growing list of spaghettified men, crushed by the weight of her rejection.

She and I had been planning to fly to Las Vegas and get married. We even had already bought the airplane tickets and booked a hotel room. But, after her dad's sharp decline, she

moved back to

Charleston, effectively ending her relationship with her longtime boyfriend, to



be with her family, and we had to cancel our trip. Don't think too hard about why she and I getting married wouldn't have broken them up, but her moving back did - it made sense at the time. Who knows if we actually would have done it anyway? I would have. Luckily, we were able to get refunded on everything because of the circumstances.

After I had been let go by Ticketmaster, I had no idea what I was going to do for work. Fortunately, just three days later, I received an unexpected call and was asked to apply for a different position within the company; Assistant Consumer Support Manager. They were

emphatic that my being offered the position was not a foregone conclusion, and that I would be evaluated the same as any other candidate. But following an interview and a writing assessment I was offered the position and although I had to return my severance, I was even able to retain my tenure.

Our department handled the complaints that went beyond the realm of standard customer service; legal complaints, the Better Business Bureau, Attorney's General, corporate, media, and the like, as well as processing any other physical mail and handling any losses the company had to take.

The manager I had been hired under moved on to other opportunities just a few short months later and in short order I found myself in a very respectable and impressive position, not even yet out of my 20's. Some of my team I had inherited but others I had been able to interview and make hiring decisions as we took on even more responsibility with the realm of social media being added to our purview.

Shareena's dad ended up being placed into a care facility, where he would remain for a few more unexpected years, her mom never missing a day traveling to be by his side. I

was glad to have her back in Charleston, but I believe she was somewhat restless in her newly single status and felt returning to her childhood bedroom had been a step backwards in her life. Before long, she had me join her for lunch downtown to meet someone from her past who had resurfaced.

A scrawny emo looking guy wearing an oversized white dress shirt with intentionally-messy unnaturally-black hair and eyes rimmed with similarly obsidian cosmetic liner joined us at a table. Coco Chanel famously said “Before you leave the house, look in the mirror and remove one accessory,” but in this guy's case if he had passed by a dozen mirrors, removing an accessory each time, he still could have been described as, “tackily over-crapped up.”

I will refer to him as Bachelor number one, as he would become the next man to have the unenviable position of third wheel in the relationship I depended on the most.

Shareena got an apartment about a block away from the house I was renting by then and for a while it was Bachelor number one's home as well.

Bachelor number two, who would eventually replace Bachelor number one after some messy overlap, was

someone I was even less fond of. We had encountered #2 on many occasions over the years, and he had the rude and insecure practice of always maneuvering to put his body in between Sareena and me, keeping his back to me in a dance that I just rolled my eyes at. If he wanted to make an ass of himself I was happy to cede the room for his buffoonery. I had no fear of losing Shareena at the time, so he just came off as pathetic and pitiable to me.

When his persistence finally eroded Shareena's resistance, he was able to leverage a stronger foothold in pushing me away. Unfortunately, I didn't help matters either. Shareena was dealing with a stressful situation as Thing #1 and Thing #2 were constantly pulling stunts to outdo the other in hellacious hijinks that she was trying to navigate. I wasn't able to, or maybe just wasn't willing to, be a supportive friend for her while these guys kept causing her trouble. I was unsympathetic and cold in my selfish opinion that she was far too good for either of them and shouldn't be tolerant of either of their messes.

In retrospect, I wish I would have been there for her more when she was in a vulnerable state and being hurt by these boys that she had feelings for. I didn't have the experience or maturity to understand that emotional ties aren't always logical or developed in your own best self-

interests. I didn't think that maybe I was jealous, because I wasn't attracted to girls.

Of course there were still unforgettable moments that Shareena and I would manage to share despite the increasing weight of each of our separate lives.

The second time we had gone to compete in the Hot Pepper Eating contest we had taken along two of our good mutual friends and a female pet project we had briefly taken on, trying to mold her in our image before deciding she was hopelessly devoid of personality and bereft of fun.

We did have a great time and everyone, except Too-Plane-Jane of course, burned our mouths off trying to score a prize, but regrettably to no avail. That year we came back home empty handed.



Our two friends that had joined us were Will Harrison and Joe Hamshur.

The first time I met Will he had already broken his back in Thailand after falling several stories from a building he had been scaling in an intoxicated attempt to reach the balcony of the apartment he had locked himself out of and been confined to a wheelchair. His mobility impairment had not diminished his outsized charisma or goofy grinned ginger haired beauty. His intellect was intimidating and between him and Jamie, both certifiable geniuses, our many late night conversations continued to challenge and expand my worldview. But if I had a crush on Jamie, I was full-on crazy about Will.

When I was first introduced to Joe, holding court and telling war stories from his environmental activism on the back patio of the Empty Glass, a local dive and music venue, he had long silky brown hair and boy band looks. He also suffers from a rare congenital condition that manifested at the time with a noticeable limp when he walked.

For a short while after being disfellowshipped I was feeling obstinate and defiant. Shareena and I had gotten matching tattoos and one night I even agreed to venture

into a strip club. Shareera, Joe, Will, and I had been out together when someone proposed the idea. I was the designated driver so they loaded up into my car and we headed to the seedy Jefferson Strip to find a venue.

After we paid the doorman at the bar Will and Joe picked out for us, he disappeared around a corner and into the back and yelled, "Showtime ladies! We got a cripple, a gimp, a fag and a chick."

Rude.

But, he wasn't wrong.

I can't claim with 100% certainty that those were the exact words the doorman had yelled, but if not, it was something to that effect. What I definitely remember is that it was both keenly attentive or perceptive and also highly offensive or reductionary.

While the first scrawny girl awkwardly "performed" on stage in front of Will and Joe looking like baby birds in the nest, I was too uncomfortable to watch. Besides, behind the bar was a fascinating menu that held my attention. There, arranged by price in ascending order, was a gigantic array of purchasables, all neatly hand written in

chalk. At the top of the board, for only 99 cents, was a listing for RAMEN NOODLES.

Who is coming to a nudie bar and eating ramen?!? I was enthralled.

At the other end of the list, for the price of \$450.00 was "Hot Tub." My mind was racing trying to take in everything on the boards. Many price points were cryptic and I couldn't guess what they might represent.

When the second girl came to the stage, she stole my attention. She was dark skinned and not only was she a real dancer, despite her plump rubenesque size, she was an acrobatic gymnast who put on a show that was well worth the price of admission.

After the second dancer left the stage, I was ready to go. Not only had I seen enough, I'd seen more than I had the nerve for. Since I was the transportation, Shareena had exited the bar with me and Will and Joe eventually reluctantly followed.

Sometimes I would teasingly make a pass at Joe. He is a free spirit and always has been very good to me. He flatly

rejected me every time, but he is a good sport about it, "you only miss 100% of the shots you don't take," he says.

Shareena and I both loved Will, but in different ways. He could totally disarm and melt us equally, though, despite any situation or circumstance, by launching into Willie Nelson's, "Always On My Mind." He would begin, "Maybe I didn't love you," and we'd both be twittering with laughter, "quite as often as I should have.. . "

At one point, he was living on the tenth floor of an office building downtown. The cleanliness of his rented space, or extreme lack of attention in that regard, would get so out of hand that on more than one occasion Shareena and I would pack up trash bags, gloves, and all manner of cleaning supplies, and rescue him from the half eaten meals, trash, and filth he'd somehow manage to accumulate; partially due to his paraplegic condition, partially due to his absent-minded brilliant intellect, and in no small measure due to the depression that threatened to overwhelm him.

After one night's deep clean rescue, Will and Shareena were battling each other, playing an already vintage NBA Jams. They were being playfully competitive to the repeated phrases of encouragement from the game; "**He's**

heating up! He's heating up! He's on fire!" Nothing else in the world mattered just then. Shareena squealed with delight. Will was singing. I was laughing so hard that I couldn't catch my breath and only gasped in loud, embarrassing honks between stretches of silence in which my body vibrated.

I wish I could be back in that moment. I wish it could last forever.

I was exhausted, though, and fell asleep on the floor while they continued to play.

Shareena woke me up when it was time to take her home. On the elevator ride down to the street she told me that while I was asleep Will had confessed his love for her, tried to kiss her, and she had turned away his advances that all three of us knew I would have given my left arm to receive.

I wouldn't find any satisfaction in saying, "I told you so," so what could I say? I hated being right. It was oddly sad and upsetting to me, but I didn't even know why exactly. These two beautiful people who I deeply loved and had felt so close to earlier that evening suddenly felt distant and unfamiliar to me. Will didn't want me, of course he

wanted Shareena. Shareena didn't want Will. At the time, she wanted that Bachelor #2 guy. The one who had always been determined to come between us and shut me out. I thought I only wanted Will, but hadn't I been guilty of falling through that same powerful singularity that Shareena still insisted didn't exist?



Song III: Eye of the Beholder

I open my eyes, what do I see
It's so hard to be objective
When everything is so subjective
And everything is in the eye of the Beholder

So I open my eyes and I see you
Well it's like a veil that lifts
Or a paradigm that shifts
And truthfully, well I think it's time I've told you

That you are my everything
You're the fire that makes me sing
All the passion and heat that my love could bring
You are my everything

So I open my eyes but scared to see
Or that I won't see past the scratches
On my rose colored glasses
And that maybe I prefer the hazy view

So I close my eyes but you're still there
And even if you walk away
Maybe it's better that way
It's a long way down from the pedestal I've made you

But you are my everything
You're the fire that makes me sing
All the passion and heat that my love could bring
You are my everything

So I open my eyes, no one's there
And it's so hard to be objective
when everything is so subjective
and everything is in the Eye of the Beholder

<https://www.reverbNation.com/buggamile/song/3393365>
3-bug-eye-of-the-beholder-2023

Chapter 11: **Drugs**

I came downtown for the specific purpose of picking up Will to take him to the laundromat with me. We both needed to wash clothes, and it would give us a chance to hang out, which I always enjoyed. There was never a time that he was around that I didn't admire his handsome features or not feel attracted to his witty uniqueness. Nonetheless, him being in a wheelchair did complicate things occasionally. On this particular day, as he was getting into my car, there was trouble, and he got drenched in urine.

I had been around cannabis before this occasion, I had timidly half-heartedly tasted it even, but Will was pretty upset and probably somewhat embarrassed, so as he was sitting on the sidewalk and I was trying to clean his chair, he asked me to sit with him and hit a bowl before he went back inside to change his clothes, and so I ripped one with him.

Naturally, I was down to do whatever Will suggested, and I wanted to help us move past this momentary unpleasantness. The mess had been contained to himself, and we would just add his soiled clothes to the wash. It wasn't a big deal to me. He hadn't intentionally or maliciously or even carelessly pissed himself trying to get into my car. I wanted to assure him everything was fine. But, I also recognized it as a reminder of the permanent situation that he was contending with since his fall in Thailand that had impacted his life so profoundly, and he was having a moment. His charismatic shield was down, and I wanted to be with him in his vulnerable state to comfort him.

When he left to go inside and change, I sat in the front seat of my car and waited. He was taking forever! I kept watching for him to come out of his building. But just as I was trying to figure out how long he had actually been gone, it hit me; I realized that I was not just high, I was most severely way too high in the extreme. Higher than a giraffe's taint in a hot air balloon high. I opened my door and immediately projectile vomited.

I closed the door back and leaned my head on the headrest. The leaves in the tree overhanging my car started unnaturally cascading with flashing gold sparkles,

and now Will was at the passenger side window ready to go.

I was in no state to be driving and told Will as much, but my car was a manual transmission, so there was no way he could drive. We only had to travel eight blocks, so Will was confident that we would be fine.

I gripped the steering wheel like I was holding on for dear life and pulled out.

After a few minutes, Will says, "Buggler, you are going less than 10 miles an hour! Give it some gas, man!"

For the next twenty minutes I had no idea where we were or where the laundromat was, but mercifully it somehow materialized right in front of us suddenly and I pulled in, parking across three spaces in the lot.

It was laundry time!

I was seeing less and less of Shareena. We never hung out with Bachelor #2 as a threesome or even in a group setting. I didn't approve of him, and he wasn't my biggest

fan either, but she had moved into a space above a garage with him. I was finally able to come over for a visit one day while he was at work. The space was large and open, but the bathroom needed some work; its walls were exposed raw and rough gray cinder blocks.

I made her come with me to pick out some supplies that would be my housewarming gifts and for the next two days we worked together in that tiny room, first fixing the floor with vinyl tiles and then applying layer after layer after layer of bright pink paint to the thirsty walls.

Something had shifted, though. There was a tension or awkwardness that had taken root in our relationship. It's only in retrospect that I can recognize this as having been a turning point and start to reckon with my feelings and actions that were involved. At the time, I was only aware of feeling off and just flying by the seat of my pants through the stresses of my career and faith and family.

Whenever we would get together again after that point, it would still be fun, but I think I lost the confidence that I was her guy and she was my girl. Maybe I was unreasonably and unfairly dependent on her. Maybe I had created the distance between us and was projecting my personal issues onto what we had shared. I know in the

end both of us got hurt and each of us might have felt let down, but ultimately I would bear the greater portion of blame; having taken a nuclear bomb scorched-earth approach to everything in my life.

Will and I played a set together at a restaurant his mom had actually once owned but had already sold by then. Our chemistry had been tight, the musical conversation between us flowing naturally.

When we got back to his place, Will was pumped, still feeling the rush of a gig that had gone well.

"Buggler, you really get me off, man. That was awesome." He was smiling wide and looking at me intently.



"Thanks for doing it with me. You know how I feel about you. I really appreciate it. It was a good time."

I wasn't sure if it was just me or had an awkwardness crept into the room?

"Actually," he said, "I've been thinking about maybe trying some things with you."

He was sitting very close to me, and there was electric tension crackling in the air. I leaned forward, closing the distance between us and kissed his lips, but he pulled away.

He tugged at my belt, but I was confused and tensed up.

"You are sweet, Buggler," he said as he backed away a little. "Probably too sweet for me."

The door had closed on whatever might have gone on between us that night, but I didn't understand what he was saying or what had even happened, really. I felt overwhelmingly embarrassed. It would be a long time before I could unpack any of it.

I believe that he was curious about the technical and pragmatic function of physical intimacy with another guy. I was too mired in an idealized emotional and romantic fantasy narrative. He was looking at a puzzle to solve, and I was looking for happily ever after.

Later on, once he had returned to Bangkok, he would be able to test those waters and establish for himself that his capacity for physical intimacy wasn't confined to a gender binary. But, by then, it was too late for us. He said I should come to Thailand, but I was too consumed with addiction by then to consider international travel.

But on that night at his place in Charleston, once the atmosphere had shifted, he spoke up again. "You can't leave right now, or things will be weird between us. Let's go for a walk and talk so that our relationship isn't damaged."

Will had brilliant insight into the psychology of the moment, and he was right. Our friendship was closer, if anything. But in the next few days, he would announce he was returning to Thailand, and along with that news, he included a statement that both hurt and angered me.

"There is nothing for me here anymore, Buggler. I've got to go back and pick up from where I left off before I fell."

I took it personally and thought it was rude and dismissive, not only of me, but also of Jamie and other people that I knew had considered him a friend.

"Nothing for you here?" I thought. "Well, if we mean nothing to you, then I will be nothing to you!"

I didn't say goodbye or go to see him off.

We would eventually talk it out, though, and he would message me frequently. But, I was so strung out by then that it is painful for me to go back and reread what I now know would be our last conversations. Months of dialogue, grotesquely heavy with gaps in which my silence now speaks volumes and his open loneliness cuts me like a knife.

Seven days into my first stint with long-term treatment at Recovery Point of Huntington, I would log on to Facebook during a lunch break and receive the news that he had passed away.

My downward spiral might have been slow at first, but it was observable, even by me, and I was trying to remedy it by grasping onto any hand-hold available, which only made things worse.

I drove up to see Patrick in NY, and when I was saying my goodbyes at the end of the visit, I suggested that maybe I could come back the following weekend. When that was brushed off as the insane idea that it rightly was, I searched for something else to hold on to.

I had long made it my practice to go home to see my mom and sister at least once a week. My brothers would go long stretches of time without so much as a call, but I never went more than a day or two without checking in.

My mom had wanted a new chicken coop and pen, so I had been over digging post holes and cementing in treated 4x4's and stretching out coiled wire fencing between them. I was physically run down, and my mom checked my blood pressure, and it was dangerously high. Several different times, I would check my blood pressure, and it was consistently way over the acceptable range.

I had a regular doctor at the time, and she placed me on a blood pressure medication; lisinopril. After testing, she determined my hypertension was stress related and wrote me a note to take a medical leave of absence from work.

I had been so on edge and emotionally fraught that on many of our lunches together, my singing partner and dear friend Jessica who had also climbed the corporate ladder at Ticketmaster in another department, would be subjected to me breaking down in tears. She was always supportive and had a quick wit and easy sense of humor, but was powerless to fix the existential reckoning I was way overdue confronting.

As I continued to grasp at any distraction that might serve as a life preserver in my sea of issues, someone I had felt protective of and enjoyed spending time with told me that he was sick but if I would buy him a pill he needed for \$80.00, then he would feel better and be able to hang out. More and more, the price of his attention or company would become that I first got him well.

This had presented the idea of an experience to me that I had not yet investigated. I knew someone else that had traveled the same dark roads, and so I called him up and told him I wanted to try it. He said, "I can get you some.

I'm not going to let you shoot it. You'll be wasting your money if you don't shoot it, but I won't let you."

I snorted a small amount of the fine powder he placed in front of me the way he had told me to, but if I was supposed to feel something, it was underwhelming and indeterminate.

The next day, I called back and told him I wanted to try it again. He repeated his conditions word for word from the day before; "I can get you some. I'm not going to let you shoot it. You'll be wasting your money if you don't shoot it, but I won't let you."

"It's my money. I'm an adult. I want to shoot it."

"Fine," he said, "come on over."

I was nervous as I observed him perform the ritual of preparing two syringes, one for me and one for himself. When it was ready, I didn't know how to do it. He had to inject me as I squeezed my eyes tightly shut.

An incredible relief suddenly washed through my body at a level I couldn't have imagined possible. It was as if I had tensed a set of muscles way back in my early childhood

days to hide my confusion and shame over the issue of the blue flowered skirt, a tightening fist that had only become more and more oppressive with each successive experience that validated and reinforced the anxiety I was carrying there; compounding throughout my entire life, never being released. I hadn't even known I was clenched so tightly inside, and yet, undeniably, that knot had been there. Now, it was relaxed for the very first time in a warm glowing bliss. Surely, this is the feeling I had expected at my baptism. The heavens were opened up, and the angels were singing.

At the beginning of many Narcotics Anonymous meetings, one of the standard readings states, "Remember, we didn't become addicted in one day, so easy does it!" This is patently false for me.

As I felt the relief settle over me, in my mind I declared a thought, more an observation than a vow or oath, with the literal words, "I will do anything it takes to feel this way, and I will never stop."

Chapter 12: **Coping Mechanisms**

As a child of the late 80s and early 90s, I had been subjected to the D.A.R.E. program, the "Just Say No!" movement, and the frying egg, "This is your brain on drugs," ad campaign. All of that messaging had a consistent foundational core idea to disseminate that could be summarized as, "Drugs are bad, mmmkay?"

Why had they lied to us?

Everyone has coping mechanisms; each having a higher or lower efficacy, and each demanding a greater or lesser price be paid. Some people eat too much, some might gamble, others will run up massive debt in retail therapy, still others smoke, and so on. Whatever indulgence a person might use to help ease them from one day to the next, you can bet someone else judges and looks down on them for giving into such debauchery while excusing and justifying their own means to the same end.

But if your crutch for dealing with your life is available at a low cost to you, let's say biting your nails for instance, well, it could prove insufficient for soothing over any serious stress or real problems. Like any other exchange in a transactional marketplace; *you get what you pay for.*

I guarantee, any situation that might be vexing you, you will find no pacifier more powerful in setting it totally aside, and instantly at that, than a shot of heroin.

Drugs are bad? Take it from someone who has tried them all; They will exceed your expectations.

But, and I realize this is a Sir Mix-a-lot oversized clause, they are expensive!

And I'm not just talking about dollars and cents here, although that too is a factor. If there is anything at all you value in your life or about yourself, it will be lost to you, paid as due for your appeasement; this too, I can promise you. *You have to pay for what you get.*

Looking back, I am heavily burdened with feelings of guilt and shame at the things I did and the state that I allowed myself to be in around people I loved and respected, but

at the time I was totally numbed against such thoughts or emotions.

My team at work were all outstanding individuals that I could count on to operate at a high level, performing skilled work that required both sharp minds and high emotional intelligence for unequivalent pay.

One of the team members I had been able to promote to Assistant Manager status, and beyond that, he was the closest and longest friendship I had ever experienced with another gay person.

Even the one person in our group that I had occasional personality friction with, I could be confident in the quality of his work without any reservations. I would like to think that I had been a good team leader, but it was just as likely a fortunate confluence of the best people that I happened to have the privilege of working alongside.

All thirteen of us shared one large sequestered office together, and my desk sat at the end of the room, not unlike the way a teacher might be positioned relative to their classroom.

They were understandably concerned as I started acting erratic, nodding off at my desk and suddenly being a poor representative of the excellence they were achieving.

My finances were depleted, and yet I still needed more of the drugs that made it possible not to care about reality going on around me, so I debased myself further to get what I wanted.

I was terminated at the beginning of August, just shy of my 34th birthday and thirteen years into a career that I had once loved and felt pride in, but now it barely registered as an event worth noting as it crashed down in flames around me. Ticketmaster was so good to me that they generously allowed me to continue to use my company phone and be paid through the end of the month.

Falling into the world of heroin use had introduced me to a whole new social circle, not that there was any socializing or entertaining going on, but rather a web or network of individuals connected by a shared interest in the common goal of anesthetization.

A couple I knew from that category had come to stay at my place one night, having lost or been thrown out of any

other space they might have shared. The three of us had piled into my car and gone to Krogers, just over two blocks away, but as I pulled onto my street returning home, a cop turned on his lights behind me.

Although I was already parked in my usual spot, he arrested me for driving while intoxicated, not while under the influence, but specifically for alcohol intoxication on a ticket where he also noted that my blood alcohol content breathalyzer score was 0.00%.

Being taken to jail was miserable. I was thrown into an overcrowded holding cell, terrified and soon to be dope-sick. The next day, when I was taken to a tiny room to virtually appear before a judge on a screen mounted high on the wall, he said, "I understand your mother is coming to get you."

Great. The last person I wanted to face.

She had called my phone early that morning and, being unable to reach me, I would learn, she drove to my place, found my guests, threw them out, and then went to the courthouse.

It would become a point of contention for her that would resurface any time she unleashed her anger towards me thereafter. *"How do you think I felt when I came to your apartment that morning and your **friends**,"* this word she dramatically over emphasizes with disgust, *"were there!"*

I must have heard that thirty times before I finally began to recognize it as evidence of her narcissism; her insistence on the weight of her feelings about a situation she had forced herself onto and should not by any consideration have been made about her. How adamantly she repeatedly demanded I be admonished by her experience while never once concerning herself with mine.

She didn't even have any right to toss out anyone from a place I rented, and she had no claim to, regardless of the virtue of their presence. But at the time, I was still blinded by what I mistook for love, a twisted and destructive loyalty to that which judged and condemned me.

My arrest would prompt another judicial tribunal within the congregation.

In the solemn back room of our otherwise empty and dark meeting place I answered all of their questions as

honestly as I could about my substance use and their other areas of interest beneath the buzzing glow of harsh fluorescent lights.

This time, they asked me to leave the room for a much longer time than either of my two previous experiences, and when I was finally summoned back inside, they informed me I was going to be disfellowshipped again.

One of the men said this was because I had failed to rid myself of all the paraphernalia of drug use. At the time I was moved by this evident display of God's involvement in the matter, but in the years since I have figured out that my mother had probably taken the occasion as an opportunity to illegally get inside my apartment and search the place, communicating her findings to the men on my committee.

I was spinning in a vortex of their distorted opinions, trapped there by the sincerity of my trust and belief, where my own existence was being undermined and denounced. I still didn't have a way out, but at least I had found a highly effective, even if costly, way of coping with the situation.

Chapter 13: **The Four Horsemen**

I lost my apartment, car, dignity, humanity, and I even lost my life, having woken up in the emergency room or the backs of ambulances multiple times and been told I wasn't breathing when I'd arrived.

None of it made any difference to me.

As I had observed only a few months earlier, I would go to any length and pay any price for the opioid induced relief I'd found. Nothing was going to alter that.

I had been to therapists, psychologists, and psychiatrists; I was well aware of and even able to articulate that the state of my being trapped between a life in which I was free to be myself and the life I was fully convinced that God and my family wanted for me out of wisdom and love was the untenable crux of my anxiety, depression and now addiction.

The parameters of that quandary were immovable.

Sure, I recognized I could decide to turn my back on one path or the other; I knew that power, and therefore, the problem was within my sway. But I refused to budge.

All of the advice I'd received from those trained professionals was to abandon the religious doctrine that conflicted with my reality and in particular they would focus on my mother as being an unhealthy figure I needed to oppose. Many times, I would then come out of their offices to her patiently waiting, having brought me there out of her concern and effort to help.

"What did they say?" She might ask, or, "How did it go?"

I didn't know how to answer. I didn't know what to do.

The only solution I'd unexpectedly discovered to the conflicting interests and stress of resisting the persistent urge to self actualize was oblivion. Why would I stop taking advantage of my means to escape?

Even when I finally yielded to the pressure and pragmatic need to go to a detox and then to inpatient treatment, I still had the unanswered question of who I was going to be. Knowing now that I could opt out of the whole mess was too tempting of an option to abandon.

An addiction residence and recovery facility called Riverside, located in the seedy Jefferson strip, where I had once visited the ramen noodle nudie bar, was my first introduction to twelve step programs.

One of the other residents there was a lumbering idiot who I called out on lying about his relationship with one of the receptionists at the building where we attended classes. The girls there would talk to me on our breaks, and so I knew first hand that despite what this guy was saying, the female in question was not fond of him. He retaliated to me publicly correcting the record by open handed slapping me across the face while he yelled the word, "FAGGOT!"

It didn't feel great, but resisting the urge to fight back felt worse and stung longer. I knew as soon as he came at me, he'd be kicked out, and I didn't want to be homeless again so soon, so I shoved my hands into my pockets and waited for the situation to be handled.

I'm not certain if that incident was the only reason two of the other guys took me under their wing or not, but one giant muscled fist of a man named Paul offered to kill on my behalf and another handsome fast talking comedian

named Josh generously gave me access to the pirated spoils he amassed by weaponizing his irresistible charm. Later I pulled another guy that I liked into our little clique named Danny, and the staff would come to refer to us as *"the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse."*

We started using unauthorized suboxone, and the supervisors knew it, or at least highly suspected that we were, but they couldn't catch us. We would keep passing piss tests because we had a system in place to swap out our samples.

At some point, the staff caught me off guard and tested me when I wasn't prepared, and I believed I was doomed. My tainted sample was locked away to be sent to the lab for analysis, where my results would put an end to my stay at Riverside.

Danny came to my rescue and successfully pulled off a real-life "Mission Impossible" or "Ocean's Eleven" style caper that involved stealing keys, breaking into an office, opening sealed packages, and swapping samples.

No, his last name isn't Ocean, but Danny certainly was my hero. I had been smitten with him right away. He was a

tattoo covered skater punk with dazzling eyes. Now I knew for a certainty he had my back.

When I feel confident that I have someone in my corner; Patrick, Nick, Shareena, Jessica, or now Danny, I am given glimpses of the person I might be. Confident, capable, daring.

The Four Horsemen were unstoppable!

Or so it had seemed.

We were blindsided and bucked from our equine mounts when they busted all four of us on a technicality and we were expelled in one clean sweep.

There had been a Goober to come to the facility who had a car, and at one time or another, each of us had been inside of it, which, unbeknownst to me, was against the rules.

I guess when I had first arrived and they had given me a handbook, because I didn't have a vehicle or expect to have access to one, I had just skimmed over that section, yet after the fact of our ejection I checked the rules and sure enough, there it was in black and white; "No client

may enter an unauthorized vehicle for any purpose at any time unless pre-approved by staff."

The Riverside program, such as it was, had very little, if any at all, rehabilitative effect on any of the clients as far as I could tell, with one mystifying exception. A young guy who bore a striking resemblance to my friend Patrick from New York, so much so that it was uncanny, connected to me through social media while we were both residents and he seems to have consistently remained active in NA and done well for himself.

I lost touch with Josh and Paul, but Danny and I kept in contact. That wasn't the last of the trouble that Goober and his car would cause me either.

At the end of my Riverside days I had started waiting tables at Tidewater, a high-end seafood restaurant, and after being kicked out, at the end of a shift there I had the misfortune to run into the Goober. He offered to give me a ride to the place I was staying. Against my better judgment, to avoid riding the bus, I got into his accursed car.

He went past my stop, saying he had to do something first. He pulled into a car wash. I had no idea what he

was doing. He got out, and I was left sitting tired and annoyed in his car, just wanting to get home. I eventually got out and yelled at him, "What the hell are you doing!? Come on!"

Later, they would accuse me of having been the lookout while he unsuccessfully attempted to rob a coin changer.

I had a pocket full of cash, so I had no reason to be involved in his stupid failed criminal attempt. Had I known what he was doing, I would have just walked away. We weren't even friends, I never liked the guy and he had gotten us kicked out at Riverside by dry snitching on everyone else after the staff had discovered he had a car they hadn't known about.

I couldn't tell you what he was thinking or why he had taken me to the carwash. But, I had been criminally stupid in accepting a ride with him.

"Come on," I yelled again in frustration.

He finally came back to the car, but as he pulled back onto the road to drive away, the police arrived and arrested us both for attempted breaking and entering and attempted burglary.

...What?!!!

If I hadn't been in handcuffs, I might have killed him. Never before or since have I ever seethed with such disgust and loathing for another individual.

Thankfully, and luckily for him, that would be the last time I ever saw the Goober, and yet I would be arrested for his bungled crime that I hadn't even known he was attempting, much less participated in, two more times.

They sent notice for me to appear in court but only to the co-defendant Goobers' address, and since I had no idea I was supposed to be there, a warrant was issued for my arrest. We had never even exchanged phone numbers; that's how little regard I had for the guy.

Police arrived and took me out in handcuffs right at the busiest part of a lunch rush at the next restaurant I worked at.

I shouldn't have taken a plea deal, but I just wanted to end my involvement with the Goober and his latest addition to his already lengthy rap sheet. Especially after having been arrested and jailed twice! So, I accepted a

misdemeanor destruction of property charge against the advice of my court appointed lawyer, who said I should take it to trial because there was no evidence to convict me.

I thought accepting the plea deal would put it behind me quicker, though, and the charge sounded inconsequential to me. I was wrong on both counts.

Months later, at Recovery Point of Huntington, where I had gotten a state issued ID with the facilities address on it, clearly not in hiding, as a bunch of us were sitting in the cafeteria one evening watching TV, the news came on and there I was, looking at a terrible picture of myself on the Fugitive Files; the region's most wanted!

I had no idea I had to come back to court again to finalize taking the plea offer! I thought that was the whole point of the last time I was arrested and jailed for 11 days! No one had informed me otherwise.

A third arrest, (my fourth if you include the 0.00% BAC DUI), and another ten more days in jail until I finally “officially” plead guilty to a lesser charge, while in handcuffs, leg irons and a belly chain, for a crime I had

nothing to do with and ended up getting sentenced to two years of Supervised Probation!

Fortunately, the observation I had made the first time I shot heroin, specifically that I would never stop, had been abjured at the time I had agreed to try going to long term treatment at Recovery Point of Huntington.

I had lost my job at Tidewater after the first arrest. But, I had found another restaurant to work at, and even after I had been humiliated and arrested there, I hadn't been fired. The owners there were demanding, but fair, and had kept me on.

Food service can be a reliable place to find drugs.

One of my coworkers at that downtown dining spot had sold me some heroin one day, and as he put the tiny corner of a sandwich baggie into my hand he said, "be careful with this stuff, it's strong."

That is something you hear all the time, and almost never is it true. No one ever tells you, "Hey, I am selling you broken up makeup and screwing you out of your money and leaving you sick." But, that happens. Still, when you

are handing over the cash, it's always, "Oh, this horse will knock your dick in the dirt. Don't do it all at once."

On this day, the warning was actually valid for once.

I had stopped at a hotel lobby that I passed on my way home to use the bathroom to shoot up. If I had been patient and waited until I got home, where I would have been alone, this would have been, without a doubt, the final day of my life.

I remember going into the bathroom, and then suddenly, I am on the ground in the main lobby. I am surrounded by police, I think, maybe they have a different kind of uniform on, I'm not able to tell. They are all yelling and seem to be scared or angry.

Calmly, I think, "Are they suffocating me? I can't breathe."

I hear the beeping of monitors.

I open my eyes, and I am in the hospital again. This time I am intubated; a tube runs down my throat and into my lungs.

There is a nurse there, but she is nasty. "I don't know why we bother to save addicts," she says more than once.

Apparently, it has been several days for everyone else, but not for me. I don't have any sense of time having passed. For me, it has been mere seconds since I was back on the floor of that hotel lobby.

I hoped that the rest of my dope might still be in my pocket.

But then I see the thing that breaks my singular objective resolve. From the bed where hoses and tubes push things in and carry others out of my skeletal body, I see my pained mother. She looks so small and powerless. She is grieved and distraught. I am heartbroken. I didn't care if I lived or died, but I did not want this; how could I have hurt her so selfishly? I don't think I ever would have been persuaded any other way. I finally didn't want to use any more for the first time since I had discovered that warm relief could flow through my veins. I didn't want to hurt the person I loved the most the way I so clearly had.

Chapter 14: **Recovery Point of Huntington**

The day after being released from the hospital, my mom and sister drove me to the Recovery Point of Huntington and dropped me off.

On the way down to the facility I didn't have anyone to call and tell that I was leaving Charleston except for one of the other fellow "horsemen of the apocalypse," Danny.

He and I had met up from time to time for hijinks after the four of us had been kicked out.

Danny said he was going to come to Recovery Point, too, if that's what I was going to do, but I didn't half believe him.

I was extremely weak, and it was hard to talk above a whisper for quite a while after having been intubated for eight days.

Recovery Point is intense. It houses one hundred male clients at any given time, plus some peer mentors as well as having some staff on hand. It is a self maintained community where residents in the program run the kitchen for three meals a day, do laundry, provide security, upkeep the facility and grounds, and perform other various jobs as you advance through the curriculum.

Your progress roughly corresponds to the bed number of the bunk bed you are assigned. After a day or two of detox a client begins his circuit on the second floor in OTS1, where OTS stands for "off the streets." At that stage you travel around two mid-size dorms of several bunk beds, first on the top bunks, then for a second lap on the bottom bunks, almost like a board game.

In OTS1 you have the least amount of freedom, but you do leave the building to walk to an off-site classroom for Recovery Dynamics during the week and then have on-site AA and NA meetings each evening.

Next comes OTS2, for which you make your way around a small dorm with six single beds. You still attend off-site classes on most days, but are assigned kitchen shifts on every third day. Probably the thing most people look

forward to getting in OTS2 is the ability to leave the facility in the evenings with assigned Phase clients.

After OTS2 comes Phase, where you are meant to slowly begin to integrate into the local community. During Phase 1, you move to the downstairs dorms and begin making your way around two larger rooms of numbered bunk beds with corresponding lockers. This is the bulk of the program, for which you will have to find an AA or NA homegroup and a sponsor for working through the twelve steps while continuing to take on-site Recovery Dynamics classes and completing a litany of associated assignments. But, you are mostly free to do whatever you'd like in the evenings or on weekends, as long as you attend five meetings per week and perform whatever job you might be assigned.

Three times each week, the Phase community is assembled to address the issues of an individual client. After someone earns his spot or is otherwise selected to be in the hot seat, the areas of opportunity in that man's growth are identified and discussed. Suggestions for helping him are then provided by the community and written on a whiteboard as a numbered list. Option one is always "Do nothing." Which if you are stupid enough to vote for, you will be the next person to be addressed by

the group. Three or four clients will then volunteer to, "Take a number," meaning they describe what they think that person needs to do to address their issues, usually a mix of tasks and writing assignments, but sometimes including placement adjustments such as having to rework a step, or steps, and I've even seen a few different guys get sent back to restart from OTS 1. Before votes are cast for the number the community feels the target needs, or deserves, a final round of adding to or modifying the "Help" numbers are negotiated by the community. If you disagree with all of the options on the board, you can abstain from voting, which sometimes can mean you will talk to the person being addressed afterwards one on one, but if a majority of votes are withheld it is translated to mean a person is beyond being helped by the community, or that the community has no faith in someone's potential for amelioration, and if that's the case then the man of the hour is immediately kicked out. Once the votes are cast and the "help" decided on by the community, that man is asked, "Do you accept?" And, if he says, "yes," he is applauded and required to complete everything assigned. If he says, "No," he is escorted to retrieve his belongings and out the front door.

Bed movements come in chunks, meaning, you might move two or three bed spaces forward, up to even seven

or eight positions at a time, as clients leave for a number of reasons, or are moved backwards for not completing step work or other assignments. Sometimes, if no one leaves or graduates for a while, bed movements can be few and far between, but then, a group will get busted for something, or a bunch will just randomly leave at once and you might rocket forward ten or more beds.

The final dorm before graduation contains just six single beds, and upon having completed all 12 steps, you are then put back in the scrubs detox clients wear to remind you of where you came from, and you must give your lead, basically tell your story, at one of the open classes that all clients attend.

Upon completing Phase 1, you can either remain on site and work as a peer mentor or transition to an off-site residence where you can begin to work a job in the real world for Phase 2.

The number of clients that successfully see the program all the way through is a tiny fraction of those who make a start at it. That huge fall off is even despite the fact that many residents have been court ordered or sentence deferred and are therefore legally required to be there. It is hard work and extreme accountability. The program is

purposely stressful and demanding. Just consider that many men decide they would rather be in jail than at Recovery Point, where your evenings and weekends are mostly free.

I completed it as an at-will client, all the way through, not once, but twice.

It has been called "Big Book Bootcamp" in reference to the primary text of Alcoholics Anonymous that is the foundational ideology proscribed there, and without a doubt anyone who has gone through the program will be able to quote and reference the Big Book and it's page numbers as if it were the Bible, chapter and verse.

When you first arrive you are paired with what is called a 72-Hour Buddy that is meant to be glued to your side for the first three days, to help show you the ropes and to possibly keep you from relapsing or giving up at the outset.

My 72-hour Buddy was a literal Abercrombie and Fitch model from California that would cause my face to flush crimson in embarrassment with any glance or word he offered in my direction. It didn't help matters that despite his flawless and gorgeous features and bulging rippling

muscles, he was deeply contemplative, self-conscious, and humble.

It is impossible to consider my experience at Recovery Point without factoring in my orientation. The population of the facility consisted of young men, being restored in physical health, confronting deep emotional trauma or other vulnerable issues, and at times that meant they were powerfully endearing and attractive to me as individuals.

But, collectively as a group, their compounding toxic masculinity and hormonally charged aggression could be terrifying and alienating.

I once mentioned to another very heterosexual and attractive client that everyone called Man-Dime, (because he was a perfect 10 according to his hetero peers, and I didn't disagree) towards the end of my second stint, that he should try to imagine what it would be like for him if he were living in a building with 99 females. I could tell right away from his reaction that the thought had never occurred to him before.

He said, "*Oh my god*, I don't know how you do it."

Fortunately, I had experience and conditioning in rendering myself sexless and inoffensive around attractive men that I had bonded with in friendship.

Still, like in my school yard days, my orientation was obvious to everyone, and it was a liability to be seen associating with me “too much.”

In an all-male pressure-cooker environment where interpersonal politics and social standing have real and immediate consequences, “no-homo” carries weight.

I could understand it but it didn’t make it any easier that one ever really cliqued up with me or ate more than one meal with me or would walk to and from any meetings with me, lest the stain of my emasculation be transferred.

I wasn't disliked though and often would be consulted with for style advice or outfit approval, and much more frequently than I can expect anyone to assume or even believe, I would be surreptitiously approached in isolation for the unburdening of a soul about some transgressive experience from their past, seeking my absolution as if I were a high priest of all things gay, able to erase their guilt and shame over something they might have done in

order to obtain or while under the influence of powerful narcotics.

True to his word, Danny followed me from Charleston to Huntington and came to Recovery Point, but once he got there, he became someone I no longer recognized. He went out of his way to befriend everyone there but me and made a point to avoid me at every turn.

Somewhere around step six, in Phase 1, he left the program to pursue a relationship with a girl from his past.

Although my overwhelmingly beautiful and sweet 72-hour Buddy didn't socialize or have much of a visible relationship with me as we progressed through the program, we always seemed to be on the same page in classes and there was a bond of understanding that I felt we both were aware of.

Then one day as we were in the final large dorm of Phase 1 shared bunk beds, I had advanced ahead of him and was only a few spaces shy of moving into the final dorm of the last six single beds, he came to my bunk and laid down beside me, pulling me close to his side. Just then, a staff member entered the room and yelled at *me* for being inappropriate with another client. He got up but asked if

he could walk with me to a meeting that night, and as we walked, he grabbed my hand, lacing his fingers in-between mine and I felt confused but so powerfully happy that I didn't dare question it or risk breaking the magic of whatever was happening and just existed in the moment. I was floating on a cloud. I felt as if somehow I had won the best lottery in the world.

As soon as we returned to the facility, once again having felt his strong but tender grip as we walked, he was grabbed by staff and piss tested, then ejected from the program and I was left feeling stupid and even more confused than ever having been totally oblivious to the fact he was faded high, never to revisit or to understand what had happened in the intimacy he had both generously given and selfishly stole from me in that anachronistic evening.

I tried chasing him down to stay in touch a few different times but without very much success. Last I heard he was back in California. It wouldn't surprise me if someday I see him in a movie or something huge. He has the looks, the body, intelligence and a humble personality.

After completing the program the first time, I moved into an apartment with another alumni who was grappling

with their gender identity. Separately, we both fell into the comforting oblivion of our own preferred poisons. When they confronted me about my using, as it was a different substance than what they preferred, I didn't put up a fight or try to defend my use, but only offered to leave the next day, and so I did, returning to Recovery Point to try again to fix the broken pieces of me that I had succumbed once again to soothing with opiates.

Each week without fail, I would receive a letter or card from my mom. A reminder of my reason for trying to overcome addiction that was at the same time a condemnation of the person that I am, and a mirror in which to see how far I had fallen from who I had almost managed to be. Bitter and sweet doesn't begin to describe the extremes that I experienced with each delivery.

The second time through the program you are able to progress at a much swifter pace, and in my case that was even despite a ten day absence, during which I was held in jail before finalizing my acceptance of a misdemeanor destruction of property charge and being placed on Supervised Probation.

Both times that I was working my way through Recovery Point, another quirky guy was also a resident. There were

actually a couple of guys that bridged both of my stays, but Mikey uniquely had nearly parallel runs to my own. I don't think we even spoke to each other the first time we were there, he being a little too far ahead of me for us to have bonded, but by the time we both took positions as Peer Mentors for Phase 2 on our second runs through, just three days apart from each other, we had become good friends.

If you asked anyone to describe him, one of the first adjectives offered and universally applied would be "weird". Mikey marched to the beat of a drummer unlike anyone else has ever heard. He is undeniably brilliant and fascinatingly diverse in topics he might be persuaded to humbly reveal an astonishing depth and breadth of knowledge about, but he preferred to be constantly silly and was never condescending or dismissive of anyone else's thoughts or beliefs. He is very short and covered head to toe in thick black hair.

I fell in love with him like I had never experienced before.

Once we were both peer mentors and had the privacy and freedom to hang out in my own room, we would watch movies together and he let me pet the back of his head, running my fingers through his hair.

Any time he came bouncing into a room, no matter if it was the tenth or the hundredth time in a day, my heart would race, and my stomach would be filled with butterflies. I guess I had thought those types of expressions were metaphors. I was blindsided by the literalness of the experience!

One night, he turned off whatever it was we had been watching, and he said, "What am I doing? I might as well give this a try," pulling me on top of him.

Before any clothes came off or anything too serious actually happened, he tapped out.

"No, I can't do anything," he said, "it's not you, it's me."

I took my experience with Will as instruction and said, "I think it's admirable that you were willing to try, I don't want this to ruin our friendship, so we can do whatever you want, but you're not ditching me right now or things will be weird between us."

He turned back on the TV.

After a while, he said, "You can still rub my head if you want."

One Sunday, I bounced into the kitchen for a cup of coffee, and a very quiet and stoic boy approached me as he was working his shift assignment. He had heard me tell my story just a few days before in open class and wanted to talk to me about it.

"So, when you were outed, that was pretty bad?" I'd noticed him often because he carried himself in a way that reflected intelligence, and he was very attractive, but I'd never heard him speak before.

I wasn't thinking at first, but as the words were spilling out of my mouth, flippantly confirming how terrible the experience had been, my mind pieced together the weight of the situation.

Softer and slower, I asked, "Is that something you might have to experience?"

"Yes," he said, still looking in my eyes, pleading for me to say or do something, and I scrambled for what to do next.

Just then, the door was flung open. It was meal time, and he had to take his place in the serving line, pausing our conversation at that awkward juncture.

I had to leave to go to my homegroup, but all I could think about was how I had made a mess of what might have been an opportunity for my experience to have been put to use in actually helping someone.

When I returned to the facility, he had already gone to bed and so I resolved to speak with him the next day.

By the time I came into the office the following morning, he had already signed out to go to the hospital as sick along with two other clients. Later on that day, two men returned, but the one I was searching for had deserted.

I went to the office of the staff and begged them not to expel him when he would eventually return, making the case that he was dealing with an issue that none of them could understand and that I recognized as a vulnerability that deserved forbearance. They assured me that he would not be expelled, but did not communicate that to the second shift, so as I was at an off site NA meeting, I received a text message telling me he had returned and the night staff had immediately kicked him out.

I was livid and left the meeting, just as it was beginning to start, to get back to the facility, but it was too late. He was already gone.

The next morning, he was spotted by a member of the day staff, having aimlessly roamed the streets all night. They picked him up and brought him back to the facility.

He was placed in a detox bed, and I tried to get him to talk with me, but he was mentally checked out. His sad eyes would not focus on me or anything in the room.

His mom came and moved him to the Parkersburg location of Recovery Point, but before the week was out, he would be needlessly gunned down, killed by police for no explicable reason. They would claim they believed he had a knife, and yet he had not wielded it towards anyone or did anything to justify his cold-blooded murder.

I grieved for him, as many of the residents did.

One of his closest friends made bracelets to honor his memory that had a Bible verse on them, and it angered me. I blamed religious based prejudice, at least in part, for his death, but at the same time I couldn't say anything to

anyone because I felt I had to respect the way he had chosen to present himself to the guys that had been much closer to him than I had been.

I know I can't claim responsibility for his tragic death, but at the same time, I was in a position to have been able to help him, and he came to me vulnerable and looking for support, and I failed to be able to help him. Nothing will ever change those facts.

There are many other men and experiences from Recovery Point of Huntington that I might have included, but I have lingered at this chapter as long as I am willing. Each story would similarly end in tragedy as a vast majority of the men I came to know and care about there are now dead.

I remember after having first arrived there, still trying to get used to the new environment and routine, a member of the staff had addressed an assembly of all one hundred men that were residents at the time and said, "Look around the room boys, I can almost promise you, only two or three of you are going to make it."

I thought at the time he had meant sober or clean from addiction, I hadn't understood that he meant alive nor that his words would prove true so quickly.

Chapter 15: **Wrecked**

Back when I was in high school, we had obtained a go-kart that I suppose had been originally intended for smaller riders than the six foot tall body I'd already found myself inhabiting. I couldn't set in the seat with my legs stretched out under the steering wheel as it was designed to be driven, but the engine had been modified and that thing had power to spare, so I could still ride it, only my legs had to go outside of the frame in a wide straddle around the metal tube chassis that flanked the steering column before bending back in for my feet to be placed on the gas and brake pedals.

One Autumn day I was riding it back on the mountain at the end of our road where we always picked blackberries to be canned or sold in the late spring or early summers and was zooming at full throttle to see how fast the Frankensteined monstrosity could actually go. As I zipped through tall grasses, I ran into a hidden metal pipe, obscured by the weeds, that was buried deep into the ground, instantly halting the forward motion of the go-

kart. The machine's kinetic energy propelling it and me across the ridge was fully absorbed by the earthbound pole in an abrupt lesson in physics that my body was not prepared to participate in.

I was flung forward with the go-karts metal frame smashing into me on either side of my groin, nearly ripping off both of my legs at the top of my thighs.

After missing a few days of school, I remember when I finally did return with my legs still black, blue, and purple, the agony of climbing on and off the school bus would cause me to break out in sweats. Regardless of any pain, I had no choice but to push through it and resume my role in the world that had kept on spinning as normal, whether or not I was there.

While I had been working as a peer mentor at Recovery Point, Chris, the younger brother of my good friend Jamie from back in Charleston, had come to the facility as a client. He was someone that I had first met back at one of the places Will had lived for a while, as one half of an obnoxious duo, along with his buddy Zack. At first, I hadn't thought much of the juvenile pair, but eventually, I would

get to know and come to love Chris as we formed our own relationship that was independent from any other associations.

We decided to get an apartment together, and were able to set up a really nice place for us to share as he started taking classes at Marshall and I began working conducting



Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey (BRFSS) research interviews for the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

After a few weeks, we unfortunately both had a relapse together, but it was different than any previous time I had ever used before. I had lost the ability to feel any relief, pleasure, or positive effects from my drug of choice.

None at all.

Accepting that conclusion unceremoniously and without any additional effort of my intent or struggle required,

removed it from off of the table for me as an option for how to mismanage, or escape from, the problematic factors of my existence. It was no longer effective for me as a coping mechanism, which was fortuitous as I would be piss tested on a monthly basis for the next two years as a condition of my Supervised Probation.

Chris couldn't stop using though and so he abandoned me and our apartment. Fortunately, perhaps even knowingly, at the time we had signed the lease on our new place, his parents had insisted upon being listed as the guarantors for the property.

In the two and a half months that I was living there alone, against my intention, plans, and better judgment, I used heroin again one terrible but final time.

Back at Recovery Point, after Mikey had thought he might try going bi, but abandoned ship before the boat ever left the dock, we maintained our closeness for the last few weeks we were there. I was still head over heels in love with him, but once we had left the facility completely, he had started living with a girlfriend, and I rarely heard from him or saw him anymore.

I would have done anything to be near him again, even kill myself, apparently.

I had an opportunity to spend time with him, but he was using, so I did too. (He hadn't pressured or even encouraged me to use, that is entirely on me.) Before I woke up in the back of an ambulance, I had been sitting close to him on a stranger's couch. That was the last time I ever saw him, and the last time I ever used heroin; December 1, 2017.

Chris had left me with an apartment that I was not able to afford on my own. I would never get to see him alive again either, as he was killed in a vehicle accident a little less than a year later. But rent was coming due that I was not going to be able to cover and I didn't know what I was going to do. Fortunately, a friend from work offered to let me stay with her, and for the next two years, I lived in her home.

The co-worker that had taken me in is a woman named Faith, and she is a truly great person with a heart of gold, a brilliant sense of humor, and some difficult issues of her own.

Our friendship had been solidified after we had shared a deep belly laugh together over something silly I had said out of the blue. While on break we had been standing outside the building where we worked, gathered with our typical little circle of misfits, and Faith was being overly dramatic in an intentionally funny way and telling us all of the various problems she was currently dealing with. I followed up on her list by adding a dry, "...and Brenda's probably dead." Quoting a line from an old movie, "Adventures in Babysitting," that I hadn't thought about in years.

Faith knew the reference, which was so random, and it really had got her. I was surprised I had said it too, but the fact that it had actually landed with her and made her laugh so hard, was even better for me. We both doubled over in laughter as everyone else just looked back and forth at each other.

When my circumstances had begun to crash in on me and I didn't know what I was going to do about my living arrangements, Faith had been extremely generous in opening her home to me.

It was a fraught situation to find myself in though because her husband and three kids were in the home too, and

they were in the beginning stages of the process of getting a divorce; a divorce that the husband didn't want. He would have preferred they stay together and be miserable, however that would have required Faith stay in her subservient position to him, and she had been diligently working on her mental health and that just wasn't going to fly anymore.

Faith had tried to work with him and told him at a couples therapy session that if he didn't meet her halfway on a few things over the next few months that she would divorce him. He hadn't made any effort to work on the practical items she had articulated, and yet, when she followed through with what she had told him would happen, he was shocked and surprised.

But, if that sounds like a stormy sea to find yourself suddenly a guest in, it was a life-saving raft tossed to my physical and mental health in an ocean of my own turmoil.

Not too long after I had become a fixture in their gorgeous three story home, Faith and her husband went to a court date while I kept an eye on their kids. When Faith came back home and told me about what had transpired, it was a wake-up call that allowed me to freshly consider the

brittle state of my life. Her husband had asked the judge to order that I leave the home.

Even though that was a pretty reasonable request and ought to have been expected, I was so mentally checked out from actively managing my own life at the time that I hadn't even considered it as a possibility. Her soon to be ex-husband complained to the judge that his soon to be ex-wife had taken in some stranger from off the street and presented it as evidence that she was making poor decisions. Fortunately, as the judge probed the situation it came out that he had taken off and left the kids with me at times he was supposed to have been watching them and so the judge told him, "It sounds like he is doing you favors and you should be glad he is there."

So, for me? A disaster averted. And for Faith? A small victory. But, I'm sure it didn't win me any brownie points with the kids Dad. Regardless of how he may have felt though, he continued to have me surrogate for his supervision.

The fact that I hadn't foreseen that totally predictable objection from Faith's husband was upsetting to me. He didn't want the divorce. His entire world was being turned upside down. He was being cast out of his own home, and

I was just waltzing in and setting down roots. I think I had been there three or four weeks in their home by then, and in that instant, the perilous reality of my situation became suddenly clear to me.

The next morning, my sponsor picked me up in a brand new Cadillac to take me to our Narcotics Anonymous homegroup. He had actually bought it a few years prior for his parents as a 50th Anniversary present, but they hadn't really driven it and asked him to put it to some use, so when he pulled up outside in the luxury ride, it barely had clocked even a few hundred miles. Another sponsee was already in the front, so I climbed into the back seat. As I began telling him about the previous day's court proceedings, we were t-boned by another car, directly hitting us at the door where I was seated.

My head had broken through the window beside me and I had the wind knocked out of me, being unable to breathe for a moment, at first trying to comprehend what had happened, and then as I processed that we had been in a wreck there were a few terrifying seconds before I was able to will my lungs to move again, gasping for air.

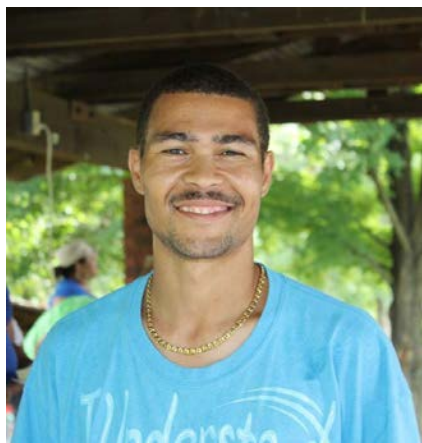
The collision occurred with such force and speed that both vehicles involved were totaled.

One thing that had stuck with me from the orientation meeting I had attended regarding the terms of my Supervised Probation was that if I were involved in any situation in which police were called, I had to contact the Probation Office. With my adrenaline surged by the percussive blow of the devastating wreck and fearing that an encounter with the police might mean that I would be arrested, after checking that everyone else was okay, I climbed from the irreparable vehicle and walked back to Faith's in shock.

Over the course of that weekend, I would also receive two devastating pieces of news.

First, I learned that a good man and friend, Kale Robinson, had died of a blood infection.

We had been coworkers for years at Ticketmaster, and we had both been at Recovery Point together. He had even chosen me to be the person that he shared



his fifth step with, which is sometimes known as the "confession" step, in which you tell someone "the exact nature of all your wrongs." It is a very deep and serious act of trust and vulnerable intimacy that I had been honored to receive.

He had even willingly accepted one of the worst communities I had ever witnessed, in which he had been moved from Step 11 all the way back to OTS1 and required to write out the entire big book of Alcoholics Anonymous by hand, a Herculean task that he had accomplished against all odds, motivated by the desire to be a good father to his daughter.

Each time he would go to court for a custody hearing, he would borrow one of my suits to wear and give me a hug before leaving to face the uncertainty of his paternal rights. Now his daughter was robbed of the father he had fought so unbelievably hard and so deeply yearned to be.

Next, I would learn that Mikey had committed murder.

He had turned himself in to the police, who at first had refused to believe he was serious until he persuaded them to come and find the body in the back of his wrecked van.

I can not say for certain that my understanding of what had happened is accurate, but with my sincere condolences to those affected by the incident and no disrespect to anyone intended, I will relate what I was told.

Mikey has a brother who has challenges that limit his social engagement. He had a confrontation with someone who had robbed him and cut off his long hair that he kept tied back, just as an extra measure of cruelty and insult.

When the person that Mikey believed was responsible for that alleged assault against his brother entered a residence that Mikey was also visiting, he hurled a metal spike that he had been fidgeting with at the man and it had unexpectedly pierced him through the chest.

Mikey had said he was going to take the man to the hospital and driven off with the body in the back of his van but had not been heard from for days.

The rest of the people in that house had taken the man's girlfriend that had accompanied him there before Mikey pierced him and tied her up to prevent her calling the police or anyone else and had tortured and abused her terribly.

As I said, this is only my understanding of the events, and I can not swear to any of the details or circumstances of the tragedy.

I wrote to him in jail right away but when he wrote back to me with a list of things he was asking me to do for him and said nothing about my emotion, or his for that matter, about his situation, the reality of it all hit me that he was gone from my life and that I couldn't mentally afford to keep investing in a one sided dead end relationship with him any more. Maybe that makes me a bad person for essentially abandoning him in his greatest time of need, but you have to admit the timing and circumstances were terrible and I am only human.

Then on Monday, not 48 hours after my sponsor's wreck, as I was riding in the passenger seat of Faith's van, a giant deer with a massive rack of horns jumped out of the woods and directly into my window, causing her to swerve and another vehicle crashed into that same side, totaling her vehicle and unleashing an unhinged flood of emotion from me that I could not quiet.

My body reacted to all of this upset by breaking out in shingles, covering one side of my torso in painful blisters

that threatened my threadbare sanity with unrelenting constant agony.

I thought that my life had been destroyed before by the devastating collision with addiction. But now, with the ease and comfort that substance use had provided no longer even an option on reserve, things seemed to just keep degrading from bad to worse. Blow after crushing blow had left me finally shattered and in pieces. If my legs were ever going to be put back under me again, it was going to take a miracle.



Chapter 16: **Almost Famous**

Around the time I was trying heroin for the first time Shareena had given birth to an adorable baby girl. She is on the non-verbal autism spectrum. I often try to imagine what it must be like for her to inhabit a world in which she is unable to communicate her thoughts, feelings, or questions to anyone else. I guess on some small level, I identify with that situation, and it pains my heart.

Shareena had been to Huntington a few times to visit me, but in order to get the assistance and care her daughter needs and deserves she had to move out of state and so followed her sister to the old steel town of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She had met a man who was good to her and her daughter there and was pregnant with their baby.

We didn't talk nearly as often or in the way that we used to, but on the day she was rushing to the hospital with contractions to give birth for the second time, she was keeping me updated each step of the way.

My life, body, and mind were in tatters, but I was existing in the real world and not using or even thinking about any substances to escape from it. Still, I was having a hard time finding any spark of hope or optimism to get me through the dark and depressed chasm two serious wrecks, the death of a dear friend, Mikey's arrest for murder, technically being homeless, and now the unrelenting tortuous pain of the shingles had put me in.

I was literally praying for a miracle to shine a light that might give me hope or open up a path to see me through the lowest of my lows.

A photograph of Shareena holding her precious newborn baby boy was the answer to that prayer.

The promise and potential of a new tiny person, one minute not here, and then suddenly alive and encountering everything for the very first time in the next, looked up to be welcomed by one of the best human beings on the face of this planet, and she held his body and gaze, beaming with love and looking fabulous and fresh despite his violent arrival.

It was the stepping stone I needed to keep moving forward through the hell that had all but consumed me;

giving me hope that life would go on and that there were wonders I still might encounter or had yet to enjoy.

In the words of the **#1 Diva**, "*I believe the children are our future . . .*"

While I was convalescing with the shingles I saw an advertisement online for a talent competition called Tri-State Stars. It was the last day entries would be accepted, so I filled out the web form and attached a video of a live performance of a song I had sung at a gig my friend Jessica had booked at the upstairs lounge of a restaurant called Little India.

Much to my surprise I was passed through to the second round, where I would be given the chance to perform in person at the Keith Albee, a beautiful theater venue I had used to be the Client Representative and event programmer for when I had been working out of Ticketmaster's Cincinnati office.

The worst of the mental and physical trauma of the shingles had passed by the time I went to the Keith Albee theater for my afternoon appointment to sing for the

judges. I chose to play the piano and do a cover of the first song I had ever publicly performed on a stage; "Song to Sing" originally by the Hanson brothers.

I was still in my teenage years when I sang harmony back then for a cousin at a 4H Club, the same small venue, where a couple of years later, I would be introduced to my friend Nick when I needed him the most, only to lose him a year later when he lost his life saving someone else. Before that occasion, I had never considered myself a singer, but the experience had been transformative and whetted my appetite for a love of the stage.

Once again, when the results came out, I had to keep checking the list to make sure I wasn't seeing things; I had made it to the final round.

Each act would have to repeat their second round performance, only this time for an audience and a winner would be crowned. This would be a real concert event at that opulent 1920s vaudeville era theater. I would be taking the same stage I had seen Liza Minnelli, Taylor Swift, Vicki Lawrence, Tony Bennet, and other iconic artists entertain packed houses. After having known that space at a time I was doing seemingly so well in life, but then having fallen so far below that trajectory, this return

to the venue as an artist was deeply personal and extremely significant to me.

As if that wasn't enough weight to hang on my performance, the event was actually a fundraiser for the Marshall Foundation and two other beneficiaries, one being Recovery Point, the place I called home for more than a year, and another being Lily's Place, where babies born addicted to substances, or Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome, are treated.

On the night of the Tri-State Stars finale I had to make my way to the theater by myself, but unexpectedly a few friends from Charleston came, so I wasn't without any support in the audience as I feared I would be, because otherwise I was alone.

I was given the tenth and final slot of the night, and I would be playing a Steinway grand piano with dramatic professional stage lighting and giant L.E.D. screens supporting my act. Because the event was a fundraiser each vote for an act cost a dollar, so the winner of the night would be whoever had raised the most money for the very worthy community organizations, one of which I owed a profound and personal debt of gratitude. Just before I took the stage, I refreshed the website where

donations could be made on my phone and saw that only



four dollars had been banked as votes for me.

I was uncharacteristically nervous and rushed the ending of the song a little bit. It was far from a flawless performance, but it came from my heart. When I left the stage, I grabbed my phone and immediately refreshed the site again. Over a thousand dollars had been donated in my name.

I was blown away and moved to tears.

I was nowhere near the top fundraiser of the night, but that amount far exceeded my expectations or wildest hopes, so as far as I was concerned, I had been a stellar success.

Faith's husband moved to an apartment of his own outside of their shared home, which meant I was able to move into their finished basement.

Faith was a great friend to me then.

With the help of her family I was able to throw her a fabulous 40th birthday bash. The rent I paid was very modest, but I also pitched in with cleaning, mowing the yard and helping out with watching the kids. My mom and sister had brought down some of my furniture for me, but they made sure to time their arrival for when I would be out, away for my NA homegroup and then work.

I had been working on Step Six for several weeks but on the day my sponsor moved me to Step Seven I had the profound revelation that although I had certainly made missteps and poor decisions in my life, I had done the best

I could with the circumstances I had been born into, and couldn't have expected much more from myself.

This eureka moment hit me with the weight of the world behind it. I had been doing step work for nearly two years; this was my third time through. I had always been sincere and thorough in my effort; reading supplemental materials, meditating on the spiritual principles, and writing on my personal application and experience. All of that introspection had finally granted me real clarity and acceptance with difficult aspects of my life.

There were some things I needed to talk to my mother about. If I was going to have a healthy future, I needed to address contributing factors to my unhealthy past.

She refused to hear anything I needed to say.

Each attempt I made to discuss significant details or circumstances from my perspective resulted in heated arguments in which she forbade me to speak. She insisted that she already knew what I wanted to say, and even though she was wrong, she wouldn't be told anything different. She would berate me for having lied and forbid me to tell the truth.

A friend I had made in Huntington named Anna, who just so happens to also be a licensed therapist, had been over to see me one evening when one of these exhausting and unproductive episodes played out over the phone for more than an hour.

She was in tears for me after witnessing my own mother explode in hostile anger and self-righteous obstinance at my attempt to talk about myself or my feelings.

Otherwise, things were starting to look up for me. I was stable and having some optimism for the future.

Surprisingly, at the office, I had even made another new friend.

From the first day Michael had begun working there, he had attached himself to me, following me around like an eager puppy. It was odd, but we did have good chemistry, and I wasn't complaining.

At some point someone in our usual break squad, I can't remember who, had asked me what kind of guys I was attracted to, a question for which there isn't a simple or consistent answer, but I had offered, "like Elijah Wood

from the Lord of the Rings," and Michael was a dead ringer for the intense eyed hobbit.

On days that we worked together, he would take his break whenever I did, and he would insist on giving me rides home at the end of our shifts. Most shifts he would be in a neighboring cubicle and we would talk between calls.

A few weeks of his attention went by before I carefully considered how to word the question, and finally asked him, "How do you identify, as straight, bi or what?"

"I'm not gay!" Was his fast and emphatic response.

"That isn't what I asked." I reminded him, "I didn't ask what you aren't. I asked how you identify what you are."

Methinks he doth protest too much. But, I let it go.

He wasn't making enough money, he said a couple of weeks later. He let me know he was going to be quitting and looking for another job, and he wasn't sure where yet. Wouldn't you want to wait until you had another job before quitting if money was the issue?

I didn't question him or try to persuade him to stay.

He said he still wanted to stay in touch though, so after we were no longer coworkers, we met up exactly one time at an Applebee's bar, where he proceeded to get shitfaced drunk.

After he went ham on "drinkin' good in the neighborhood" and we shared some appetizers, I drove his car back to my place since he was sloshed. He came inside for a minute to try and sober up some before driving himself home. He picked up my guitar and strummed it a few times, and then abruptly left.

I never heard from him again.

Had he been hoping he could get enough liquid courage to act on repressed urges? Was I being tested to see if I would take advantage of someone in a weakened state? I don't have answers or an explanation for any of it, but it was undeniably strange.

He vanished after that, and I mean nearly all traces of him just disappeared. We had communicated through social media before, but I wasn't just unfollowed or blocked from his accounts; his profiles were totally deleted. If I didn't

still have pictures of him, I might wonder if I hadn't imagined the whole experience. I had enjoyed his friendship, and the attention he gave me was flattering, but it always felt a bit odd or unearned, and his egress was weird.

But as peculiar as that whole situation with my celebrity crush stand-in might have been, I was not prepared for how



thoroughly the inscrutable was about to overwhelm my entire life.

Chapter 17: **Threatening Spaces**

It felt like my life was on an upswing. I was stable and living life on its own terms. I even enrolled in online college classes for the first time in my life to pursue a degree in Graphic Design, and although it was much more demanding and difficult than I had expected it to be, I was making straight A's and in my Presentations class the teacher even asked if he could use my work to show other students as examples of the right way to do the assignments.

Apparently I had made a strong impression on someone at the Tri-State Stars event, although I couldn't recall meeting them. They messaged me a few times and were very kind and supportive. I had been working to get a Little Library donation box for Faith's neighborhood, and this mysterious person offered to let me borrow their truck for the project. It seemed overly generous and trusting to me. I wasn't even sure if I had a drivers license or not.

In the end, they did help deliver the materials, but I didn't have to personally borrow or be in control of their vehicle and I just missed being able to see this benefactor in person again.

A second Tri-State Stars was being planned and I had gotten emails from the organizers encouraging me to enter again. On the final day to register, literally with one minute to spare before the deadline, at 11:59pm I submitted a half-hearted entry.

Almost immediately I got a response back telling me I had made it through to the next in-person auditions.

When I went to the second round appointment I was able to make a proper introduction to the man who had been messaging me since the previous year's event. He said that his family was opening a new business downtown and asked me if I'd be interested in working there. I didn't make it through to the final round but a second job seemed like it might be a welcomed consolation prize.

The new job was incredible! It was creating a fun space for groups to have events where different forms of competitive games would be available. Customers came in hour blocks and I would configure the arena space for

whatever mode of play had been selected and then serve as the host and referee for their battles.

It was extremely fun. But it was also taxing and on the weekends we would be booked solid and it could be thoroughly draining. Controlling crowds, making sure everyone was safe and having fun required your personality to be “on”, with fast thinking, strong communication skills and some elements were physically demanding. I helped to design the games, and I was the only employee they had for emceeing the events.

Faith had run into some roadblocks getting her huge and no doubt very costly house refinanced in her newly single status and so we both were going to have to find new places to live. My new bosses had an apartment available so I was about to be not only their employee but also their tenant.

A friend that I had made through Recovery Point had been over to spend the evening with me for my last night at Faith's and he was going to help me move the next day. JJ was just my type; red hair, tattoos, brooding, mysterious.... But, surprise! He actually was interested in me too!

He had recently inherited a car, which he was proud of, however it had come to him by way of the death of his father, and he said he would never get in a vehicle again if it meant his dad could still be alive.

He promised he would be back at 11:00am the next morning to take my clothes and other possessions to my new place, but I half expected him to be late. I called his phone at 10:30am to make sure he was awake and to see if he was going to be on time, but it was his roommate that answered, wailing and sobbing; JJ was dead.

We were very open with each other about our thoughts and feelings on drugs, or at least he knew he could be transparent with me if he wanted to use. I wouldn't have judged him for it if he did. I don't believe that substances have a moral weight.

He didn't have any cash when he left my apartment. I had to force him to take \$10 to get gas and a snack as he was saying goodnight. Hell, I'm pretty sure I had offered him more than that and he had refused to take it.

He texted me when he made it home that he had fueled up and was going to bed. To this day I am still convinced that at the time he was last by my side, he had neither the

means nor desire to relapse. I have no idea what happened.

There was no time to grieve or to even think about the loss, I still had to move.

I called home and my Mom and sister rushed down and had me moved before I had to be at work that evening.

My new apartment was the largest space I have ever lived in. In fact, you could probably put all the other places I've lived inside of this one and still have room left over.

It was the lower level of my new boss's parent's home. From the front of the house it appeared as if the apartment would have to be an underground basement, but from the sides or back of the house you could see that actually the lower level was fully exposed, letting light into the huge space through a dozen or so large windows. Two doors that were both private entrances to the rental property were at either end of the back side of the house with a stone patio stretching in between.

It was unbelievably grand, but its location was inconveniently remote, and the vibe was kind of creepy. Other than the large kitchen and a bathroom, the rest of

the massive apartment was one open room that included a large mirror backed bar with maybe 10 stools, a fireplace, an oversized leather sectional couch, and a full size billiards table with plenty of elbow room. Those furnishings comprised maybe a quarter of the cavernous great room.

Between the main living space and the kitchen, a staircase descended from the upper level main home, where the somewhat elderly man and woman of the house lived. The man, my boss's father, had dementia, they said. I had met him briefly at the shop when we were all working to prepare the space for opening, and he had seemed fine, but I know that sometimes you have to be around someone for a while before you can pick up on the slips of their mind, or the repetitive loops that often emerge.

While I was moving I had come across some books that, thanks to my religious superstition, I had thought better of bringing into the house. I was sure there was nothing to fear, but, just in case . . . why not err on the side of caution?

In the middle of the night, I got up and made my way to the kitchen for a snack or something to drink. When I flipped on the kitchen light, there were the books that had

occult references in them, the ones I had left outside by the trash, in the center of the floor. My mind and heart were racing, trying to stay rational. Had I brought them back in and forgot?

Just then a voice said, in a sing-song, "I'm watching youuuuuu!"

I screamed like a banshee.

I have a loud voice and high lung capacity from singing most of my life. I could have woken the dead.

The old man from upstairs was on the landing, about four steps above the kitchen floor. I kept screaming until his wife appeared. She was pissed - at me!

"He's not going to hurt you, he isn't in his right mind," she scolded.

If he's not in his right mind, then you don't know what he is or isn't going to do, I thought.

He must have been watching me from a window when I had left the books out by the garbage. But, I'm surprised he was able to go out of the house and retrieve them on

his own. I never knew of him exiting the home alone any other time before or after that night. Regardless of the details, what I know for sure is that my books were brought inside by someone other than me and that the old man from upstairs had scared the bejesus out of me in the kitchen I was renting.

The door at the top of the stairs that separated my apartment from the main house had a lock on their side, but there was no latch on my side. After that incident I could never get a good night's sleep in that place because it would often sound like someone was coming down the stairs and I would have to rouse myself and look.

A couple of weeks later, while I was at work one evening I got a weird text message. It started out by saying whoever sent it had plans to kill me and chop off my head, but the rest of it was just word salad, it didn't make any sense.

I thought I should take it seriously though, once again, just in case and to err on the side of caution, so I stopped by the police station on my way home and tried to get help.

When an officer finally came out to talk to me, I handed him my phone to read the messages.

He looked up after a short time and handed my phone back to me. "So? It's a weird text message, what do you want me to do about it?"

"Is it not a crime to tell someone you are planning on killing them?"

"Let me see it again." He said, taking my phone back. He pulled a scrap of paper out of his pocket and wrote something down, and gave me my phone back again.

"Is there anything else?" he asked, doing his best to make sure I knew he thought I was wasting his time.

"Well, can you follow me home and check my apartment?" The bike ride home in the dark and the apartment were already creepy, it was going to be worse now that someone claimed I was going to be decapitated.

"I have more important things to do."

"Well, way to protect and serve. What a joke! I should have known better than to expect help from the police." I said, turning my bike around and taking it out of the police

station lobby, intentionally making it bang into things and making as much noise as possible.

I was furious. I hoped someone had the nerve to jump me or to be waiting for me. I was going to take out my frustrations with the cops on them.

Fortunately I made it home without incident, but the next morning I continued to receive text messages from the same number.

I looked online at the Huntington Police Department public records and the officer had filed a report about my complaint, HPD19-05438, but had already marked the case as closed.

I was going to have to handle it myself.

I set up a trap. I created an image to send that when the recipient opened it, it would capture their IP address and information. Before I sent it to the mystery texter, I sent it to Shareena and we tested it.

It worked!

I sent it to the number of the bizarre messages and a few seconds later it captured the culprits info. The IP address was to the same router I was using to connect to the internet, located upstairs. The call was coming from inside the house!

I suddenly felt guilty. Surely the man upstairs must have gotten my number off of something and might not even know who he was messaging or what he was saying. I phoned my boss, apologetic because I was afraid that even though my case had been marked as closed I thought there still might be a possibility the police could show up and it would be a problem or even just embarrassing.

My boss was adamant that his father didn't have any devices or even access to any, and that was the end of the discussion.

I tried following up with the phone service provider that the number belonged to; a company called Bandwidth, but they directed me to TextNow who blocked the number from texting me but said the police would have to contact them for more information or details about the owner of the number. I called the HPD and left message after

message but no one ever returned my calls, so eventually I just dropped my investigation.

A few weeks later on my bike ride home from work one evening a white truck ran me off the road, honking and yelling. They circled the block and came at me again, coming farther onto the shoulder and I had to drive my bike over the edge of a hill and into the creek to avoid being hit. I'm not saying it had anything to do with the text messages or anything else, people are awful to bicyclists even though the road I traveled to and from work was marked as a bike lane, but it certainly didn't help my peace of mind which was already suffering.

I had to repeat one of my college classes because due to lack of sleep and my declining mental health I had dropped the ball.

Then one evening as I sat at the bar doing school work in the creepy apartment, the light above me dropped down and some kind of crud fell out of the fixture onto me. I told myself to stay calm. They had just remodeled the basement before I moved in, the light had just gotten warm for the first time and had slipped down, I reasoned. But then I heard the old man's voice from upstairs. It

sounded like he was laughing and saying, “we are going to get you.”

Why did he have to keep being so on-the-nose creepy?

I walked outside and to the street in front of the house to get some air. I called my boss on the phone and I asked him what his father had done for work before, and he said he had owned a candy shop. Then my boss said, “Just go back in the house, you will be fine.”

I hadn’t told him I was outside.

It gave me chills but I tried not to acknowledge it on the line. Maybe his mom had seen me out there and texted him or possibly he could just tell where I was by ambient noise, who could say? I didn’t want to jump to conclusions, but I was having a hard time dismissing paranoid options from my potential explanations for all of the weird things that kept happening. For instance, my garbage would vanish sometimes when it wasn't trash day. Or, another example, my bike's tires had both been slashed while on the stone patio out back one night. Weird stuff.

We ended the call, but I was even more disturbed and on edge than I had been before it. Still, I was managing to keep myself together, not quite hysterical yet.

Then I saw the house at the end of the street had flashing red and blue lights beside one of the windows, coming from where the shutters hung. The dam broke and I was completely swept away by a rushing wave of paranoid fear. At work we also had red and blue flashing lights. I didn't know what it meant, but it felt like a bigger conspiracy and I was having a full out panic attack.

I started running.

I was barefoot and just in pajama bottoms, no shirt. I ran farther than I would have normally been able to, but I was full of adrenaline and overwhelmed by the tsunami of emotion. Nothing felt real. Everywhere I looked I would see flashing red and blue lights somewhere in my line of sight, driving me further.

I had run all the way to a used tire shop and I was crouching beside a wall trying to avoid the lights. Suddenly there was a bang on the wall behind me. It was made of thin metal sheeting and it had made a loud crashing sound. I came around the wall to see what had

caused it, and you will never believe who was on the other side; it was Bachelor #1 from Shareena's return to Charleston days.

I must be living in a simulation or horror movie, I thought!

We talked for a little while and it helped to pull me back into reality. He had moved to Huntington and his new girlfriend was pregnant. I was suddenly exhausted, so I said I needed to head back home, but we exchanged numbers before parting so I could prove to myself I hadn't hallucinated running into him the next day.

I started back towards the apartment but the going was slow because now my feet were feeling the wear and tear of running without shoes or socks for nearly two miles.

By the time I made it home I was so tired and defeated, that I didn't care what happened to me. I slept the soundest hours of sleep I had managed since the first night I had moved into that unnerving place.

The next day on my walk to work I called my mom and begged her for help. I told her I didn't know what to do, but I seriously needed her. "What do you expect me to do? It's too far to drive anyway!" Was her response.

I tried to make it clear, I was in trouble. I gravely needed her, but she brushed me off. In her defense, she never drove on the interstate, ever, and I was a good hour's drive away. Still, I had pleaded with her, and she was cold and unmoved.

The following Friday, after an afternoon party of guests at work, I walked to the Sheetz gas station for a smoothie where I happened to run into a friend of a friend from Recovery Point. He offered me a hit off of his cigarette that he said had dabs, the waxy concentrated version of marijuana, in it.

I only hit it once, but after I started walking away I totally blacked out. I am highly sensitive to THC but even at that, I can't imagine what made me completely lose hours of time.

When I came back to myself, it was dark out, I was covered in mud and far from the last place I could remember having been.. My body was hurting like I had been beaten up.

Even down to this day I still don't know what had happened.

I walked home and stripped my filthy clothes off on the patio and went inside to get cleaned up. I was aching all over and panic was building at being back in the disquieting solitude of the oversized apartment. The more I tried to piece together what had happened to me and persistently kept coming up with nothing but black emptiness only made it worse. I was starting to have another panic attack.

I called 911 for an ambulance.

Four uniformed first responders came and checked me out, but I didn't want to go to the hospital. Once the EMTs were there with me I felt foolish at having been so out of sorts, so they left as abruptly as they had arrived.

Still, I desperately wanted out of that spooky apartment and out of the town of Huntington, so I threw my laptop into my backpack and decided I was leaving. I would walk to Charleston if I had to.

I walked through the rest of the night and into the morning hours.

In the early sunlight a woman on a porch gave me a cup of coffee and called my mom, but I confessed to that kind barista that I felt like I was being followed. I was still feeling paranoid. The woman saw the man I pointed out to her, as I asked if she was seeing him to confirm to myself that I wasn't imagining things, and even though she didn't have an explanation for why he was there in her cul-de-sac, she said she was sure he wasn't following me.

I continued on towards Charleston, but after a short while a policeman pulled up behind me. Getting out of his vehicle he said, "We've gotten three calls on you already today, I'm taking you in."

A man came out of the house I was in front of. The cop asked him if his car was unlocked, and he said yes. So, he said, "Alright, I'm charging this guy with tampering with your vehicle."

The man said, "He clearly hasn't, I have an ipad and a wallet in my car, and they are still there."

"It doesn't matter, you'll never be subpoenaed or anything." the cop replied.

I had been mellow with the officer, hoping that if I just stayed calm and compliant he would let me go. He had me get face down on the ground and he cuffed my hands behind my back and then he twisted my thumb until it popped and I thought he had broken it. He was trying to get me to fight so that he could charge me with resisting arrest. Well if he wanted a scene, I was going to give him one. I screamed and cried after he torqued my thumb. I was thinking clearly, but the situation was maddening, it was totally unfair and I was fed up with the whole town and weird things that kept happening and being afraid while also feeling abandoned, alone, and trapped.

I was taken to the jail and immediately thrown into solitary confinement in a pickle suit, forced to strip totally naked except for that stiff green blanket wrap with arm holes. Eventually another man was put into the same cell as me. He claimed to be there for having brandished a gun, threatening to kill himself over an issue with his wife, but I suspect he might have been placed there to evaluate me.

I had been arrested on December the 20th, so due to the Christmas and then New Years holidays, I was held for 20 days without even being arraigned.

When I was able to use the phone I called my family and my mom said, “you are going to go to prison for ten years,” even though I told her I was innocent. She either didn’t believe me or didn't think it mattered.

I told her my college classes were going to be messed up. She didn’t care. And sure enough, because I was already repeating a class and then had two weeks of total absence, I was expelled.

The man in the cell above me had twice broken his toilet, flooding my cell with vile sewage water both times. Still, she wouldn't bail me out.

Once they finally took me to the courthouse to at last appear before a judge, I was still denied that right, instead I was just returned back to the jail and released without ever seeing a magistrate or anyone. I was given a piece of paper ordering me to go to Presteria for psychological follow up, but that was it. My mom and one of my aunt's were there. Who knows if they had meddled in my affairs? I was never charged with anything, but I should never have been arrested in the first place. That officer should lose his badge and have to pay for a wrongful arrest and filing a false report.

Clearly everyone had operated on the belief I was crazy. I was certainly stressed and exhausted but I was completely sane.

When my mom took me from the jail back to the creepy apartment my boss claimed that I was behind a thousand dollars on rent, which wasn't true, but my mom just paid it. I had, in fact, been struggling to pay rent but my main employer was also my landlord. I was in a crazy situation, but I was not foolish. Still, she wasn't on my side. My mother paid out a grand rather than believe or support me.

I moved out of there and rented a room off of another coworker from the office where I conducted surveys for the CDC.

I continued to work both jobs even after all of that traumatic experience for a short while but, I would fully part ways with my former landlord and boss soon. The whole world was about to come to a screeching halt. The Corona virus global pandemic was just about to strike.

Chapter 18: **Armageddon**

All of my life I had been in expectation of “critical times hard to deal with,” basically the worst era to live through that the earth would ever know, to then be quickly followed by the war of Armageddon in which everyone outside of our religion would be killed and Satan the Devil and his demons would be locked away for a thousand years during which the planet and surviving humanity would be restored to perfection along with the resurrected dead who had been faithful in life or otherwise had missed the opportunity to be educated in matters of faith before they had perished.

It was fuel for many nightmares and a looming threat to encourage obedience and good behavior.

With the Covid virus popping off it felt like the apocalypse was upon us. Fortunately for me, even before the pandemic began, I had already started back attending the

Sunday meetings of my family's faith in the preceding year.

In the first weeks of the pandemic I had continued to have occasional calls with my mom in which my devotion to her had finally begun to sour. She was still closed off to any attempt I made to express myself to her about anything of substance to me.

I wanted her to know that the door to any form of relationship between us was closing. I asked her if there was anything she would want to say to me if it was going to be her last opportunity and she had nothing to offer.

The last straw for me was a conversation we had in which she related an account to me of how some homeless people had been sleeping under the carport of the place of worship I had helped build several years before, and she told me with relish how they had been run off and sent packing.

I was through with her. She had killed my affection for her, a death by a thousand blows, and now even beyond our relationship she seemed to just be an objectively bad person. Someone I would not willingly be associated with.

Still, even if I wasn't going to have a relationship with my mother, I thought that being in the congregation was necessary for my future.

A few months later I asked for the local elders to meet with me to evaluate the possibility of my being reinstated to the congregation. After a lengthy process I was approved, and an announcement was going to be made that I was once again a member.

Later I would eventually learn that my brother living in Florida had tried to intervene in the process. He had been so stupid and bold that he had called the father of the girl he had once used as a tool to dissolve his first marriage to try and involve himself in my affairs.

What could he have had to say? I hadn't spoken to him in the past decade. He lived a thousand miles away. He certainly had no business sticking his ugly nose where it was in no way welcome. This is one of the many mysteries my family withholds the answer to, in their haughty narcissistic silence.

Out of consideration for the fact that I knew people would be approaching my mother to ask about me once it was

known I was back in good standing, I gave her a call. She didn't ask me about my experience or have much to say about me, but she talked at length about her chickens and other of her mundane interests.

I was annoyed at how my attempt at empathetic thoughtfulness had yielded further proof of her unworthiness.

Still, I needed help which hadn't come up since she never even asked me how I was doing. So, I called back and told her about a financial situation I was dealing with in which my paychecks were backed up and I hadn't been paid yet, although I was owed for a couple of weeks. She loaned me some money.

Later that night, she called me for a third time in the same day and when I answered she practically yelled at me in an angry huff, *"Where are you?"*

I was sitting on the toilet in my home. I have no idea what prompted the sharp inquiry or where she thought I might be, or even where I could have been to warrant that kind of call. How was it any of her business anyway where I was? I wasn't doing anything other than what the commode was made for. I told her I was at home and in

the bathroom, and that I had been paid finally and would be returning her money in the morning, ending the call.

The next day, on my way to the bank, I called to tell her the money would be back in her account momentarily and that I thought she had no business claiming to be a Christian and that her doing evangelical work was a joke. It was only my opinion, and one I wouldn't have shared with anyone else. She, however, would apparently go on to broadcast it to anyone who would listen.

I hadn't wanted to call her when I was reinstated and clearly I shouldn't have. But what she did next is truly heinous.

My rejoining the congregation had come at a time when an elderly woman who was always especially fond of me, and used to consistently save me a seat to sit beside her, was receiving hospice care for her final days.

I was able to speak to her on the phone for a couple of hours in which we openly discussed both of our lives, and deepest thoughts and fears, mistakes we had made, and our affection for each other.

It was one of the most meaningful, open, and salient conversations of my life.

I called to check on her the next day and she was deeply troubled and grieved, she had been upset by the poison gossip of my mother while on her deathbed.

I don't know if I could ever forgive her for that. How evil of that selfish woman to take away that dear lady's peace in her final hours with business that only concerned the two of us.

I approached the elders of her congregation to ask them to mediate a meeting between us so that I could finally say some of the things I had needed to say to her and to tell her to stay out of my life, but they didn't want to get involved and turned me down.

I sat on my hands and tried to do what the men in charge thought was best.

In the meantime, I was able to call my-friend-Patrick-from-NY, and we had a nice conversation. At one point he said, "I promise, I'm always going to be your friend."

A few days later he cryptically texted me, "A mind is a terrible thing to waste." I replied, "You think I am wasting my mind?" I don't know if he had been fed information by my family or what had happened. But, I haven't heard from him since.

A couple of weeks later my sister reached out to me to tell me about a Covid utility supplement that the office where she worked was overseeing and administering. She encouraged me to apply for it, promising me, unprompted and extemporaneously, that she would never even see my application.

During the process she suddenly became angry at me, emailing me "not to insult her intelligence." I have no idea what had triggered her or what she was referring to but it had come to my attention that not only had she accessed my application, she had altered it without my knowledge or approval.

I was afraid that since she was abruptly pissed at me for unknown reasons that she would do something to thwart my application. Out of the blue she fired off another message to me and offered up her boss's email in case I wanted to report her for messing with my files; so I did.

The next day my mom called, yelling and cursing. She ignorantly accused me of causing my sister to lose her job, and demanded I get it back for her, as if that were even within my power. I lost my temper for the first time ever with her and regrettably called her a “stupid bitch.”

That was the last I ever heard from her.

But, her premise had been faulty. My sister's actions had jeopardized her own employment. Nothing I could do fifty miles away had any bearing on her compliance with internal policy or decision to violate it.

I sent copies of a lengthy letter to everyone in the family after that incident in which I had expressed my feelings on matters and recounted events that had deeply affected me over the years. It included my discovery of the significance of the blue flowered skirt I had worn as a child. In it I asked for an explanation of the meddling they had been doing in my life and insisted that they stop.

No one ever responded at all. No, “I’m sorry that happened to you,” or “that you felt that way,” or to tell me I had anything wrong in my recounting of the past. Only silence has stretched out from each of them ever since.

My friend Anna, the therapist, said it shouldn't be surprising my correspondence wasn't answered, they obviously are horrible people who have never been interested in hearing me.

Being back in the congregation was going much differently than I could have imagined. I was having a one on one study with one of the elders that was presenting me with matters that I had used to fully believe, only they weren't holding up under my adult scrutiny. I had lived too much life to easily swallow the bitter pills I was reencountering; ideas that I never had questioned before.

Right at the beginning of my return to the faith, one of the first events I had been able to attend was the observance of the Lord's Evening Meal or Last Supper. That morning, a corresponding video from the denomination's world headquarters had referenced Adam and Eve and said they had been presented with a clear and simple test of obedience in the Garden of Eden with the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

It bothered me.

If our perfect ancestors had been given a "clear and simple" test, why is our trial so difficult and muddled on

top of us being imperfect? If they had failed the easy version while being perfect, putting us at a disadvantage since we inherited sin, then why were we taking it in hard mode in addition to having that handicap? The test, the part God was supposed to be in charge of, had become exponentially more complex and shrouded in contradictory interpretations between many denominations and different religions. It didn't make sense.

Other problems would continue to emerge.

I was frustrated to find that the prophecies in the scripture are not independently confirmable as having been told in advance of their fulfillment, such as with the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of Babylon for example.

Furthermore, whereas in the scriptures it had said that once Babylon was destroyed that it would never again be inhabited, this had proved to be false. Saddam Hussain had even rebuilt Nebuchadnezzar's palace in the 80's.

When I considered if the men who had written the Bible had the opportunity and motivation for promoting their own ideas or beliefs, instead of the wisdom of a supernatural Divine being, the answer was not reassuring.

The record even supports that discouraging conclusion when you consider passages like Deuteronomy 21:10-14 that says while the Israelites were committing genocide, if a man saw a foreign woman he would like to take as his wife, he could take her in, give her a month to get over the fact he had killed her father, brothers, and destroyed her home, then try her out sexually and if he wasn't pleased, push her out to fend for herself.

Godly sanctioned sex slavery out of genocide? And I am the abomination?

The death blow to a lifetime of absolute confidence and trust in the Bible and religion at large came with my realization that objections to the theory of evolution had been made in bad faith.

I had always been presented with the persuasive argument that random chance couldn't have produced the complexity and diversity of life we can observe. Well, that had been precisely the issue answered by Darwin's "On The Origin Of Species"; natural selection is *not random*.

The filter of competition between organisms to successfully reproduce and pass along their genetic information across an incomprehensible passage of time handily explains all of life in its many forms we know

today, a conclusion supported by multiple lines of evidence, including the fossil record, comparative anatomy and molecular biology.

Surely, anyone still using that outdated argument had to know it had long since been answered. That only leaves intentional obfuscation or irrationally persistent ignorance as the motivation behind using debunked “proof.”

And just like with a **snap** from the infinity gauntlet, or for my real comic nerds, a blast from the ultimate nullifier, a huge chunk of my cause for all of the shame, the foundation of my walls, the whole conflict central to my life, was gone.

Never had it been my goal, or even an outcome I would have thought possible, for my belief in God or trust in the Bible and religion to have to be changed at all, much less be eviscerated.

If ever anything was immovable, I had been sure it was those beliefs. Now, like the walls of Jericho, the whole structure of my universe magically collapsed into ruins, and I, like the modern day Rahab, was the lone survivor left to sort through the rubble.

At the same time my family and faith had failed me, so did another institution I believed to be unassailable; my relationship with Shareena.

Bachelor #2, the man who had been so determined to wedge himself between us finally succeeded when he messaged me and propositioned me for a rendezvous. I had flatly refused him and immediately told her, thinking that we would laugh about it. She took offense though and said I should never have engaged with him at all and bizarrely said that I was untrustworthy.

She understandably has strong emotions regarding him, since he is the deadbeat father of her little girl.

I never had approved of him. Still, I don't find any satisfaction in saying, "I told you so," so what can I say? I hate being right.

Obviously that was a flimsy pretext for something she must have felt she couldn't be honest with me about. I don't know what that issue could be, but I think I have a clue. I had told her before that if she ever engaged with my family behind my back that I didn't know if I could forgive her.

I see that some of my family has friended her on social media.

That was the last I heard from her and it has been more than a year now.

Writing this book has been a love letter to her as much as anything else, but I am afraid that there is just too much distance and history between us now to ever see us back together again.

I would run out into the night and offer to give her a ride if I could, to bridge the gap that is too far to expect her to walk alone. But, I can't.

Even my friend and singing partner Jessica had gotten married and I hadn't even been told about the wedding. She has also become a mother now too, and I am happy for her.

Life has gone on for everyone else while I went off numbing against, and then trying to make sense of, my own. Now that I have started to heal, I can't expect them to be where they were when I had taken the extreme detour I needed to find myself.

It would be selfish of me to wish they were right there waiting where I had left them, but sometimes, I confess that I do.

One thing I know for certain and from first hand experience; you can't force someone to love you or to be who you wish they were, rather than who they really are.

Experiencing incredible loss, grief, and pain, teaches you the real value of the things that make you smile. Being exsanguinated of everything you believe in, trust in, and hope in, sharpens your focus on happiness and the simple truth that achieving it is a decision.

The Bible book of Revelation is a prophetic fever dream about the end of the world as we know it and the ultimate battle between good and evil. It's also where the idea of the ride of the four Horsemen of the Apocalypse had come from.

With the entire globe in lockdown and so much of my own framework for viewing it destroyed I found myself remembering when I had been designated as one of those riders.

I wondered for the first time which one I was supposed to have been.

The red horse symbolizes war. I immediately recognized that would have been Paul. I had described him before as a muscled fist of a man, and noted that he had casually offered in plain language to murder on my behalf. He was always sweet to me though, and I loved him for being so protective of me. I saw his heart was soft and golden, but he told me he had a violent side and liked to fight.

The black horse with its rider holding scales is famine. That had to be Josh. Even though we had a communal kitchen that was stocked with anything we wanted on a weekly basis, his personal room was crowded with his personal stash of food and drinks. He obsessively hoarded up those goods that he managed to obtain with only his good looks, fast talking and irresistible charisma.

The pale horse, trailed by hades, represented death. That had to be Danny. He was nihilistic and always the last to show up anywhere, always with some goth chick haunting behind him.

That meant I had to be the rider of the white horse. The one given a crown and bow.

Well, I had seen the fall of Babylon the Great Harlot, or false religion, but if I was meant to be Conquest then I was going to have to slay the wild beast.

I only knew one way to summon it; every other time I had confronted it had involved the same person. But, unfortunately, Patrick wasn't speaking to me.

Kurt, a friend that Patrick had introduced me to when we were all still just teenagers, surprisingly had sent me a drawing he made for me on my 42nd birthday. It was an opening that allowed us to reconnect, and he had become one of my only confidantes and supports.

Kurt was still living in upstate NY and had been going through a divorce. I think us both being black sheep had allowed us to flock together once again.

We were sharing music we had been working on when I came across an old recording of an original song Patrick had written several years earlier.

"The weekend has just begun and you're tired,
Strung out again

I try to make you laugh
but it's no use,
You turn away and you say
That you care for me but you don't,
It's false
Why don't you make up your mind
I was kind
Now leave me alone

You mock me
No I can't believe the words that you said
Shock me
Yeah I can't get you out of my head
My head, my head"

"I'm sitting here by the phone all alone
My thoughts to myself
Why haven't you called me yet
Oh I regret
The words that I said
Baby why don't you care for me
You pushed me away
I said maybe
this is my second chance
And I'm better off

You broke me
No the tear can't be repaired
You're joking
It's a shame you don't even care
You don't care, don't care"

As I listened to it for the first time in well over a decade it hit me incredibly hard and sliced right through me. The lyrics were speaking to me right then and about that very moment. I don't know how it was possible. I sobbed in heaving, heavy gasps of emotion. When the song ended I was totally shattered and like a thick creeping smoke the monster filled the dark spaces of my room.

It laughed with the power it held over me and relished being set free once again, as its grotesque face and dragon body slowly materialized before me.

It mocked me and belittled my solitary sexuality that had been forced upon me by my being denied the opportunity to pursue healthy relationships or to escape this backwards inhospitable geographic region earlier in my life.

But the ugly beast didn't know I was prepared.

I was my own person now, not bending myself or hiding parts of who I am to try and live up to what someone else thought I should be. I had been given the crown of self governance and acceptance.

Refusing to be a vessel for the small minded self loathing, fear, anger, and poison that are the monster's life blood, I was no longer defenceless. I felt as if I had been given a weapon; a bow with love and pride as arrows in the quiver.

Facing the beast clear eyed, it suddenly appeared much smaller and feeble. I held the bow in front of me, pulled the arrow back to my cheek on the taught string, sighting down the shaft to aim at the target and with an exhale released the nock.

The arrow flew true, piercing the scaly skin of the ugly creature.

With a whimper the monster retreated away, deathly weak and drained of power, and although not dealt a mortal blow, it won't find a home inside of me anymore.

"Then I saw a white horse. Its rider carried a bow and was given a crown. He had already won some victories, and he went out to win more." - Revelation 6:2

Armageddon was touted as the final battle between good and evil, so in a sense, it had come to pass. Everything I had ever thought to be holy or of virtue was utterly destroyed and laid bare, yet somehow, I had managed to survive.

Song IV: (Maybe) It's All Up To You

Maybe you're stuck in the middle
So non-committal
Is that all you'll say

Maybe the woulda could haves
The shoulda could haves
Are just in the way

Tell your own story
Write your own ending
Follow it through
Some new beginning
Your own happy ending
Is all up to you
It's all up to you

Maybe if you're seeking perfection
A course correction
Is overdue

Maybe at the intersection
The wrong direction
Would be a better view

Tell your own story
Write your own ending
Follow it through
Some new beginning
Your own happy ending
Is all up to you
It's all up to you

It's the plans that you make
The path that you take
It's the road mapped out before you
Another clean slate
The rules that you break
It's what you're going to do now

Tell me your story
Write your own ending
Follow it through
Some new beginning
Your own happy ending
Is all up to you
It's all up to you

<https://www.reverbnation.com/buggamile/song/3459001>
9-bug-maybe-its-all-up-to-you

Chapter 19: Conquest

For so much of my life, I had believed that my mother and our religion were unquestionable. That these two pillars of virtue, the guideposts and foundation stones of my life, were made out of love, wisdom, and concern for my best interests. Despite experiencing their contempt, ignorance and selfishness, I held on to the idealized versions of them both. Even in the face of more and more contradictory evidence, my trust and love were the locks that kept me captive. I had been willing to destroy myself rather than walk away from those things. Had I been less sincere, less trusting, or more hard hearted, I would have been free all the sooner. I never would have imagined that all the baggage I desperately clung to would turn out to be not only worthless, but also the very thing that held me back.

I had thought that if I were just virtuous enough, strong enough, or determined enough, so as to never stray too far from who other people thought I should be and never fully towards who I really am or could be, that I would be able to hold on to some pieces of the things, people and life that I believed to be good.

But I was wrong and I ended up with none of those things.

My family, my indoctrinized faith, and my former friends are no longer part of my life. I only wish it hadn't taken me so long,

through so much pain, to discover that those things were only fool's gold.

Once I finally recognized my own mother as being unloving, hypocritical and narcissistic, maybe it was inevitable that, for me, the parallel tower of denominational religion would also fall.

Back when I was at Faith's house and I had those first failed attempts to communicate with my mom, all I had wanted was for her to know me, much in the way that you now do. She had been too selfish and self-righteous to allow me to speak. But isn't that all anyone ever really wants; to feel seen, to be heard, to be understood, to matter?

An ancient Chinese seller of implements of war had been confronted with the paradox of what would happen if an immovable object should meet an unstoppable force. For this thought experiment, two assumptions are required; that two separate bodies are involved and that both are indestructible.

There are unstoppable forces that affect us all. The laws of nature and the march of time are absolute and inescapable.

If I could go back in time, back to when I was in the hospital for my first failed attempt at suicide, when that Doctor had said, "But honey, you have to be yourself whether other people like it or not," and I thought, "she hasn't heard me," I would tell myself, "No, you are wrong! She perfectly understands and is telling you

the simple truth, unlike everyone else in your life." But, I wonder if I could be convinced?

I was trying with all my might to be an immovable object back then.

Sadly, I have come to appreciate all too well that I, like all human beings, am fragile and ephemeral. We can be destroyed by trying to resist those unstoppable forces.

But, like a tree in a storm, it's our ability to bend that makes us strong. Or, as Charles Darwin said, "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent. It is the one that is most adaptable to change."

Even the "Serenity Prayer" often heard at meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous says: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

But, I have heard old timers say a better version might be, "God, grant me the serenity to accept the people I cannot change, the courage to change the person I can, and the wisdom to know that it is only me."

My life has proven to me that I am flexible, adaptable, and I am willing to learn and to change.

I wasted a lot of time trying to be like the rigid, backwards and blighted role models I had grown up with.

I know I am a good friend and that I am trustworthy. And, I have a deep appreciation for these hard learned lessons;

As long as you have life, change is possible.

You must be your authentic self, whoever that is, and whatever that might look like.

What other people think about you is their problem and none of your business.

Whatever source you personally attribute to the existence of the vast and awesome universe, rest assured, He, She, or It, is obviously not concerned with how you, or anyone else, is intimate or finds satisfaction in this brief and astronomically unlikely moment of our physical experience. There are much larger concerns in the universe than the sex enjoyed by consenting adults.

Most of the regressive, fear-driven, and small-minded religious zealots would rather engineer a violent Apocalypse than practice empathy or engage in honest dialogue. They are terrified of unclothed human bodies and are mentally and emotionally blighted by ignorance and/or dishonesty about human sexuality.

Many of them are sincere and well intentioned, but that doesn't mean they aren't idiotic, hypocritical, and wrong.

Jesus taught that loving your neighbor was a superseding tenant and illustrated with the parable of the Good Samaritan that it means protecting and caring for people with different ways of life, religious beliefs, and practices you may disagree with!

Religion can be the cudgel of the unsympathetic to protect against uncomfortable confrontation with the reality of someone else's experience when it is unfamiliar, uncommon, or different.

To paraphrase a quote from AA's Big Book; Contempt prior to investigation is the key to everlasting ignorance.

Not that long ago, religious belief was the basis for forcing the left-handed minority to conform to the right-handed majority's dexterity. Similarly, this unkind insistence in the virtue of the default experience of the majority is at the heart of prejudice and vilification of transgender, gay or lesbian, and all manner of other social minorities despite there being scientific and biological indicators for the validity of their experience. This suppression of nonconformity fuels the anti-"woke" movement.

Ironically, Jesus Christ is recorded in the Bible as choosing to associate with sex workers and others viewed as transgressive or repulsive.

When I told my mother that she had no business calling herself a Christian, it was a conclusion I had reached supported by the evidence of her unkind attitude and actions toward the unhoused and disadvantaged she proudly relished in describing being coldly dismissed and displaced from the shelter they sought at

her place of worship during the global pandemic. I just don't believe that is what Jesus had in mind when he drove merchants from the temple. He was protecting the poorest people who had come there for comfort. Somehow, despite a life of dedication to the scriptures, she has managed to miss the point!

Still, I truly believe the vast majority of us do the best we can with the circumstances and situations we find ourselves confronting. But, the higher good and way of loving kindness is to understand and feel the mind and heart of someone different than yourself; an act you have undertaken by allowing me to tell my story.

People often say, "It doesn't cost anything to be kind." When actually, true acts of kindness usually involve personal sacrifice and a conscious decision to invest in someone else's interests that don't necessarily align with your own. Kindness is a gift to be received graciously and given generously, but it certainly is never free.

Please try to be understanding and kind with yourself and all other people.

But, If someone is misguided or evil enough to try and undermine your pursuit of integrity in your life, or to deny you the honest expression of your authentic self, just know that they are the one with the problem and their immature ignorance is not your responsibility.

Even though I'm no longer part of an organized denomination of Christianity, I still find a lot of beauty and value in the Bible.

"If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God's secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't love others, I would be nothing. If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing.

Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.

... love will last forever." 1 Corinthians 13:1–8 (NLV)

16th Century writer John Lyly (alternatively, Lily or Lilly, interestingly as my last name is also Lilly) observed, "The true measure of life is not length, but honesty."

THIS is your life! Right now! Are you living an honest life or trying to be what someone else thinks you should be? Choose

your friends carefully, wisely and deliberately. Honor them with your time and love while you can.

No one is immovable, and that is a beautiful thing. There is always room to grow in love.

So, that has been my life. Thank you for taking the time to consider it. You, my dear reader, are now a part of my story's happy ending.

I am truly grateful and honored that you have come to know me by reading my memoir. It is my hope that my experiences might help someone else be freed all the sooner from their solitude and they start living with personal integrity and authenticity.

If it's true that I am, in some small way, like the rider of the white steed from the four horsemen in Revelation, that I have been given a crown of autonomy and a weapon to defend myself against shame and guilt, then I can look to the future with optimism!

I have won some battles and will go out to win more!

It took everything I went through to get me to where I am today. I'm proud of who I am and what I've been able to overcome.

I guess when I look behind me, the fact that my path is littered with a little horse shit, makes perfect sense.



Terry Bug Lilly

Currently resides in Huntington, WV and hopes that sharing his story in this way will open doors of opportunity for him to be able to help others.

www.TerryBugLilly.com

www.BuggedOutDesigns.com