

A stone window with a cross inside, viewed through barbed wire in a field. The window is set in a concrete frame and has a cross visible through the panes. The scene is framed by several strands of barbed wire, with white feathers caught on them. The background is a bright blue sky with white clouds and a green field.

DALE BROWN

CHILDHOOD LOST

PART ONE

Memories of a childhood in
THE WORLDWIDE CHURCH OF GOD
- THE PAINFUL TRUTH -



This is Dale Browns story. A story of child abuse, parental conflict, and the horror within the confines of a religious cult founded by Herbert W. Armstrong.

From the age of six, Dale tells the story of a family broken apart by a religious cults powerful influence over his family. What had been a middle class family of eight became a single parent family of seven living on welfare. At age twelve, the conflict between family and church, the lack of love and support at home drives young Dale to the streets in a desperate attempt to escape the insanity!

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DALE BROWN
AUTOBIOGRAPHY

CHILDHOOD LOST
PART ONE

- THE PAINFUL TRUTH -

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Chapter 1

The winter of '54 was a cold one on the Washington coast, the kind of winter kids applaud and adults cuss. I had one year of pure freedom left before starting first grade and, although I suffered vague misgivings about leaving home at the early age of six, it seemed as far off in the future as heaven or hell, neither of which carried a tenth the seasonal weight of Christmas.

Parents and spirit beings of either persuasion might well have been jotting down each and every Sunday school transgression but, as I and every other child knew, Santa drove the sleigh.

That being the case, all one had to do was adhere to a short list of rules: Don't hit your brothers, don't swear, obey your parents as if you were encephalic, say your prayers each night, say, "Yes, sir," and "Yes, ma'am," to every human being on the f__king planet who was more than ten days older than you, be nice to dear Uncle Bruno and Auntie Phlebitis (even if you did hear Daddy uncharitably refer to them as a couple of miserable peckerwoods last week), and so on and so forth, and the rules ground on and those of us with attention spans commensurate with our educations (which is to say innocently illiterate), opted for Blanket Order Number One.

Blanket Order Number One, although written down nowhere, could be quoted verbatim by any child of religious upbringing the wide world over. It went like this: "Thou Shall Not Get Caught!" That was it! All the freeze dried morality in the entire comprehensible universe reconstituted into five simple syllables. For Santa, it seemed, took umbrage only at such evil doings as were reported to him by adults, and what they didn't know he wouldn't hear about!

The child's mission in life was, thus, clear; aside from personal Christmas wish lists, one's sacred duty lay in seeing to it that parents knew nothing at all. Such blasphemies as spitting on the sidewalk, cursing, or extending a solitary equatorial phalange to

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innocent passers by, which would have been swiftly reported to headquarters in previous epochs by a sorrowful (but righteously indignant!) older brother, ("I'm sorry, my son, but it's for the good of your soul,") were now judiciously overlooked. Right was right, but this was war.

Despite having the shortest days of the year, December hours struggled past in single file; time drags when you're being good. For as every child knew (and, again, the theorem was never publicly propounded), there is an inverse relationship between time and righteousness which goes like this: The apparent length of any given day is automatically increased by a factor of four the nicer you have to be to those you despise. As an addendum, it swiftly became apparent that the nicer one had to be to those they loathed the more of them they had to put up with at any given time.

As the great day lurched laboriously closer, however, all such equations became splotched and smeared and eventually ran together like watercolors in the rain. On the day before the day before Christmas, every rightly constructed child's emotional state had one or more counties in it which would have qualified as emotional super fund cleanup sites had an EPA existed at that time. We'd been as good to as many for as long as was humanly possible and the earthly dams of self control and moral restraint began buckling.

There were just a few trickles at first, a quick Camel cigarette appropriated from my father's pack when he wasn't looking (I'd sworn off tobacco several weeks before Christmas but the strain of total abstinence had become well nigh unbearable), a stealthy "Ah, shit," when a younger sibling lost his favorite shooter in a game of marbles, and even his highness, older brother Bruce, was moved on more than one occasion to mutter "Oh, chicken poop!" when asked to perform one of the many meaningless tasks which parents seem so adroit as assigning. The end was near and it was none too soon.

If one more centimeter of goodness had been forcibly extracted from my tortured soul it would've been bled lily white but, finally, it really was the night before Christmas.

Visions of sugar plums aside, I was exhausted. Being good for so long had robbed my natural sinfulness of all its native vitality. It would, I felt, take at least a year of uninhibited self indulgence to repair the damage... and why wait? It was 9:00 p.m. Pacific Standard

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Time, Santa was on his way, the goodies were in transit and, during one of my semi daily reconnaissance missions through the kitchen, I had discovered a large cache of Christmas candy. I had also seized one of the tastiest of these bags and hidden it under my mattress. Under cover of darkness, I had intended to devour the entire contents at my leisure but, alas, I was overcome at the crucial moment by the spirit of the season.

I selflessly offered to share my ill gotten booty with my older brother and had asked the great Bruce if he thought Santa would overlook the dubious methods by which it had been obtained so long as it was shared with those less fortunate (and larcenous). With the kindness and diplomacy which so characterizes youth the world over, my brother informed me that I had nothing to worry about. Santa Claus didn't exist.

It was easily 11:00 p.m. at this juncture but I fled for sanctuary down the long, dark hall to my parents' room, burst through the door and yelled, "Mom! Dad! Brucie says there's no Santa Claus! He's lying, isn't he? Please say he's lying! There is too a Santa Claus... isn't there?" For the next several hours, Santa was explained away as a rite of passage. One of those quaint, cultural baptisms little children get dunked in. But when the ceremony was over, it was over. Forever. One got on with life, that was how life was...

Without Santa, I no longer had to worry about storing up goodness for Christmas days; they would never come again. Nor would I ever again have to attempt the impossible task of staying awake all night on the twenty-fourth of December in hopes of catching a fleeting glimpse of the elusive elf. And never again would I totally trust my parents' word on issues which seemed too good to be true.

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Chapter 2 HERBERT

That proved to be the last Christmas I ever celebrated. My parents joined Herbert Armstrong's Radio Church of God late that winter and were full fledged members by April.

Herbert claimed to have made a thorough study of history and the Bible. In so doing he had discovered that Christmas, Valentine's Day, Easter and Halloween were pagan holidays of the most idolatrous sort. They were principally Babylonian in origin, he said, and had been adopted as Christian by that great harlot in Italy, the Roman Catholic Church, in a nefarious attempt to corrupt and deceive honest Christians the world over.

As God's prophet he had been called, he declared, to "Cry aloud and spare not! To lift up his voice like a trumpet and show America and Britain their sins!" He was not slack concerning this divine commission, either. These laudable assignments not only came straight from God Himself, but the good book made mention of his Holy Mission, as well. He had no doubt that the sacred scriptures spoke of him.

By early summer, my brothers and I had been rather forcibly introduced to Armstrong's god and he was a demanding piece of work. All unnecessary social contacts with the heathen world, such as playing baseball at school or hide and seek with the neighbor children were terminated. God's people, including their offspring, were commanded by God (through Herbert) to "Come out from among them and be not partakers of their sins!"

The sect's marching orders were simple and succinct coming nearly straight as they did from the Lord via Armstrong. "Fear and Tremble," to question Herbert, his hand picked ministry, or their god. While the enduring task of the laity, on the other hand, was to listen and obey. All else emanated from the evil one.

This new deity didn't mess around. He was extremely touchy.

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One never knew what might set him off. But there was nothing prejudiced about the way he evidenced, in general, an unbiased and unmitigated disgust for all his children. He was an equal opportunity destroyer.

Besides wreaking vengeful havoc upon rebellious teenagers, lip-sticked females, and skeptical males, he was a killer of disobedient children. He waited his chance, bided his time and kept the most meticulous records imaginable of every six year old's felonious crimes and gross misdemeanors. For soon enough they would all add up into a veritable mountain of blasphemy, and carnal depravity which no amount of forgiveness could ever expunge, and they would dwell in the lake of fire forever, amen.

He was like parents in that regard, only worse. At least with parents, kids had a chance because, no matter what they did, if it was never discovered, they were home free. But God was not blind. He cataloged everything everyone did, what they were doing, and what abominations they were planning on committing. Hell, he knew what the entire world was going to be doing the year after next. With that kind of foresight, the only mystery left in life was why He had created it at all.

I was dealing with a being who refused to be placated no matter how much good I did. If I helped a little old lady cross a street or low crawled fifty miles over broken beer bottles on my hands and knees to rescue some luscious damsel in distress, it was to no avail. Two or three minutes of bad in one's life canceled ten years of good out in a heart beat and I knew it.

Sooner or later (sooner knowing me) I'd spit on the sidewalk, say "Ah, shit," or be thumbing happily through the pages of the National Geographic to gaze in wonder at the dark naked ladies and remember: HE was watching, listening, taking it all down, and I would be toast.

I discussed this (and other) theologically weighty problems with school yard buddies to get their slant on the matter, but they were all of different faiths and persuasions (if one could believe first graders had faiths and persuasions) and what I learned was shocking. None of them knew the truth, at least the truth as I'd heard it. Furthermore, they'd never even heard of the fundamentalist church I was forced to attend, the Armstrong congregation of the called and the chosen.

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That being the case, they could lie, steal, and fornicate to their hearts' content...and still have hope in salvation! That really sucked, and for the first (but not the last) time in my life I looked heavenward and mentally asked, "Why me?" What offense could I possibly have committed to be unfortunate enough to have parents who'd stumbled across "The Way" and worse yet dragged me along with them? For I knew the truth, but instead of setting me free it seemed determined to slit my throat.

I knew the year of my execution as well. Herbert had written a book on the subject entitled 1975 In Prophecy. 1975, he publicly proclaimed, was the year a merciful God had lovingly chosen to show humanity the error of its ways. Privately, however, church members were instructed to be prepared for their Lord's return by 1965. As religious tracts go, 1975 In Prophecy was crude, even for its time, full as it was, of prophetic invective and coarsely drawn pictures.

For all of that, it was still a nightmare booklet designed to strike terror into the hearts of all who read it by purporting to show the ghastly end of a corrupt and decadent world, a world which had stubbornly refused to heed the dire warnings of God's last true prophet, Herbert W.

In his artist's conception, the earth, circa 1975, was a radioactive wasteland wracked by supernatural plagues and unimaginable disasters. Volcanoes erupted in suburban housing developments while earthquakes and tidal waves devoured what was left. In the midst of all this outpouring of divine love, high flying caricatures of nuclear bombers overflowed the smoldering ruins of a devastated planet, while far below huge earth moving machines plowed their mindless way through endless miles of rotting corpses, pushing them unceremoniously into heaps and trenches.

But, the inspired text continued, in spite of this unprecedented display of concern and affection from God, there were still unrepentant survivors, incorrigible recalcitrants who refused to give up Christmas, Easter and ham on Sunday so, in Armstrong's macabre liturgy, God had to come back to earth in person to smite degenerate heretics, abolish evolutionary science, and ban sex education in high school forever.

Having never knowingly met a heretic, scientist or sex educator, I was unsure just what iniquities they might be guilty of committing, but to warrant that kind of loving attention from the Lord, I

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figured they had to be big ones, perhaps even worse than mine, so big in fact that by the time he got around to toting up the tally on my sins, mine might seem small by comparison! There might, I thought, be hope for me yet. That being the case I was eager to make their acquaintance. Hell, I was eager to make the acquaintance of anyone whose heavenly ledger was as black or blacker than mine.

With all this excess religious baggage hanging off my spiritual shoulders, I was usually too mentally exhausted to do school work; I barely had enough physical energy to play. Besides, I saw no reason to bother with the three R's. The way I read Armstrong's calendar, the world was going to come to a rip roaring halt sometime around my fifteenth birthday, so why bother? I did, however, continue to excel in those areas of academic endeavor which appealed to me.

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Chapter 3 THE CALLED AND CHOSEN

God didn't change much either during the fifties. Neither did the sense of impending catastrophe I carted around with me.

It was like some bad religious hangover that just couldn't be gotten rid of. Every time I kissed a Gentile, lit up one of the four or five camels I'd taken to smoking daily, or surreptitiously flipped off my older brother, there was this undeniably muted, yet stridently vociferous voice deep inside my soul which cheerfully whispered, "You're gonna burn, you're gonna burn!" And there was no way short of selling my soul to the Devil (just to get things over with) to shut that bitchy little voice up either.

In light of my rapidly advancing age (I was almost ten by now) and because I had semi-publicly suggested a rather smutty little game the local minister could participate in with the aid of a rolling pop bottle, I was no longer a welcome guest in the church of the first born, I was barely tolerated, and that with a jaundiced eye. Nevertheless, I was not at peace in my defiance. Parents and children alike had been so repetitiously warned about the consequences of rebellion against God, Armstrong, and his ministry; "Remember what happened to Korah, Dathan, and Abiram! This could happen to you!" or of asking inconvenient questions, that pondering the validity of the least of their opinions was intrinsically regarded as heresy, while to actually challenge their private interpretation of scripture was spiritual suicide. They were heavily into "Thou shalt not's," especially when it came to skepticism regarding divine revelation.

The Sabbath, as all had been taught, was the biggie. This was the day, their theology had it, that God, after creating the entire universe in less than a week, settled down to rest and admire his handiwork. And on that day all Christians were to do likewise, period. The problem, as I saw it, was that having never created a universe

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I had nothing in particular to admire on that day and, that furthermore, God apparently had not anticipated the advent of a five day school week. Otherwise he would never have created the Sabbath on a weekend. He would have placed it in the middle of the week and interrupted classes on Wednesday when kids would really appreciate a break.

On top of all that, the church's idea of a properly kept Sabbath bordered, if not wholeheartedly tromped, on the constitutional prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment. Sabbath, in their estimation, began some hours before, at sunset the previous day to be exact. From then on, no form of activity outside of reading Herbert W's private interpretation of the Bible was permitted. On the big day itself, the called and chosen bestirred themselves from their mild mannered walks of life, donned such formal attire as they were capable of affording after numerous tithes and offerings and, strode forth to become the future masters of the universe.

A rented grange hall was the arena for this weekly metamorphosis in my neighborhood. A hollow shell of a place with windows too high to look out of and filled with the most uncomfortable fold out steel chairs humans have yet devised. Here the merry throng gathered for at least five hours every Sabbath and the exhausting ritual of rest and relaxation began.

Some deacon or elder would hop up on stage, bid the congregation be seated and, once it was, to rise. The first of four hymns was then thoroughly butchered...and they were no ordinary hymns either. Herbert W. had a brother who fancied himself a song writer and musician. He'd taken many of the more bloodthirsty of the Psalms and added what he thought were appropriate melodies, most of which sounded like lugubrious variations of the funeral dirge played backwards. Once the joyful noise had been replaced by blessed silence, the called and chosen were told again to sit, and they did. For the next four hours.

The ministry of the church labored mightily under the illusion that they were experts in every field of human endeavor. Their training and education did little to relieve them of this happy burden. They were, to a man, all educated at Ambassador College in Pasadena, California. This college had been invented by the big man himself to teach young minds his version of God, the universe, and the hereafter. Among other things, the curriculum fostered a

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humble attitude of self importance, spiritual arrogance and personal conceit. They were, they were told, the most called of the called and chosen.

The rest of the curriculum at A.C. was decidedly simple. The entire universe was six thousand years old, modern science was all wrong, contemporary educational institutions were tools of the devil, as were medical doctors, dentists, and especially psychiatrists. If you had the faith (and were as nearly perfect as they were), God would cause all you did to prosper. If you had the faith, he would protect you from all manner of evil and heal you of all maladies...except mental illnesses (these were, and remain to this day, in private church theology at any rate, products of either self deception or demon possession).

If you had the faith! That was the catch. And it couldn't be just a smidgen of faith either. Anyone who expected results had to have it all (and what a cop out for the ministry). There were actually members who, during after services counseling sessions, were overheard to complain, "But I tithed thirty percent of my gross income to the Church; I've given offerings (free will and otherwise) amounting to another twenty percent. Income taxes ate up twenty-five percent and I'm having a hell of a time feeding my fruitful bough and our four young olive plants on the twenty-five percent that remains. Why hasn't God provided for me?" **BECAUSE YOU LACK THE FAITH, BROTHER!**

The sermons themselves were models of inspired inventiveness. It was assumed the inspirations came down from on high, that every word in them was useful for "correction, admonishment and reproof!" as the gathered faithful were sternly and often reminded. Being inspired, they ranged unhindered by facts over the entire length and breadth of human experience and history.

As a first grader, I was surprised to learn I was an Israelite. It meant nothing to me outside of some personal embarrassment caused when the teacher asked us all our nationalities and I replied with pride, "I'm Jewish!" It was soon established that the closest I'd ever been to Bethlehem was a nativity scene in the last Christmas play I was allowed to attend and that, furthermore, my ancestors were of German and English extraction. But Herbert had assured us that the mysteries of the ages had been laid bare before him. America, Britain, France, Holland, Finland, Ireland, and a handful of

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other mainly Scandinavian countries were the lost ten tribes of Israel.

God's purposes in hiding them out all these years were closely held secrets and, as such, only gradually revealed. But, little by little details of the divine plot leaked out via the church media, and through them to the church as a whole and we all understood, at last, God's awesome plan for us, his called and chosen people.

We were, it seemed, the true descendants of the ancient Israelites and heirs according to prophetic promises. As such, we were destined for greatness, for grandeur beyond human comprehension; we were going to be bigger than Elvis! We were born to become 'Gods,' and after our Savior had returned and gratuitously laid the planet waste, it would be our solemn task to rule over the rubble and the rabble with a mythical, yet oft quoted, "Rod of Iron."

As a ten year old, my interest in international politics was apathetic at best, while any future personal participation by me in some religious monarchy was beyond my comprehension. Furthermore rods, iron or otherwise, would have been banned in any province I was elected tyrant over. Like most children of the called and chosen, I'd had too much first hand experience with the "rod of correction."

Among Herbert's many accomplishments, and by his own admissions they were many, was his assertion that through decades of careful Bible study he had become an expert on raising children. Moreover, he was delighted to share his profound wisdom with all who asked; in fact he insisted on it. In his estimation, foolishness was bound up in the hearts of children but the rod of reproof would drive it far from them.

Immediate corporal punishment was his prescription for any childish behavior which in any way annoyed or inconvenienced adults in any manner whatsoever. Babies who couldn't yet talk were openly cuffed for crying during the weekly marathon church service. Toddlers who fidgeted or squirmed midway through a four hour sermon received slaps, kicks, punches and whispers of more robust remedial retribution as soon as services were over. And this was okay and quite all right. To slap, punch, or kick a child while in the presence of other members, the ministry, and their Lord was a solid sign that the parents were operating strictly out of the good book, *The Plain Truth About Child Rearing*, and more or less out of the Bible as well.

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A typical sermon from a ten year old's point of view was nothing if not boring. What Nero or Vespasian did hundreds of years in the past was meaningless to me, none of their antics were, in my estimation, worthy of note. Antiochus Ephiphines was another matter, however. I remember Antiochus well, but only because of his culinary excesses. He had the mildly disagreeable habit of frying Christians sunny side up in huge frying pans. This was suitably horrifying enough to stake out a claim in my memory.

Because of these and other eccentricities he was a constant fixture in many sermons...the very epitome of a futuristic world ruling Catholic Pope who was going to come one day soon and brand everybody on earth with the dreaded number 666.

Those who refused to participate in this Roman Catholic cattle drive would be enslaved, tortured and, in some cases, fried to death; and that was the good news. The bad news was, anyone who accepted the devil's brand of Catholicism would be roasted alive when God got back. It often seemed to those of us on the receiving end of all this religious largess that our only real choice was where and when to burn.

Interesting characters like Antiochus, however, were few and far between in the average sermon. The usual bill of fare dealt with sin in all its depraved manifestations, followed closely by damnation and limitless amounts of hell fire and brimstone. After a few years of listening to such heart warming doctrines, most kids were burned out.

But now and then some semi unexpected event would invigorate the inspired discourse. A brother or sister might have engaged in conduct unbecoming a world ruling trainee, profaning the holy name of Israel. Lest the infection of sin spread, contaminating the virgin body of the bride of Christ still further, emergency surgery was required to remove the gangrenous appendage. That was when things got interesting, at least from my perspective.

Fortunately for those accused, convicted, and tried, (and usually in that order) they lived in America where the only unlimited power the clergy still wielded was the power to raise money. Heretics must not be burnt, in frying pans or anywhere else for that matter. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the FBI, and the U.S. Marshall's Service were quite strict about this; that was their department! Neither could a person's assets be seized, his chil-

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dren stoned, or his wife sold into slavery. (State and local municipalities reserved those rights unto themselves.) In short, all the quaint, time honored remedies for spiritual turpitude were denied Armstrong and his merry men of the cloth, many of whom to this day resent that fact. So they did the best they could with what they had.

The order of worship in a standard disfellowshipping, which is to say that of a lay member, was precise and prescribed. It entailed verbally flaying the flesh off the unrepentant, vocally roasting their heretical remains over brightly burning cauldrons of collective self-righteousness, then figuratively holding the still smoldering carcass up before the entire congregation for spiritual edification and formal disfellowshipping.

When a member was disfellowshipped, all regular sermons were temporarily preempted to deal with the juicy allegations. Questioning the authority of the ministry, divorce and remarriage, use of tobacco products and poor attendance were all capital offenses, spiritually. Once a member was amputated from the body they were regarded as dead, spiritually now (unless they humbly and abjectly sought the pardon of the ministry) and literally later when God returned.

On the great day of a disfellowshipping, the pastor would mount the podium with that dejected air of reluctant regret which only the hopelessly self-righteousness can muster, the consummate spiritual executioner too weary to wield his axe.

He would then stare out over the sea of gathered faithful and begin. But he wouldn't just solemnly announce the distressing news and get things over with. No, he would begin softly, sadly, blending shadow with shade, color with hue, till, in the middle of his discourse, the lurid portrait of a vile sinner would slowly begin to emerge and take horrifying shape. Toward the end of the sermon this despicable creature, once known as a Christian, was conclusively identified and their craven deeds of rebellion and intransigence fully and finally described in a crescendo of sound and fury from the pulpit that would have had even Satan quaking in his boots. And members would park pitiful expressions of dismay and shocked disbelief on their incredulous faces and ask each other, "How could this be? How could Brother or Sister... have fallen from grace so horribly?"

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But in reality none of them were surprised in the slightest. Everyone had been discussing the situation for weeks as befits concerned responsible Christians and, as a rule, had socially ostracized the poor bastard many Sabbaths previous. The obligatory casting out was a mere formality. Except when it involved, as it sometimes did, the ministry. In those cases, the hell fire and brimstone was kept to a minimum with little or no information on dastardly deeds forth coming; other than "by the way," asides to the flock to pray for an endangered brother who was fighting a deadly one man battle in hand to hand combat with Satan himself.

The sense of relief at any sermon's end was palpable. More than a few of the called and chosen would quietly (but wholeheartedly) whisper "Thank God!" as the minister wrapped things up, and not for the spiritual sustenance they'd nearly gagged on either. But even this wasn't the end. Two more uplifting hymns were essential, plus a closing prayer.

The hymns I could live with, I just dry mouthed the words anyway. But the prayer...Well, it wouldn't have been so bad except that it was never performed by a professional; any baptized brother would do and most invariably did! And it usually took forever. A mini sermon, that's what one heard. Because this was the only forum available to them, the only place they could publicly vocalize their righteousness, their Christian concern, their all encompassing love for their brothers, sisters, and those teeming hordes of uncalled heathens they planned on ruling over one day. Besides, they were always trying to outdo each other.

They would pray for dear Herbert and that God would continue to sustain and inspire him; for his son Garner Ted; for Mr. and Mrs. Wayne Cole and Frank Longuski; for Gerald Waterhouse, Tony Blackwell, and Burke McNair; that the tithes and offerings would continue to pour in from the faithful (and even from those who were not); that God would defend his people from the muted but growing scourge of religious persecution, so rampant in the 1950's. And especially to protect his people from the polio epidemic which they, in accordance with sacred instructions from Herbert, had refused to get themselves or their children inoculated against. The prayer usually ended with barely audible sucking sounds from a scattering of the more obviously unrepentant, which was swiftly over ridden by whispers of adulation and thanksgiving for the

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wisdom and eloquence of his eminence the local pastor courtesy of an inevitable cadre of posterior oscillators after which the entire congregation wearily murmured, "Amen."

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Chapter 4 THE TRUTH AND THE WAY

After a year or two of weekly indoctrination, the church became both a way of life and, in the words of its founder, the only way to life, and if it hadn't been for an unguarded cigarette machine down the road at the Brookdale Golf course it is unlikely I would have survived those pre-pubescent years with my sanity intact.

Despite modern claims to the contrary by the current crop of womb to tomb social engineers, the tobacco industry's advertisements of those days were entirely correct. Winston did taste good like a cigarette should, Chesterfields most certainly satisfied and I not only would, but often did, walk a mile for a Camel. There was something inherently romantic about zipping the crystal cellophane off a fresh pack of coffin nails, inhaling the pungent aroma emanating from the pack, then lighting up a forbidden fag deep in the evergreen forests which surrounded my house; something invigorating; a sense of control over the entire f__king universe which was horribly absent at nearly all other times.

Tobacco, of course, was forbidden both in sociological and fundamentalist lore. The usual reasons were given; it's expensive (twenty-five cents a pack); it will stunt your growth (this to 4'11" nine year-olds); it will stain your teeth (does the tooth fairy care?). Cool was never mentioned, however. I suspect because, had cool been a religious requirement, the Unitarians themselves would have been tried in the balances and found wanting. For whatever else might have been said of the called and chosen, none of them were or ever would be in the slightest danger of being cool.

Neither were any of the little Herbert's (and there were far too many of these). Their only dream in life, other than getting laid by Annette or Bridgette Bardot, was to be among that favored group of individuals who had so impressed the ministry with their pre-conversion feats of gluteus maximus osculation that they were con-

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sidered, at last, to be bona fide Ambassador college material. For it was only by ministerial recommendation that commoners could be initiated into that mysterious inner sanctum.

My prospects for attending Ambassador College were dim at best. I had neither the moral nor spiritual capital necessary for such a great endeavor. Only once was I asked by a group of tentatively called and partially chosen teen aged disciples, "Don't you want to go to Ambassador College when you grow up?"

"No," I replied. "My current goal in life is to be hung for rape when I'm a hundred and ten."

This was, admittedly, the wrong answer. All mental and spiritual processes temporarily ground to a halt while pious faces froze in shocked disbelief.

My older brother hissed at me, "I'm telling Mom!" in response to which, I gleefully prescribed a multifaceted regime of violent self abuse for him and his entire group, slipped outside, into the trees to light up a fag. After four hours of unmitigated horse shit I felt I owed it to myself.

Life for a child under the benign auspices of Armstrong's church consisted largely of staying as far away from all future saints, (including ones parents), as possible. Moreover, their theology was so twisted and draconian that it virtually guaranteed complete social isolation from ones normal peer group in the dreaded "world". And, as we all knew, other than inadvertently sitting on a Grizzly Bear trap disguised as a toilet seat, the "world" was the last place one would want to get caught up in.

The world, it seemed, was populated by unworthy heathens whom "God had, at this time, not seen fit to call". These pagans engaged in all manner of detestable practices which, according to Armstrong were, "A vile stench in the holy nostrils of God Almighty," loathsome practices such as throwing a child a birthday party, a worldly custom alleged to encourage greed while fostering a carnal attitude of sinful self esteem.

That there were no specific Biblical injunctions against the observance of birthdays proved no impediment whatever. God's truth as revealed to HW was regarded as self evident to the spiritually discerning.

Halloween got the ax, as well. A diabolical celebration glorifying Satan and his demons, it had no chance in that church from day

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one. Participation in such abominable activities as extorting candy from defenseless adults (obviously quite terrified by marauding bands of pillaging nine year Olds) might inspire young minds to begin worshipping Satan without even knowing it! He was clever, that one, a master of deception.

That children might have neither the capacity nor inclination to worship anything was not a thought which occurred to them.

Thanksgiving was, for the most part, left intact. 'Over the river and through the woods to Grandmother's house' was acceptable with the following proviso; when we sat down to enjoy the sumptuous feast which Grandma had labored several days to produce, we were told to eat the same everyday amounts we would at any other meal. God's people were not gluttons, that was that!

A slight problem arose, however, when this titanic theology abruptly collided with an icy reality which was, just how normally can one eat a twelve course meal plus four different kinds of dessert? The answer, alas, was one couldn't. And so, by meal's end, theology had sustained critical damage far below the water line...and was sinking fast.

Christmas, of course, was out. We'd already had our last one, but an even dicier and totally unexpected problem cropped up. I either had to tell everybody at school about the deep end my parents had cheerfully jumped off of or invent a respectable list of presents. I unhesitatingly selected subterfuge over honesty and the sleigh full of booty Santa was alleged to have deposited underneath my tree was the envy of the school. Too late, I realized my mistake (not in lying; after all I might want to run for public office some day), but rather in ignoring a simple crucial axiom: Don't over do it.

Good news traveled fast and it soon seemed to me that nobody in the entire f__king school wanted to talk about their own loot at all. I'd fabricated such an incredible assemblage of technological wizardry (some of which remains un-invented to this day), that all they wanted to know about was mine. Finally, in the early hours of the afternoon, five minutes into math class and right after receiving a note from three aisles over requesting pertinent data on the sub-machine gun Santa had so thoughtfully stuffed in my stocking, I stood up and looked wildly around, yelled "F__k this shit!" ran out of the school, into the woods, lit up a Camel, and vowed never again to grace civilization with my presence.

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I realized from the outset that such public disclaimers as mine were likely to exact a heavy toll. Freedom, after all, always has its price, and thus I loitered in the cool evergreen forest for the better part of that day. Needless to say, the half mile walk through the pines, later that evening, was an extraordinarily long one.

I presented myself to the gathered faithful at around eight p.m., just before the demons came out. By this time I was resigned to my fate, prepared for the severest of repercussions, and thus, I stood before them with that easy air of nonchalance which only the condemned can muster knowing full well, as I did, that my future was of no further consequence.

I'd been treated to the Herbert Armstrong concerned parent routine so many times in the past that I could sing the song by heart. First I would get yelled at, next would come a sorrowful addendum about how this beating (for which I should be thankful and of which I was surely about to receive), was going to hurt them a lot more than it did me. After the beating I would then be incarcerated in my room until I was ninety-five or the second coming, which ever came first. No matter, I was prepared.

At the merest mention of parental agony by osmosis, I was going to say, "Well, why don't you just beat the shit out of each other then and eliminate the middle man?" But, as I strode into the living room that evening to meet my doom, all my parents said was, "Are you all right? Where have you been? Don't ever do this to us again, we were worried sick about you. Now sit down and eat your dinner."

Temporarily devoid of the rebellious winds which usually filled my sails, I ate my dinner in puzzlement...without even mentioning that it was very, very cold.

New Year's was another casualty of the truth and the way. But, since my parents had heartlessly refused to ever let me get drunk anyway, it was no great loss. Valentine's Day was another forbidden revel celebrating as it did the unbridled lust, licentiousness and sexual depravity of the carnal human masses. As a nine year old listening to the enlightened discourse of my elders, I wasn't sure exactly what those big words meant, especially that bit about sexual depravity, but it sounded interesting.

I had, I believe, unconsciously begun to develop certain behavioral equations succinctly codifying the parent/child relationship. Cardinal of these was, "If they're against it, I'm for it." In an effort to

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discover just what it was I was newly for, I retreated to my bedroom with the family dictionary.

My fifth grade education had ill prepared me for an assignment of this magnitude; my command of the English language was definitely inadequate to the task so, after about a half an hour and with book in hand, I confronted my mother and father who at this time were knee deep with the visiting minister in some theological quagmire or other. Speaking softly so that my voice would not carry beyond the generally accepted boundaries of the continental United States I hollered, "Hey Dad, how do you spell sexshell gravity?"

That all the more meaningful holidays, Christmas, Valentine's Day, Easter and Halloween were consigned to the slag heap of iniquity was bad enough and obviously more than any preadolescent heretic should have been made to put up with in one life time, but Herbert continued to have revelations, among which were his very own set of shanghai'd holidays.

The Jewish Passover was to be celebrated, sort of, on the day before, actually. All baptized brethren were required to wash each others feet on Passover evening, then retire to their respective homes to contemplate their utter unworthiness to call on God the Father for anything other than their own damnation.

The following day was the first of seven annual Sabbaths, the first day of the week-long Festival of Unleavened Bread. It was called this because the ancient Israelites, prior to fleeing Egypt, had apparently all been afflicted with both selective amnesia and a sudden, terrible compulsion to bake bread.

To this day, no one knows why hundreds of thousands of allegedly sane people who, having been advised that Pharaoh was pissed and that it would behoove all who desired health and longevity to round up their flocks, mount their asses and camels and head for the promised land, that the first thought on everyone's mind was, "What the hell, let's bake some bread."

But there was more to it than that. Every Israelite baker that night, to a person, unaccountably forgot to include yeast in their recipes. As a consequence, all modern day spiritual Israelites were required to eliminate any product containing or capable of inducing leavening from their homes. Members' homes were then to be thoroughly vacuumed and diligently scoured from top to bottom to eliminate even the slightest particle of bread, cracker, or cookie.

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Only then could the Feast be properly observed.

Children of the faithful were not required to attend school on Holy Days. In point of fact, they were not allowed to...but it was far from a vacation. The called and chosen would gather at some rented hall or other, lugging in potluck dishes for the midday feast then, from eight till noon, everybody sat and listened to the ministry's inspired discourse on whatever facet of human perversion appealed to them that week.

The actual feast itself was, from the point of view of the unconverted at least, the bright spot of the day. Not because of the cuisine but because it meant a two hour recess between services. The food, like the spiritual sustenance which preceded it was, for the most part, unpalatable. Each accomplished little other than to create a gnawing void which only unpardonable amounts of sin and countless packages of twinkies could ever hope to assuage.

To begin with, the obligatory omission of leavening agents precluded the construction of sandwiches, at least any of which were native to planet Earth because, as any child with even a marginally developed palate knew, sandwiches required at the least some reasonable facsimile of bread. Of course, there was (and usually remained to the end of the feast) copious quantities of unleavened bread. But this was because no mortal could possibly choke down more than a couple mouthfuls per millennia.

To be fair, this fact was not lost upon the ladies of the congregation whose job it was to concoct these boot leather offerings. It was just that, after years of trying, they were unwilling to admit defeat. They remained cheerfully confident in the face of each new failure. Theirs was a holy crusade, this quest for an edible unleavened bread. It existed. It was out there somewhere and they would find it. And so it was that year after year at the appointed time, they would sort through volumes of obscure cookbooks and reams of mostly Scandinavian lore in a futile search for the missing ingredient to the Israelite's mythical manna.

But a lack of recognizable sandwich material was not the only gastronomical impediment one faced at these joyous gatherings. Health foods were in vogue in the church of the fifties. More than in vogue, they were touted by a rather vociferous majority of the called and chosen as an absolute prerequisite to salvation itself!

"Lukewarm" members who profaned such holy dictums by

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drinking Coca Cola (which was rumored to be made out of pig's blood), or got caught eating a Hershey bar (which allegedly contained unhealthy amounts of cocaine), or any thing at all made with white sugar, white flour, or an incredibly long list of other morally debilitating ingredients were initially gently reproved. If these subtle hints fell on deaf ears, offending parties were somewhat rudely confronted. When all else failed, they were suspiciously regarded as wolves in sheep's clothing and openly ostracized until their decadent behavior was corrected.

Lavish amounts of garlic, rumored to precipitate longevity, enlivened a majority of feast dishes whether they needed it or not. As did primitive cruets of Italian salad dressing, also laced with garlic and cheerfully blended in a succulent base of homemade vinegar and cod liver oil, the latter so necessary for the development of strong bodies and minds. The desserts were little better.

If a poll had been taken of all responsible children present, which is to say that handful of the patently incorrigible with a penchant for circumstantial honesty, the verdict would have been unanimous, "We find, in the utter and complete absence of any compelling evidence to the contrary, that it is humanly impossible to create an appetizing meal, and criminally negligent to concoct a dessert when lacking such essentials as sugar, white flour, chocolate, and yeast. Be it also noted that we hereby sentence those who attempt to produce such abominations, that they be forced to dine on their own swill until it is either totally consumed or they die of boredom which ever comes first."

By two p.m. we were once again ensconced in our comfortable fold out metal chairs where, for the next four hours, we were condemned to sit and listen to Herbert's plans, as revealed by God, for the Wonderful World Tomorrow. These homilies were always prefaced by grim exhortations to "Fear and tremble before the Lord our God and his appointed ministers lest we fall into rebellion and miss out on this great opportunity." A few vivid examples of what had happened to indolent and insubordinate of the past were, then, interlarded (Remember Lot's wife!) and even the marginally ungodly who knew the truth but had failed to diligently heed it was then sketched out.

A child who went fishing on the Sabbath was drowned when a sudden and terrible storm blew up out of the heavens and his boat

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capsized. Several members in good standing and their families who, alas, decided to skip Sabbath services one bright and sunny day were struck by lightening from out of a cloudless sky and fried to death right where they sat at a metal picnic table. Others who had not heeded Herbert's prohibitions against eating clams, lobsters and, especially, pork were now dying slow, agonizing deaths from cancer and other maladies which doctors had, as yet, no names for.

The (by now) properly chastened congregation was then treated to the sermon's twin main courses which consisted of equal amounts hellfire and veritable mountains of brimstone which, God willing, would pour down from heaven and devour damn near everybody who did not believe as they did.

As the chosen faithful however we, if we were good, would be whisked off to a place of safety while the Satanic world burned. It was no mythical place we were going to either. We were told both what and where it was. It was called Petra.

Petra was a city carved out of rock in the inhospitable deserts of southern Jordan. That it had lain abandoned since 1200 AD, was largely in ruins and was located in the midst of a kingdom traditionally hostile to Israelites, spiritual or otherwise, was of no importance. Neither was the region's total lack of food, drinking water, showers, or sanitary facilities. God would provide.

Once there we would loiter around, all one hundred and forty-four thousand of us, for approximately three and a half years while Satan and his cohort, the Pope, waged unrelenting war in the form of a ghastly tribulation against God's Church which had already escaped and was secluded in Petra. Then Jesus would return and change us all into gods, just like him. We would then be crowned kings and priests over the various nations, states, and towns of the world and would, with our new found powers, then proceed to lick this disgusting planet and its blind, deluded, inhabitants into shape.

As the sermon ground wearily on, poignant pictures would be interspersed of the lion laying down with the ox and a little child leading them. Peaceful agrarian communities were penciled in devoid of strife, bickering and, unfortunately, rock and roll. Over-shadowing these Norman Rockwell pictographs of basic Americana straight from the early nineteen hundreds would be...US! For we were born to rule. Make no mistake about it.

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God had drowned out the entire planet in Noah's day, and he was determined to lay it waste once more in the very near future.

But even in the face of these coming supernatural catastrophes there was no reason to suppose that a decadent and perverse humanity had, or ever would, learn its lesson. Left to themselves they would, without a doubt, swiftly return to a lifestyle of iniquity and corruption.

This then was our calling and in Armstrong's world tomorrow it was going to be an eternal one. As literal members of the God family we would be immortal spirit beings, champions of truth, justice, and righteousness. As such, we would bear rule over the squalid human scum who had somehow escaped the almost total destruction God had so lovingly wreaked upon his children and this planet. We would teach them the truth and show them the way. Either by word of mouth, or if that failed, by rod of iron...which ever struck our fancy.

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Chapter 5 DOOMED

I was not enthused by these similes and platitudes for it was lam-entably clear to me that I had been born far too late. The way I saw it, by the time I would be old enough to enjoy drunkenness, debauchery and white sugar instead of brown in my koolaid, the saints would have taken over, sin in any meaningful sense of the word would have become a logistical impossibility, and everyone but me would be disgustingly righteous.

As usual, I left these joyous gatherings with a growing sense of despair knowing as I did, that I, and I alone, in the entire f__king universe was lost forever. It was only a matter of time before God got around to punching my ticket and I knew it. I would be snuffed and that would be almost, but not quite, that.

Incorrigible children such as myself had one last thing to look forward to in the Wonderful World Tomorrow, our own personal resurrection.

Since Herbert's beliefs didn't quite square with even a generous interpretation of scripture, three resurrections instead of the usual two mentioned in Revelation were required. The first resurrection was strictly for those souls who, during the course of their tenure here at the hind end of the universe, had lived holy and righteous lives. The good guys, as it were. They would be brought back to life as members of the God Family with all the powers and prerequisites of Godhood and, together with the rest of the newly immortalized saints, would fan out across the entire globe bringing truth, justice and the American way to all who desired it (and even to those who did not).

A second resurrection was to take place one thousand years later. This event was for those who, throughout history, had never heard of Herbert Armstrong, his Radio Church of God, or God either for that matter. These biblical illiterates would then be brought back to

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life as mortal humans. That this resurrection also gave otherwise unemployable kings and priests a ready supply of serfs and oafs to rule over was not lost upon the chosen. Under the stern (but loving!) governance of the "first born", these heathens would be taught to lead moral and productive lives. After a respectable but unspecified period of time, a judgment regarding them would then be entered into the heavenly ledgers.

Successful graduates of this worldwide version of Ambassador College would then be graduated as vassals second rate and given minimal positions of subservience under the holy rule of the first born, and this was completely understandable. After all, they were there first!

Resurrection number three was reserved for creatures such as myself, pagan swine who knew the truth about Santa and the Easter Bunny, but liked them anyway. Besotted beings who had begun to notice girls' legs (and other even more unmentionable anatomical landmarks which there were, as yet, no technical names for) and wondered, "Do these luscious creatures possess the same interesting attributes as the dusky ladies of the National Geographic?"

The mere contemplation of such depraved concepts was proof, and I knew it, that I was bound for hell on a B-52. One's tender years or lack of baptism were not considered mitigating factors in cases such as mine. Anyone who had sat through Church services year after year obviously did so because God was working with them, offering them front row seats in his kingdom. That they were forced to do so against their will was inconsequential. Those who had heard the word and the truth were responsible for such knowledge and the penalty for failing to heed such a high calling was final. Eternal death.

But before this merciful gift from above could be bestowed upon the incorrigible, one last ritual remained to be performed: the third resurrection itself. The only group brought back to life for this final and last goodbye were the bad guys. They would be paraded before the saints who would pass swift and certain judgment upon them. They would then be cast into that lake of fire and brimstone reserved for Satan and his demons and all burned up.

When the words "incorrigibly wicked" appeared together in the same sentence, I knew they were talking about me. After all, during my tenure as a preadolescent I had lied, cheated and stolen; shown

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disrespect (from a safe distance) to my parents; embarked upon tantalizing anatomical explorations with the neighbor girl in our hay barn; smoked, cursed and played hooky. Who else could they mean? I was wretched and despicable, the very epitome of sin itself. I had committed so many unpardonable transgressions in the ten long years of my life that for me there was no hope. That being the case, I was tempted to just say, "F__k it!" and quit trying. If I was going to burn anyway, it might just as well be for a worthwhile cause. But worthwhile causes were hard to come by, especially for wicked ten year Olds, so, for a time, I had to content myself with causes which were not so worthwhile.

Following the Feast of Unleavened Bread, there was a fifty day dearth of festivities until Pentecost. But the way it was written up in the Bible made it hard to decide whether Pentecost should be observed on the fiftieth day following the last Day of Unleavened Bread or whether one should count fifty days and then celebrate it on the fifty-first day, or if it really began at sundown on day forty-nine. Fortunately, God at last revealed to Herbert the proper day (for the decade of the fifties at least) and the matter was temporarily settled.

There were three other feasts the first born were required to attend, Trumpets, Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles. The Feast of Trumpets was celebrated more or less like all the previous feasts. Four hours of sermon in the morning, a two hour reprieve at noon and four more hours of listening to what abominable little bastards human beings were in the afternoon, after which everybody went home and waited for the sun to go down so life could be begin again in earnest.

Atonement was unique however, so much so that many of the unconverted, including myself, often wondered how it came to be called a feast in the first place. To start with, no one was allowed to eat or drink anything from sundown preceding the feast to the sundown following. There was, unfortunately, no shortage of spiritual meat at this festivity. If ever there was a clear cut case of insult not only being added to injury but of insensitively violating her as soon as the lights were out, this was it.

Sermons of any type are a drag, that's why people have to be threatened with hell and damnation to sit through them, but Atonement Day sermons were the worst. The subject matter of which al-

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ways reflected the meaning of the day itself. On this Great Day we were told where sin came from and reminded that since Adam had sinned, all had sinned. Transgressions were geometrically progressive in Herbert's version of God's view on things. Any budding hope I might have had for a merciful deity overlooking my world class transgressions was annually dealt a low blow at these proceedings.

As humans we were God's children, now doubt about that, but we were also carnal, filthy and altogether depraved. We were, we were told, worthy only of a screaming death in that great Christian barbecue coming soon to worldly neighborhoods everywhere.

It didn't matter how good we tried to be, or for that matter if we had personally never committed a single sin in our entire lives, we were liable for Adam's screw ups as well. This was well nigh intolerable, in my estimation. It was bad enough to be sentenced to death for my own voluminous iniquities, but to have to pay for the sins of people who had f__ked up and died centuries before I was even born, was incredible.

Fortunately, sermons such as these usually offered a glimmer of hope near the end. If we were all as good as we could be (which wasn't too damned good in the best of times), if we dutifully obeyed those omnipotent twenty-three year old shepherds whom the Lord had chosen to rule over us, if we faithfully surrendered thirty percent of our gross unadjusted income God, just maybe, would grant us salvation. But there were no guarantees.

At any such sermon's end, the faithful were worn to a frazzle. It was tough enough for anyone to have to sit for hours and listen to what a hopeless piece of shit they were, but to have to do it on an increasingly empty stomach while suffering from the debilitating effects of rampant dehydration was torture. Brotherly love was always at a low ebb on this day. The after services glad handing and gossiping which usually passed for fellowship was almost entirely absent. Brethren, for the most part, just gathered up their Bibles, grabbed their notebooks, kicked their kids and headed for the door.

That there was no one to stand in the middle of the pathway to the refrigerator five minutes before the sun went down and say, "Drivers, start your engines," was just as well. For before that golden orb had slipped into the boudoir of the night, the jackals had descended, gulping down jugs of brown sugar koolaid as if it

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were the nectar of the gods, insanely cramming handfuls of potato salad into ravenous maws as if it were the last supper, devouring cold fried chickens whole until, at last, the feeding frenzy abated, and all that remained were empty jugs, greasy bones and upset stomachs outraged by the sudden introduction of food where once was void.

There was an unspoken thought which was on every child's mind on days like this which was sometimes voiced by a parent who could get away with it. "Thank God we only have to do this once a year!" To which we were allowed to say, "Amen."

Last in the annual series of feasts was the Feast of Tabernacles. Of all the feasts, this one was almost as eagerly awaited by children of the church as Christmas was by children of the world and for the same holy reason, personal gratification. God had inspired Herbert to hold this feast in Texas, where cowboys came from. So he bought some property near Gladewater, with church money of course, and commanded all members to mosey on down, rent motels, or stay in tents on his property for a week and just kick back and enjoy the scenery and the daily sermons. To finance this temporary trans state exodus, members were to set aside ten percent of their gross income for an entire year, every year.

Thankfully (Texas weather being what it is), this last feast didn't occur in the summer but rather in late September or early October. Children of the first born thus were forcibly dragged kicking and screaming from public schools and compelled to endure, in my case, a cross country road trip from Washington State through magical lands which other children could only dream about. The great coastal forests of Oregon, the badlands of Utah, the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, the colorful landscapes of New Mexico and the Texas plains all rushing by in kaleidoscopic color, and all I had to do was sit and watch. Of course, there was that disagreeable bit about a week's worth of sermons, but the ride down and back seemed worth it. Not that it made up for Christmas and Halloween, but it helped.

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Chapter 6 REVELATION

Herbert had so many new revelations in the fifties that if the pace hadn't slowed toward the end of that decade, there would've been nothing new for him to say in the sixties. Divorce and remarriage was a particularly thorny issue. But God, he said, had finally inspired his understanding of these difficult spiritual problems. A thorough, heart rending study of scripture yielded but one conclusion. Divorce and remarriage were against God's law.

Members who had been divorced were instructed to seek reconciliation with their original mates whether they were in the church or not. Failing that, they were to remain unmarried and celibate for the rest of their natural lives, or until their former spouses died. Members who had remarried after a divorce were commanded to separate and, unless or until their first partners died, to remain separate. That many of these members had children, were happy with each other, and that their divorces and, in many cases, their remarriages had occurred prior to their discovery the truth and the way was regarded as inconsequential.

Members who objected to their families being so cavalierly torn apart were told that the trials and tribulations one must suffer in order to prove to God that they loved him and, thus, to eventually be allowed entrance to his kingdom, were never very pleasant.

They were then enjoined to remember Abraham's test. God had commanded him to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Most people, if faced with a chore like that would procrastinate, if indeed they would do it at all, but Abraham didn't dawdle. He arose early, eager to preform this grisly task and in so doing, he proved to God that he loved him.

"God tests and chastises each one of us who come before him to be called his children and this is how God knows we love him," went their rationale. A sizeable number of members bowed to the

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inscrutable workings of God, abruptly severing their adulterous second marriage relationships with wives, husbands and children, and attempted to abide by these and other dictums pouring out of their new center of the universe, Pasadena, California.

HW also had definite ideas about what constituted proper Sabbath day dress and decorum. Which is to say, all men should dress like him, conveniently overlooking the scriptural admonishment in James 2:1-9 which specifically forbids prejudice (let alone expulsion) based on dress. Suits and ties, he maintained, were absolute prerequisites for the worship of God; men were to wear them, or else. Those who thought otherwise were invited by the ministry to leave until they repented of their rebellious attitudes against God and Herbert.

Women, of course, were to wear loosely fitting dresses with hemlines no higher than mid calf. Nor should there be the slightest hint of cleavage above, lest the Christian gentlemen of the congregation be overcome with lust.

Furthermore, only harlots and evil women wore jewelry, or painted their faces with lipstick and rouge. The example of Jezebel was tentatively proffered as an example of this vulgar custom and, as most knew (and those who had any doubts were told), God's women were not to imitate that decadent queen.

That Jezebel also wore clothing along with her jewels and lipstick was glossed over though, women were to remain fully clothed. Few of these weighty spiritual matters directly impinged upon my lifestyle. I was too young to wear either make up or suits, but the next round of revelations hit subtly and hard.

Merely being a good person by secular standards was not good enough. After all, human righteousness, we were told, was looked upon by God as filthy rags. That being the case, there was no real way to gauge one's spiritual status since it depended almost entirely upon the Lord's whims rather than human effort. Still, they reasoned, there was no sense in taking chances. So Herbert and the clergy became much like believing Pharisees of centuries past who, in a effort to be as absolutely perfect as possible, painstakingly created their own set of "thou shalt nots," as if God had, perhaps, left some out. These they taught as doctrine.

The Lord's admonition to come out of, and remain separate from, the world became of sudden and immense interest to the ministry

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of the late nineteen-fifties. In their view, people of the world were likened to pigs living in a filthy sty. Members of the church, on the other hand, were the "called out ones." As such, they were enjoined to put as much distance between themselves and the pig sty as possible, while being constantly reminded that it would have been better for them never to have been born than to have escaped this evil world and the clutches of Satan and become enmeshed again in corruption.

Given a choice then, most brethren would rather have fallen into a den of rattlesnakes than be likened to scriptural "dogs returning to their own vomit," as members who reverted to the world were equated with.

As part of the process of coming out of the world, lay members were encouraged to have as little social contact with people outside the church as possible. This included unconverted family members such as parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, aunts and uncles. School activities such as dances, clubs and athletics were out, as were memberships in the Lions, the Eagles, the PTA and any labor union. In short, anything the ministry had no control over, or was not personally in charge of, was forbidden. The inspired ruling on employment came next.

After more deep and prayerful study, Herbert said, he was led by the Lord to understand that God's people were to be a "separate and peculiar people." God, in scripture, had said so himself. Military service was, of course, contravened...due to their long standing practice of not only working on Saturday's, but of killing their enemies on that and other days, as well. He'd also come to understand that there were other ways brethren might find themselves serving as unwitting cogs in the political and martial machines of this country, anyone of which was just as evil. Civil service was one. Working for the government was, in Herbert's estimation, a clear cut case of thumbing one's nose at God. Those who were employed in such capacities were told to resign.

Up until that time, my family had enjoyed a middle class existence even though the nation was in the midst of what later came to be known as the "Eisenhower depression." Jobs were scarce, especially well paying ones. Nonetheless, with faith in Herbert's pronouncements, my father quit his job, secure in the knowledge that God would provide.

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Weeks turned into months with unbelievable rapidity. Having voluntarily quit his job, he was ineligible for unemployment benefits. With little food in the house and no money to pay the bills, Mom and Dad grew increasingly more irritable with each passing day. Eventually my father went to the minister and demanded an accounting. He asked why, since he had obeyed their instructions, God had not provided for him and his family. Their answer was predictable.

The ministry, then as now, operated out of two cozy assumptions. God could never make a mistake and hence they, as his ministers, could not either. Therefore, there was only one viable possibility. God had not fulfilled his part of the bargain because "YOU LACK THE FAITH BROTHER!" Dad was sternly commanded to take stock of his obviously dwindling spiritual capital and humbly repent of whatever sin or faithlessness which was prohibiting the Almighty from providing for him.

He replied, he told me years later, that they were in his opinion, the three stooges ministry, and as such were the most witless and inept sons of bitches he'd come across in all his days, and that furthermore, that "special wisdom" which they all alleged had poured into them on the day they were ordained was nothing more than a bucketful of wishful thinking. He was immediately invited not to attend services until he repented of his blasphemy, an invitation he accepted until the day of his death.

Anytime a member was disfellowshipped it went without saying they were to be shunned. Such spiritual pariahs were not to be contacted or corresponded with by any lay member of the church, and they were to be totally ignored in the event of chance encounters in public. Headquarters in Pasadena was immediately notified by the local minister. These individuals names were then marked in case they moved and tried to attend church in another locale where they were not known. Delivery of "The Good News," the church magazine intended for and delivered only to, the baptized, was promptly discontinued. Any tithes or offerings these outcasts tendered, however, were gratefully accepted.

My parents separated soon afterwards, due in no small part, to the continual meddling of the church. They never reconciled, and what had been a middle class family of eight became a single parent family of seven living on welfare.

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Our diminished circumstances precluded a once regular allowance. This was, for me, particularly vexing. Spinach may have cut it for Popeye, but I required semi moderate amounts of tar and nicotine in my daily diet. My trips to the golf course became more infrequent and, had it not been for the money we were occasionally given for hot lunches, they would've ceased altogether.

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Chapter 7 LAMM

Since there was no "man of the house," the men of the church felt it both their calling and duty to take my brothers and I in hand, to show us the way, as it were. The frequency with which they offered their guidance in the form of slaps, cuffs, kicks and admonishments can only be regarded as a measure of their efficacy. I, for one, had been told by so many, so often, that I was going straight to hell that I believed it, and therein lay their problem; there's so little those already condemned can be threatened with.

Ten year Olds (as a rule) are not eye for an eye aficionados. Yet within an acceptable framework they would, I believe, make fine special operations troops. Especially when the generally accepted rules of engagement governing traditional parent/child conflicts have been arrogantly abrogated by those in positions of power. In such cases, rebellion and sabotage become the only civilized means of exacting retribution.

I had received a few undeserved slaps in the face by Mr. Harold Lamm, an incestuous (yet upstanding) member of the church who shall remain nameless. One of the more bombastic of the called and chosen, he took umbrage at the fact that I refused to admit guilt for something I hadn't done, namely peeing on the toilet seat in the men's can. If I had given the matter any thought and had been assured that he or any other future member of the God family had been about to plant their butt on that particular throne, I would have pissed all over it as a matter of principle; that was a given. But I was innocent and said so every time this moron alternately slapped my face, then asked me why I'd done it.

Mom finally rescued me after about the sixth or seventh slap but I was mad. There were rules to this game, after all, and this latter day nimrod wasn't following them. The rules went like this.

- 1) If you get caught in the f__king act and can't plead innocence,

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plead ignorance! Hell, give it a shot. You've got nothing to lose. If it doesn't skate, take your licks and solemnly resolve never to be so stupid as to get caught again.

2) If you are accused of an infraction you really are guilty of, but were not caught committing, deny it. And do so just as vehemently as if you really were innocent. For if they have no witnesses, and are relying merely on conjecture or hear say, the odds are in your favor. If they can't break you by interrogation, that should be the end of it. But if it isn't (and the rules are quite specific on this point), while you are allowed to be justifiably outraged at being assigned punishment by guess and inference, acts of sabotage and vandalism are not permitted.

3) If you truly are innocent, proclaim your integrity till hell freezes and the heavens melt. Never give in to vague promises of amnesty if you'll only confess; it sets a bad precedent in one's future life. And as far as retribution goes, it's yours for the taking.

Since this bastard had refused to abide by those unwritten rules, which for centuries had made semi civilized coexistence between adults and children possible, I felt righteously absolved of all strictures. The big dog may get the meat, as children and other victims of these self professed sons of bitches are so often reminded, but there is no telling where that meat might have been, or what non-traditional additives might have been incorporated into it before the big dog gets it.

Impartial and inscrutable, as always, fate grinned down upon me only a week later. My mother had tentatively accepted an invitation to share the next Sabbath day's dinner with the Lamms. I had a whole week to devise and perfect a fiendish plan with which to exact a just and fitting reparation. It was a demanding job, requiring courage, and no small amount of financial sacrifice on my part, but good Christians do not shrink from such duties I reminded myself, they persevere.

As the great day drew inexorably nearer, all preparations were, at last, completed. I had a single task to perform upon arrival at my adversary's home, but that was the easy part. As I climbed into the back seat of our '53 Chevy for the long and dreary after-services ride to the dear brother's house, I whispered to myself as I had so many times in the week past, "F__k you, Lamm!"

We arrived at his ramshackle dwelling at about six p.m. Sabbath

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day dinner consisted of a fat drenched, precooked pot roast, a limp assortment of squalid vegetables, and thick slices of cold and clammy homemade whole wheat bread. It would be a memorable feast, the cuisine notwithstanding.

Mr. Lamm was a macho man who went to strange lengths to maintain his facade. In an unguarded refrigerator on his back porch he kept, along with his mail order male enhancement pills and (God and his wife knew why) his lubricated prophylactics, a quart jar of peppers which, to hear him tell it, came straight from the nether regions.

When impressionable children and adults supped at his table, he would produce this hellish container, munch down a few of those fiery beasts without so much as batting an eye, and then offer some to his children who would dutifully roll their eyes and screw up their faces as if they'd taken a sip from the lake of fire itself, while they fawningly intoned, "Oh no, Daddy, not me, Daddy. They're way too hot for kids!" Most adults, unsure of what to do at this juncture, usually murmured polite no-thank-you's, and that was the end of it.

I'd had some first hand experience with that jar however, the last time I was marooned there for dinner. He'd plunked those peppers down on the table, asked the usual, and the kids said no, and the adults said no, and I said sure; so he forked one over on my plate and I picked it up, crunched it down, and waited for Satan, his demons, and the fires of hell to issue forth and there was...nothing, zero.

That should have been the end of it, but I suddenly realized that I had become the center of attention. Every eye at that table was fixed on me as if I were some kind of ticking bomb about to go off, but no one knew when. Finally, old man Lamm had cleared his throat with a "harumph" and asked, "Well, how was it, boy?" I didn't know what else to say, so I had just said, "Not bad." Obviously that had not been the right answer, and he had found several reasons that blessed Sabbath evening to cuff and, on one occasion, kick me.

As we sat down to eat that evening, I could only reflect that, this time, things would be different. About half way through the meal, Lamm told his wife of too many years to fetch his pepper jar, which she did. He went through the same bullshine routine as always by

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offering his children some which, thank God, they still refused. Then he stared at me with a somewhat dangerous glint in his eye and barked, "You want some, boy?" But I had learned my lesson. I knew the right answer at last. "No, Mr. Lamm," I said. "They're way too hot for me, too," and I meant it. Immensely gratified, he stuffed two rather large ones in his mouth and began to chew briskly.

There's a definite lag between the time one begins to masticate a bona fide hot pepper and the time one actually begins to feel the heat, and by then it's too late; and Harold had long since passed the point of no return. Being a macho man, he couldn't do the prudent thing, which was to spit it out and either piss down his own throat or run for the nearest fire hydrant so, for the first ninety seconds or so, he just sat there, tears streaming down his beet red face, afraid to spit, terrified to swallow and with the possible exception of a providential coronary, no good way out.

In the end, it must have become unbearable, however, for he rose from the table with surprising abruptness, disappeared into the nearby bathroom, and closed the door. For the next ten minutes all that could be heard was the sound of water, running.

It had cost me the equivalent of two packs of Camels to fry Lamm's tonsils. Seventy cents for a tall, narrow bottle of Green Jalapeno's, so hot they glowed in the dark. Few self respecting Mexicans would even handle those babies without welders gloves on. That's what Gabriel Sanchez, the school mate who appropriated them for me from his father, had said. And after the demonstration I had just witnessed, I had to admit it. Gabe was shoveling gospel.

Two packs of Camels had represented ninety percent of my worldly wealth in those horridly expensive days, and I had a lot of time on my hands on the way home to meditate upon the curious concept of sacrifice. Was it worth it? Was it not? But as I ran the replays of old man Lamm, heading for the can with his mouth on fire and a barbecued tongue, sacrifice won hands down. I'd have quit smoking for another two weeks just to watch that show again.

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Chapter 8 IN THE BEGINNING

Sunday's did little to lighten my spirits. Herbert saw to that. He'd personally developed a Bible Correspondence Course which, he said, properly reflected what the Bible really said, as opposed to what contemporary Christianity typically believed.

The correspondence course began with humanity a mere six thousand years old. They had to be because Herbert had discovered that God had a seven thousand year plan for the ultimate salvation of certain, select segments of it.

During the first six thousand years, he said, God, like all doting fathers, had determined that his children were to be left alone; left strictly to their own devices so that they might experiment with, and ultimately fail at, every thing they did. In so doing, he asserted, they would come to see that they, as a species, were utterly incapable of living without him. After arriving at this momentous conclusion, the remnants of the human race who had survived the catastrophic effects of both human misrule and those loving corrections meted out by the concerned and merciful Lord of the Revelation, would welcome the worldwide rule of the kingdom of God, as administered by Herbert W. and his faithful followers.

One dared not question these mysterious concepts too closely, however, and especially the murky premise that humans, left alone and unmolested, would invariably produce governments which would self destruct. Because from beginning to end, both Herbert's correspondence course and the bible itself were a litany of outside interference: From the Lord and his angels on one hand, to Satan and his demons on the other.

For starters, there was that initial account of the Edenic epoch. The story, divested of sanctified religious verbiage, was that God (six thousand years ago) created a garden and (much like the gingerbread house of Hansel and Grettle) filled it up with scrumptious

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things to eat. He then fashioned a physical replica of himself to dress and keep the vines, shrubs and trees, and called this creature Adam.

Realizing that his child might get lonely, the Lord had all the animals he'd created previously parade before him to see if any of them would make a fitting wife. For whatever reason, none of the ants, goats, sharks or giraffes were deemed suitable consorts. At this point, some sort of anesthesia was induced, the Lord removed a rib from Adam and, using this as a source of raw materials, he fashioned a female. He called this unlikely duo his children and turned them loose in their garden home.

For reasons which can only be inferred, since the good book is characteristically silent on the subject, the Lord also created an especially beautiful tree loaded sinfully down with a luscious looking fruit of genus unknown. He placed it smack in the middle of the garden. But just in case the kids couldn't find it, he told them where it was and mentioned that, by the way, he'd kill them if they took so much as a single nibble.

Whether or not this obviously induced temptation constituted interference of a direct sort is still being juggled by theorists on both sides, but at the very least it could certainly be construed by those less inspired to have contributed heavily to a foregone conclusion.

To preserve the illusion of noninterference, from one side at least, a talking, sexist snake was introduced. This reptile slyly enticed the weaker willed human female, who then used her no doubt perfect (and ample) charms to beguile her mate, the results of which were disastrous. Within hours, the Lord had discovered their treachery, kicked his kids out of their garden, and told them they could forage in the dirt for food till hell froze over.

Several thousand years then passed and human beings, still rotten to the core, had apparently made so much of the one good thing they still had going for them, that they'd populated the entire planet from stem to stern, and filled it with nameless (but despicable!) iniquities. The Lord, it is said, then paid the planet a visit so he could see for himself the true extent of human depravity. By all accounts, it must have been phenomenal. So much so that He is recorded as saying he was sorry he ever had kids.

He found only one of child in all the earth who met his modest criteria for absolute perfection, and told him to build a boat because

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he was going to flood the whole earth and drown all his other brothers and sisters. The flood, as Armstrong related the occurrence, must have been a logistical nightmare. For starters, it required five times more water than has ever been available on earth, enough to submerge the entire planet more than five miles deep, if all mountains including Everest were taken into account. Such preemptive impossibilities (when raised) were never directly addressed by Herbert and Company, however, for when questioned they asserted that only a dangerous lack of faith in God's miracle working capabilities could prompt such queries in the first place. If the Lord had needed five times more water than he had on hand, he would have made some more. It was that simple.

In the matter of the ark itself, and just how much living and food storage space was required to sustain multiple pairs of every kind of wild and domestic animal, all creeping things (apparently excluding politicians) and every bird, winged creature and insect, to say nothing of four entire families, for a voyage lasting more than one year, was never satisfactorily examined. But a definite lack of space was inherently implied by a humble vessel, three hundred cubits long, fifty wide, and thirty high.

After the deluge, it apparently took humanity a few centuries to regroup and get back up to abominable speed. For other than a few incomprehensible genealogies, there was apparently nothing titillating to report until that curious incident at the Tower of Babel.

There came a day in pre-civilized history when nearly every single human on Earth was simultaneously seized with a burning desire to visit the Shinar valley in what is now Iraq. Once there, they decided to call it home. Moreover, being of sound mind and one language, and having nothing better to do with their stupendous life spans, they decided that, as long as they were there, they might as well build a tower so high it reached into outer space. For reasons yet unknown, this enterprise, when reported, was objectionable to the Lord. Apparently unable to view the goings on from his location, he descended to earth once more and determined that, contrary to the expectations of all the prophets both past and present, his children were getting along remarkably well; too damned well, as a matter of fact, so he instantly created new tribes, languages, cultures and, in blatant violation of civil rights statutes, segregated people strictly on those basis.

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To those more cynical, this surely smacked of interference of some sort, but when such questions were raised the doubting were swiftly admonished not to question God Almighty (or his inscrutable prophet).

By the time I'd finished with the first installment of Armstrong's fifty two lesson course, Sunday was half shot. It was abundantly clear that if I was to enjoy any free time at all, Herbert W. either had to get a lot less bombastic or I had to become a lot more religious, neither of which seemed likely. There are always third alternatives to such situations, that much I knew. The problem was, alternatives born of desperation were usually the very ones most likely to result in retaliation.

Nevertheless, sacred script began disappearing from our premises. Oh, not all at once, or even sequentially, to be sure. Just the odd lesson here and there. At first, I buried them out in the pasture, but apparently not deep enough. Some nameless animal, in search of spiritual edification no doubt, unearthed them. Fortunately, I discovered the disinterment before my firstborn and far more sanctimonious brother did. After that, I simply burned them one page at a time and buried the ashes.

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Chapter 9 FIRSTBORN

First born male children were accorded special status in that church. In the Old Testament they were the ones who, because they were wise enough to slide down the chute first, were born to "bear rule over their brethren". Upon their father's demise, they inherited the lion's share of the family estate while wives, concubines and siblings typically received nothing.

In the modern world, this practice was for the most part looked upon as archaic; unfortunately, many of the doctrines of that church had little in common with civilized notions. Every first born male in that sect, having repetitively heard that they were special, adopted the tenet with the same fervor that tyrants of old embraced the doctrine of the divine right of kings to rule.

As firstborn, unless caught in the act, there were few crimes they could be punished for. During meals, they invariably got the most meat and biggest helpings of dessert; they always got to stay up at least an hour later than their siblings; and when adults unconscionably needed a few hours alone, they got to sharpen their already substantial skills at world domination by being appointed official baby sitters of the realm.

It was fortunate for them that they had been blessed by God with a superior intellect and a natural ability to rule, for if the events which took place in my brother's duchy were (and I'm sure to varying degrees they were) representative of the chaos which must surely have ensued in other households of the called and chosen, then these first born wouldbe monarchs were in desperate need of all the arrogance and presumption their special status engendered.

My brothers and I looked forward to those occasions, when Bruce was the man of the house, about as much as Republicans looked forward to Watergate. As temporary despot in charge, he had even formulated a little speech for these occasions which sel-

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dom varied. "Mom was gone," he would begin, "and he was now in charge, therefore life as we knew it had ceased." "We would," he solemnly intoned, "do exactly as instructed or else." For emphasis he would wave a thick wooden paddle brusquely in our faces. It was twice the size and exactly the shape of a ping pong paddle. Carpenters in the church had been instructed to cut them out and pass them round to the brethren as disciplinary aids for the small honorarium of two dollars each.

Mutinies are neither specious nor spontaneous. Contrary to both societal and religion's cherished notions, rebellion is not an individual's first and natural response to benign authoritarian directives, otherwise societies, nations and religions, would never have the chance to inexorably evolve into that state of institutionalized repression so characteristic of all of them. But, rather, rebellion is an individual's quite natural reaction to dictatorial oppression.

His first few attempts at domination by decree went unchallenged mostly because he had followed the regular pattern familiar to us all. Keep quiet, don't run around the house and get to bed on time. His problems began when he attempted to rewrite the program.

To this day, I am positive that the dishes would have been done, the floor would have gotten mopped, the toilet cleaned and he would have retained possession of two of his original front teeth if only he had somehow learned to govern with grace.

Having been diagnosed as demonic by Herbert's local pastor/inquisitors rather than bipolar, I was on one of my inexplicable highs that night, which usually lasted from several days to several weeks. During those periods, I was invincible. Nothing could touch me when I was in that state. If called upon to defend the humblest of God's creatures, a cat, a dog or even a brother, woe betide the perpetrator.

Little brother Keith (in stark contrast to most eight year Olds) had failed to display any real diligence in scrubbing down the bathroom. In point of fact, he had merely given walls, tub and toilet a few perfunctory swipes with the mop, retired to his room and gone to sleep. When Bruce discovered the slovenly workmanship, he went in search of the offending party, rod of correction in hand. Yanking the tyke out of a sound sleep, he began shouting at him and was about to start hitting him with that god damned Christian

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club when I reached over and grabbed it out of his hand. "Go to sleep, Keith," I said. "I'll take care of things."

My actions seemed to constitute a far more egregious offence than that of Keith's barely cleaning the bathroom and I knew Bruce would leave him in peace to deal with the unconscionable crime I had just committed, that of rebellion against duly constituted authority.

We faced off in the living room. Bruce, a good five inches taller than I, took center stage and assumed an aggressive stance. Hands on his hips, he had that enraged cast to his eyes seen only on the faces of the egotistically selfrighteous who've just been told to f__k themselves. He demanded I return the paddle to him forthwith, go immediately to my room and stay there forever. Of course, he felt it necessary to add, in a low and icy voice, that he was telling Mom the instant she walked through the door.

I slouched against the wall about ten feet away, mentally forcing myself to look relaxed. Bruce took a few decisive steps towards me biting off his next words as he advanced.

"Give me that paddle. Now!" he commanded.

"No." I quietly replied.

This was definitely not the correct answer, for he rushed me at this point, trying to smother me with his superior weight and height. I hit him in the stomach as hard as I could with my left fist and, just before he crashed against the wall from the force of his momentum, slipped to one side just beyond arm's reach. Holding his midsection with both hands, he looked shocked. "It's against God's law to hit people with your fists," he gasped. "You've had it now!"

"Stay away from me, Bruce, or I'll hit you again," I replied. Still half doubled over from the shot he'd taken to the stomach he was, nonetheless, only a couple feet away and he suddenly straightened up with alarming speed and lunged at me. I hit him hard and fast, once on the chin, and once to the right side of his face, staggering him. His hands and arms went limp and he was barely standing.

And I suddenly felt an overwhelming rage, towards him, that f__king Church, the substantial part they played in the impoverishment and subsequent breakup of my family, and their doctrinal nomination of this sanctimonious bastard as temporary king in residence. I gave him one last shot for the road, full on the mouth, split-

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ting both lips and breaking two of his upper front teeth. He dropped to the floor screaming and clawed his way to the couch, bleeding over everything as he went. Burying his head in the seat cushions, he rocked his body back and forth sobbing.

I went over to him and put my arm around his shoulders. I felt like the most vicious son of a bitch since Attila the Hun. At that moment, I'd have given anything to take that last punch back.

"I'm sorry Brucie, I really am," I said.

He elbowed me aside and, turning his bloodied visage to me hissed, "Mom's been talking about sending you to Juvenile Hall and she'll do it now." "You're going to rot in jail for this," he finished smugly.

"Yeah, right," I replied, and stalked off to my bedroom. Bruce waited till I'd closed the door, tromped down the hall and locked me in from the outside. I'd figured he might try that but it didn't matter, nothing mattered, certainly not locked doors. Besides, I was planning on using the window.

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Chapter 10 ESCAPE

The night was dark and cool with only the faintest hint of a breeze. Without an itinerary, it was difficult to determine just which way to go, so I sat on the wooded hill overlooking the house and puffed thoughtfully on a Camel. A pair of headlights appeared in the distance down the long gravel road. Mom was home.

Years later, one of my brothers told me that Bruce's tale to her had been, I'd "gone berserk for no apparent reason and just started beating on him." Mom immediately called the county sheriff. Within forty-five minutes they came roaring down the road as if the hounds of hell were chasing them. After they'd dismounted and filed inside, I crept to within twenty-five feet of their car.

After conferring with Mom and Bruce, the cops emerged from the house and called for additional units. Two more pair of headlights soon barreled down the road, crunched to a halt in the freshly oiled gravel and four more cops piled out. I listened as the deputy in charge described me to his fellow defenders of the law and public safety. I was a vicious, possibly insane, eleven year old male, four feet eleven inches tall with green eyes and short brown hair. I'd just assaulted my older brother for no apparent reason and Lord knows what I'd do next.

"Now, we really stand no chance of catching this kid at night. His mother says he knows the land for miles around, but I'm betting he's close by. He's only eleven and he can't have gone far. We'll split up and walk the ten acres of this property calling his name, in a friendly manner. Something along the lines of, 'Dale, we know you're out there and you're scared. We're here to help. Just give yourself up and we'll help you work things out.'"

"What happens to him if we catch him?" one of the deputies asked.

"He's going straight to Remann Hall," came the reply, "and if the

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little prick gives us any trouble he'll wish he'd never been born."

Any thoughts I might have had about seeking an impartial audience with representatives of the law were quickly supplanted by a keen desire to reach puberty. I wasn't about to surrender to those gorillas. I cut east through the woods on familiar paths, thinking as I went that "The last time I walked this trail, I still had a home," and "Just yesterday I was free."

I traveled about five miles before dawn, meandering, heading nowhere in particular. The only real comfort lay in pushing on, it was the one element in life at the moment I had any control over. I holed up in rustic barn as a clear, cold dawn broke over Mt. Rainier and the Cascades forty miles to the east; tunneling into last year's hay, I slept fitfully.

The world looks altogether different to an eleven year old fugitive from justice than it does to the average child. I awoke in the hot afternoon, suffocating in a cold grey blanket of despair, no longer invulnerable, just depressed and alone. I had, it seemed, two choices: live in hay barns forever or turn myself in. I lit up a Camel sucking the fragrant smoke deep, blew a few smoke rings, and tried to think rationally. Thirst was the major problem. Up to a point, cigarettes dull hunger pangs, but they only intensify sensations of dehydration. After a furtive exploration, I located a stand pipe about a hundred yards from the barn, wound about with vagrant blackberry vines. The water was rusty, brown, and about the tastiest I'd ever drunk.

Green and pleasant lands stretched away in all directions. The Northwest of my youth was still heavily timbered. Rural homes and small farms dotted a countryside which had, for the most part, remained unchanged since the 1930's. For the next several days, I wandered aimlessly about this country, sleeping in barns or other outbuilding and dodging any contact with humans. I avoided roads except at night, when I could see a car's head lights long before the occupants could see me. I dove into ditches and hid behind trees when ever a vehicle approached. More than once it was a sheriff's car.

I ate what I could steal or forage, drank from outside faucets, sometimes creeks, and temporarily forsook my long allegiance to Camels, switching brands to Lucky Strikes, after discovering an unguarded carton on the front seat of an unattended pickup. They

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weren't humps, but after a few days I scarcely noticed the difference.

On day five, I found an aging .22 caliber single shot rifle resting on rusty spikes above the rough hewn doorway of a barn. A 500 round brick of Remington Long Rifle ammunition was tucked away on a the ledge below. I snatched up both without a qualm, figuring that I needed them far more than their original owner. Although I didn't know how to shoot or hunt, this seemed as good a time as any to learn. I headed for Clover Creek, a small cold stream which flowed out of higher hills ten miles or so to the east and down through semi wild tracts of land where deer and bear still roamed.

Hunting, as far as I knew, was a simple enough undertaking. One walked through the forest until an animal was sighted, pointed a gun at it while it obligingly stood there, and pulled the trigger. I walked all day, and all the next, and never saw a deer.

They'd been there before, that much I knew because slightly muddied paths along the creek were rife with their tracks and droppings. As the sun set on the second day, exasperation set in and I shouted at the top of my lungs to no one in particular "Where are you f__kers, anyway?" About forty yards away a doe and her fawn, which blended in so well against a backdrop of tall meadow grass and trees that they had been, to me, all but invisible, raced away across the clearing and disappeared into the woods beyond. I would never have seen them if they hadn't moved, and as it was it didn't matter, I never had a chance to shoot.

I tramped the woods for two weeks feeling, as a rule, ever more lost and alone. Finally I just said the hell with it, I was lonely, tired and running out of smokes. I headed home. Life on the run had lost much of its mystique. I cut through the pasture at twilight and stashed the .22 under some loose boards in our hay barn along with the shells. Although I couldn't bring it home, I didn't want to take it back.

Expecting the worst, I stepped into the house prepared to light out if the need arose but mother, upon seeing me, merely asked if I was all right and if I'd had dinner yet. I could've done without the split pea soup, but the brown sugar Kool Aid was of surpassing vintage. For reasons still unknown, it was as if the past few weeks hadn't happened.

Not being one to keep track of the futile hours and days allotted

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to useless human existence, it hadn't occurred to me to check the stats, otherwise I would have known it was Friday, and stayed out another day. As it was, on the day following my return to civilization, I took my place in the congregation of the called and chosen and found to my shock that in my absence I had become a hero...of sorts.

My peers gathered around me, eager to hear grim tales of battle and survival in the inhospitable wilds and, while many were dragged away by future saints who glowered at me like I was the devil incarnate, a few remained to hear hair raising (and modestly remodeled) recitations of my many and varied adventures.

The sermon that day rolled roughshod, as usual, over worldly religion, history, science and everything else Herbert hadn't personally authored, and would have been totally committed to memory's waste basket had it not been for a cryptic, after services, announcement that next Sabbath, great news from headquarters would be announced. The faithful were enjoined to be there.

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Chapter 11 THE APOSTLE

Speaking strictly for myself, I probably could have been enticed to forego the occasion. Usually when portentous declarations were proclaimed from Pasadena, they involved either a demand for more money, a diminution of the already short time we sinners had left to sin before God returned and the righteous came to power, or, as was usually the case, a pleasant mixture of the two. With all that in mind, I (along with much of Christendom) was totally unprepared for the glad tidings emanating from California that following Saturday.

Services that day started off like they always did: stand, sit, stand, sit. The customary ream of uninteresting announcements was read, and then the sermon began. No portentous declarations were forth coming, however.

It was a rough hewn sermon, the kind one usually heard when the ministry attempted, as they often did, to facilitate the mal-positioned copulation of world events with biblical prophecy. But that was not what the dissertation was about.

It was strictly New Testament in reference, regarding the (heretofore) inconsequential subject of pastoral hierarchy within the church. As such, it careened through the four gospels and lurched through Acts, Romans, Galatians and Corinthians, before grinding to a shuddering halt in Ephesians.

As sermons went, it appeared to have gone nowhere with bewildering rapidity. It virtually ignored the impending demise of the world, made no mention what ever of that great madam, the Roman Catholic Church and its Protestant prostitute daughters, nor were there any allusions to lakes of fire or marauding bears. From the stand point of anyone who had come just to get the crap scared out of them it was dud!

The sermon ended, much as it had begun, on a long drawn out

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note of nothing. The minister then folded his notes, closed up his bible with a decisive slap of the hand and leaned forward on the podium.

"Herbert Armstrong," he declared "is a simple man." He had neither sought nor desired the staggering burden of Church rulership, but God (always unpredictable) had selected him. There was no doubt (he continued) that Herbert Armstrong was God's chosen servant. He was a humble man with simple tastes and as such was highly uncomfortable with the adoration and accolade accorded him as he jetted across the United States and often around the globe on his private airplane. That long list of titles behind his name, Founder, President, Chancellor and Editor-in-Chief, to name but a few, were forced on him by the ministry and a majority of the called and chosen who wished to honor him, and thus he allowed them to be appended to his name... for the sake of others.

And now a new title was about to be conferred on this modest man, we were informed. In the face of overwhelming popular demand, Herbert had reluctantly agreed, for the sake of the Church, to be ordained an Apostle with all the privileges and prerogatives attendant thereto.

The called and chosen, most of them at any rate, arose as one, breaking into an emotional storm of cheers and tears which shook the grange hall windows and rattled the doors. The pastor attempted in vain to quell the unseemly disturbance (so out of character for God's children), but it was an ill fated effort which died young; the faithful were having none of it. After all, it was not every day that a congregation found itself in possession of its very own apostle.

When some semblance of sanity was finally restored, a taped message from the newly anointed was played over the PA system. "Greetings brethren," an apostolic voice boomed out (just prior to launching into a thirty minute history of the God-inspired life that it, along with its owner, had led).

The voice then related how it had neither desired nor sought the high and honorable office it now held. It had never aspired to be even a preacher, much less an apostle, but God, (working in mysterious ways his wonders to perform) had seen qualities in it that it had not seen in itself.

Just what those qualities were, went unstated, and thus were

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largely a matter of conjecture but, this did not stop after-worship fellowshippers from hazarding guesses as to just what it was that set such a blessed creature apart from and above everybody else.

His enormous stockpile of personal humility obviously played a large role in the apostolic selection process. After all, God would not bestow that much power and glory upon an average individual, for it might go to one's head. And soon he'd be living like a king, ordering the construction of ornate edifices, flying around the world in his private jet with valets and chefs, dining from solid gold plates and quaffing wine from golden goblets! No, one had to be a meek and nearly spotless lamb for the Great Shepherd to make use of it in so holy a manner. And most men simply had not grown enough in the power and spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ to be worthy of such a high calling.

"Where does God find such men?" That was the question on many lips as the flock shook their heads in solemn wonder and trooped out of church that day.

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Chapter 12 WHO WILL RULE?

Where can I find more cigarettes? That's what was uppermost in my proud, deceitful mind. I had but one fag left and, although I'd already stolen more than enough money from my brother Bruce's second tithe jar that morning to purchase several packs, the Pro Shop at Brookdale Golf Course would be closed several hours before Sabbath was over. And I didn't dare buy cigarettes on a holy day, for I knew that to do so might invite sudden and utter destruction from a thoroughly outraged God.

In the end, I just had to make that one lone coffin nail do till Sunday morning, when the heathens went to church...and God would, perhaps, be so preoccupied cataloging their disgusting abominations that he might have little time left over to take note of mine.

Sunday morning, of course, was a total loss. No matter how hard I tried, no matter how many issues I desecrated, that f__king correspondence course kept turning up with appalling regularity. It wasn't until several months had passed that I discovered that brother Bruce had acquired his own private set of issues and (quite out of character for him) was only too glad to share them with me. They were like weeds, these things; the more I chopped, burned and buried, the more of them sprouted up elsewhere.

The momentous issue confronting me that morning dealt with the space race. A photograph of the most powerful operational rocket in the U.S. inventory, the Jupiter "C", appeared on the cover, captured at the instant of full lift off burn. Who will rule space? That was the question with which Herbert, who was always concerned about who would rule what, had captioned page one and for which, as always, he alone had the answer.

Human beings, he asserted, were unfit to even explore the pristine oceans of space beyond earth's shores, let alone colonize or rule over the planets beyond. Harkening back to a religious belief pop-

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ularized during the dark ages, he envisioned a kind of virginal cosmic purity existing out there which, he bluntly stated, God would never permit filthy rotten humans to defile.

Despite all the money and human resources the United States and the Soviet Union were pouring into their respective projects, the Lord, he said, would see to it that man would never make it to the moon, let alone the planets.

The Plain Truth about space race, he declared, was that it was really an insidious undertaking inspired by none other than that wily serpent, Satan the Devil. Satan, whose original name was Lucifer, had been, in the beginning, the most powerful and perfect being God had ever created.

He was an Archangel of the genus Cherub and all other angels were subordinate to him. But for all of that, his prime function was that of a baby sitter. God, Armstrong maintained, had always intended to create human beings and, when they reached a certain level of spiritual proficiency, had intended to change them into gods just like himself with all the power and prerequisites of the Godhood. These, literally, God begotten creatures would, incidently, then possess powers and abilities far surpassing that of their former nanny, and it was mainly for this reason that Lucifer was pissed.

Being assigned such a menial task, asserted Armstrong, eventually engendered such feelings of jealousy and resentment in the great Archangel that despite all the power, beauty, wealth and wisdom given to him by God, he became totally disenchanted with his station in life. He wanted more! Since, as Lucifer, there was little "more" left to be had, except God Almighty himself, he turned his covetous eyes towards the third heaven and plotted war.

As CEO and Supreme Dictator for Life over all the other angels, Lucifer managed to indoctrinate and recruit fully one third of his subordinates, who then accompanied him in a spiritual blitzkrieg of the heavens.

As the primordial battle between good and evil raged, supernatural forces beyond mortal comprehension were used by both sides, the results of which are still visible today. The universe, Herbert maintained, had originally been created perfect, like all of the Lord's creations, but if one looked around now the horrifying results of Satan's rebellion against authority, his dissatisfaction with

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his lot in life and his ensuing disobedience were clear. The craters on the moon, the disorderly and non symmetrical orbits of the planets, an earth tipped fully thirteen degrees off its axis resulting in desert terrain in one region and arctic wastes in another, these and other evidences bore mute witness to a supernatural calamity of unbelievable magnitude, one which God had determined must never happen again.

Sometime afterwards, the Lord patched up the Earth. With his original plan, which had been to create earthly children, have Lucifer baby sit them and then turn them into gods now in shambles he now knew that he could never trust them not to use their supernatural powers for evil purposes. The only way available to insure that his children would ever be trustworthy then, was to create a small number, give them free moral agency, and watch what they did with it.

So, he created a couple of humans and placed them in a garden. But Satan, being aware of all that went on, had never given up his obsessive ambition to destroy the Lord and his future children. As soon as the Lord was out of sight, he tempted the kids with stolen fruit and, on the basis of that, successfully subverted God's divine purpose once more. The Lord was forced to kick his kids out and they wandered the earth in shame and disgrace to God's dismay and Satan's delight.

But the kids began to dream about somehow reaching the planets and stars, and Satan, ever resourceful, made full and evil use of this proclivity as he did all with all things good. It was he, Herbert asserted, who was really behind the attempt to invade the heavens from that modest launch platform, the tower of Babel. It was he who, throughout history, had incited humans with hopeless dreams of flight, and thus there could not be the slightest doubt that Satan was the driving force behind NASA and the Russians.

Herbert stated that the concept of rocketry was the twentieth century's technological equivalent of the tower of Babel; that the language of science was rapidly becoming humanity's common medium of communication; and that their ultimate goal was to ascend into the heavens themselves that they might thumb their collective nose at God.

Whether NASA or the Soviets ever issued covert directives to their Astro/Cosmonaut Corps regarding thumbs and noses re-

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mains classified. Both agencies remained traditionally tight lipped about the subject. It has been alleged by those in the know, however, that during the height of the cold war it was perfectly permissible, when orbiting over enemy territory, to give ones adversaries the finger as one went zipping by.

The issue ended with Armstrong's reiteration that God would never allow humans to travel space or ever colonize the other planets. He had God's Word on it. This was thoroughly depressing news to me on an otherwise gloomy day. I'd been going down for over a week and although this in and of itself was not uncommon, the depth of the decent was. There truly was nothing worth living for on the best of days in Armstrong's Church and these were definitely not the best of days. I had to face it, I had no future.

Since the world was going to end before my seventeenth birthday, there was not much point in going to school. I knew I'd never have a chance to marry, raise children, own my own home, or embark on a good career. The only future available to me was that one of total obedience to God's dictums as interpreted by Herbert W.

If I somehow managed to please his implacable Deity, I would get to live forever, wield my own personalized rod of iron and rule over such squalid human scum as were placed at my disposal.

To rule or be ruled? The question itself was a disgusting one. I had, and I assumed most normal people had, neither the desire to rule over others nor to be ruled over by them. This type of attitude, in the estimation of the church at any rate, was regarded as rank heresy, undoubtedly emanating from the evil one, for only Satan it was said was in favor of anarchy. It was also one in a long line of proofs both to them and to me that I truly was different. Not only from the heathens of the world, but from those of the church of the Living God who had called me out of it, as well. When taken in context, for these and oh so many other reasons, I belonged, nowhere.

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Chapter 13 THE CAGE

I crumpled that particular lesson up, crammed it into my coat pocket and slipped outside for a smoke. In deference to the first-born who, like all spoiled brats, wanted to be first at everything, I torched his Correspondence Course before ceremonially lighting my cigarette from its burning pages.

Under all but the most trying of conditions, nicotine seemed to sooth and calm the tidal effects of depression and elation which had begun to strike with increasing frequency. Virtually the only time I felt good anymore was after several deep drags of fragrant smoke, but that day it barely took the edge off.

I stopped by our root cellar where I almost always kept a spare pack of cigarettes hid. The root cellar was about twenty feet long, six feet wide and eight feet high. It was fashioned of concrete, with a vented shake roof and built into the side of a sharply sloping hill. A dirt bunk, three feet deep and two wide lay along one wall where carrots and potatoes got buried in the fall for use during the winter. Rows of shelving occupied all other spaces between the floor and ceiling. All told, there was room for over one thousand quarts of produce. There was also room for twenty gallons of wine. This wine had languished there for several years. If it had been aging there since the crusades it is unlikely anyone would have noticed, however, since one sip was all that those, except the more extremely suicidal, could ever be enticed into taking.

The wine was courtesy of Brother Lamm. Its vintage predated by several years that famous batch which bore my trademark. Although vaguely positive it was cherry wine, I would have been unable to swear to it under oath. The old green half gallon jug I was chugging it from effectively camouflaged its true color, and I had not then, nor have I to this day, smelled or tasted any earthly substance to which it might have been related.

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The taste was abominable, there was no two ways about that. I solved the problem by holding my nose when I swallowed. By the time the dusty jug was half empty, however, the taste had improved substantially. Apparently only the top third tasted horrible.

I discovered that wine performed many useful functions that afternoon. For one thing, cigarettes tasted better. I found I could smoke more of them than ever before with no ill effects and, best of all, my depression disappeared. There was, I just knew, a beautiful, warm, sunny day awaiting me the moment I stepped out of that cellar.

I finally staggered outside late in the afternoon, the wine jug nearly empty. The earth was all I'd hoped for. The sky was that brilliant shade of blue one sees only in technicolor dreams, full of huge white billowy clouds which floated lazily overhead. The soft warm grass was a striking green, but of a shade I'd never seen before. "YES!" I thought. "This is where I want to live!"

I was later informed by my younger brother, Kevin, that what ever problems I took in there with me had apparently been left far behind for I was singing at the top of my lungs.

My hymn, for the day, "Bless 'Em All", was of World War Two vintage. It had been a favorite of my father's and, from what I was able to reconstruct, it must obviously have become one of mine as well...except for certain liberties I allegedly took with the lyrics. The song, as I was reported to have rendered it, went like this:

F__k 'em all, f__k 'em all,

The long and the short and the tall.

F__k the whole world just for being alive

F__k all the preachers and all of their wives.

F__k the presidents, bishops and chiefs.

They're nothing but bastards and thieves.

Put flags on their faces, hell, f__k this whole nation.

Just give 'em the dick; f__k 'em all.

Mother came running out of the house to see what all the commotion was about. I was sitting on the ground by this time as the earth had turned to rubber beneath my feet. All the grass, trees, and sky and creation itself now merged into oozing blobs of disassociated color occasionally punctuated by a parental face peering owlishly into mine. "What's the matter with you?" the distorted face demanded wrathfully.

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"Nothing," I reportedly replied. "Not one f__kin' thing."

I don't remember getting slapped in the face; I never saw it coming and, given the state I was in, I certainly never felt it, but I lurched back, fixed my mother with as sorrowful a stare as I was capable of and sadly opined, "You know you and Armstrong have got it all wrong about this world. It's not coming to an end in 1975. It's going to f__k itself to death by the year 2003!" I then roared off into a gale of laughter at this elegant jest while my younger brothers snickered appreciatively. Mother, however, declined to join in the mirth.

In the state I was in, correction was judged to be ineffective. If children can't feel the pain of a beating, there was just no sense in administering one; that was the Church's view on the subject. Mom and Bruce (who was always so willing to lend a hand) dragged me into the house, locked me in my room and called the ministry to see what they should do with me.

After several hours, my room got tired of spinning and gradually slowed to a halt. The instant I tried to sit up, however, it resumed its madcap antics. I was horribly thirsty, my head ached, and when I tried to open my mouth it felt like the inside of a glue bottle. I finally managed to crawl over to the door, bang on it, and request a glass of water. "You can't have any water for twenty-four hours," I was curtly informed. "The minister said that water was the worst thing to give someone who's been drinking because water forces more alcohol out of their body and into their brain and they just get drunk all over again." "Please Mom?" I pleaded. "You should have thought of this before you got drunk, but don't worry," she added. "By this time tomorrow you can have all the water you want." "And bread, too!" Bruce chimed in from behind the door. "Now shut up and don't bother us again!" Mom snapped, and I didn't.

Fortunately, evening had fallen, Mom, Bruce and the boys were eating an apparently long delayed supper to which I was neither invited nor permitted. With some sense of equilibrium at long last restored, I cautiously opened the window, slid through and jumped to the ground. The impact nearly drove my eyeballs out the top of my head where they seemed to remain painfully suspended for an inordinate period of time.

My heart was hammering, the world was spinning off its axis once more, and the glue in my mouth had coalesced into a gummy,

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vile tasting substance previously unheard of in the universe. I headed for the nearest outside water faucet up in the pasture, pried my mouth open, and ingested several gallons.

Contrary to the ministry's medical prognosis, I did not experience an alcoholic flash back, the introduction of water into my system did not force alcohol molecules in hiding into my brain; all I really felt was better. Surprisingly though, I found out that, temporarily at least, I had absolutely no desire for a cigarette.

The social atmosphere within the house was profoundly altered the next morning. Mom would not even look at me, and Bruce, when he did, just smiled smugly. Amazed at not being beaten, I left for school slightly hung over, but otherwise fine.

The first half of the day went normally enough. By lunch time, I felt almost fully recovered from the previous day's drunk. At one thirty a tall man in a business suit walked into the classroom and whispered something to the teacher. She called me to her desk.

"Dale, this is the school district's psychiatrist. He'd like to talk to you," she said. I accompanied him through the halls and out the front doors.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"To my office downtown," he replied.

He ushered me into a brand new Chrysler, got in on the other side, and we drove off heading towards Tacoma.

I noticed the police radio under his dash and the butt of a Smith & Wesson protruding from his suit coat in the first couple of miles.

"You're a cop, aren't you." It was a statement not a question.

He studied me thoughtfully for a moment before replying, "Yeah, my name's Bud Meyers. I'm a detective with the Pierce County Sheriff's Office."

"I haven't done anything," I protested. "What do you want with me?"

"Your mother," Deputy Meyers replied, "says you're an incorrigible delinquent and a troublemaker. Whether that's true or not, I don't know but it's my job to take you to Remann Hall, the county's juvenile detention facility for evaluation and incarceration. From the rumors I've heard, I expected you to be a scruffy looking six foot tall bully, not a twelve year old kid who looks, maybe nine."

I sat back in the seat, stunned and too badly frightened to make a reply. I attempted to assess the situation rationally. I couldn't jump

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out of the car; we were traveling at better than fifty miles an hour. He was too big to try to overpower, and as an adult, a male, and a cop, he undoubtedly was not amenable to reason. Nevertheless, I tried.

"I had no idea drinking wine in the family cellar was against the law," I asserted somewhat stiffly. "Do you lock everybody up for that?"

Deputy Meyers smiled compassionately at me for a moment and shook his head. "No, Dale," he said. "We don't." Situations like this arise when parents want to get rid of a kid. Does your Dad know about this?" he asked.

"I don't know," I whispered, fighting back tears, which were so inevitable when I thought of my father that I usually refused to even think about him.

"I'm sorry, Dale. If it was up to me, I'd let you go."

"What's going to happen to me there?" I asked.

"Once you're admitted, they take you upstairs where you shower and surrender your street clothes. You are then issued a pair of jeans, shorts, and a tee shirt, then they lock you in one of the five detention cells. The cells contain two metal bunks, a sink and a toilet. There is literally nothing to do there but sit. You will have no access to reading material, paper or pencils. Meals are served through a metal grate in the door three times a day. Except for showers, which you will take every other morning, you will remain in your cell until a juvenile probation officer decides what to do with you. That's what's facing you now. The best thing you can do is keep your mouth shut and do as you're told. If you do that, I'm betting you'll be out within a week."

"I'll tell them," he went on, "as the arresting officer, that you were cooperative and gave me no trouble. Believe it or not that sometimes makes a difference. I'll also stop by in a couple of days just to see how you're doing." He put a comforting hand on my shoulder. "You can make it, kid," he said.

He pulled out a pack of Winstons, tapped out a couple and handed me one. "We're almost there," he said. "They don't let you smoke inside so you better enjoy this one."

Remann Hall was everything Bud Meyers had said it was. There were five cells numbered 301 to 305 down a long, dim, third story hallway. All were unoccupied. For reasons known only to them

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they put me in the middle cell, 303. The interior decorator apparently had a fetish about lime green must have been obsessed with it, because everything in sight was either that color or some bastardized version of it. The only exceptions were a porcelain sink bolted heavily into the southwest wall and a lidless, seatless toilet fastened securely to the floor.

The green door was solid metal about three inches thick. A half inch thick metal plate, six inches wide and twelve inches long, was inset into the door at a height of about five feet. The plate was full of evenly spaced half inch holes and, I assume, its function was that of a window. Since there was nothing to look out at except the narrow lime green hallway it served no practical purpose. The walls were reinforced concrete, a foot and a half thick. In the southwest corner, two feet above the toilet, a steel grate was built into the southern wall. It was just big enough to slide a metal meal tray through.

Two metal racks protruded from the western wall. Fashioned from heavy three quarter inch angle iron and three eighths inch sheet steel, these bunks were obviously designed by people who hated kids and I wondered how many of the called and chosen had voluntarily labored there when the place was built in the early nineteen hundreds. An inch thick mattress, a surplus army blanket and no pillow completed the appointments.

The only bright spot was the north wall. It sported a window which was four feet long and four feet high. It was covered with a heavy wire mesh, but this was sufficiently spaced so that one could see most of north Tacoma and the suburb of Ruston. I spent the first few hours gazing out of that window at regional landmarks. Ruston's three hundred foot tall copper smelter smoke stack, the twin white spires of a Lutheran Church, and the huge white screen of the Auto View Drive-in, about a mile distant, were among the most prominent features. "If only I was there" I thought "I would be free."

Dinner was served at five. Since I was apparently the only incorrigible in the city of Tacoma and the County of Pierce that evening, I dined alone. "Am I the only one in this place?" I asked the matron who brought my tray. "I'm not supposed to talk to you," she replied somewhat curtly and quickly walked away.

My appetite was for all practical purposes non existent and, if my tray had not contained several illicit offerings, it is doubtful I

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would have even bothered with it. I naturally noticed dessert first, chocolate cake with fudge frosting. Undoubtedly, made with real chocolate! My beverage for the evening appeared to be grape KoolAid. I gave it a perfunctory sip. It was indeed the genuine article and made with real, one hundred percent, tooth decaying, gut rotting white sugar to boot! Three slices of lightly buttered, diagonally cut, totally white bread (neatly stacked) inhabited the lower right hand pocket of the tray. And suddenly my appetite returned; I was famished. I hadn't tasted anything that good since the last bag of Christmas candy I stole so many childhood years ago. Meat loaf, mashed potatoes, and gravy completed the repast.

With my spirits temporarily lifted by the deliberate ingestion of forbidden fruit, I sat on the bunk and rested for awhile. The matron came by and asked for my tray. I slid it to her through the steel grate above the toilet. "Who are you?" I asked as she took it. She looked at me for a full ten seconds, then walked away in studied silence down the long green hall. "Whatever I am, they must think it's contagious," I thought.

As evening fell, a scattering of lights flickered softly on, wavering in the purpled distance. Out there, families would be gathering in modest homes, clustering around the TV, children would be laughing and playing; they had parents who would tuck them in bed, kiss them goodnight and never teach them the truth; that the world was coming to an end, that all but that chosen few who caught the Lord's fancy would be destroyed. "They are the lucky ones," I thought. "They've never heard of the Radio Church of God or of Herbert F__king Armstrong; they don't know they're doomed."

They never turned the lights off in that place; it was always daylight there. The only sound at night, or almost any other time for that matter, was the constant background hum of the ventilation system. With nothing to do and no reason to sleep, that first night was a long one.

Breakfast arrived about seven a.m. The toast and jam, cereal, sugar and milk didn't seem like much but, at least, the bread and sugar were white. Between meals, there was nothing to do except think. "Yesterday at this time, I was free," I mused. "Only a handful of hours ago." And I dreaded the coming of afternoon for it wouldn't be true anymore.

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That night I stood at the window for hours, staring out at those far flickering lights where normal people led ordinary lives. The end of the world could come at any time, and no matter when, it will come unexpectedly, like a thief in the night that's what I'd been told, and what if it happened now, this night? I became terrified, locked in a cage as I was with no way out. "God," I thought, "if things can just hold together and you'll see to it I get out of here tonight, that's all I'll ever ask." God apparently wanted to leave me free to make other requests, however, for that night ended before the world did.

I endured several more days of solitary confinement, and one more night of icy terror before a paradoxical rationalization brought some measure of comfort. I was standing at the window, looking out at a freedom which was only inches away, watching another long day slowly dissolve; "When I was a baby," I thought, "I wonder what my parents would have done if they could see where I've ended up. Would they have held me closer, or hit me less often? Would they have talked to me instead of yelling? Would they have answered my questions instead of demanding blind obedience? And would it have made any difference anyway? And where was I before all that? What was I before I existed?" I was nothing, a concept which hadn't occurred to me before. "Non existence incarnate. At some point in the near future, I'll be nothing again. Life is transitory; existence is the illusion; only nothing is real. They can only hurt you here."

On the fourth day, just before noon, the Juvenile Officer assigned to my case managed to tear himself away from whatever momentous affairs of state had required his attention. He unlocked my cell door and said, "Come with me," then stalked off down that long, pukey, lime green hall. He led the way into what looked like a dormitory, a large sunny room about forty feet long, by sixty wide, and filled with dozens of neatly made beds.

His name, he said, was Herbert Lawrence, and he asked me why I thought I was there. When adults asked rhetorical questions like that, no matter how one responded, one's answer was invariably wrong. It was as if they had some predatory primal need to force their prey into defensive postures or to verbally flee before they felt fully justified to pursue and attack.

Knowing there was no right answer to his question, I remained

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silent and just stared at him. He too remained mute. Several progressively more uncomfortable minutes passed in this fashion before he asked, "Did you understand what I said?" I continued to stare in his general direction, but at nothing in particular. I understood what he said but it was meaningless to me. He was meaningless to me.

"Do you know what day of the week it is?" he finally asked.

"No," I abruptly replied.

Startled by my sudden response he pressed his attack, "Why not?" What difference does it make?" I flatly rejoined.

"Are we feeling a little sorry for ourselves?" he inquired somewhat mockingly.

"There's no "we" to it, as I doubt you're wired for feelings," I replied somewhat caustically.

He stared at me stoically for several moments, then repeated his initial question. "Do you know why you're here?"

"I drank half a gallon of homemade wine in a root cellar."

"Why?" he asked sternly.

"Why not?" I replied deadpan.

"Have you done anything else you'd like to tell me about which you feel might have contributed to your present predicament?" he queried.

"No," I unhesitatingly replied.

"Your mother," he stated ominously, "tells us you beat one of your brothers so badly that he had to have several of his front teeth repaired. Is that true?"

"Yeah, it's true," I admitted.

"Well?" he persisted impatiently.

"Well, what?" I shot back.

"Why?"

"I've noticed no mention was made of the fact that this was my older brother. That he's six feet tall and out weighs me by at least twenty pounds, or that the reason we got in that fight in the first place was because he was going to beat my younger brother with a board," I hotly retorted.

"And you expect me to believe that you were protecting your younger brother, and that's the real reason you're here?" he inquired derisively.

Stung by his contempt and disbelief, I answered with all the

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diplomacy and tact characteristic of the eternally condemned, "I don't really give a flying f__k what you believe."

He slapped me across the face so hard it almost knocked me off the bed we were sitting on.

"Listen you little punk," he hissed, "I don't care what your brother did or how much older than you he is, we don't solve our problems in this life by hitting each other."

"Is that a fact" I rejoined. It was neither a statement nor a question; it was an observation.

We sat in silence for an uncomfortable span of minutes. For my part, I had nothing legible to say to him and, apparently, he had nothing further to say to me. Suddenly he glanced at his watch and with that horror of haste which only civil servants who've just discovered they're thirty seconds late for lunch are capable of. He informed me, "I'll be back in an hour." He headed swiftly towards the door, then paused and turned slowly towards me as if weighing something, in what passed for his mind. "If you'll give me your word you'll remain in this room, you can stay here until I get back. Do we have a deal?" he asked.

"Ok," I tonelessly agreed. "I'll be here when you get back."

He gave me a long hard look then, seemingly satisfied with my sincerity, he left the room without even locking the door behind him.

I wandered over to the large bank of metal framed windows where brilliant shafts of sunlight streamed in unobscured, and reveled in the warmth and light. Due to the geographical position of the cells, whose heavily screened windows faced only north, I hadn't seen the sun for days.

The windows opened inward and were wide enough for a person to fit through. I judged it to be about a thirty foot drop to grass and shrubs. An ornamental cherry tree, directly below, easily cut that distance in half. There was no question I could do it. But, then what? This was Tacoma's northwest side. To both the north and west lay Puget Sound, effectively cutting off any avenue of escape in that direction. A large slice of the east was blocked by Commencement Bay. South, South/ East were the only practical headings, diagonally, across the longest, most heavily populated, and therefore most dangerous, section of town.

I sat down on the nearest bed, the desire to escape still tugging

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irrationally at me. "Not today," I thought. "Not on their terms."

"For a moment, I thought you'd jump, kid." I swivelled around and Bud Meyers was standing in the doorway grinning at me.

"I was thinking about it, Bud," I admitted.

"I don't blame you, kid. I would be too," he chuckled. He ambled over, sat down on the bed opposite me shook out a couple of Winstons, and offered me one.

"What happens if they catch us smoking up here, anyway?" I asked the lean Detective.

"What the f__k are they going to do, throw us in jail?" he laughed.

We puffed our weeds in silence. The effects of nicotine on my tobacco starved system were nothing short of spectacular. For several minutes afterwards the room, the sunlight and the scented breeze wafting in through the open window took on unworldly hues and casts, as if visions of heaven had descended upon hell. "If I could feel like this all the time," I mused, "none of this would matter."

Bud finished his smoke and flipped it out the window. I did likewise.

"I gotta be going, Dale," he said. "I'm not supposed to tell you this, but they're going to send you home tomorrow." He paused for a moment, then reached into his shirt pocket and fished out a small white card. He scribbled something on the back, then handed it to me. "This is my card, Dale. It's got my name, office address, and office phone number on it. On the back, you'll find my home phone. If you need some one to talk to, call me. Anytime," he emphasized.

"Ok, I will, Bud," I replied, and stuffed the card in my pocket. "Thanks."

"No sweat, kid," he grinned, and was out the door.

Herbert Lawrence reappeared about fifteen minutes later. He took a seat opposite me. Silence reigned anew between us and I thought, "I'll be damned if I'm going break it."

He finally did. "I ran into Deputy Meyers on the way up here. He said he stopped by to see how you were doing. Isn't he the officer that arrested you?"

"You got it," I affirmed.

"So how do you feel about that?" he queried.

"Just fine," I retorted.

"I'm curious, how do you feel about him?" he persisted.

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"I like him."

"Why?"

"Except for my grandfather who died when I was five, and my father, who was okay before he became a f__king Christian, the only man to treat me with any kindness at all is that Deputy," I said.

"I think I don't approve of the adjective you used to describe Christians," he said, disapprovingly.

"I'm sorry," I spuriously apologized. "It's just that I couldn't think of anything worse to call the bastards on the spur of the moment."

"I'm a Christian," he stated evenly.

"I knew that when you hit me," I quietly responded.

The merest hint of a smile flitted across his blunt features. "Are you really as tough as you think you are?" he inquired softly.

"No," I answered immediately. "I'm only as tough as I have to be."

"How would you like to get out of here?" he asked, watching me closely.

I suspected some kind of trick. Previous experience with the called and chosen had taught me that when they offered something they thought I wanted, it was only to determine how badly I wanted it, so they could properly gauge the amount of pain they'd inflict by withholding it.

"It depends," I answered carelessly.

"On what?" he inquired.

"The price," I answered.

"Fair enough," he conceded. "You have to promise me that if I let you go you will obey your mother, attend church regularly and take notes on each sermon. That you will not use profanity, that you will show respect for all adults, that you will not use tobacco or alcohol. Your school grades are far lower than I'd expect from someone with your vocabulary," he stated. "Where'd you learn to talk like you do anyway?"

"Even the things I do well, you people use as a means of condemnation." I retorted evasively.

"Which "you people" are you referring to?" he asked solicitously.

"Every shit heeled adult I've ever known," I replied.

"Perhaps you'd care to define exactly what kind of adult we're talking about here," he suggested.

"A shit heel is a person so gutless that the only way they can get

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by in life is by kissing someone else's ass. To make themselves feel better," I continued, "they insist that those they consider subordinate to themselves do likewise."

"You seem to have an extremely low opinion of adults in general," he declared. "I'm used to seeing such attitudes in teenagers, but not twelve year Olds."

"They've earned it," I retorted.

"Well," he stated matter-of-factly, "this is getting us nowhere, and you still haven't answered my question. If I release you will you behave yourself?"

"I'll do my best" I stated quietly.

"How good is your best?" he pressed.

"No matter how hard I've tried in the past it's never been good enough for anyone; not God, parents, school or the church," I replied cuttingly. "So I'm sure I'll screw up somewhere and justify your expectations of me as well."

"That's a profound philosophy for one so young," he interjected. "Did you hear that somewhere or make it up yourself?" he inquired.

"Most adults think I'm a smart ass due to my command of the English language," I said, and then added deliberately. "Rather than castigate me for excellence, why don't all of you rectify your ignorance?"

"Castigate? Rectify?" He repeated the words slowly as if savoring their implications. "Where did you learn words like that?" he probed.

"Demons," I proposed.

"Yes, well; your mother is coming to pick you up in about an hour. Do we have a deal?" he inquired.

"I'll do my best" I shrugged.

"Okay," he said firmly. "We've got a deal. Oh, by the way," he announced in an offhand manner, "You're on probation now. Your mother will be bringing you back up here once a month to tell me how you're behaving and if you mess up even once I'll put you right back in your cell."

He strode off without another word.

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GO TO

CHILDHOOD LOST

PART TWO



The story of Dale Brown began as an Article for
The Painful Truth website.

www.hwarmstrong.com

DALE BROWN



CHILDHOOD LOST

PART TWO

Memories of a childhood in
THE WORLDWIDE CHURCH OF GOD
- THE PAINFUL TRUTH -



This is Dale Browns story. A story of child abuse, parental conflict, and the horror within the confines of a religious cult founded by Herbert W. Armstrong.

From the age of six, Dale tells the story of a family broken apart by a religious cults powerful influence over his family. What had been a middle class family of eight became a single parent family of seven living on welfare. At age twelve, the conflict between family and church, the lack of love and support at home drives young Dale to the streets in a desperate attempt to escape the insanity!

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DALE BROWN
AUTOBIOGRAPHY

CHILDHOOD LOST
PART TWO

- THE PAINFUL TRUTH -

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Chapter 14 HOMECOMING

Mom picked me up about forty five minutes later. She didn't say "Hi," "Hello," "How are you?" or nothing. Just, "Get in the car." The eighteen mile drive home was the quietest ride I'd ever taken. Not one word passed between us.

On the basis of that, I didn't expect to be welcomed home by my family and therefore wasn't disappointed. My brothers, with the exception of Bruce, scurried away to their rooms. Even Mom disappeared. Bruce remained, however, standing regally in the center of the dining room, hands on his hips and, as usual, scowling down at me.

"We didn't have much say in you coming back." He began, staring at me contemptuously. "And if it was up to us you never would have. You're an outsider now," he smirked haughtily, "not a member of this family anymore. You have to earn the right to even be here."

He paused, waiting for a reply. When none was forthcoming he went on, "You're going to do exactly what we tell you, when we tell you, and how we tell you or we'll send you right back to jail, and next time you'll never get out," he concluded smugly.

I turned on my heel and headed for the door.

"And where do you think you're going?" Bruce instantly demanded.

"Outside," I replied. "I don't believe in idol worship."

Before Bruce could respond, Mom came hustling in from the living room where she'd been listening in on Bruce's oration.

"And just what did you mean by that little crack?" she queried.

"That I'm not going to bow down to you or your little tin god here; not now, not ever," I shot back.

"You're going right back to Remann Hall this instant, you little punk," she screamed. "Go outside and get in that car right now."

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I just shook my head and headed for my room. Bruce tried to grab me as I walked by; I twisted free and raised my fists. "You want to lose two more teeth," I advised, "you just try it."

"You little hellion!" Mom shouted. "I'm calling the police!"

I went to my room and grabbed my outdoor clothes. Bruce rushed down the hall, slammed the door shut and locked it from the outside with the sliding bolt. I tried to open the window but they'd nailed it shut. By now I knew that Mom was calling the cops. I had no doubt they would soon be on their way, so I pulled out my top dresser drawer, bashed out the bedroom window with it and, using my bundle of clothes as a cushion against the sparkling shards of glass still sticking up from the putted frame, I crawled through the clutter and hit the ground running.

I cut southeast through the woods for about half a mile before turning north, and then west in a wide circle which brought me to within a couple hundred yards of the house. By then three sheriff's cars were parked in the driveway. Out of curiosity, more than anything else, I decided to stay put and watch. About twenty minutes later eight of Pierce county's finest emerged from the place, held a brief conference out in the yard, and then dispersed to their respective cars, two in one car, two in another, and four in the remaining squad.

The knowledge that I alone was solely responsible for such an overwhelming turn out of those guardians of peace and public safety became, in later days, a matter of professional pride. "At least," I thought, "someone wants me!" Still, I would, perhaps, have foregone that distinction for comfortable anonymity and a measure of peace.

I waited until dusk before leaving a dense cover of Scotch Broom which bordered the road a hundred yards north of the house. Slipping down on to the dusty dead end drive which ran past my now former abode, I brazenly strode right past it, cut across the pasture, entered the barn and retrieved the rifle and shells I'd stashed there only a few weeks ago.

Next, I paid a visit to the infamous root cellar to retrieve the cigarettes and matches which, since my incarceration, had been languishing there and I discovered to my chagrin that the outer door was now secured with a brand new paddle lock. "Damn!" I thought, "What next?" I ran over to the woodshed about fifty feet away, re-

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tried an ax and pried the complaining hasp off the door.

Whom ever had installed this hardware had, in my estimation, meant business. They'd used the longest wood screws I'd ever seen. Prying them free had generated enough metallic screeches and woody howls of protest to alert half the residents of the county; and a vast preponderance of its cops to boot. I rushed inside figuring I had little time to waste, dug my box of smokes and matches out of the dirt bunk where I'd hidden them, and was out the door and into the night in less than a minute.

Maintaining a steady pace, I never slowed down until I was several miles to the Southeast. I rested in a tall grove of evergreens, sitting down on the ancient, crumbling stump of a long dead fir. I mentally surveyed my meager provisions. One rifle, several hundred rounds of ammunition, three packs of Camels, four books of matches, and one change of clothes. "Not so good but, far better odds than I faced just yesterday at Remann Hall.

Remann Hall," I thought bitterly, "and dear old Herbert. Of all the things I thought I needed in life another 'Herbert' was not one of them. F__k you Lawrence," I whispered. "F__k you and the horse you rode in on, the cops behind you, and the Christians following."

I lit up my first in hours, slid down and rested my back against the tired old stump. As night wore on it became progressively cooler. Gathering my spare clothing around me in a kind of nest, I dozed off.

I awoke to a riot of sound. Every bird in the state, and half their out of state cousins were partying down from the sound of things. The drooping branches of nearby fir and cedar were alive with goldfinches, sparrows, robins, and wrens. The morning air was thick with non stop chattering. The instant I sat up and reached for a Camel, however, they fled in a jumble of wings leaving behind a sudden and empty silence.

The first smoke of any morning was always the most satisfying, and I wondered if the rest of the day's habit really was...or if it was just a futile attempt to recapture the morning.

There was obviously no point in staying where I was so I headed for Clover Creek, a little over a mile away. By the time I got there I was hot, sweaty, and thirsty. I bundled my gear up under some tall alder trees near the heavily greened bank and plunged into the ice

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cold water. A twenty minute soak more than compensated for the gathering summer's heat. I got out, got dressed, and sat on the bank for a while, staring into the crystal clear waters hurrying noisily along.

Having no idea what to do next effectively precluded any constructive action. I was, I felt, totally alone in the world, undisputedly cut off from what passed for my family. Due to Armstrong's theology, I had no friends. The cops were looking for me for such high crimes and misdemeanors as defending what little remained of my thoroughly trashed world, and for advising certain Neanderthal assholes, with a spiritual case of theologically induced hemorrhoids to cram it, ram it, and rotate. "Rebellion," I mused, "whether justified or not always exacts a hefty price."

I collected my gear and wandered the creek in aimless silence. Wild plum and apple trees were abundant in the area. The plums were little bigger than peas at this time of year, some of the apples, however, had reached what I considered to be an edible state... which is to say that they were roughly the size of golf balls; and damn near as hard.

I made camp that night several miles up in a dense copse of fir. An hour's toil wading up and down the stream yielded ten crawdads. I cut off the orange tails, secured them with crude wooden pegs to a broad section of tree bark, propped them up in front of my fire and, within an hour, dinner, such as it was, was ready.

For the next three days, I wandered the entire length of Clover Creek eating what I could catch or pick, without a clue as to what to do next.

A hideous depression settled in about the fourth day and made itself so at home that there was absolutely no facet of the past or present which wasn't horribly defaced by open wounds. The mental effort required to envision some semblance of a worthwhile future represented an investment of optimistic capital far exceeding my means. I had no family, no home, school, or church; the cops were after me, I was totally alone, and God no doubt despised me. There was no way out.

"The best thing to do," I thought, "would be to end it." I sat down by the creek, and lest reason set in, quickly put the 22 up under my chin and pulled the trigger.

It was theoretically possible, I concluded later, that my judgment

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and attention to critical details had become temporarily impaired by depression and suicidal stimuli, otherwise, I am quite certain that I would have remembered to take the safety off.

I sat there for a long while stunned and in shock. Stunned that I had actually pulled the trigger and shocked that I'd nearly succeeded.

"If only the safety had been off," I thought, "I'd be dead now. I would never again see these trees, feel the dry warmth of summer winds against my face, or taste the scent of rain. There wouldn't be all these problems to face, that's for sure... or any chance to solve them either."

Not that I knew the answer to my predicament. I didn't, but perhaps there was someone who might. I gathered up my gear and headed south towards Fredrickson, a little community about three miles away. Fredrickson was so small that its Post Office, General Store, and Gas Station were one and the same. In older, and therefore happier, times it had been a thriving community of several hundred. No more than twenty residents, mostly retirees from Olin Matheson's nearby powder plant, now remained.

The owners of the store still struggled along but their main source of revenue now was derived from Bethel Junior and Senior High School students who nearly always succeeded in coercing usually affable school bus drivers to stop there on the way home for candy, pop, and chewing gum. Fredrickson possessed one other remnant of a more prosperous past, the only pay phone in a ten mile radius.

The protective cover of brush and trees ended about half a mile away from the little community which was primarily bordered on all sides by privately owned acreages, gardens, pastures, and generally open terrain. For the last stretch I would have to take to the road.

I carefully concealed my gear, crept out of the trees and walked as normally as I could down a half mile of freshly oiled and graveled roadway into what seemed like forever. I had ninety five cents with me.

I knew my dad had gone back to work for the government after his dissension with the ministry, and I knew where he worked, but that was about all I knew, so I called the General Services Administration and ask to speak to him. After some confusion at the other

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end and after affirming that this really was, to me at least, a genuine emergency I got to speak to with him for the first time in several years.

The voice sounded guarded, suspicious, and a just little bit irritated. But that didn't matter, it was Dad. After a short conversation he said he'd be glad to see me. He gave me his home address and told me to meet him there the next evening around eight p.m.

He lived in a rather plain apartment complex about fourteen miles west of Fredrickson on the outskirts of Lakewood, a small rather affluent suburb of Tacoma. He had told me his car was being worked on and so I'd have to get there on my own. It was going to be a long walk to see him but I felt sure it would be worth it.

I began the trek that evening. I made it to American Lake, a quarter mile from my dad's apartment by late afternoon the next day. When I'd started out I had employed my usual evasive tactics. At the first sign of trouble, which is to say people, I'd disappear, wait until they passed, and move cautiously on. But, as my journey took me through ever more populated regions where homes were four to a block and cars half a dozen a minute, this strategy swiftly became both impractical and inordinate. "The hell with it!" I thought, "I'm going for it. I'm going to walk down these streets just like I belonged here." The gamble had worked. I'd made it. All I had to do was to wait until dark, and I could see my dad.

The old brick clock tower which parceled out the day piecemeal from nearby Lakewood Square, and by which I'd been counting the hours, fell silent after seven bells. It seemed determined to stay that way until time yellowed and eternity had grown gray. It was nearly dark when I finally gathered such ragged shreds of courage as I had left and approached the apartment complex.

He was sitting on the steps outside smoking a cigarette, occasionally glancing around as he was expecting company. I walked to within thirty feet of him before he spotted me. I hadn't seen him in almost two years and as he stood up to greet me I noticed that he wasn't as tall as I remembered. None of that mattered now, though. "Hi, Dad," I said.

"Hello, son," he replied. He flicked his cigarette away and asked me if I'd wait right there for a minute, that there was something he had to do and he'd be right back.

"Sure," I replied and sat down on the same step he'd been sitting

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on, fished out one of my last cigarettes and, for the first time in days, relaxed.

He reappeared several minutes later and invited me up. His apartment was sparsely decorated but spotlessly clean. We sat at his kitchen table traversing awkward sentences in lurching conversation. He asked what I was doing there, how Mom and the boys were and what I'd done to account for all the cops he'd heard were after me. I told him I couldn't be sure because it seemed like every time I took a piss or drew a breath anymore, I'd broken some damn law or other. He finally asked me how I was (which I felt should have been the first question on his mind) but since I didn't know the answer to that one I just said, "I don't know."

He appeared to be mull over that response and we sat in stilted silence for a several long minutes. "You know I can't have you here," he began, looking up at me. "I work all day and sometimes on Saturday as well. There's no one here to look after you."

"Also," he continued, "since I work for the government I can't risk having anyone around who's in trouble with the law. I gave up a good government job once. I can't afford to lose my position a second time."

I just stared at him incredulously, battered by so many different emotions, I couldn't name them all. Shock, abandonment, fear, loss; those were identifiable. The rest? Anonymous barbed wire feelings which, no matter which way I turned, ripped and tore at my already tenuous existence.

"I didn't ask you to adopt me, Dad." I only wanted some advice, but I wouldn't want to f__k up your precious job for you, so goodbye," I spat out and rose to leave.

"Where are you going?" he demanded.

"What do you care?" I countered immediately.

"Well, ah," he stammered, fumbling his words, "ah, just don't, don't go just yet."

"Why not?"

Rather than answer, he motioned towards the kitchen table. "Let's just sit down and talk a little more," he equivocated. I remained standing unsure of him or his motives.

"What do you want to say?" I asked suspiciously.

"First of all, I want you to know that I'd never do anything to hurt you," he began solemnly. "What I've done, I did for your own

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good and I want you to remember that. Later on in life you'll thank me for it," he piously predicted, "and..."

But I cut his self congratulatory epistle off. I'd heard that "some day you'll thank me" song so many times in the past that I could translate it into dozens of foreign languages in my sleep. What it really meant was, we're going to f__k you and someday you'll thank us.

"What have you done?" I asked fearfully.

"I notified the police when you contacted me the other night," he said quickly. "Now these people only want to help you," he insisted. "They know what's..."

"Yeah, like Hitler helped the Jews," I interjected sarcastically. "So what's the plan?" I continued. "Am I supposed to call them up and turn myself in or are you going to do it for me?"

"I called them when you first got here," he admitted, staring at the floor "They're already on the way."

I eyed at him for all of a handful of seconds before responding. "You worthless piece of shit," I hissed.

I fled through his door, down the stairs and was promptly tackled on the sidewalk by a burly sheriff's deputy waiting in the shadows below. Rolling and twisting I struggled free and managed fifty more feet before a dozen cops converged on me from all directions and, it seemed, half that number hit me at once, knocking me to the ground. They yanked me to my feet, handcuffed me, and then dragged me over to where my father was standing.

"Is this your boy, Ferris?" the deputy asked.

"It is," he replied in a subdued voice.

"You may not believe this now, boy," the deputy said turning towards me, "but this man's the best friend you got."

I made no reply. "Is there anything you want to say to your father before we take you to Remann Hall?" He persisted.

"Yeah," I replied quietly, looking Dad right in the eye. "One of these days you're going to be old and dying from some horrible disease. I'm going to be the only one around. You'll ask me for help, and when you do I'm going to tell you to go f__k yourself. And when you die," I added, "I probably won't make it to your funeral, but I promise I'll come by on your first night underground and piss on your grave."

A sheriff's deputy backhanded me across the face knocking me

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to the ground. "That's your father you're talking to, you little punk," he shouted.

I struggled to my feet and wiped away the blood running out of my mouth and down my chin. "He's not my father, Deputy Dawg," I said. "I'm the product of a cluster f__k and somebody got in there ahead of him."

Deputy Dawg, for that was how I would always remember him, let out a howl of rage and started for me again. But another cop stepped between us and said in an obviously exaggerated southern drawl, "Ah think we've accomplished everything out here that we might could do for one night. Let's head for the barn, boys, what d'ya say?"

Deputy Dawg glared at me, then grunted in affirmation. He started to turn away but couldn't resist the temptation to have the last word. He chose as his own that threadbare litany of pontifical males the world over. "You're lucky you're not my kid, punk!"

"That would've have been anatomically impossible," I retorted. "My mother walked upright."

Deputy Dawg lost any semblance of self control. He probably would have killed me with his bare hands if several of his coworkers hadn't restrained him. The deputy who initially had shielded me led me away to his patrol car a half block down the street. He opened the front door. "Get in, kid," he said, and he was laughing when he said it. "You can ride up front with me."

"Who was that guy anyway?" I asked when we were safely underway.

"My supervisor," the deputy said with a chuckle.

"We going to Remann Hall?" I inquired.

"Yeah," he replied matter of factly.

"Then what?" I persisted.

"That depends on what you've done and how many times you've been up there before," he said.

"Just what the hell have you done?" he inquired solicitously after a moment of silence. "I know you're a runaway with a penchant for inviting those who displease you to go f__k themselves, but from my point of view that hardly justifies the deployment of six squad cars and twelve deputies."

"I haven't done anything," I answered dejectedly. "At least nothing which would justify all this." I fell silent for moment recalling

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the events of the past four years which, I felt, had heavily contributed to the situation I now found myself in.

"How long have you're parents been split up, Dale?" the deputy asked gently.

"Four years," I replied emotionlessly.

"Do you miss your dad?"

"Not anymore," I answered rigidly. "I've learned a lesson tonight I'll never forget," I said, and paused for emphasis before adding, "Never trust anybody."

"I know you must feel like your father betrayed you," the deputy observed. "But what would you say to him if it really was like he said, that he thought what he'd done was in your best interest?"

"I'd tell him to stick to manual labor and give up any aspirations he might have about thinking for a living," I responded tartly.

The deputy chuckled heartily, reached out a hand and said, "Shake, kid." I shook his hand warily wondering what this unexpected display of civility was all about.

"You know, Dale, if you could market those barbs, you'd be a millionaire." He chuckled anew, "Where do come up with all those nasty little cracks anyway?"

"The dictionary," I replied after a moments reflection. "All the words in the English language are in there. Thousands of words I've never heard before," I reflected, talking more to myself now than him. "A lot of these words are, at once, both evocative and, magnetic. They paint pictures in your mind and are highly attracted to other words and pictures; and the phrases just string themselves together." I ended in a whisper.

The deputy laughed and clapped me on the shoulder, "Keep reading that dictionary, Dale. At this point in your life that's about all you've got going for you." He hesitated as if unsure of what to say next, then added, "It's a hell of a lot more than most people ever have. Just remember, your life's not over yet."

We arrived at Remann hall a few minutes later. Within forty minutes I was booked in, showered, and walking once more down that long, pukey green hall. The only bright spot in the whole damned evening was that they put me in a different cell.

304 had a slightly different decor. The toilet and sink were on the opposite side of the cell as those in 303, as were the bunks. As soon as the guard was gone I discovered the reason for my new accom-

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modations. A disembodied voice echoed sharply down the hall.

"Who are you?" it queried.

I didn't feel inclined to answer and, so, didn't.

"Hey, you there?" the voice queried again.

"Yeah, I'm here," I affirmed.

"Well, where you from?"

"America," I replied.

"Well, listen America, why don't you just kiss my ass?" the voice uttered provocatively.

"You'd have to mark the spot 'cause it sounds to me like you're all ass," I replied contemptuously.

Silence intervened for the few moments. It was apparently taking the unseen toilet head down the hall a few moments to assimilate and respond to my aspersions. Meanwhile another voice, a familiar voice, reverberated from cell 305 at the western end of the hall.

"Brown, is that you?" it asked.

"Yeah, it's me. Who am I talking to?" I inquired.

"Mike de'Shaw," came the jubilant reply. "Where you been, Dale?" he continued.

"Hell, I think, Mike. But I can't be certain; all I can say for sure is, it ain't been heaven. What are you in here for anyway?" I asked.

"Running away from my foster home, playing hooky, and telling the principal to f__k himself."

"Sounds like serious crimes to me, Mikey," I replied facetiously. "Think you'll get the chair?"

"The way they're f__king acting around this joint I wouldn't be at all surprised." He laughed, then asked, "What are you in for, Dale?"

"I don't know, Mike. It must be my personality, ya know?"

"Yeah," the voice trailed off. "I get out tomorrow, Dale. They're sending me to the boy's ranch. Maybe you'll get sent there too."

"Maybe, Mikey, but I wouldn't count on it," I replied dejectedly.

"Hope for the best, Brown," he admonished. "Well, old buddy, I'm going to conk out now. We'll talk to you before I leave in the morning, okay?"

"Sure, Mikey," I responded. "Maintain your cool."

It was no way out, but I walked the cell throughout that night never stopping traveling around and around, not that it initially ac-

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complished anything but just because it was something I could do. I slept for a few hours after breakfast. Each day thereafter was a mirror image of that which preceded it, and each night I walked away forever in an empty cell cut off from dreams and hope and all that made existence endurable.

Herbert Lawrence made no attempt to contact me for fifteen days. It is unlikely he would have when he did except he had no choice. I awoke on the sixteenth day of solitary confinement with a sharp, burning pain, low on the right side of my abdomen. It hurt to even move. I told the matron who brought my lunch and, after silently acknowledging my complaint, she apparently informed Herbert. Several hours later he arrived outside my cell with a nurse in tow and told me to lay on the bunk while the RN examined me. After a series of painful pokes and prods she diagnosed possible appendicitis and recommended immediate hospitalization before it ruptured.

Herbert moved swiftly. From the time he left my cell to the time I was riding in an ambulance to Mt. View Hospital, no more than two and a half hours had elapsed.

In spite of the pain, I felt better than I had in days; just getting outside into the late afternoon was intoxicating. The soft summer wind felt warm and fluid on my skin, the sterile reek of Remann Hall was nearly forgotten as a bouquet of scents wafted down that sea salt breeze from nearby Puget Sound. Best of all I was, temporarily, surrounded by real people, people who seemed to care, people whose whole attitude could have been summed up in the very first words they spoke to me. "Don't worry kid, we'll take care of you."

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Chapter 15 MOUNTAIN VIEW

Mt. View Hospital, before the advent of effective medication, was originally constructed as a Tuberculosis Sanitarium. A four story brown brick building, it sprawled in all directions on a landscaped grassy knoll overlooking Pacific Avenue, the main road south out of town.

I had expected to be locked in some special cell or other secure area which I assumed most hospitals utilized when treating dangerous criminals such as myself. My notoriety had, however, apparently, not caught up with me; or if it had, they ignored it. These health care professionals went about the risky business of examination and diagnosis as if I were as harmless as a thirteen year old child.

I was then wheeled into an elevator, taken up to the third floor, settled in a large ward, and cheerfully informed that if I needed anything, all I had to do was call a nurse. I'd just turned thirteen four days earlier. I had perused the National Geographic for as long as I could remember. Many of the nurses in evidence were, to my salacious eye at any rate, strikingly beautiful. Nevertheless I did not request that which I felt I needed most, suspecting as I did that the term "anything" was inherently qualified by many of society's more obnoxious constraints.

The culture of hospital life was alien to me. I'd never been in one. Having grown up among the called and chosen and heavily indoctrinated from an early age against the evils of hospitals and human medical interventions (which tread on the toes, while trampling on the prerogatives of Almighty God), I was totally unprepared for the care, concern and, best of all, the attention I was receiving. It was as if life had been one long nightmare from which I'd suddenly awakened.

The doctors examined me again that evening. After palpating

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my abdomen and finding no evidence of swelling, they decided to postpone surgery for day or so and keep me under observation. The pain, although bothersome, was abating. "Just my luck," I thought. "The damn thing will probably get better on its own, they'll discharge me in a day or so and I'll get sent back to jail. The knowledge that I would soon have to leave this gentle oasis for the bleak vistas of Remann Hall was horribly depressing. I would have done anything to avoid it.

By the evening of my third day in Eden, all traces of pain had vanished. No matter how I poked, prodded, and probed it was a no show. The doctor believed that the pain had probably due to all the non-stop walking I'd been doing in my cell. The comfort of life around me began to recede in a gray mist of utter despair and it was as if, life as it should be, was visible only from afar... Through a glass and darkly.

At three p.m. a ward nurse informed me I had a visitor and asked if I wanted one. Curiosity more than anything else prompted me to say yes.

Dad walked towards me hesitantly, as if unsure whether to scrap the whole idea or not. He sat down in the bone gray chair next to my bed, handed me a small brown paper sack he'd been carrying and said, "Son, I'm sorry." I eyed him warily and, not knowing what to say, said nothing. After a few awkward moments had passed, he stood up, cleared his throat uncomfortably, and said in a subdued voice, "Well, anyway, I brought you some things." He gestured towards the sack I'd placed on the cart near my bed. "I thought you might enjoy them. I'm really sorry, kid. I never wanted your life or mine to turn out this way."

"Me neither," I regretfully replied. "It's okay, Dad. You did what you thought you had to do. Let's just forget it okay?"

"Yeah," he sighed. "Sure."

After a few more exchanges of civilized nothings, he left. I opened the sack a few minutes after he'd gone. Inside I found a note which said, "Forgive me," signed, "Dad," a fully fueled Scripto Vue lighter, three packs of Camel cigarettes and, best of all, a five dollar bill. I stuffed the plunder in my jacket pocket and was about to head for the hospital canteen when Dr. Edmund came by on afternoon rounds. "We'll probably be discharging you tomorrow," he said. "I think you're going to be fine." I thanked him for taking care of me.

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We shook hands. He left to care for other patients, and I wandered down to the first floor. After buying a couple of candy bars and a Coke, I sat in the lobby staring vacantly out the window.

A city bus dieweled its way up Pacific Avenue, paused at the bus stop in front of the hospital, then continued south, out of the city. Within an hour I knew it would be in Spanaway, only a handful of miles, if not from home then certainly, from lands that I knew. "Tomorrow at this time, I'll be staring once more out of cell 304," I reflected.

I had no idea what Herbert had in mind for me. On previous visits to his cozy little domain he'd threatened me with Fort Worden, a roughly run facility for juvenile offenders sentenced to one or more years of incarceration in a medium security institution. On others he would dangle the prospect of involuntary enrollment in a Juvenile forestry camp; where I might spend the better part of my youth learning "discipline" and some measure of "respect for my elders." On one such occasion, when I remarked that it might be helpful if my elders behaved in such a manner to demonstrate some small degree of worthiness for that respect, the prospect of eternal life at Green Hill was wrathfully wielded; as of a club over my head.

Green Hill was, reputedly, not the place to squander one's youth. Located at Chehalis, Washington, it was the juvenile justice system's private version of Hell. Only those considered utterly beyond redemption were sent there, and there most remained until the stroke of midnight on their twenty-first birthday.

At this point, they magically became adults (no doubt imbued with all the wisdom and integrity they'd lacked at 11:59 PM) and were, thus, now worthy recipients of the respect and reverence which both Church and State implied were due from all those younger than themselves. As such, they were then released to society, conclusively reborn and fully rehabilitated.

All things considered, the travel brochure of the juvenile justice system, as laid out by Herbert, had no itinerary in it which fit my plans. And the prospect of spending anymore time than I already had in solitary confinement, although benign, when stacked up against forestry camps, Fort Worden, or Green Hill was totally unacceptable.

I sauntered over to the newspaper rack and picked up a copy of that August publication, The Tacoma News Tribune. Holding it up

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to my face as if I was so engrossed in its captivating revelations that I was unaware of the world around me, I strolled out through the main door, walked casually down the sixty or so concrete steps to Pacific Avenue and, collapsed wearily on the bus stop bench. My exhaustion was not feigned either. From the moment I'd walked out that door my pulse had at least doubled and I was having trouble breathing normally. I looked warily, yet surreptitiously around. There was no sign of the fuzz, no plain clothes detectives or hospital security guards, nothing. I had fully expected to get pounced on the moment I'd set foot outside which is why I settled on the newspaper ploy. At the least, I could claim some sort of temporary amnesia, a situational distraction, something. The fact that I was sitting at a bus stop was to my devious mind easily laundered. I was tired. Worn and frayed from the manifold rigors of hospital life, I had wandered out there aimlessly with no particular destination in mind and it was not my fault that City Transit had seen fit to build a bus stop in front of this particular hospital. I was resting. That's all I was doing. And no one could prove otherwise unless a bus stopped and I actually got on one.

I continued to scope the environment for signs of surveillance or pursuit, there were none. Within half an hour another bus struggled up the long hill out of Tacoma, the familiar blue plume of unburned diesel trailing in its wake as its driver kept the pedal to the floor. Grinding commodiously to a halt, its pneumatic doors hissed open in my face. I took a last look around, saw nothing alarming, casually folded the paper up, stepped aboard.

It seemed like half the cops in the city decided to tag along after that particular bus that particular afternoon. Every time I glanced out the rear window, I spotted a black and white either a few cars back or a green sheriff's cruiser somewhere nearby. It was a nerve wracking trip. Quite apart from the hordes of cops which seemed to be dogging that bus, half the citizenry of Pierce County seemed to have decided that this was the perfect day for a bus ride. The bus stops were full and the driver dutifully stopped at every one, which is to say, on damn near every block. By the time we crossed the city limit's line, I was exhausted. The strain of attempting to appear outwardly normal when every rational instinct advised one to rush to the front of the bus and tell the driver to either learn how to drive that friggin' heap or turn the controls over to someone more moti-

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vated was almost overwhelming.

Once past the city limits, the topography became progressively rural with each passing mile. I did some quick mental calculations. The bus was now about ten miles south of Tacoma and five miles from the end of its route. The last stop, at Spanaway, was the nearest the bus ever came to my home and, therefore, the most logical place for me to disembark. But if my presence had been missed, a search, no doubt, was already underway. And if they'd surmised I'd hopped a bus, they would undoubtedly suspect that I'd chosen this route if not to go home then at least to take cover in the heavily wooded areas I knew quite well. They might even be waiting for me at the end of the line. I glanced around; there were deep woods on either side and very few cars on the highway. I pulled the cord. The bus lurched to a halt and I exited through the rear door. As soon as it dwindled in the early autumn haze, I fled across the road and vanished into the woods running southeast through the trees.

After several miles, I collapsed against a giant fir and lit up a Camel. I was, I told myself between painful drags, probably suffering from the debilitating effects of rampant oxygen inhalation. Copious amounts of nicotine and carbon monoxide would, I felt sure, correct this imbalance.

By late afternoon I was home. The house looked much the same. For some reason I was surprised. My brothers, with the exception of Bruce who was probably nose deep in the latest installment of Herbert's Correspondence Course, were tidying up the yard, divesting it of pine cones, limbs, and other such flotsam as the wind and trees had seen fit to deposit on it over the course of the now faded summer. Mom's disembodied head bobbed periodically past in the kitchen window. She was probably hard at work giving health food the reputation it roundly deserved. For a while I sat at the edge of the wood, a scant sixty yards away, watching.

"Family," I philosophized as I gazed down on the pastoral scene. "What a joke. Families were, I felt sure, society's way of guaranteeing that one's childhood will be as thoroughly f__ked as possible."

By the time evening had fallen I was several miles away, retrieving the .22, its shells, and that handful of other oddments which now constituted the bulk of my worldly possessions.

Although it had been a risk, I had also slipped into the country

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store at Fredrickson just ahead of twilight and had, for the exorbitant price of thirty nine cents, purchased a loaf of totally white bread. I had choices in the matter. I didn't have to stray. After all, I was aware of cases when even the most rabid of the called and chosen, who simply couldn't bring themselves to look at another fallen mound of wet, doughy, homemade bread, had slipped quietly out to the local store and purchased a loaf or two of the commercial variety. And I had heard rumors of those even rarer occasions, when tautly repressed gastronomical memories had suddenly surfaced from unguessable depths and compelled an admittedly small few to temporarily forsake their traditional Armstrong diet and resort to the consumption of half-assed bread. I knew all this, but it didn't matter. That tiny store didn't dabble in such ascetics anyway. Their admittedly abridged line of baked goods came in only two categories, a whole lot of white and a smattering of whole wheat. Half-assed bread was not on their menu, and even if it had been it is unlikely I would have selected it.

Half-assed bread was both a commercial and a religious compromise designed, as it was, to circumvent the industrialized appearance of being utterly and unpardonably white. It incorporated many of white bread's more desirable characteristics such as the possession of a definable texture, a mild, as opposed to an overpowering, taste, and a pleasant appearance. Due to its lack of inherent sogginess, traditional sandwich fillers such as roast beef, bologna and chicken emerged at lunch-time relatively unscathed and tasting as they should, as if they'd been humanely slaughtered, rather than remorselessly suffocated.

Half-assed bread was allegedly a semi-healthy conglomerate of fifty percent white and fifty percent whole wheat flour. One would have been hard put to it to visually discern that elusive fifty percent whole wheat, however. To the unbiased eye, which is to say, an eye that was looking for nothing in particular, the stuff looked sort of white! Moreover except for a few stray husks of bran and its slightly off coloration, it tasted and felt white too. But there was no longer any need for me to quibble over such fripperies. I'd committed so many abominations in my life that I was constantly surprised when I woke up each morning alive and semi-well in the land of my nativity rather than doing the Armstrong back stroke in his soon coming lake of fire. For when that time came, and I had no

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doubt that it would, the gratuitous consumption of Wonder Bread would, most likely, be judged as the least of my iniquities.

A small jar of mustard and a sixteen ounce bottle of Double Cola rounded out my purchases which came to a grand total of eighty-two cents. Counting the fifteen cents bus fare which facilitated my escape, I had four dollars and three cents to my name. I spent that night at a campsite I'd occupied previously, midway up the southern flank of a wooded hill overlooking one of the many valleys Clover Creek wandered into. I kept my fire small and after a sumptuous repast of mustard sandwiches washed down with generous draughts of Double Cola, I settled back and watched as the wavering lights of civilization flickering in the rural distance. Autumn was settling in and, as night deepened, chilling airs spoke of frost. With no blanket and clad only in summer clothes, I spent a moderately uncomfortable night. The prospect of mustard sandwiches for breakfast did little to assuage that discomfort.

At one time, the majority of adults in my childhood would have, I suspected, gladly exchanged unmentionable parts of their anatomy for even one of my mustard sandwiches; and thanked God for the opportunity. They had all survived the Great Depression when food as I knew it was unheard of, jobs were scarce, the hourly wage was two bits a day, and they felt damned lucky to get that. Those were their good old days; when cornmeal, cornbread, and corn husks constituted breakfast, lunch and dinner, and, they would solemnly recount, they got down on their knees every night and thanked the Lord in heaven for providing them even with that.

I had asked what I thought was a perfectly natural question at one of these semi frequent deprivation testimonial's which went, "As long as you were talking things over with the Lord, why didn't you ask for some dessert?" I was, of course, instantly reprimanded for my outrageous insolence. The Lord did not take orders, I was curtly informed, he gave them.

Fond reminiscences of that character building epoch of early twentieth century America were most frequently disinterred at certain, specific mealtimes, when offerings nauseating enough to make a buzzard puke were unceremoniously plopped down in full view of the appalled and disbelieving. Such meals were always accompanied by parental warning glares which said, "If you want to reach puberty, don't say a word."

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That hideous corpse of the "good old days" would then be waved in the horrified faces of children who being unused to deprivation were, even without a word being spoken, quite obviously ungrateful for a blessed abundance of boiled, anemic looking parsnips accompanied by steaming bowls of vomitorius split pea soup. The entire Great Depression program was, of course, only a thinly veiled attempt to achieve by guilt that which the prospect of perpetual starvation had been unable to effect by logic.

Any fundamentalist devotee foolish enough to reject the concept of mental telepathy out of hand had only to sit in on such a dinner to satisfy themselves of its existence. One could feel it: an unspoken, palpable assertion which hung thickly in the air like an oppressive fog conveying the following message, "I'd rather die than eat this shit."

By the time morning had opened even a crack in the doorway of the night, I had stoked up the fire and was attempting to make toast. I finally achieved a reasonable facsimile and, having forced myself to resist the attempt to substitute mustard for margarine, was able to choke three dry slices down. For all of that, it was a beautiful autumn day. The sky was a pale washed out blue, the air was crisp and cleanly scented with wispy hints of moss and evergreen. Best of all, I was free.

After extinguishing my fire I wandered on down, emerging from deep cover out on the open valley's grassy floor. A winding path meandered away between sparsely scattered clumps of Oregon grape, blackberry tangles, and the occasional solitary offspring of freeborn fir or hemlock. I headed vaguely southwest for no reason in particular, cutting the railroad track that ran through Fredrickson, southeast toward Mt. Rainier, and northwest towards the rail yards of Tacoma. I could hear in the distance the lonely wail of an approaching train tossing a vagabond salute to the tiny community as it screeched, rumbled and slowly passed.

It was long and heavily laden with massive logs from vast pristine forests far to the south and east. Rounding the slight curve a quarter mile away, it bore ponderously down upon me and, finally, began to struggle slowly past with the metallic squeal of mechanically applied brakes. A ladder on the side of a dark brown Northern Pacific boxcar slid by, inches from my face, then another. Log trains often incorporated a number of boxcars. I was standing too

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close and I knew it but I was totally mesmerized by the sight and sound of the passing cars. Another ladder appeared, then another. I grabbed it with both hands, was pulled off my feet and slowly swept away down the shiny metal rails towards Tacoma.

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Chapter 16 THE OLD MAN

As I rolled down out of the now familiar woodlands, roads and houses appeared with increasing frequency. I climbed the ladder to the boxcar's roof to better enjoy the view. From that lofty perch I could see for miles, a blue and hazy land brilliantly consumed by the spreading fires of autumn. The wind in my hair was cool, brushed with the aroma of wood smoke, tasting of old memories.

The train snaked its way through a tangle of rail yards southeast of Tacoma, slowing nearly to a halt as it navigated the switches. I climbed down the ladder and jumped off into the rust red canyons of Great Northern freight cars. The train lumbered on towards Puget Sound.

I wandered out across the serpentine maze of tracks heading nowhere. Some of the freights were loaded, doors closed, secured with shiny metal strips any reasonably mature Robin could have opened with its beak. Quite a number, though, were empties, their doors opened wide. I picked a car far back down on a train already coupled to a line of engines and hopped aboard.

It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the gloom and when they did I noticed I wasn't alone. A featureless form propped against the door side wall about twenty feet away was quietly regarding me. After several uncomfortable minutes passed, he finally spoke. "Where ya bound for, son?"

"I don't know," I replied, after a moment's reflection.

"Well, don't feel too bad about that," he returned with a chuckle, "that's the way it is fer all God's children."

He stood up, grasped his small canvas pack and, walking with a distinct limp, plodded over and sat down against the far wall opposite me and facing the door. "You git a better view of life if you sit where you can see it," he explained. "C'mon over."

I walked across cautiously and sat down just out of arm's reach.

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He was an old man crumpled with years. A faded Stetson slouched tiredly above bushy eyebrows capping a weathered visage three days or more in need of a shave. Clad in well worn denims, he seemed amused at my wary scrutiny.

"Name's Bo Svenson," he said gruffly, extending a gnarled hand.

"Deke Collins," I lied, as we shook.

"Kinda young to be riding the rails, Deke," he observed. "Home go ta hell on ya'?"

"I just got tired of stayin'," I responded, evasively.

He gave a low chuckle, "Yeah, I been there. When ya get too long and time's too short there ain't nothin' to do but leave. Yer the youngest I seen it in so far though," he added.

"When did you leave, Bo?"

"I was fifteen, first time I hit the tracks," he said in wistful remembrance.

"Why'd you do it?" I persisted, after a long silence.

"Well, my old man and me never got along. Ya' see he was a country preacher who thought God rose and set on his side of the earth and only shone on him and his flock. Now preachers mostly think they live next door to heaven and maybe they do, but I'll tell ya the gospel Deke, if you have to live around 'em fer any length of time, life next door is hell." He paused for a few moments to light up a smoke and then settled deeper against the wall. "See, the problem is ya' gotta be perfect around 'em at all times. Ya' daren't say shit if ya' got a mouthful, and ya' allas got to be prayin and thankin' the Lord for each and every morsel of food ya' swallow and every damn penny that ya' steal."

"Ya can't drink, smoke, chew, or swear and in short, ya can't do anything at all that might possibly take the edge off'n life or make yer days tolerable."

"My old man preached the Christian miseries at me as early as I can recollect. When that failed ta 'bare fruit fer righteousness,' as he was so damned fond of sayin', he tried beatin' God into me with a stick. Well, I finally got big enough to knock him on his pious butt, was then I left." He fell silent for a moment, lost in an unseen tangle of yesterdays. "I never looked back, kid," he sighed. "I hopped the first freight I could catch and rode the rails fer the best part of two years."

"Did you knock him on his butt?" I inquired.

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"What'd ya' think?" he rejoined with a grin.

"I don't know," I replied. "I guess I think you walked away."

"There's not much that's worth hittin' yer parents over, Deke," he said sadly, "or anyone else for that matter."

"What'd you do for food and clothes on the tracks?"

"When I'd hit a town, I'd start lookin' for odd jobs, fences that needed mending, wood that needed choppin'. I could usually find somethin' to do for nickels and dimes. That was all people had then, ya know. Hell, five dollars in them days was a pile. You could get a bath, shave, haircut...new jeans, shirt, and jacket, and still have enough left over fer a good meal and a couple packs of smokes. Sometimes," he continued wistfully, "I'd stumble across a job that'd take a week or two to do. Times like that I'd usually make enough to keep me goin' for a month." He fell silent for awhile, lost in a past I'd never know.

"You been ridin' since you were fifteen?" I asked incredulously.

"Naw," he chuckled. "World War One broke out when I was seventeen. I figured 'what the hell.' I got an old bo to swear he was my father. He signed my papers, semi legal like, and joined the Army."

"Did you go to war?"

"Yeah."

"What was it like?"

"Like life, once you understand it," he replied with a short laugh, then explained, "War is just life accelerated. A fella mostly has more fun quicker, works harder, and dies sooner, ya' see, so all we're really talking about here is the time. Ya do all those things when the world's at peace too, it just takes ya' longer to do 'em."

The box car suddenly lurched several feet forward, throwing us both sideways. A series of lesser jerks followed. The protesting screech of metal wheels on steel rails reverberated in the empty car; we were rolling east.

We sat in silence for a while, the old man and I, then he drifted off to sleep. I walked over to the door and stared out at the passing scenery. Houses soon thinned out, gradually replaced by unfenced lands and old growth evergreens. We were, I knew, headed for the Cascade Foothills. Beyond that, I had no clear idea about either the train's destination or what I would do when I got there.

"Is any of this real?" I asked myself, staring out into the gathering gloom. With time now to reflect, it seemed decidedly unreal,

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there were so many parts to the whole. So many accidents, any one of which, had they gone the other way would have changed the circumstances entirely.

"Where would I be today if my parents had never heard of Armstrong, if my Dad hadn't quit his job, if my parents hadn't split up?" The 'if's' were endless.

On the other hand, what if none of this was accidental? What if it was the will of God? Payment in full for rebellion tendered? That was supremely possible, more than that, it was damned likely. For this was, loosely interpreted, just the kind of future the called and chosen had envisioned for me. Cut off from family, friends and God. Consigned, if not to outer darkness, then at least to a physical, spiritual and emotional twilight. "Free, at last," I thought. "Headed nowhere, with nowhere to go."

I walked back across the steel deck of the rail car and sat down next to the old man. He had slumped to one side, and was resting his head on his travel worn pack. His eyes were staring at me though, as if he had been about to speak and at the last minute, changed his mind.

"You okay, Bo?" I asked.

When he didn't answer, I gave him a gentle shake. His head and shoulders slipped off his pack and he slid to the floor as limp as a puppet. His body quivered like Jello from the vibrations of the train. I felt for a pulse in his neck. There was none. I sat down by his side, took one of his hands between mine and held onto it for miles.

In the early hours of morning, just before dawn, the freight finally stopped somewhere in Eastern Washington. I hopped off, leaving the old man laying there in that empty boxcar. He was beyond any help I knew of and, except for a prayer and a handful of useless tears I could find no real reason for, he was certainly beyond mine.

The tracks stretched out in all directions. I'd been south as a child for some of Armstrong's gatherings but, although the scenery was spectacular, I had no desire to live there. Canada was less than two hundred miles to the north, but winter was on the way; besides which, I had no idea what I'd do once I got there. West was totally out of the question, I'd just come from there. The only thing church, family or the state wanted to do was to beat the Good Lord Jesus, either into or out of me depending on the circumstance, or lock me in a cage. East seemed as good as good a choice as any.

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Chapter 17 MONTANA

Several miles up the tracks, I cut the nearest highway. Dawn was breaking to the east and by now the anesthesia of death was wearing thin. It was a cold gray morning, blood red at the edges with a discordant wind whistling madly through the wires. I hadn't had a smoke in hours, I was bone chilled, emotionally exhausted, and I'd felt nothing but empty since the old man died. I tapped out a Camel and fumbled with my lighter. The damn wind seemed determined to help me kick the habit. It blew straight on, sideways, all ways, but I finally got a light.

The first few drags, as always, lifted my spirits and turned out the lights on hunger. Counting the hours back, I realized I hadn't eaten for over a day. Hell, it didn't matter. I couldn't keep from thinking about Bo and the miserable way I'd left him, stretched out in a boxcar, cold and dead. "What should I have done?" I asked myself for the hundredth time. "Called the police?" No, I'd seen up close how those bastards worked. Between them and their friendly f_king court system, they would probably claim I killed him. They'd stick me in a cell where the accused would stand condemned, try me in a local kangaroo court where his eminence, the honorable judge so and so, would sentence me to hang by the neck forever and God, who I had reason to suspect wasn't any too fond of me anyway, would be enjoined to have mercy on what passed for my soul.

"Maybe," I mused, "I should have called in anonymously? No, that would only prove someone was with him when he died, someone they'd start looking for." In the end, I concluded that I'd done the only possible thing. Besides, no matter what I did it wouldn't change things for Bo one damned iota.

Hitchhiking was illegal in the great state of Washington of the sixties. The cops, always on the lookout for serious violations of the

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law, arrested hitchhikers on sight. I knew if they caught me out on this highway, whether I was thumbing or not, they'd pick me up on suspicion of violating any handy local convenience as a pretext to arrest me and find out who I was. It was wide open terrain, there were no trees to hide behind and it was broad daylight. I didn't have a lot of choices.

A great moral axiom I'd learned at church now stood me in good stead. If they're going to blame you for something anyway, you might just as well do it.

I'd never thumbed a ride before. It seemed like a demeaning way to travel, but the highway had no end that I could see. Having no better sense than to thumb everything that rolled, I even tried a long haul trucker. He pulled over and waved me aboard.

His name was Bill Callahan, he said, as he shifted smoothly through a maze of gears. He was heading home to Missoula after a two week run to Arizona, California, Oregon and Washington. He had one last stop to make in Spokane and figured to be home in Montana by evening. And what in hell was a child like me doing out on the highway in the middle of nowhere this early in the morning, he wanted to know? I told him the truth as it affected me, not as it might have been interpreted in the self serving language of church or state.

Keyed up as I was, the words poured out in a tangle of emotion rather than the crisp, evasive recital I always strove for. My mother and father were dead, killed one morning on the way to church; only I had survived. Since I had no family worth mentioning, I'd been placed in a state run orphanage. Conditions there were horrible and I ran away. The cops were probably looking for me now; I had no idea where I was going or what I was going do when I got there.

Bill took a few moments to formulate a response, as if searching for just the right words. When he found them they were sincere. "I'm sorry kid," he said quietly. "What a hell of a way to start your life." The compassion of a stranger was unexpected. I had no time to prepare for or guard against it. I started crying and couldn't stop. It was as if I'd been running flat out from loss, stress, loneliness; from the hell of life itself, and for some damned reason, they'd all caught up with me at once.

I wiped my eyes and took solace in a hastily lit Camel. "I'm okay,

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Bill. I just have to figure out what I'm going to do next. What would you do if you were me?" I asked quizzically.

"In this day and age, I don't know, kid." he replied. "I run away from home in the late forties. Time's were different then. People in them days cared more for each other. A guy could get a ride one hell of a lot quicker then and hard work was easy to find. I guess if I were you, I'd head up to eastern Montana, to the high plains. There's a lot of cattle ranches up there. I'd try to land a job on one of those." He paused for a moment then added, "That's where I run away to when I was a kid. I learned a bunch on the ranch I worked at. Learned how to ride and rope, milked cows, plowed and disced, harrowed, and harvested fields, and they taught me how to drive truck there. Them was good days and I wouldn't trade 'em. That's what I'd do if I was you," he said.

We rode on in silence for the best part of ten miles. If I could manage to get a job on a ranch, many of my current problems would be solved. I doubted that Lawrence and his cops would go to the trouble of hunting that far for me. Like most authorities, they were primarily bullies. When the pickings were easy they had a banquet, if not they waited until they were.

I'd belong somewhere. That in itself meant worlds. I'd have money, the importance of which was becoming clearer with each mile I traveled, and I'd have time to sort life out. "I'm going for it, Bill," I announced. "What's the best way to get there?"

He grinned and said, "I had a feeling you might."

We made a last stop in Spokane then headed east through Couer D'Alene, Kellogg and Mullen, Idaho, reaching his home in Missoula early that evening. His wife seemed totally unperturbed with him for lugging a stranger in off the road and inviting him to spend the night. She even washed my clothes while I showered and then lounged about in some of Bill's, which were several sizes too large for me. We had a pot roast dinner with corn, mashed potatoes and gravy, cold beer and apple pie. After a couple hours of slothful relaxation in front of the fireplace, Bill got out his maps and traced the route he advised me to follow.

"Head east to Garrison and take Highway 12 to Helena. It's good looking country this time of year but the nights will get colder the farther you go. Hook up with Highway 15 to Great Falls, then take 87 out of Great Falls to Havre. You'll be on Highway 2 then, the

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home stretch! Stay on 2 'till you get to Malta."

"While you were taking a shower, I tried calling the ranch I worked on, but there wasn't any answer. I'll keep trying 'til I get them. The owner's name is Adair Hotchkiss. I'll ask 'em if they're in need of a ranch hand and if they are I'll ask 'em to give you the same chance they gave me. When you get to Malta, call this number." He handed me a slip of paper bearing a sketch of the route I was to follow, Adair Hotchkiss's phone number, and notations of the names and locations of other ranches I might try. "At least this gives you a road to follow and a chance at making it. If it don't work and you come back this way, stop in and we'll figure something else. Okay?"

I couldn't think of anything to say that would've expressed how I felt, so I just said, "Thanks to both of you. You've really been great."

The early morning air was crisp and clean. Bill, Katherine and I said our good-byes in the driveway, in the shadow of his rig. Katherine handed me a plain, white, sealed envelope. I started to open it, but she reached out and gently touched my hand. "Wait at least until you're out of town, maybe even until you get to Helena," she said. "It's a gift from us that will grow in ways you can't imagine now," she added softly, "and the longer you keep it, the more valuable it will become."

"Thanks to you both," I said. "Without your help I don't know where I'd be. When I get wherever I'm going, where ever that is, I'll give you a call and let you know about it." We shook hands and I walked off down the road feeling better than I had in days. It was a struggle but, I didn't look back.

I hitched a ride through Garrison that took me a dozen miles up Highway 12 almost as soon as I stuck out my thumb. After that I walked for hours. I tried toting up the months and days as I walked along. I knew it was November, late autumn, but the precise day escaped me. It didn't seem to matter much, though; at least I was still free of Mother and Father, Herbert and Herbert and their seriocomic Greek chorus of God and Sherlock wannabes. The nearly deserted road ran due northeast, a narrow ribbon of ice age gravel and pre historic effluvium, bisecting stubble fields of earth and gold as it ran down out of far blue mountains. The air was cool and clear with a morning hint of shallow haze which deepened as it receded into the obscure distance. I had a pack and a half of smokes, several books of matches, and a couple of dollars in my jeans. For the mo-

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ment, there wasn't much else I needed.

I reached Helena early in the evening and stopped at a small store on the northeastern edge of town. With the last of my money, I bought a loaf of bread, a small jar of mayonnaise, an extra pack of cigarettes and two bottles of Coke. As I walked along in the utter darkness of a rural Montana night, I concluded that it was entirely likely that mayonnaise sandwiches would never achieve the popularity of roast beef or hamburger. Nevertheless, they were at that moment a feast.

The temperature, which had been steadily falling all afternoon, began dropping rapidly and a fierce northeast wind howled down out of the high plains shot through with ice and snow. Within an hour, the road had disappeared, buried beneath a drifting blanket of deadly white. An hour later, I lost all sense of direction. The only way I could tell I was still on the road was to scrape away the snow from time to time and verify that asphalt did indeed exist beneath. My hands, feet, arms and legs were numb. As I pushed on, it became progressively harder to walk. I would have stopped, but there was no point in doing so. There was no place to hide from this storm. After what seemed like forever, the wind died and the snow flakes became fat and lazy, floating idly down as if they couldn't be bothered to fall straight. I stopped by a twisted rock outcropping to rest, have a smoke and to try to work some feeling back into my arms and legs.

A large cardboard box was wedged beneath an overhang. Five feet long and probably three feet square, it had been jammed up against the rock facing by the force of the wind. After a bit of urban renewal, which included moving the box to the protected side of the outcrop and piling snow up against one of the open ends, I crawled inside, pulled the box down around me and was asleep before the next snowflake fell.

I awoke to one hell of a racket. Judging by the light outside, it was mid morning. I was warm, comfortable, and the very idea of moving even so much as a muscle was repugnant. Nevertheless, I had to determine what all the noise was about. I crept out on all fours, like a dog night-weary from chasing the moon. A snow plow was grinding its determined way up the highway followed closely by a dump truck dribbling sand from a slightly raised box. Although nearly a quarter mile away, the sound they were making

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still set my teeth on edge. I waited until they were well out of sight before lighting out, shivering in the cold morning air.

I hadn't been walking more than fifteen minutes before a middle aged man in a silver Cadillac came flying up behind me. Before I even had time to stick out my thumb, he pulled along side, opened the passenger door and asked if I wanted a lift. He didn't have to repeat himself. The interior was warm, comfortable and luxurious. I made up my mind on the spot that the first spare five or six thousand I made, I was going to buy a car exactly like that one.

His name was Jake Allison, he said. He was a gambler and played Reno, Las Vegas and other lesser known (yet moderately profitable) establishments all along the west coast. He was on his way home to North Dakota. "What's a kid like you doing out in the middle of this god forsaken land?" he wanted to know.

I recounted a moderately abridged version of the events which brought me to Montana...not so much to conceal as to make what was, to me, a baffling set of circumstances manageable. "It's just me in my life these days, Mr. Allison," I said in conclusion. "I've got to make my way somehow and this is about the only way I know, to just keep going 'til there's reason to stop."

He nodded in apparent understanding. "I've known a lot of people who would have given up and died if they found themselves in your place, kid," he said after hearing me out. "Don't ever give up. Remember, life is almost nothing but chance. As long as you don't lose your nerve you've got house odds, just like anyone else."

I looked around at his expensive car, the rich cut to his clothes, his elegant western boots and commented, "This looks like more than chance to me."

"Not really," he replied seriously. "I could have been born to different parents, gone to different schools, turned right instead of left at any number of places along the way and I'd never know life as I'm living it now. Most people don't start out to be what they become. If they could have looked ahead and seen their future, they would have chosen to be something else. There are very few of us," he observed, "who're satisfied with the way our lives turned out."

We drove on in silence for the better part of half an hour. By the time we were past Great Falls, the ice and snow from the last nights storm was gone. The next town of any size was Havre, on U.S. Highway 2. From there it was a straight shot to Malta.

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The trip down U.S. 2 was a novel experience for me. Not because it was all that different either in construction or appearance than any other Montana State Highway I'd been on, but because it had no speed limit. Jake held the Cadillac to a moderate one hundred miles an hour. The lands outside whipped past in a blur. This was as close to flying as I'd ever come and I relished every mile of it. His machine, he informed me, was capable of greater speeds but, he maintained, one should always eschew excesses of any kind. "Just because you can do a thing," he told me, "doesn't necessarily mean you should."

We rolled into Malta thirty minutes ahead of sundown. After a long and comfortable ride, the twilight air was cold and cheerless. "Goodbye, Mr. Allison, and thanks for the ride," I said through the half open window.

"Glad to be of help. Good luck to you, kid. Oh! I almost forgot, I want you to have this," he said and handed me a ten dollar bill through the window. He drove off into the darkening east before I even had a chance to thank him, but I guessed he knew.

I watched the swiftly receding tail lights of the caddie as they melted into the crumbling day, lit a Turkish talisman against depression and loneliness and walked the streets wondering, "What now?"

For a small town, Malta had all the necessities. A Great Northern Railroad Station where passenger trains still plied the rails between east and west, several banks, a couple of restaurants, and an astonishing number of bars. For guests who preferred their pleasures and necessities under one convenient roof, there was the Great Northern Hotel, a combination bar, hotel and restaurant. I stopped there in search of a room to spend the night. The bar seemed to be the hub of nearly all the activity. I sat down at a far end, picked up a menu that was lying there, and began to read.

Within seconds a plump, middle aged, pleasantly featured waitress appeared and asked me what I'd have. I ordered the biggest hamburger they made with a special request to please hold the mayo, a mountain of french fries, hot coffee while I waited and Coke with my meal.

Hamburger had never tasted so good, neither had the french fries or Coke. As the waitress came to clear away the wicker basket and collect the heavy green Coke bottles, I asked her if she knew

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Adair Hotchkiss, a rancher in that area. "Shore," she replied, with a hint of a drawl. "Why everybody knows Adair. He's the biggest rancher in these parts."

"What kind of a guy is he?" I inquired.

"Well, he's one of the nicest men you'd ever want to meet. Why'd you want to know, honey?" she asked curiously.

"I'm thinking about calling him for a job." I answered.

"He's a good guy to work for, I know that for sure." she volunteered. "I worked for him and his wife Beatrice for two summers as ranch cook when I first came to Malta. That was back, oh, the last year or two of the forties, maybe first of the fifties. They were fair, decent and nice people. You'd do well if they'd hire you."

"Did you know a Bill Callahan then?"

"Billy? Why, shore. He wasn't much older than you in those days, but a harder worker you'd never find. I fixed many a meal for that boy. Lord, he was a character." She laughed. "How do you know Billy anyway?"

"He gave me a ride and suggested I call Adair and ask for a job," I replied.

"Can't hurt to try, child. There's a pay phone just up the hallway between the hotel lobby and the bar." She pointed the way.

I dialed the number Bill had given me and a high pitched voice said, "Hello."

"Is this Mister Hotchkiss?" I asked.

"Naw, my dad passed on years ago," the twangy voice replied with a good natured chuckle. "My name's Adair. Who am I speakin' to?"

"My name's Deke Collins," I replied. "I'm looking for a job. Bill Callahan said I might look you up and see if you needed a ranch hand."

"I just talked to Bill last night. He called and said you might be coming up this way. Tell you what. Check in at the Great Northern and get a room for the night. If you need a bite to eat, order whatever you want and tell them to put it on my bill. I'll drive in and pick you up in the morning. Sound fair?"

"Sure does. Thanks!" I replied fervently.

"Don't mention it. Meet me at ten o'clock in front of the hotel, okay?"

"Sure thing, Mister Hotchkiss."

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"Please," he implored just before he hung up, "anything but Mister."

I checked into my room a few minutes later. Sparsely furnished, it sported a well worn chair, a small, scratched hardwood table carelessly covered with turn of the century cigarette burns and a single bed. I tested it out for comfort, relaxed, and woke up in my clothes at eight the next morning. My reflection in the cracked, full length mirror precariously fastened to the door was frightening. Night tousled hair framed a dissipated face which stared back at me from drooping eyes too bleary to care. My clothes were rumpled and I needed a shower and one of my weekly shaves. All things considered, I mused, I looked like hell. It was the perfect way to meet a new boss.

I stumbled down the winding staircase to the restaurant, ordered hashbrowns, sausage, eggs, and toast, lavishly accompanied by several gallons of jet black coffee. The sausage was exquisite. I hadn't tasted anything like it in years. I wolfed down several of the plump, delicious links before remembering why. It was pork, the consumption of which was a sin. I struggled through my breakfast remains, heavily laden with a pernicious burden of guilt...and the sure and certain knowledge that the further I strayed from the truth and the way, the longer I refused to abjectly repent before God and the ministry of his church, the more frequent transgressions like this would occur. For Satan would slowly divest my mind of whatever divine knowledge I once possessed until, at last, my conscience would become "seared as with a red hot iron!" and I would become, in the end, so depraved that blasphemies such as eating pork wouldn't even register as sins anymore. I would then be just like all the other heathens in the world.

Worse actually, because I once had known the way. I had supped in Eden, had been offered life eternal by God Almighty in exchange for the paltry pittance of perpetual allegiance to his thirteenth apostle. And I had blatantly refused that gift. I hastily lit up a Camel to rid my palate of the haunting after taste of filthy, prurient pork, paid the check and walked out into a bright Montana morning to wait for Adair.

I lounged up against the hotel wall, one foot back against the time blackened brick, and watched the handful of natives slowly come and go along and across Main street. It was a clean little town.

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The streets not only looked like they got rolled up at night, but that they got swept and cleaned as well.

When Adair pulled up and got out of a new four wheel drive GMC, I had no doubt that's who he was. From his silver gray Stetson to his black western boots, he looked like a cowboy. All else between was faded denim. He approached me with his hand out. "You Deke?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," I replied.

He cringed as if a low flying buzzard was about to poop on his head. "Just call me Adair, son," he chuckled. "We're sort of informal hereabouts. Listen, I got a load of wire to pick up at the grange. You want to collect your things and I'll meet you back here or you want to come with me?"

"Everything I own is either on me or in my pockets. How about if I just ride along and give you a hand?" I inquired.

"Sounds right," he said with a grin. "Climb in."

The grange supply was about six blocks away. Adair backed his rig up to the loading dock near some ponderous rolls of four-barb wire and said, "Why don't you wait here? I'll get this signed for and be right back." When he returned, he tossed a new pair of leather gloves at me. "You gotta wear these to handle this stuff," he said. We loaded eight spools, a dozen bundles of six foot steel posts, slammed the tailgate shut and were on our way inside of fifteen minutes. He headed east out of Malta then turned north onto a dusty seldom graveled road.

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Chapter 18 BAR H

Chestnut lands rolled away into unguessable distances. Bronzed by summer's heat, tanned by autumn frosts, the high plains of Montana were a windswept patchwork of whispering grass and far stubble fields, scented with the dampness of rain.

Adair shook out a Lucky Strike, offered me one, and asked, "You been around cows much, Deke?"

"Some," I replied truthfully. "My grandfather always kept a couple of milk cows. He taught me how to milk when I was five or six."

"Yore not afraid of 'em then?"

"No, they don't generally mean any harm," I answered.

"You say you know how to milk?"

"It's been awhile," I admitted, "but I still know how."

Adair nodded as if satisfied. "I'm right glad to hear that because I've got two Brown Swiss cows that I've had to milk first thing every morning and last thing in every evening for the better part of five years. It's all my wife's doin'," he grinned impishly. "You see she loves fresh milk, whipped cream, cottage cheese, and butter, and that's all well and good. But, dang! I need a break once in a while. How would you like to take over that chore for me? I'd sure appreciate it."

"Be glad to, Adair," I said, and I meant it. "What's an average day like anyway?"

"Well," he drawled, crushing his smoke out in the ashtray. "We generally get up around six thirty, have breakfast at seven, and begin work at seven thirty. This time of the year, all we're really doin' is feeding the cattle. One herd is up in the far east pasture about ten miles off, another is eight miles to the north. The third bunch is seven miles south. It takes up half a day for four hands to feed them after which we break for lunch. We usually spend our afternoons doin' odd jobs, fixin' fence and if we don't run into any

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'what nexts,' we're mostly home eatin' dinner by five. Sound like somethin' you'd want to do?" he inquired.

"After everything I've been through, it sounds almost like a vacation," I laughed. "But you'll have to fill me in...what exactly are 'what next's?'"

"What next's," he began seriously enough, "are the bane of every cowhand's existence. They tend to occur in groups, five minutes apart, just before quitting time at the end of any day when you're more cold, hungry and tired than usual. They always require your immediate attention and are absolutely guaranteed to make you a minimum of one hour or more late for dinner." He paused for a few moments communing with himself before continuing.

"You'll know it was them the first time you find yourself crawling out of the muck ten miles from home after changing a tire which, for no good reason, went flat when you got stuck in the middle of the only invisible mud hole in the state of Montana. You suddenly realize, as you scrape the gunk off your brand new boots and jeans, that you lost your wallet crawlin' around down there in the sludge. As you reach for a match to light up the dark you find they're all wet, so you reach for the flashlight you keep in the truck and discover the batteries are dead. You'll then look around at the shadowy cows and a truck that won't budge and the flash that won't light and yell, 'What next!?!'"

"This sort of thing happen very often?" I asked with a perfectly straight face.

"Often enough," he replied with a grin.

We arrived at the ranch house about one o'clock. Situated on a low hill overlooking a broad, nearly barren valley, it was almost completely encircled by a bleak march of seething trees. Their unclad limbs and barren twigs jostled restlessly as they whistled in the cold November wind. The main house was antique white, trimmed in fading blue. Adair pulled up near a huge Quonset style sheet metal garage above the house, killed the engine and got out. I slid out the other side and looked warily around.

An intricate maze of empty corrals some two hundred yards below the main house fed into an enormous red barn. A hundred cattle could easily have taken up residence inside it. A small white bunkhouse, fifty feet long by fifteen wide occupied the middle ground between the main house and the corrals. The sheer re-

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moteness of the setting, the emptiness of life, the futility of its exercise suddenly struck me and the blow was overwhelming. "What am I doing with my life?" I asked myself. "What am I doing here? I should be in school, not out in the middle of nowhere. My days should be filled with books and play, a mother, father, brothers, not Montana, where nothing I know is at home."

Adair interrupted my cheerless reflections, "Come on in and meet the family, Deke," he said and led the way into the house.

His home was unpretentious, western comfortable. A cozy lair of thick rugs, antique wooden tables, brass lamps and in a small ante room, an old oak desk. A large overstuffed sofa and several reclining chairs, tucked away in homey living room corners, were the only visible concessions to the modern world of the sixties. The home was, quite simply, two steps backward in time. He introduced me to his wife Bernice, a plump, pleasant featured woman of fifty or so and, to Johnny, his lean, thirty year old son.

Bernice regarded me with profound and detached indifference. I immediately had the feeling that no matter what I did it would never be satisfactory to her. Johnny, on the other hand, had a an immediately identifiable devil-may-care streak in him several oceans wide. Adair, I surmised, fell somewhere in between.

We had a late lunch of meatloaf, corn, mashed potatoes and gravy followed by a thick wedge of apple pie. Adair, Johnny, and Bernice carried on most of the conversation. Towards the end of the meal, she addressed me directly, one of the few times she ever would.

"What size clothes do you wear, sir?" she asked perfunctorily.

Taken aback by the unexpected query, all I could say is, "I really don't know."

"Come here then."

I approached her cautiously, wondering. She reached into a drawer and pulled out a tape measure, fastened it around various portions of my anatomy, wrote the revelations down and said brusquely, "That's all then." Sensing I had been dismissed, but not yet knowing where to, I headed toward the door. If nothing else after an excellent meal, hell any kind of a meal, I needed a good smoke. Johnny followed me out, lighting up before he'd even cleared the porch.

"Where you from, Deke?" he inquired.

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"State of Washington," I replied.

"How old are you anyway?"

"Fourteen."

"When I was fourteen," he observed, "I was still in school. How come you're not?"

"I matured early," I suggested, deadpan.

He chuckled to himself. "Out here," he gestured with an all-encompassing wave of his hand, "it's considered bad manners to pry into a guy's personal life, or his past. What a man does in the here and now is what counts, but you're a curiosity. You," he concluded, "are definitely not regulation issue."

"You got that right," I conceded somewhat ruefully.

"Want to see what the rest of the place looks like?" he asked, abruptly changing the subject.

"Sure thing," I replied enthusiastically.

We hopped in Adair's four wheel drive and set off down a winding, bumpy, rut filled road heading south. Other than an infrequent cottonwood or clump of aspen, the land about was devoid of trees. Most of which were adorned, no doubt due to the lack of suitable building sites, with dozens of nests of varying shapes and sizes built by birds who had long since fled south. One notable exception grew five miles out by a hillside spring, a huge old giant of a cottonwood, topped by wind and age, towered fifty feet above the nearby road. Crowned with a single massive nest of limbs and twigs it bore no other sign of habitation. This, Johnny informed me was a Golden Eagle's nest, which I assumed accounted for the lack of interest by other residents.

Coming, as I had, from a world of forests on the Washington coast, eastern Montana resembled nothing more than an undulating desert of windblown grass. An occasional coyote loped into view, then swiftly disappeared each time Johnny hurriedly stopped the truck and reached for the 30-06 hanging on the gun rack. It was as if they knew a moving vehicle presented no real threat.

After nearly an hour's travel, we dropped down into a broad river valley where several huge stacks of alfalfa and hay had been deposited. Although enclosed in a five strand barbed wire fence five feet high, this had proved no impediment whatever to several dozen deer busily munching on the succulent bales. We drove to within one hundred yards, Johnny killed the engine and we sat for

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awhile and watched. While the majority of the herd seemed to be does, there were several bucks in attendance sporting massive antlers. All of them looked exceedingly fat and well fed. We got out of the truck and slowly approached. Other than intermittent glances in our general direction, the browsing animals paid little heed to our presence. Johnny walked right up to the wire a scant thirty feet from the herd and yelled, "Hey get up, get out of there!" The deer gazed at him curiously for all of a couple of seconds before returning to their feast. All but one of the deer, the largest buck, ignored him.

"This is a real wild herd you got here, John," I commented wryly.

"You think that's something, watch this," he replied with a laugh. "Here Bucky, here Bucky, here Bucky," he called in a sing song voice. The deer which had been eyeing him took a few cautious steps in our direction, hesitated for a few moments, then ambled over. John tapped a Lucky out of his pack and held it out across the wire. The graceful animal sniffed the fragrant tobacco appreciatively, snorted several times then nibbled it bit by bit from between his fingers.

After we'd returned to the truck and left the herd to their meal, I just had to ask, "How'd you ever manage to teach a deer that trick, Johnny?"

"He was an orphan. I don't know what happened to his mother, but when I came across him, I don't know, must be five years ago now, he was starving. I took him home, called the vet to find out what to do and bottle fed him 'til he was old enough to eat on his own. The first couple of years he stayed pretty close but he's been rangin' further afield with every passing season."

"How'd you know it was him?"

"His face! Once you get to know an animal, none of them looks the same and the more you get to know them the more differences you'll see."

We arrived back at headquarters shortly after dark. Johnny gave me a guided tour of the bunkhouse. Due to the size of the thing, it was a short trip. There were three beds, one each against the various walls and a gas furnace in the middle of the floor. Each bed was accompanied by a small wooden writing table. A couple of well worn rocking chairs and a black and white TV completed the appointments. I would, Johnny informed me, have the place to myself for a spell as the other ranch hand had taken several days off to visit

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his mother in Great Falls. Visiting one's mother, I soon discovered, was an artful Montana euphemism designed to cover a wide variety of indiscretions. Anything from a three day drunk to an overnight stay in Malta's casual (but highly efficient) bordello.

My first night there reached back for miles, down every road I'd taken. My first Christmas, when the house on 8844 South D Street in Tacoma had been filled with laughter and the pungent scent of evergreen lightly steeped on spiraled strings of brightly colored bulbs...and of Christmas last, when the magic of childhood had been harshly exposed for the lie that it was, and promptly replaced by an even bigger one.

Grandpa's death when I was six, from inoperable cancer. And his corpse at a funeral I was expected to cry over, but couldn't. Withdrawing instead somewhere deep down inside, where I hoped that, perhaps, if I could flee from today, I could escape to the past where life still made sense. And how after the service I could still hear my parents remarking to friends how chilling it was to have a child like me who felt nothing at all, and how much pride I took in that inadvertent deception. Besides, none of the heroes I'd seen at the movies cried when someone died.

That first day of school at Fernhill in Tacoma rolled down off my memory and parked in the lane. School was a nightmare of strangers and rules and of someone called teacher whom I'd never met and yet who acted like she had some God given right to order my comings and goings. My solution to the problem had been elegant and simple. The instant she turned her back on the class I was out of her door, onto the sidewalk and heading home at a merry clip. Well, almost.

Home was a mile or so away, by road that is, but there was a shortcut which wound its malingering way through the dry autumn woods and blackberry brambles; and it skirted a magical swamp where, as I had reason to know from illicit experience, huge gray and green frogs grew. Reasoning that I had plenty of time to explore, I traversed the entire area. I discovered a grove of yellow plum trees and gorged myself on their succulent fruit. Apple trees grew in scattered abundance as well and I felt it my duty to sample each one. By the time I arrived home, it was precisely three o'clock.

Time ordinarily meant little to me, but I remember that particular hour with grinding precision. As I walked through our old front

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door, I was instantly confronted by an enraged mother who had obviously been counting seconds, to say nothing of hours.

"Do you have any idea what time it is!?" she yelled; and before I could profess innocence by ignorance she informed me, "It's three p.m., and just where have you been young man!?" she demanded in an infuriated voice, which conveyed to me the utter futility of even attempting to explain.

"At school," I replied, with all the conviction of the undeniably guilty.

"Don't you dare lie to me, you little heathen," she shouted angrily.

"I'm not lying," I stubbornly insisted. "I was at school."

"For how long?" she seethed.

"Ah, er, um... five minutes?" I proffered, hopefully.

"And where did you spend the rest of your day?" she demanded furiously.

"Well, I guess I took the shortcut home, through the woods and past the swamp."

"You guess!?! You guess!?" she yelled, her voice rising several decibels in sound and fury. "Arrgg!!!" She calmed herself ever so slightly before passing sentence in a clipped and thoroughly authoritarian manner from which I knew there was no appeal. "You will spend the rest of the day in your room," she began. "You will not eat until breakfast, you will attend school tomorrow, and you will apologize to your teacher and your class for running away. You will never, ever pull such a harebrained stunt again! Do you hear me!?" she shouted.

Although I was positive that not only I but everybody in the county probably had, I wisely refrained from saying so. I merely acknowledged her request with a polite (and carefully neutered), "Yes."

If she had stopped right there, chances are I would have survived with my butt intact, but we always seemed to arrive at some point in her discourses where stupidity demolished common sense and I found myself perversely compelled to utter witty rejoinders which did nothing but make an already incendiary situation explosive.

"Don't you ever pull a stunt like this again. I'll beat you within an inch of your life," she reiterated wrathfully. "Do you hear me, you little hellion!?"

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"Yes."

"Do you understand!?" she persisted through clenched teeth.

"Ah yes, I know, senora," I responded in the languid Spanish accent I'd learned from watching Zorro on TV. "I've heard eet all so many times before."

She lunged at me, grabbed a handful of hair and dragged me across the living room, propelling me into my bed room with far greater force than seemed absolutely necessary for someone of my modest height and weight. "You smart mouthed brat, you had me worried sick and you think you can just waltz in here and backtalk me!" she shrieked. "Bend over!" After an obligatory (and extended) licking, she left the room in a steaming silence.

Her professions of incipient infirmity rang hollow, however, for I had detected no lassitude whatever in the arm that wielded the belt...

My father's name invariably surfaced in these instances, usually toward the end of the conversation when, to add a sense of grim foreboding to my already dubious future, Mother would wrap things up with a threat, over her shoulder...as she left the room. "And don't think I'm not going to tell your Father about this the minute he gets home!"

She was routinely better than her word in these matters. A more accurate interpretation would have read, "The instant he gets home." I could hear her narration quite clearly when Father arrived. Not only because her voice rose several octaves in the process, but because I had my ear anchored securely to the partially opened bedroom door...

"Do you know what your son did today?" she asked.

"Let me guess; we're talking about Dale. Right?"

"He played hooky all day long, ALL DAY LONG!" she shouted.

"On his first day at school?" my father asked incredulously. "You want me to have a talk with him?" he queried hopefully.

"I don't care what you do with him just as long as you make sure he never, ever, does this to me again." she retorted.

"Yeah," I thought, as the night wore on. "He tried."

The tides of time, ebbed and flowed as I stared out the window at the deepening night and at a halo of snow flakes drifting lazily down past the mercury lamp by the lodgepole corrals.

Morning bled out across the heavens staining clouds a crimson hue and in the all pervasive silence I felt totally alone, cut off even from the now nearly comfortable antagonism of my enemies.

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Chapter 19 ICE AND FIRE

Adair knocked on the bunkhouse door, milk pail in hand, and we walked on down to the one acre barn. His milk cows were gentle creatures, even to strangers and, although my wrists ached from not having milked for several years, I was finished and eating breakfast within forty-five minutes.

Following breakfast and a conversational smoke, Johnny and I hopped in his truck and headed out to feed the first herd pastured to the south. After loading the truck from the alfalfa stack, he drove along very slowly while I cut the green bales and tipped them off by quarters. We then checked the huge stock tanks, making sure they were full and that the propane heaters were keeping them free of ice. By the time we returned to headquarters, it was lunch time.

Bernice had fried chicken, masked potatoes and gravy, and chocolate cake waiting for us. After lunch, she motioned to several large bundles mysteriously swathed in brown paper, lying just behind the half open kitchen door. "These are for you," she informed me. "I'll take them out of your wages a little each month." Inside the bundles were several pairs of jeans, two changes of long underwear, a fleece lined Levi jacket, a pair of heavily lined leather gloves, and a down filled cap.

"Thank you, ma'am," I said. "I really appreciate this."

She nodded curtly in my general direction, then turned her attention to the kitchen stove.

By the time each day was over with, we'd have fed over one thousand head of Hereford, I'd have milked the Brown Swiss twice and if, by that time, evening hadn't fallen, it was hard on our heels.

Winter was the slow time, so I'd been told. There were no cows calving, no hay to cut, bale, or stack; no calves to dock or brand. Temperatures ranged from a high of ten to a low of minus thirty-five and stayed that way for weeks. In conditions such as those, I

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had been cautioned not to touch anything metal with my bare hands. Like most lessons, I learned it the hard way.

I was feeding the south herd by myself one bright winter's day and, after checking the stock tank heater, had discovered that the burner had recently gone out. I pulled off my gloves and reached for a match to re-light it. I grabbed the face plate of the burner with my free hand and it welded instantly to the subzero metal. I couldn't budge it without tearing off all the skin on my fingers and palm. After about five abortive efforts it occurred to me that I was in one hell of a fix, welded as I was to an icy stock tank in the middle of nowhere. What I needed was a pint of warm water, that would have set things right in seconds. After a several minutes of desperate thought, however, a solution presented itself.

Moments later, as I fired up the truck and drove off with most of my skin intact, I realized that I had several things to be thankful for that morning. One, that I was in the habit of drinking three or four cups of coffee for breakfast and, two, that I hadn't been born a girl.

Winter lingered on well into March across the eastern high plains and it would not be until late April that the last iceberg sized snow-drift had finally melted in the light spring rains. Ranch work was constant. Rounding up cattle on horseback; branding and vaccinating, building fence; tilling the wheat and alfalfa fields. But there was playtime, too. I'd saved up a few months wages and bought a Honda ninety. It wouldn't do much above fifty, but that was plenty fast for the topography of the ranch.

Before I knew it, another November slipped away, and then another. I might have stayed on forever if it hadn't been for a porcupine.

Spring rolled in early the start of my third year there, welcome mild, but unseasonably dry. By mid April, cool prairie rains had all but ceased. Winter grasses and last year's weeds stood knee high, brown and parched.

May twenty-third started out like any other Montana weekday. I was up at six to milk, eating flapjacks and bacon by seven, then Johnny and I were on our way south to feed the herd. When we came to the eagle tree, we both noticed a strange shape moving around in the nest. Since I had a lot more experience climbing trees, I volunteered to climb up and investigate. It was an easy climb. I reached the nest within five minutes, peered over the edge, and

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found myself eye ball to eye ball with a startled young porcupine. Face to face, porkies are cute. They have beaver shaped faces and brown inquisitive eyes. If they have a fault, it is their inherent lack of trust in anything or anyone. True to its upbringing, this one whirled swiftly. If I hadn't ducked, it would have slapped me in the face with a thoroughly nasty looking barb-quilled tail.

I'd got a good enough split second look at the nest to inform Johnny there were no eggs and, other than the porky, no sign of occupants. He yelled up at me that eagles would probably reject a nest a porcupine had camped out in, and especially one that humans had been near. The best thing, he said, would be to burn it out and give them fresh space to build a new one.

I fished out my vue lighter and, after a couple of abortive wind-blown attempts, set fire to the bottom of the nest. Old and dry, as it was, it took off at once, burning fiercely in the gathering breeze. The porcupine, its suspicions about human beings now fully confirmed, barreled out of the nest as if its butt depended on it. It landed with a heavy 'plop,' right on top my head. I could dimly hear Johnny laughing himself silly down below, but there was nothing I could do except hug the tree and (for the first time in months) pray. Apparently concerned only with survival, the frightened animal clawed its way down my neck, across my back, and out onto the long end of a nearby branch where it sat as if petrified. A shower of flaming twigs and brands began dropping all around me. In the interest of postponing premature hair loss I began a hasty decent.

From forty feet below, the strains of raucous laughter suddenly ceased, ominously replaced by an explosive "OH, SHIT!" I glanced down at once and promptly echoed my partner's earthy sentiments. A small segment of nest had fallen away. It hit the ground still burning. The knee high grass, dead and dry as it was, erupted. Pushed by the wind, it was up and over the top of the thirty foot high draw before I was back on the ground. Once there, it spread in all directions. We never had a chance.

I hit the ground running and piled into the truck. Foot to the floor, Johnny took off careening madly down the road hoping to, perhaps, get ahead of the flames and either backfire them or stop them, some way, anyway. We cut down a draw, raced up on top where the land ran flat for several miles before abutting the Milk River, and saw to our chagrin that there was no way. The fire was

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now approaching us on a front over half a mile wide, expanding every second. We got back in the truck, drove out of its way and, for a few moments, sat and watched, stunned.

In such times, my first reaction was always to light up a smoke and think things over, which I promptly did. No matter, nothing came to mind. Johnny also appeared to be deep in thought. After a few minutes it became hopelessly apparent that he too was fresh out of possibilities.

"Got any good ideas, Deke?" he inquired, quite calmly.

"Canada's nice this time of year." I suggested half jokingly.

He regarded me stolidly for a half a moment, then wearily rubbed his eyes with the back of one hand, while fervently querying no one in particular. "What in hell was I thinking of? What the f__king hell!?" He shook his head in resignation and, speaking to himself as much as to me, said. "Well, we're going to have to call for help on this one."

I chuckled...In my mind, I could clearly see that porcupine, sitting high and tight on its tree branch, giving us the middle paw while it laughed itself sick. "F__k with me will ya?"...I just had to chuckle.

"Damn it, Deke, this isn't funny," he said angrily.

"You don't know what I'm laughing at." I returned, ironically

"Do I want to?" he retorted.

"Probably not." I coolly replied.

He gave me an irate look and reached for the mike on his two way radio.

"KFJ 2356, unit two calling base, unit two to base, over."

The response was almost immediate. "2356 unit two, this is unit one, I hear you."

"Dad," Johnny began, "We got one hell of a grass fire burning south of the eagle tree, it's at least a hundred acres and spreading. We'll need the fire department from Saco and a couple of cats to stop it. You got a copy on that?"

"Got it," came the terse reply. "Where will you and Deke be?"

"We're going to try to get out in front and do what we can to slow it down."

"Good enough, I'll make the calls and be right down. Unit one clear."

"Clear on two" Johnny responded. He turned to me and, in an

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obviously irritated tone of voice said, "If this was your land, a fire wouldn't seem so funny"

"Is that what you think?"

"That's it" he said, then added, "I've watched you over the past two years and there was always something strange about you. You're a loner, you never mixed in and you never joined in, and I couldn't figure that out before, but now I know, you really don't give a damn do you...about anyone or anything?"

I kept him waiting for a reply while I tapped out a Lucky and fired it up. If I'd learned anything at all in dealings with my species, it was 'never bother enlightening the deliberately obtuse.' His assessment of my clockwork was too outrageous to dignify with denial, and too deliciously provocative to slander with the truth. I took a long, resigned, nerve settling pull, looked him squarely in the eye and, in the most unprepossessing of neutral tones said, "No."

We fought the fire alone that morning. Adair showed up around ten with a D-6 Cat and disc. The Saco wild fire unit responded and was on the scene by noon. By that time, Adair had disked a sixty foot wide fire break along the front the fire was approaching on. By two p.m., having burned over seven hundred acres, it was out. Johnny and I had wielded shovels most of that time and for the first time I could remember, at the end of a long hard day, the last thing I wanted was a smoke.

We drove back to the house in silence. As we got out of the truck, Johnny invited me in for a drink and mentioned that we were probably going to need one because, as soon as his Dad rolled in, he was going to want to know about the fire.

"What are you going to tell him, Johnny?" I asked.

"The truth," he replied, determinedly.

"In that case, you better let me tell it," I suggested, wryly, "After all, you have to live here, I don't."

Adair stumped in before we'd finished our second beer, sat down, reached for a brew himself and asked, "How in hell did that fire get started?"

"I saw something in the eagle's nest and climbed up to see what it was." I responded, quickly. "When I saw a porky had moved in, I figured the eagles would never nest there again, so I lit it on fire thinking that maybe they'd build a new one in its place. It burned like a torch. Unfortunately, bits and pieces of it fell to the ground

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still flaming and set the grass on fire. It was up the hill and over the draw before we had a chance to stop it," I finished quietly.

Adair looked at Johnny and asked, "That what happened?"

"Pretty much, except he left out a few details."

"Like what, son?"

"Like the whole thing was my idea and I told him to do it."

"That so, Deke?"

"Sort of," I conceded.

He nodded thoughtfully, then spoke slowly, as if weighing his words.

"I appreciate your help down there in putting the fire out, and all the work you've done for me past few years, but you should have told me the truth about this," he asserted quietly.

"What I told you was the truth."

"No. What you told me was true; but it wasn't the truth."

He fell silent again, then finally asked, "Why?"

"Johnny has to live here, I don't."

"And you thought I'd kick my own son off the ranch for making a mistake?" Adair laughed, incredulously.

"I've seen it happen," I retorted.

"Loyalty to a friend, Deke, is a noble attribute, but it's got to be tempered with honesty. One without the other is worthless."

"From what I've seen of life, loyalty and honesty are seldom bunkmates." I countered.

"I don't know where you came from, but it must have been one hell hole of a place," he responded. After another moment of strained silence, he addressed both Johnny and me.

We'll talk more about this later, in the meantime let's take the rest of the day off, get cleaned up, and ready for tomorrow. I don't know what I'm going to do about you yet, Deke. Maybe tomorrow you better ride with me while I figure it out."

I walked down to the bunkhouse feeling as rootless as I had when I first set foot in that state. I wasn't sorry for what I'd done and wouldn't have changed it if I could. In the course of the last few years, I'd adopted a simple code. I required people to leave me alone. I did not insist that they live by my laws and in my estimation they had no right to demand I live by theirs. I would do anything in my power to help a friend, or anyone else in need for that matter, and if that required a strategic restructuring the truth (what-

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ever that was), so be it.

After years of exposure to it, however, there was one thing I had no tolerance at all for and that was the employment of hackneyed psychological warfare techniques by those envisioning themselves to be in positions of power over me. Power existed, I had determined, only as long as peasants paid homage to it.

I tucked my clothes and what gear I could in a small canvas pack, retrieved the four hundred dollars I'd saved out of my wages and, at two a.m., strapped the pack to my motorbike. I pushed it down the lane, past the corrals and barn, then along the road leading out of the ranch for about half mile. Confident no one would hear, I kicked down on the starter, turned on the headlight and drove away. I hit the main gravel road sometime later and, contrary to practice, killed the engine looking wistfully (and defiantly) back. "No great loss," I told myself, "if you people think I'm going to hang around for even one hour while you shoot craps with my fate, you got the wrong boy." I cranked up and headed west. I had no idea where I was going, but at the moment it didn't matter, I was moving on; that was the main thing.

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Chapter 20 STRANGER ON THE TRAIN

Heading into the darkness, I never looked back. I was free of parents, brothers, church, and, most important of all, free of those f__king Herbert's. No more cages to be locked up in, no cows to milk or brand. No eternally pissed off god to ineffectually attempt to placate. I could go where I wanted and live as I pleased.

I reached Malta around six a.m., had ham, eggs and coffee for breakfast at the Great Northern, then wandered over to the station. I stared around at the handful of souls in evidence and after watching their machine-like antics began to conceive a genuine pity for them. They were trapped, doomed to a life of fulfilling exterior expectations. I, on the other hand, was unfettered. The possibilities were endless...the future infinite.

I decided to flow with fate. Whatever train departed first, that I would get on. The station master informed me that the next train out was at ten a.m., westbound through Great Falls, Whitefish, Kalispel, Bonners Ferry, and Spokane. When it pulled out two hours later, I was on it.

The spacious cars and comfortable seats were, for the most part, unoccupied. "All the better to indulge my antisocial, never mix or join in proclivities," I thought, sardonically.

I was surprised to discover that those sweeping judgments rankled. In the end, I concluded that although I didn't mind people hypothesizing the worst about me, I would prefer that they left some room for doubt, just in case they were wrong. Nevertheless, in the interest of image self preservation, I would do nothing overtly to change their minds, while doing everything in my power to facilitate their delusions. As long as they believed I was cold and vicious, the more likely they were to leave me alone.

Prairie lands flowed past outside in grim unending shades of brown, as if spring never sojourned on this dreary patch of earth.

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Euphoria continued to course through my veins, however. I was intoxicated by an utter and complete freedom which was now mine.

A voice interrupted my private reverie.

"Would you mind if I sat here?"

I glanced up. A pleasantly featured man of middle age and average height stood before me in the aisle. With the obvious availability of empty seats, I wondered immediately why he would choose to sit across from me and, "Yes," I thought, "I do mind." But what I said was, "Sure, have a seat."

"Thank you, young man," he nodded graciously.

He sat down on a portion of the seat directly opposite me, chucked a black brief case to one side, unbuttoned his suit jacket, loosened his tie and settled back.

"And where might you be going?" he asked conversationally.

"If I knew, I probably wouldn't go," I replied without hesitation.

"You're not going home then?"

"Homes are just places where people eat, sleep, and f__k each other while they figure out what to do with the rest of their lives. I don't need their problems," I responded icily.

"You know what are you going to do with the rest of your life then?" he asked with apparent interest.

"I haven't the faintest."

"Perhaps there is more to our meeting than chance then," he suggested.

"And this is my lucky day, right?" I drawled.

"Have you been saved, young man?" he inquired seriously, choosing to ignore my sarcasm.

"From what?"

"Hell!"

"Yeah, I slipped out the back door a couple years ago and saved myself."

He regarded me thoughtfully for awhile before speaking. "Do you respond so caustically to everyone?"

"Only on good days."

"Who did this to you?"

"What?"

"Robbed you... of the innocence and trust which should still be yours," he demanded.

"Reality," I responded sardonically. "It sucks us all dry; innocence

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follows shortly thereafter. Trust, on the other hand, is neither inherent or innate. It's a measure of faith between two parties. As such, it can't be stolen, only betrayed."

"Why do you think the Lord came?"

"He never told me."

"He came to restore trust and love, between all his children. He came to find and save you; you and all others like you, hasn't anyone told you this?"

"The way I heard it, he came to send me and people like me straight to hell and save those chosen few who were willing to spend all eternity kissing ass," I countered.

"No, son, absolutely not! The New Testament is full of Christ's personal example and his own explanation for why he came, listen to his words." He produced a Bible from his coat pocket and thumbed expertly through well worn pages."

"I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.' Again in the beatitudes, Christ blesses the poor, the sad, the meek, and the merciful." He peered out at me over the scriptures as if I were the one lost soul in an entire congregation he was determined to save and, with the barest hint of a twinkle in his eyes, continued, "Though you are not outwardly meek, you surely fit in several of the other categories."

"And one thing above all you should remember, it was not the prostitutes, hobos, cowboys, or runaways who both demanded and arranged for the death of our Lord, but rather the ministers, priests, lawyers and politicians; those who considered themselves righteous."

"On one occasion, when Jesus sat and ate with common people (described as publicans and sinners) the Pharisees, who were the priests and lawyers of that era, demanded to know why he was mingling with such people. His reply was eloquent; 'They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick.' And I say to you that if Christ walked the earth today, he would take your part. He would fight for you, he would die for you, and you can know that because he already has died; for you and all his children."

"Don't allow the sheer number of his children, your brethren, to dilute the magnitude of that love. Yes, he gave his life for us all, but if you had been the only one he still would have died for you alone, that by his death he might save you with his life."

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"Seek for the lord while he may yet be found, though he is not far from any of us, and you will find rest from your burdens, peace in your soul, and love in your heart. You need not fear anymore, child of God," he asserted softly, "read the book."

"I have, many times."

"What did it say to you, personally?"

"That I'm evil, beyond redemption and doomed. I find little peace, or love in those sentiments."

"And you believe that?" he queried gently.

"About ninety percent of the time," I answered resignedly.

"Have you ever read it straight through, cover to cover, or do you just read chapters or verses here and there?" he probed.

"I've read it through half a dozen times and, having done so, I can see why most people, including preachers, prefer to read and preach only selected verses, because you see, taken in aggregate, read like a textbook, it makes no sense. It contradicts itself from chapter to chapter and often times verse to verse."

"Show me a contradiction." he requested kindly, offering me his Bible. I promptly opened it to the first chapter of the first book and read verse three. "And God said let there be light."

"You doubt God created light?" he asked, the faint trace of a smile tugging at one corner of his mouth.

I shrugged, then continued, "The first thing God did in the creation account of Genesis was to create light, he then divided that light from darkness, called the light day and the darkness night and, verse four concludes, the evening and morning were the first day."

"I see no contradiction there." he stated unequivocally.

"Ah! but read on. Try verse fourteen. And God said, 'let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth... and God made two great lights, the greater light to rule the day, the lesser light to rule the night, and he made the stars also.... and the evening and the morning were the fourth day.' So, where did the separation of darkness from light, day and night come from on day one, when the sun, moon, and stars weren't created until day four?"

"And you find that contradictory?"

"Don't you?"

"On the surface, perhaps, but before I respond do you have any other examples?" he inquired thoughtfully.

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"Yes," I replied, thumbing hastily through the first few chapters of Genesis. "Here, in chapter four, verse fourteen. Cain, after being cursed for the murder of his brother Abel, tells the Lord that his punishment, to be driven forth as a fugitive and vagabond upon the earth, is too great for him to bear. Because, he says, it shall come to pass that everyone who finds me shall slay me. Now, if Eve was the mother of all living, and Cain and Abel were, as Genesis recounts it, her first and second born, then why couldn't Cain find a safe place to hide, where did all those other people he was afraid of come from, and last, but certainly not least, where did Cain get a wife?" I demanded, closing the book decisively.

He stared kindly at me for the space of a minute before speaking.

"Well", he began, "I can certainly see you've read your scriptures. I'm equally certain," he added, "that if requested you could produce numerous other such examples, many no doubt from memory. Correct?"

"You got it." I replied tersely.

"There are any number of plausible explanations, some of which you've no doubt heard. God, for example, could have created light out of anything and thus didn't require the sun, moon, and stars for that purpose. As for Cain, due to the inordinately long life spans common to those days, perhaps Adam and Eve had, by that time, produced so many offspring that they really had heavily populated the known regions about them. Regarding the origins of Cain's wife, well, popular theology has it that she must have been his sister."

He paused for a moment, gave a deep chuckle, then added, "Personally, I find it hard to believe that the Lord chose to propagate the human race through even the temporary medium of incest, but you never know." He looked at me with a merry twinkle in his dark brown eyes, "Judging from the collective progress of our species as a whole, it might explain a good many things!"

"As a collary, you might also ask the following," he continued. "If incest was the sexual medium by which the human race survived and if, as the good book tells us, God is the same yesterday, today and forever, then why in Leviticus eighteen, verse eleven, are the marital and sexual unions of brothers and sisters forbidden, and in verse twenty-nine described as evil and abominable? The Bible can become contradictory if one's premise regarding it is presump-

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tuous. However, it makes perfect sense when viewed in a proper context."

"What context might that be?" I asked skeptically.

"That it is a reflection of the culture which generated it." He replied. "Notice who the heroes are, Noah, who after miraculously surviving the flood, plants a vineyard, makes some wine and proceeds to get drunk. Abraham, who was so afraid that the king of Egypt would kill him for his beautiful wife Sarah, that he lied to the sovereign and told him she was his sister. The king believed it, took Sarah into his harem, gave Abraham sheep, oxen, cattle and servants in exchange for her and, if the Lord hadn't put a stop to it, Pharaoh would have married her."

"Look at the lives of Moses, Saul, David, Solomon and all the others you're no doubt familiar with. They were all as imperfect as you and I yet, the Bible is their story, their story, not God's story. That's important. For you must agree, is it a surety that we are not to emulate their lives but, rather, to learn from them as we walk with God. Our journey and our stories should be as uniquely ours as theirs were theirs. After all, how many carbon copy personages do you find in scripture? If you look at the Bible as a collection of examples through the changing times and seasons of human experience with God then, and only then does, it all make sense."

"What about the tenet of divine inspiration?" I respectfully inquired.

"Nowhere in the Bible is God recorded as having made that claim," he answered. "Various biblical authors claimed that distinction for themselves. And they may have been, or really thought they were. However, they also make mention of such non-existent constructs as the foundation of, or the four corners of, the earth. These understandings were obviously reflective of the scientific knowledge of the day and certainly not representative of God's wisdom. I would remind you also that many of the atrocities committed throughout history, from the crusades through the inquisitions of the dark ages, to the machinations of Adolph Hitler who claimed, in private at any rate, to be the Messiah, were all accomplished under the questionable auspices of divine inspiration."

"So, how do you know the difference between inspiration and imagination?"

"The easy answer is, it's not important that one know, but if you

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must, judge all things by the life and words of Jesus," he replied with a smile. "The authors of the four gospels, when writing about him, were merely reporting the events and activities of Christ's life. They recorded what our Lord said. Being perfect, his life, deeds and words should, unlike all others in the Bible, be just as relevant and meaningful today as they were those long centuries ago. You will find, if you look, that they are; no fault can be found in them. We, that is any human, can emulate Christ's intent in any epoch of history and not seem too far out of place. Try emulating Abraham, Moses, Hosea, or John the Baptist to name but a few, these days. Yes," he grinned as I nodded in gradual understanding, "I think you see the difference. Christ's example was one of love and tolerance for all. He didn't have to rely on inspiration from exterior sources, then filter it down through his own ignorance and prejudices to determine its meaning. He was, and had been always. He knew all things. His words were simple, eloquent, eternally correct... The Bible is a mirror, let it reflect you and you won't stray too far off the straight and narrow," he concluded.

"What faith are you... ah.... I don't even know your name."

"Allen," he said kindly, "and I have no faith, if by that you mean what denomination am I affiliated with. I am a child of God, much like yourself."

"You don't attend church then?"

"I do... yes... from time to time," he answered slowly.

"Which one?" I persisted.

"Whichever one I am closest to when I feel the need for going! Ah! But you want to know which one you should attend, right?"

I nodded.

"Well, that depends on you... and your unique spiritual needs. Let's see, you've obviously spent a great deal of time in church and one church in particular, at that. It must be a fundamentalist congregation, otherwise you wouldn't believe you are already damned. Furthermore, you must still believe much of what you were taught, otherwise you wouldn't feel so hopeless and angry about it all. And you must know inside your soul that, normal human failings aside, you are not the devilish creature you believe yourself to have been portrayed, otherwise you wouldn't have concluded that God is unfair."

"That not very instructional," I remarked.

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"If you asked my advice it would be this: begin your journey where you left off, at your old church, wherever and whatever that may be. You have unfinished business there. Until you can either stay or depart in peace, the harmonies of life will escape you, truths will pass unrecognized, and for you there will be no rest. Return to your battle, and this time win it, for otherwise you will carry your enemies with you all your days. Make them walk on their own for a change," he whispered vehemently.

"You're right," I agreed after several thoughtful minutes. "I'll never find peace running away from a war. The problem I have with my church is that while I believe many of their basic doctrines, the means by which they derive their theology is horribly flawed."

"Suppose ten people watched an accident occur, a hit and run involving a brown, newer model Chevrolet, driven by a skinny, curly headed Caucasian. These people are all decent honest citizens. Not only wouldn't they lie, they have absolutely no reason to lie. The police arrive on the scene, the ten are then interviewed and asked to give written statements regarding their recollections of the accident. A comparison of the witness's information reveals that three of them reported the car as being blue, two thought it was beige, one thought it was dark red, while only four reported it as brown. The driver was described as fat and bald by four of the respondents, crew cut and average build by two, while being correctly envisioned as thin with curly hair by the remaining four. Now I ask you, why did so many of these people lie?"

"Maybe they didn't," I suggested. "Maybe they reported what they really thought they saw."

"Correct, my young friend," Allen nodded approvingly. "Absolutely correct. But it gets even weirder because, you see, we all carry our own personal proclivity to see things differently into every facet and nuance of our lives. We are, each of us, as mentally, spiritually, and physically distinct as our fingerprints. Because of this we all see God differently, and it is for these reasons that it always will be impossible to establish a truly universal religion which strays much beyond the common sense dictates of the Ten Commandments. This postulate further, if you stop to think about it, neatly answers the age old question, Why so many gods?"

"These tenets, as you may well imagine, are not and never will be popular with either secular governments or the clergy. Primarily

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because they are quite rightly perceived as threats to the power and authority of those respective hierarchies. Nonetheless, I believe it to be a fact that, as long as individualities are muzzled, or otherwise constrained out of fear and ignorance, that our species will never achieve its full potential. It's all right for you to be different," he said kindly. "That is your birthright; don't sell it for mere social acceptance as Esau sold his for a bowl of lentils."

"I never liked lentils all that much anyway," I replied with a laugh.

He smiled, nodding in acknowledgment.

We sat for some moments in silence and, for the first time in hours, I looked out the window as the outskirts of a sprawling town slid into view. The train slowed perceptively and began braking gently as all too quickly we arrived in the station at Great Falls.

Allen stood up, collected his brief case, and held out his hand. "This is my stop. Goodbye," he said, evenly.

I couldn't think of anything meaningful to say, so I shook his outstretched hand and said, "I'm not well versed in good-byes."

"I know," he replied softly, "but you don't have to be. I'll see you in heaven child." And with that he turned, walked down the aisle, and disappeared through the door... Within minutes, or so it seemed, the train was rolling west.

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Chapter 21 END OF THE LINE

I arrived in Whitefish, Montana by noon the following day. It was a picturesque town situated along the Kootenai River in the Flathead National Forest. After the barren expanses of the high plains, the forest and encircling mountains looked like Eden.

The conductor announced a forty-five minute layover so I got off, wandered into the nearest copse of verdant evergreens, sat down under their tangled shadows, and reverently inhaled the clean, woody, memory laden scent. The train pulled out, forty-five minutes later, right on schedule. Soon, the last car wound away out of sight into the hazy distance.

With childhood over, adolescence aborted and the ghost of Herbert W haunting each footstep, I got up and strolled down off the gentle hillock and headed out into adulthood, vaguely southwest.

THE END



The story of Dale Brown began as an Article for
The Painful Truth website.

www.hwarmstrong.com