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Don't Save Me A Place In Heaven
My search for a deeper inner life
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FORWORD - Last Stop Heaven

After my wife died in January 2004, I was fortunate to become the caregiver for my ninety-year old stepmother, Erbie Womack. This included escorting her to weekly Chemotherapy treatments. We sat together until her name was called. I'd then leave, to return when she was through.

Erbie enjoyed our time together. She especially loved my irreverent comments, patterned after those of my always-joking Dad.

Because she was almost deaf, when the receptionist made an announcement, Erbie would ask, "What did she say?"

My usual reply was, "She wants to know what kind of sandwich you want for lunch?"

The other waiting patients and family members always got a laugh from my joking response.

Erbie would then loudly report to the room, "He always does that to me. He should be ashamed of himself treating a deaf old lady that way."

Once, while pushing her out of the hospital in a wheelchair, I stopped at the front desk and asked directions to the morgue. Erbie joyfully shared this with her friends at the retirement home.

On one Chemo visit, I waited during the treatment to discuss her progress with the doctor. Fumbling through a reading rack for something with which to bide my time, I came upon a copy of a neighborhood newspaper. It contained an article, *What Will Heaven Be Like?* The byline was Dr. Sellers Crain, Church of Christ minister. Given my youthful experiences with the Church of Christ and my continuing interest in all things religious, I could not resist.

The article began with a reference to a *Calvin and Hobbs* comic strip.

Calvin asks, "What if there is no afterlife? Suppose this is all we get?"

Hobbs answers, "What the heck? I'll take it anyway."

Calvin responds, "Yeah, but if we aren't going to eventually be rewarded for our good behavior, I'd like to know it now."

The minister wrote that eighty-nine percent of Americans believe in Heaven. Most felt, however, no matter how they live their earthly life, they would end up there. This perturbed the minister. For if true, he'd be out of a job.

From the article:

What if there is no Heaven? Have you ever really thought about it that way? What if Heaven does not exist? It would mean that when we die, that would be the end of our existence. The grave would be our final resting place, where our bodies would await decay and putrefy with no hope of resurrection. It would mean that our loved ones who died in the Lord are gone

forever, and we will have no hope of ever seeing them again. We believe in Heaven because God is there and the Bible tells us so.

Several *Bible* verses were cited to prove his point. He finished big with: *Have you ever wanted to live like Adam and Eve did before the fall? In heaven, you can. All of our real needs will be provided for. A crystal stream, flowing from God's throne will water Heaven. The tree of life will be there to provide health and healing. The darkness of night will never shroud that place. All things will be made new. There will be no hospitals, no drugstores, no funeral homes, no cemeteries, and no more tears.*

Reading the preacher's interpretation of the perks of Heaven, reminded me of those I heard often heard as a youth. Brother Crain believes heaven awaits. As a teenage Christian, I too believed that Heaven was a place I wanted to go. I also believed following specific Christian rules was required for entering Heaven.

Finding nothing else to read in the waiting room, I leaned back, closed my eyes, and created a scenario drawn from Brother Crain's version of the Heaven. I imagined that I died and went to Heaven. The first person I saw upon arrival was the preacher of my youth, Brother Pickens Johnson, from Buchanan Street Methodist Church. I hadn't seen him since going away to college in 1956.

Heaven's welcome center looked a lot like the grand ballroom of the LAX Marriott Courtyard in Los Angeles. A couple of hundred people were just milling around nodding at one another. No food or drink was being served. I'm wearing tan chinos, sneakers, and a navy blue lightweight sweatshirt, like you'd find at Target. There is nothing in my pockets. Looking around for other familiar faces, I see my maternal grandfather, Walter Craddock, Mother, my old piano-

playing pal, Al Deleonibus, and my late wife, Diane. They waved, but do not come over to personally greet me. I assume they'll visit me after the introductory period. Several others from my past are there. Some of whom I didn't know was dead. I see no famous people and note there are no African Americans, Hispanics, or midgets. Everyone is white and "normal" looking. A man in a blue serge suit approaches the rostrum.

"Testing (screech!) One, two, three," he says. "Would someone turn the microphone down, please? It is a pleasure to welcome you newcomers to Heaven. I am Dr. Sellers Crain. For your information and much to my surprise, there is no sectarianism here, only Christians. It is just my turn to introduce God to those of you who have just arrived. Though most of you are new, you may notice persons in the audience with whom you are familiar. Some of those who died before you – family, friends, acquaintances, etc. The purpose of their being here is to assure you that you are dead. They will personally greet you later.

"Being dead is easy, since you have no requirement for food, drink, trips to the bathroom, rest, or entertainment. Other aspects of being dead will be explained later, but your only purpose in death is to worship God and give him praise ad infinitum. Hallelujah, Amen!"

There is a low smattering of *amens* throughout the assembled.

"And, without further adieu, I present God!"

God, dressed similarly to me, steps to the rostrum. He too is bald. I can't tell if he lost his hair over time, always looked that way, or regularly shaves his head. There was no white beard, as I expected. The person who follows God onto the stage is obviously Jesus Christ. He's wearing Birkenstocks, a brown sackcloth robe with a hemp belt and has a beard and long stringy hair. Jesus looks just like the lighted, three-dimensional picture over the altar at my childhood

church. Not knowing the protocol, we recently dead are not sure what to do. As God adjusts the microphone, the longer dead people clap. The others of us just stand there.

God opens with, “Good Day!”

To which we all reply, “Good Day!”

After a brief pause, God leans into the microphone, smiles, and says, “Told you so.”

He waits for laughter. Sporadic nervous laughter sprinkled throughout the room.

“How many of you knew Jesus here as your personal savior?”

Every hand is raised. With some hesitation, I raise mine.

Leaning again into the microphone, God repeats, “Told you so.”

The laughter is more confident than before.

God then says, “I’ll ask Jesus to say a few words to you later, but first I want to welcome you to Heaven. In Heaven, you will find no anomalies – only disease-free, white, heterosexual, Bible-reading, God-fearing Americans. Speaking of the *Bible*, it is replete with contradictions placed there mostly by well-intentioned, albeit self-serving souls. I hope to clear up some of those misunderstandings during my remarks. Jesus will address a few of them, as well. I know the first question that most of you have is: *What is Heaven really like?* It is easier to start with what you will not find here. As promised, there is no pain, no disease, no hunger, no thirst, no debate, no work, no fighting, no danger, no injustice, no inequity, no hits, no runs, no errors.”

Sporadic laughing wafts through the room.

“What you will find in Heaven is peace, love, and happiness. Contrary to what appears in the *Bible*, our streets are not paved with gold. There are no streets because there is no place to go. This is it. There are no mansions. You do not need housing. Basically, what we do is stroll around

Heaven all day . . . day being a euphemism since there is no night. There is music, much like you heard in the elevators on earth. Music that will offend no one. Nothing here is offensive. There is, however, worship. Say, "Amen!"

A loud "Amen" rings through the hall. God then tells us that periodically we all get to shake his hand. Then He debunks the story about Jesus having a hole in his side. He says it was made up years later. God says there is no need to fall prostrate, bow, or genuflect before him, a simple nod or occasional handshake will do.

"That's about it," said God, "I will not ask you newcomers for your questions, for you will find once you enter heaven there are no questions and no answers. None needed. Thank you and welcome. Jesus?"

Jesus walks to the microphone to modest applause and says, "Anybody want a cup of wine? Just kidding. Welcome thee to Heaven. In just a few moments, I will lead thee through those doors. Heaven awaits, a place of tranquility, equality, continuity, and perpetuity. And as thee know, I died for the sins of the world so that whole thing about judgment day is just a hoax, made up by those on Earth who wanted to control thee. I'll bet if thee had known that sooner, thee would have had a lot more fun. (scattered laughter.) We are glad thee are here. As thee should be, considering the alternative. (scattered laughter.) Now if my disciples will open the doors, we will all enter Heaven. Come. Follow Me."

Twelve men with beards open twelve doors. Light floods the room. Jesus leads us into the light.

I'm jarred back to the present by the sound of the receptionist's voice inviting the next Cancer patient in for treatment.

To some, my imagined heavenly experience may seem far-fetched. But, if you had lived in my old time religion neighborhood, it would sound all too familiar. And, I'm sure it resonates today with Brother Crain's fundamentalist congregation. My waiting room musing is also reminiscent of the Heaven described in stories I heard at Buchanan Street Methodist, the church of my youth. Stories I believed at the time.

INTRODUCTION - The New Exodus

On Sunday, January 1, 1989, upon leaving an Episcopal Church service, I accelerate my search for a deeper inner life. I didn't know my departure would be a harbinger of times to come. However, moving away from typical Christian affiliations is fast becoming the rule for many faith seekers. My hope is this chronicle of my journey to a deeper inner life will be useful to questioning Christians and doubting Thomases. Those who wish to establish a new context in which to practice tolerance, charity, love, respect, and appreciation for others. A context that assures one's wellbeing, by serving the wellbeing of others. An inner peace void of fear that doing otherwise denies one passage to an ephemeral eternal life.

For decades the number of practicing Christians in the United States has dwindled. There are now more cultural Christians than practicing Christians in out country. Until recently individuals have been reticent to identify themselves as "none of the above" because of the fear others would denigrate or ostracize them from relationships, commerce, or social settings.

However, according to the latest Pugh Research study of spirituality in America, “none of the above” now ranks second behind Evangelicals. The fear of exclusion is subsiding.

Though no longer directly identifying with Christianity, I still place great value in my four decades as a devout, mainstream Christian. Christian philosophy and history continue profoundly shape my convictions and practices related to life, death, loyalties, and morality.

Musings from learned secular thinkers and the essentials of Eastern religions also provide enlightenment to my role as a contributing habitant of this planet. As my direct allegiance to Christianity was winding down, I provisionally tried the agnostic, deist, “more spiritual than religious,” and humanist labels for a while. I am now, like a growing number of fellow sojourners, “none of the above” and better for it.

Being Christian, or a member of any spiritual group, has always had more to do with personal identity than with the practice of a set of clear-cut religious beliefs. Faith practitioners always project their values onto a religion, rather than just derive their values from it. If it were otherwise, how could slave owners and Abolitionists have used the same Christian scriptures to justify their divergent positions? The same scriptures, by the way, Nazis used to justify killing Jews.

Since the first glimmer of reason flashed through the mind of a Homosapien, awareness that one's wellbeing is enhanced by concern for the wellbeing of others became paramount to one's survival. All religions are rooted in that innate human desire to enhance one's wellbeing. The hocus pocus, reliance on the goodness of deities, and promises of afterlife followed.

Communities, nations, and races create agreed-to moral codes to enhance individual and societal wellbeing. Usually included is some type of retribution for those who do not function

within the code. Through the ages, religions have been the primary though not always, arbiters of these societal codes.

My Values

I believe an articulated moral code is important to living a joyful and productive life. My personal code is drawn from my Christian/Judaic heritage, and exemplified by scores of individuals who have crossed my path. There is nothing within my collection of values contrary to the Abrahamic religions or Eastern mystic thought.

Each evening I review my daily activities against my code to determine progress. Though, most evenings lapses of my values and judgment prevail, I'm a better person from the nightly ritual. My canon is for living in the here and now. It does not include earning a trip to heaven. So, don't save me a place. I won't be coming.

Good Fortune

My physician once told me that man was designed to be eaten by a saber-toothed tiger by the time he was thirty-six years old. Any life thereafter, he said, was a bonus. So far, I have been most fortunate and extremely lucky. Much of my luck, however, was created through my own intentional actions. Most of my misfortunes were created likewise. Along my way on this improbable journey to my ultimate demise, I learned to love life, not fear death, try hard to keep my promises, and use my self-adjusting moral compass to stay out of serious trouble.

Having successfully avoided the tiger, I'm obviously living on borrowed time. Now seventy-six, and still doing most of my own stunts, I continue to trust that the Christian Bible contains treasured, universal, and moral truths. But, I no longer believe those stories are deity authored - the work of some omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent entity, and his miraculous son.

Sage prophets, wise thinkers, and inspired storytellers – yes! Heaven sent, historically scrupulous – no! This tome chronicles my thoughtful journey.

So with twenty percent or less of my life left to live, I look forward to my remains becoming useful to others. I will eventually rot in the ground, be absorbed into dung heap of humanity, and end up as the pistil or stamen in a beautiful flower. Or, maybe as the pit in a delicious piece of fruit. So don't save me a place in Heaven.

CHAPTER ONE: Unto Us

On its surface, my childhood appears typical for the 40s and 50s, but my interests were markedly different from most of the others in my lower middleclass North Nashville neighborhood. My boyhood friends and brothers preferred playing sports, going hunting and fishing, and playing uncaring practical jokes. I love the radio, television, movies, music, and, most of all Jesus. I lived those early years much as I do now, in my head. Only then, it was as a faithful junior, servant of God.

A Child Is Born

Much of this documentation, regarding my birth, is based on hearsay. On Thursday, September 29th, 1938, just after midnight, I was born in the right side of a rental duplex at the corner of Clay and Cephas Streets in North Nashville, Tennessee. Rain steadily beat on the front window. Thunder could be heard in the distance. In the corner of the darkened room, the *Cavalcade of Music* was playing Broadway songs on the RCA console radio. The music was briefly interrupted with the news that Great Britain and Germany had signed a peace agreement. Ending speculation of a second war in Europe.

On top of the radio was a pan of heated water, with the two white towels needed to facilitate my birth. Dr. Wyatt, his nurse, and a midwife were gathered around Mother's bed when Dad, a substitute city fireman, walked through the door. It was then I made the first of my many theatrical entrances. According to legend, there was applause. Though I'm sure some of it was

for Mother and her significant role in the event. It would also be the first of many times Mother and I shared recognition from appreciative audiences. As soon as the doctor proclaimed, “He’s a boy,” Dad unwrapped and lit the blue-banded cigar. One of the two he’d been carrying in his pocket for over a week.

Dad exclaimed, “Don’t forget to tip the stork, Doc!”

Always the card, my Dad.

Mother groggily announced, “His name is Larry Gordon Womack. Larry, after the handsome actor Laurence Olivier and Gordon, after his uncle, Kenneth Gordon Womack.”

For a short time, following my christening at Buchanan Street Methodist Church, I was the sole heir to the fortunes of both my parents’ middle class families. Hauled from house to house, as if the grand trophy of lineage in both the Craddock and Womack clans. Brother Jerry, born three years later, ended my singular rule.

My first real memory is at the age of four. My maternal grandfather, Walter Craddock, and I are seated on a bed in a small room off his kitchen. We are passing a harmonica back and forth. Strains of *She’ll Be Comin’ Round The Mountain* are mellifluously flowing from his lips, and God only knows what is coming from mine. A few days later, Grandpa Walter died in his backyard on his way to feed his chickens. The death certificate read, heart failure.

Dad said it was from a “bourbon attack.”

Always the card, my Dad.

My second childhood memory is shopping in downtown Nashville with Mother. I was rattling on about Grandfather Walter dying. To shut me up, Mother suggested we buy a colored duck for an Easter treat from a Negra man on the street. I chose the green one and named him

Walter.

Though Walter often crapped on the floor, he stayed in the house for about a month. He was then assigned to a rickety pen in the backyard. After Walter lost his Easter egg green and bit me, I stopped visiting the pen.

One Sunday, my parents, baby brother, and I were seated at the dinette in the kitchen.

As Mother ladled a second helping of peas on my mashed potatoes, Dad said this rhyme: “What taste like chicken but doesn’t go cluck. Could it be we’re eating your. . . ?”

I blurted out “ Duck!”

Mother said, “Charles, I asked you not to say anything like that!”

I jumped up from the table and cried out, “We are not eating Walter are we?” and regurgitated on the floor.

Mother led me into the bathroom.

Dad thought the episode was funny and told the story often. Always the card.

First Performance

At five, Mother and I received our second round of applause in the parish hall of St. Peters’ Episcopal Church, where my fraternal grandparents attended. I was in burnt cork blackface on a stage imitating the renowned Al Jolson singing, *Toot Toot Tootsie*, with Mother on the piano. When I finished, down on one knee, arms extended, the audience, mostly soldiers on leave from the War, leaped to their feet applauding and demanding an encore. Since *Toot Toot Tootsie* was the only song I knew, I sang it twice more before leaving the stage to a thunderous ovation.

Backstage, the elderly parish priest patted me on the head and said, “Bless you son, you

are quite a trooper.”

I thanked him, but didn't have a clue what he meant.

The Early Years

A few weeks later, just before the birth of my youngest brother Dennis, my journey almost abruptly ended. While visiting my maternal grandmother, I fell, face down, into a goldfish pond in her front yard. I would have drowned, if it had not been for the quick action of a teenager who lived next door. That evening Mother informed Dad of my near demise.

His response was, “There once was a doctor named Doctor Peck. Who fell in the well and broke his neck. He should have known better. The fault was all his own. He should have stuck to the sick and left the well alone.”

As a young boy, I was frail, and enjoyed indoors more than out-of-doors. My favorite activities were going to church and to movies with Mother. While at home, however, I mostly played with my collection of lead toy soldiers and cars, looked at comic books, and listened to the radio. On Saturday mornings, Mother and I listened to *Big John and Sparky* sponsored by *Buster Brown Shoes* and to *Let's Pretend* dramatizations of fairy tales featuring Billie Burkes. (Burkes played Glenda the good witch in the *Wizard of Oz*.) *Let's Pretend* was our favorite show. *Cinderella* was our favorite episode.

Almost every night, Mother read classic books to my brothers and me. My favorite was the *Tales of Uncle Remus*. Brer Rabbit was my hero. Smart, wiry, and always getting into and out of trouble. He had a special hiding place for thinking and planning his next adventure. So did I.

My “special hiding place” was under a small, round table in the living room, with a cloth

that draped almost to the floor. It was across from the RCA console radio, so I sometimes listened to my favorite shows from under the table. That dark, quiet, isolated hiding place was great for daydreaming and playing-out fantasy adventures. Two activities that I continue to engage in today.

Entering the first grade at Jones Elementary School was a milestone because I loved walking alone to school and being in the company of so many new people, both teachers and students. During the first few weeks Mother, classmate, Nancy Green, and I practiced a duet for an upcoming school assembly. We performed *I'll Give To You A Paper Of Pins* and there was another big round of applause for Mother and me. And, Nancy as well.

At midyear, my teacher took me into the little tempera-permeated art room that separated her room from the other first grade teacher's room. I thought it was to discuss my class clowning or daydreaming. With both of us seated on little wooden chairs, among the art supplies, she gave me a choice. I could choose to be the worst reader in the best group or the best reader in the worst group. I chose the latter and set the course for many of my future life decisions.

Being second best has always had a certain appeal to me.

After school, listening to afternoon radio shows was my passion. While my friends, including my best buddies, Billy Roy Carrigan, Rodney Adair, were playing football in the street or baseball in the alley, I was in the living room listening to the *Lone Ranger*, *Sargent Preston of the Yukon*, *Tom Mix* and *Sky King*. A highlight of elementary school assembly was the day *Sky King* made a guest appearance. I got his autograph.

While my grades were average, my report card usually indicated I was clowning, talking too much, or daydreaming, instead of paying attention. *Not reaching his potential* would also

crop up on occasions.

First Love

On my first day in the fifth grade, the principal offered me a crossing guard position on the school patrol. The first few days on patrol were hell because the older patrolmen bullied me. That slackened when I began making them laugh.

At the first assembly of the year, when our principal introduced the new third grade teacher, Miss Haley, I was smitten. Miss Haley, a raven-haired goddess with the most beautiful face and smile I'd ever seen, became my first love. She reminded me of Elizabeth Taylor. Most of the other fifth and sixth grade boys had a crush on her as well.

I suggested to my patrol captain we collect a flower from each of the bouquets that the girls brought to school and give them to Miss Haley. Upon completing our flower collection, I was assigned to lead the delegation to her classroom. When we knocked on her door, Miss Haley invited us in. As I walked to her desk, the door slam shut behind me and I could hear the other boys laughing from behind the door. I was standing there alone.

Miss Haley said, "Oh my, what beautiful flowers! Are they for me?"

"Ye . . . Yes mam," I stammered. "They're from the school patrol."

"Well, what's your name?" She asked.

"L . . . L . . . Larry," I stuttered.

"Well, Larry, thank you" she said, "And, please, thank all the other boys for me, especially those hiding outside the door."

Christian Thing To Do

By the time I was eleven, when the doors opened at Buchanan Street Methodist Church,

that's where I was often found. Learning all I could to ensure my triumphant entrance into heaven. Most people in the neighborhood, including my family and close friends, seemed to count on forgiveness to get them past the Pearly Gates. I preferred to rely on being a good boy. I didn't use cuss words. Often invoked the golden rule. Didn't smoke corn silks or Indian cigars or chew the tar balls left when the workmen repaved our street. Addressed all adults "Yes mam" and "Yes sir." Always said my prayers before bed.

And, though I tried not to let my friends know, I hated it when we tied thread to the legs of June bugs to watch them fly around our heads. It saddened me when the bug's leg broke off, and it flew away without it. It just didn't seem the Christian thing to do. From time to time, my playmates mocked me as being a sissy.

Our preacher, Brother Estes, looked like Dickens' Ebenezer Scrooge and had a similar grumpy, aloof disposition. Many in the congregation said he was not a good preacher; too hellfire and damnation. Since he was the only preacher I heard on a regular basis, I was mesmerized by his every sermon. And truly tried to take his words to heart and to live the life he said I should. Brother Estes was particularly adept at sternly pointing us boys toward the straight and narrow path to heaven. Rodney and Billy Roy were afraid of him. I was a bit too. But I also looked up to and admired him. In his most memorable sermon, Brother Estes paraphrase the Golden Rule: *Do unto others as you say you will do. And, do the same for yourself.* I never forgot that message.

In August 1950, just before beginning my first year at North Nashville Junior and Senior High School, Brother Estes took several of us boys on an overnight campout.

On a Friday afternoon, we piled into Brother Estes' 1945 two-door, black Plymouth and

were taken to a nearby lake. Once camp was established, we went on a nature hike. After about thirty minutes of the nature stuff, I realized that traipsing about in the woods was not for me. And, that I had made a grave mistake coming on this overnight. After another regrettable thirty minutes on the trail, we returned to camp for sausage and scrambled eggs sandwiches. As the sun began to set, Brother Estes told Bible stories, including the one about Jesus in the wilderness.

He ended his stories with, "I have a great surprise for you. This area is covered with snipes. They are just like little chickens and are delicious fried. As a special treat, we are going to catch some snipes and take them home to your parents. Does that sound like fun?"

As the other boys cheered in the affirmative, I muttered to myself, "I don't think so."

He went to the car, returning with a big burlap potato sack.

"One of you gets to hold the sack while the rest of us shoo the snipes toward it. Once we get three or four in the sack, we'll get another and capture three or four more. I've decided that Larry will hold the first sack."

I was already pondering which would be worse, running around in the woods in the dark or holding the sack while wild chickens were herded to me? I didn't say a word. We all then headed out, me with sack in hand, to find the clearing in which I was to stand.

The half moon gave an eerie glow to the clearing. Brother Estes said for me to stand with the sack open, ready to receive the snipes, as he and the others shooed them to me.

They left in the direction from which we came and began shouting. "Here snipe, oooooo, here snipe, oooooo!"

I was so scared and almost peed my pants. I could hardly breathe and was frightened out of my mind.

Then I remembered that I was supposed to be saying, “Here snipe” as well. My voice was weak and shaky. Suddenly I noticed that instead of getting closer, the snip hunters’ voices were fading. After a few minutes, they stopped altogether.

I shouted, “Hey out there. Where are you guys? Brother Estes? Brother Estes? What’s going on? Hey out there.”

Total silence. I did pee a little in my pants. I tried to think of Bible words like: *Be not afraid for I am with thee. Yeah, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.*

Nothing allayed my fear. Suddenly I heard a wolf or something baying at the moon. I figured I was a goner. It seemed a lifetime before I heard the others coming towards me. They were laughing and carrying on.

Led by Brother Estes, they walked into the clearing shouting “We got you!” and “There's no such thing as a snipe.” The chorus of taunts and laughter continued until we got back to camp, where Brother Estes said a prayer for the wilderness and for the fellowship we were sharing. He never said a word about scaring me almost to death. I was sure Brother Estes had a message for me in his actions, but I couldn’t figure it out.

After having survived the ordeal, I returned home Saturday morning with stories that, to my parents, sounded as though I’d enjoyed the adventure. Dad, an avid outdoorsman, would have otherwise chastised me and accused me of acting as if I was a sissy. Something he did frequently.

“Did you see any bears?” he asked.

Always, the card my Dad.

Wanting to be alone, I spent the balance of the day, on the couch, in the living room

listening to the radio. Following supper, I went to the bedroom, where I shared a bed with brother Jerry.

I knelt by the bed, said my prayers, climbed in bed, and instantly fell asleep.

First Major Sin

When I awoke early Sunday morning, trying not to awaken my brother sleeping next to me, I tiptoed into the bathroom to pee. Flushing the toilet and turning to leave, I saw something move on the Jackson's back porch next door.

Holy, moly, I mentally exclaimed! *It's Darla Jackson standing there in her underpants. No top!*

Darla, fourteen, was not a beauty, but she wasn't ugly either.

"Oh, my God," I said aloud. "I can see her tits!"

They were smaller than the ones I'd seen the barbershop magazines, but they were tits nonetheless. I had never seen real ones before, except on Mother. That didn't count. Darla also had a curvy butt. She walked to the edge of the porch and looked to see if anyone was around. She didn't see a soul. Not once did she look towards my bathroom window. I stepped into the tub for a better view. Her breasts had little brown circles and nipples like mine, only bigger. She reached up and rubbed them. At the same time, she kind of twisted her butt around, as though she was dancing. Darla raised her arms, turned two circles and went inside.

I rushed back to the bedroom to check the time. Six fifteen. I knew I'd be standing in the tub again the next morning at six o'clock. I crawled under the covers and it suddenly hit me. I had just sinned - and on the Lord's Day! I had said tits aloud, looked at real breasts on a girl, and admitted to myself I wanted to see them again! Those were the worse sins I had ever committed

in my life.

My insides were hurting, as I began to quietly sob. *God probably wouldn't want me serving him after looking at Darla's naked body. Looking at the naked ladies in the magazines at the barbershop was bad enough, but this could get me sent directly to hell!*

Dad called out, "Let's go! The fish are biting. The car leaves in ten minutes with or without you! Let's go!"

My brother Jerry jumped from the bed, but I stayed under the covers until I heard the car pull away, then quickly dressed for church. When I entered the kitchen Teresa Brewer was singing, *Music, Music, Music* on the radio. Mother was drinking her sweet tea and reading the paper.

"Was that you I heard around six o'clock this morning?" she asked.

"Yes mam, I had to go to the bathroom."

"I thought I heard you talking to someone?"

"Oh," I replied. "I just stumped my toe."

Walking to church that morning, and throughout Sunday school and church, all I could think of was seeing Darla's breast. I asked for forgiveness for lying to Mother and prayed to God. Saying I was sorry for looking at Darla's breast and making a half-hearted promise not to look again. The promise only exacerbated my guilt and anxiety. I knew I would look again, if given the chance. Though I did become momentarily distracted by the beauty and joyfulness of the hymns, Brother Estes brought me back to reality with his hellfire sermon. Guilt arose in me again, like an upset stomach.

"And now we will have the offering," said Brother Estes. "I'd like for Leroy Sadler

representing the Men's Club, Boots Norton, representing the finance committee, Billy Cripps representing the grounds committee, and Larry Womack representing the youth to be our ushers."

Miss Louise played the introduction to *From Whom All Blessings Flow*. I had no choice but to stand up and look pious. Every time I handed the plate to a woman, my eyes darted down at her breasts. As the congregation sang, we collected the offerings and walked up the center aisle to the altar with the plates. Brother Estes took the plates and we returned to our seats. I felt terrible, like I would pass out. *I'll be there in the fiery furnace with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego*, I thought, taking my seat. *Woe is me*.

I didn't even walk through the greeting line after church to shake Brother Estes' hand. I dashed to the church basement and out the side door unsure of what I needed to do to shake my guilty anxieties.

Monday morning, there I was, standing in the tub at six o'clock. No Darla. After about fifteen minutes, I crawled back under the covers, without disturbing my brother, and tried to go to back to sleep.

I lay there thinking: *Somewhere along the way I heard it was evil to look at naked people. Now I'm not only looking at Darla, I'm going back to the scene of the sin for another peek. If evil people go to hell and I committed an evil act by looking at Darla's breast, am I going to hell? What would Brother Estes say or do, if I told him about Darla?*

Thinking of Brother Estes reminded me of the snipe incident. *Aren't we supposed to love our neighbor as we love ourselves? If I understand that right, doesn't it mean to be thoughtful and kind to everyone? That episode in the woods didn't seem to me like an act of kindness on the*

part of Brother Estes. Once he said in a sermon that everything happens for a reason. What earthly or heavenly reason could there be for sending someone on a snipe hunt? Brother Estes acted as though my fear was funny to him. He encouraged the other boys to have a laugh as well. How would he have liked it if someone had taken him on a snipe hunt? I must listen more closely in church and Sunday school because there are some things I just don't understand about being a Christian.

The Willow Tree

During summer, when not in church or listening to the radio, I was often sitting under the willow tree in Miss Etha Green's backyard. That willow must have been a million years old. It was the tallest tree I'd ever seen. Though its limbs were too high for climbing, its myriad drooping branches provided a comforting dome of shade and a perfect setting for daydreams and reflections. It was my special hiding place where I could lean back on the gargantuan trunk, sort through my recently accumulated knowledge, and dream of future exploits and accomplishments. Minutes, hours, days, weeks, eons went by. I had no concept of time - when I arrived or when I left. Time to me then, was just hands on a clock.

Closing my eyes, I heard my friends at play in the distance, smelled the earth beneath me, felt the bark against my head, tasted the bitter juice from a willow branch between my teeth, and thought:

I really like church and love God and Jesus. Thank you God for the friendly people at church who help me better understand Him and Jesus. I wonder why Brother Estes seems the saddest person there? He has the best reasons of any person to be happy that I know. He is a man of God, a preacher, but he always seemed a bit angry or sad. Mr. Sadler, my Sunday

schoolteacher seems really happy, as does Mr. Boots Norton, who is also the most cultured and apparently the richest man I know. Mr. Norton reminds me of my Grandfather Walter.

My thoughts shifted to Darla. *I wonder if I should tell someone about what I had seen. What would Brother Estes think? What would he make me do? The Darla thing bothers me, especially because I want to see her naked again. Why do I feel that way?* Just then a slight breeze swayed the willows, changing my thoughts to: *That willow would make an excellent whip for playing cowboy. I miss my stick horse - Palomino. I sure like playing cowboys and Indians better than baseball and football. Rodney and Billy Roy think cowboys and Indians is for babies. I think baseball and football are for dumbos.*

My thoughts were interrupted by playmate, Billy Roy's voice in the distance shouting my name and saying something about baseball.

"Okay. Give me a minute to run home, get my glove!" I hollered back.

Observing Death

I met up with Billy Roy and Rodney and we headed down to the high school to meet the other guys. On the way we stopped at Jimmy Ballenger's to invited him to join us.

Jimmy's father was killed in the War when Kamikaze pilot crashed his plane on the deck of a carrier and blew Mr. Ballenger into the water. The Navy said some shrapnel also hit Mr. Ballinger in the head and killed him. He was buried at sea.

After the game we stopped at Seats Grocery Store, across from the baseball field. Seats wasn't actually a grocery store, like the sign said. It was a place where you could get novelty stuff, soft drinks, peanut butter and crackers, or an ice cream sandwich. My favorites were the miniature paraffin six-packs of juice in cola-shaped bottles. You chewed off the paraffin cap,

drank the juice and then chewed the bottle.

Mr. Seats was the skinniest man I'd ever seen. He looked like he only shaved once a week. He had a large mole on the side of his nose with considerable black hair growing out of it. Mrs. Seats was skinny too and usually wore a faded light blue dress. She didn't say much either. I wondered if they truly cared whether we came in and bought something or not.

They lived in the back of the store. A beaded curtain hung between the store and their living room. We went into the store several times a week in the summer, but I'll bet Mr. Seats didn't say more than twenty words to us altogether.

We told him what we wanted, gave him our money, and walked over to the cooler to get our soft drinks. We could hear the baseball game on the radio in their living room. Through the beads, we could see Mrs. Seats moving around.

Just as we opened the drink box, however, Mrs. Seats hollered, "Leonard, get in here! I think I'm dying."

He ran to her.

We just stood there as we heard him say, "I'm calling the doctor now!"

I peeked through the beads to see Mrs. Seats falling to the floor. She smiled at me, closed her eyes, and went limp.

I turned to my friends and said, "Let's get out of here!"

We ran out and up the street towards my house. About halfway up the block, I stopped.

"What did you see?" asked Jimmy Ballinger.

Out of breath, I said, "I think I saw someone die!"

Jimmy threw up on the spot. Billy Roy and Rodney ran away like bandits! I started

walking home. But when I got to my house, I cut through the alley and ended up at the willow tree. When I sat down, I started to cry.

I've seen cowboys kill many Indians in the movies, but that's the first time I've seen a real dead person. Mrs. Seats even smiled at me right before she died. Hey, we were so scared we forgot our drinks. I guess we can go back later. Did Mrs. Seats go directly to Heaven when she died or does it take a while?

I'll ask Brother Estes to answer that one. I wonder if Jimmy's dad being killed in the War had anything to do with him being a smart aleck and a mama's boy? Did he throw up because of being around a dead lady or because the event reminded him of his daddy? Was Jimmy's daddy in Heaven? I hope I go to heaven when I die. From what they say in church, it seems like a pretty nifty place - streets lined with gold, angels singing. I wonder if Darla will be there.

The next morning while I was standing in the tub, Mother came to the bathroom door to ask if I was OK. When I said yes, she asked if I was in the tub. I said no. I heard her slowly and quizzically walking away. It was a relief when she didn't ask me about it again.

Going To Hell

Later that day, a bunch of us boys were hanging out in front of Miss Etha's house. She was the most outspoken Church of Christ member in the neighborhood. And always acted as though she knew stuff the rest of us didn't. When she'd meet someone new, the first thing out of her mouth was, "Where do you go to church?" If you didn't say you went to the Church of Christ, the next thing was she'd ask you to go to Sunday school with her.

The Church of Christ was the largest church in the neighborhood. Buchanan Street Methodist Church was next. There were also several Baptist churches and a Church of God. The

few Catholics who lived in the neighborhood went to church outside the area. The Church of Christ members, however, outnumbered the rest of us three to one. My friend Kenny Green said that only people who went to the Church of Christ were going to heaven. Mother and Brother Estes told me that wasn't true.

While us guys were deciding what to do next, Miss Etha came out and asked, "Who wants to go to Sunday school with me next Sunday?"

Except for her nephew, Kenny Green and me, the others ran away. Like a fool, I just stood there. Kenny asked if I wanted to go.

I responded, "I guess so."

My parents said I could go, if I wanted to, but they frowned at one another and then sniggered.

Kenny came by my house Sunday morning about 9:15. We walked together to Twelfth Avenue Church of Christ, one block over from my street. The place looked more like a school than a church, but it was air conditioned throughout. Miss Etha introduced me to the class and informed them that I usually went to the Methodist Church. Though I knew most of the kids from school and the neighborhood, they looked at me as if I were some kind of freak. It made me want to leave right then.

After an hour or so of mostly Bible readings and prayers, Sunday school ended. Kenny and I then went into the big auditorium. It looked like the movie theater with the lights on. He informed me that the Church of Christ didn't believe in musical instruments, so there wasn't an organ or piano. He said they didn't believe in crosses or stained glass windows either because those things weren't mentioned in the Bible. I was wondering about the air conditioning,

thinking, *I don't remember reading about that in the Bible*. I suddenly realized we were staying for church. That was something I hadn't planned on. After we all sat down, a man announced that we should turn to page 347 in the hymnal and sing, *Are You Washed in the Blood of The Lamb*.

I thought that was a pretty creepy song to sing in any church with or without an organ. Church seemed to go on for days. Various people stood and said they'd sinned and promised not to do it again. That was something I wasn't used to in the Methodist or Episcopal Churches.

There were made-up prayers about this and that from what seemed like everyone there. Along with lots of terrible singing of songs I'd never heard before. The preacher was louder than Brother Estes and seemed a lot angrier with sinners. As church let out, I thought, *I'll never complain about the Methodist Church again*.

Mother asked me how it went. I said that it was long and boring, and that it all seemed a bit weird to me. I also told her I was eager to return to the Methodist Church next Sunday.

That was my first inkling of how different churches operated and believed in different ways. One of my friends said the Catholics believed the communion wine actually becomes the blood of Christ! We didn't use wine at Buchanan Street. We used grape juice. Episcopalians used wine but I was sure they didn't believe in drinking blood. I thought, *that's only for vampires!*

Saturdays Downtown

My grandfather, Charles Womack, Sr. was the policeman assigned to the Fifth Avenue beat in downtown Nashville. He was tall, handsome, and smart, and look majestic in his uniform. One Saturday each month, I would join him on his rounds and we'd lunch at the *Jack & Jill Café*.

When we entered the waitress would say, "I see you have your grandson with you today."

He would nod as we were seated. She'd then ask what we wanted. My grandfather would order meatloaf with extra gravy, green beans, whipped potatoes, cornbread and iced tea. I would order a cheeseburger, French fries, and a *Coca-Cola*.

He'd say, "Bring him the same as I'm having, with a glass of milk."

My grandfather always blessed the food before we ate.

After lunch, he would escort me into the movie houses to see Westerns, the *Three Stooges*, *The Bowery Boys*, and eat free popcorn.

In the summer of 1951, I realized my weekly fifty-cent allowance would not sufficiently feed my appetite for sodas, shakes, comic books, movies, and playthings. So, I started a neighborhood window washing business. It included the Laundromat, *Bill's Place*, Jones Drugstore, Owen Hunt Barbershop, and Fuqua's Antique & Used Furniture Store.

On my first Saturday as a window washer, flush with cash, I ventured downtown on the bus. My first stop was at Fifth & Church for a short visit with my grandfather; passing on lunch and the movies.

My next visit was to the arcade that connected Fifth Avenue with Fourth Avenue. Mr. Peanut, a man in a peanut costume and a top hat, handing out samples of my favorite nut, Cashews. I'd walk up and down, passing Mr. Peanut several times to receive his handouts. I figured he couldn't see all that well through the eyeholes in the peanut costume. I must have been right.

In Woolworth's, I bought a duck wearing a top hat, much like Mr. Peanut's, that you placed in front of a glass of water. After soaking its head in the water, the duck bobbed up and

down for hours sticking his beak into the water glass. Before catching my bus, I stopped by the *Tom McCann Shoe Store*, to stick my feet into the x-ray machine and see the bones in my feet.

Arriving home, I placed the duck and a water glass on the mantle in the living room to the enjoyment of Mother and brothers.

Jew Man Stein

“I’ve got it!” said Rodney, as we sat on the sidewalk. “Let’s go up and make fun of Jew man Stein.”

“Great idea!” chimed in Billy Roy. “Let’s go!”

Mr. Stein ran the Five & Dime. It was the only general merchandise store in the neighborhood. Mr. Stein was short, fat, had a large red nose and talked funny, like some of the people I saw in the movies and heard on the radio. One time I heard Mr. Stein say that he was from New York.

He used to tell us, “If you play with it boys, you buy it!”

We headed up Cephas alley to the *Stein Five and Dime* on Buchanan Street, just a few doors up from the church.

“Mr. Hunt at the barbershop said that Jews, like Mr. Stein, are the reason our boys got killed in the War in Germany,” said Rodney.

“I heard the Jews are trying to get all the money, too,” added Billy Roy.

We hid just outside the door to the left of the display window.

On the count of three we ran in hollering, “Jew man Stein from the Five & Dime! Jew man Stein from the *Five & Dime*,” and ran out the other door.

Billy Roy and Rodney made it, but just as I was going out the door, a lady came in. I ran

into her and fell to the floor.

Mr. Stein came over and said, "Larry? You okay?"

"Yes," I said.

He said, "You need to be more careful next time. And, you should apologize to Mrs. Crenshaw for running into her."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Crenshaw."

She said, "You need to be more careful young man."

I limped out of the store. Rodney or Billy Roy were nowhere to be seen. Cutting through the alley behind Cephas Street, I returned to the willow tree.

I'm afraid Mr. Stein will tell my parents or even call the police about our prank gone bad. It's hard to imagine Mr. Stein had anything to do with our boys getting killed by the Nazis; he's always nice to me. And anyway, I think it was the Nazis who were the bad guys. I did hear in church though that the Jews killed Jesus and they didn't believe in God. That's confusing.

That night at the dinner table, Mr. Stein was still on my mind with other matters sometimes floating through - Jews, breasts, snipes, Nazis, and church. When Mother asked if I was alright, I blurted out, "Yes mam, I was just thinking about Nazis."

"Why in the world were you thinking about the Nazis?"

"Oh, no reason," I replied. "May I leave now?" I said getting up.

"Where are you going?"

"To the living room," I said.

The next morning after a quick glance out the bathroom window toward Darla's back porch, I was back at the tree.

My thoughts returned to church: *There seems to be a difference between how I'm told people should act and how they actually do. No one ever mentions church from after Sunday dinner until breakfast the next Sunday morning. Everyone just goes on with his or her doings. Never mentioning Jesus or God. Almost like they didn't exist. Rodney and Billy Roy are that way. But on Sunday, everyone dresses in their finery, goes to church and sits there, looking as though they are taking everything in the preacher says. They sing the songs, put money in the collection plate, shake the preacher's hand on the way out the door, go home to Sunday dinner, and then just forget about church altogether. I think about church a lot. Especially the advice from my preacher and Sunday school teachers to love one another, be good, love Jesus, and not to use God's name in vain. It's hard to get anyone adult or child to talk about those things except at church on Sunday. Once I suggested to Billy and Rodney, we play Jesus and the Disciples, instead of cowboys and Indians. They said I was nuts! It sounded like fun to play Jesus to me.*

Grace Of God

In May 1952, just before school was out, Brother Pickens Johnson replaced Brother Estes. Brother Johnson was a big man with large scaly hands, a big voice, and a big friendly smile. His sermons were more interesting and understandable than Brother Estes' sermons. Not as scary – more about how to be and do good. Less about the wages of sin. When Brother Johnson wasn't preaching, it seemed as if his mind was someplace else. I guessed he was thinking about God or Jesus or something in the *Bible*. During the week, he spent considerable time in his office talking on the phone and to church members who dropped by.

Buchanan Street Methodist Church became increasingly central to my life. I thoroughly enjoyed the Sunday services, Sunday school and belonging to the Methodist Youth Fellowship

(MYF). I had my own *Bible* and almost always read the Sunday school lessons before class, where I absorbed every word of my teachers. My *Bible* was the *King James Version*, where the things that Jesus actually said were in red. Brother Johnson read from a new *Bible* called the *Revised Standard Version*. When I followed along the words were similar but not the same. It was confusing. I wondered why they had to create a new Bible when the old one worked so well.

Mesmerized by the words of Jesus and the stories in the *Old Testament*, as presented by my teachers and the preacher, I felt fortunate to have knowledgeable people directing me on my Christian journey. Though sometimes confusing, I knew the Scriptures contained the truths and the rules I needed to get into Heaven. Confident that my Sunday school teachers and Brother Johnson were far better equipped than I to decipher the *Bible* code, I listened carefully and took what they said to heart.

Once in Sunday school, however, I did ask, “Why did Jesus talk in riddles instead of just saying what he meant?”

My teacher, Mr. Leroy Sadler responded that God and Jesus want us to discover these truths for ourselves instead of having them served on a silver platter. He continued on with the class while I just sat there oblivious to his words, thinking of John the Baptist’s head being brought to Salome on a silver platter.

One morning, Rodney, Billy Roy and I were sitting on the rock wall in front of the church waiting for Brother Johnson to arrive to let us into the cool basement to play Ping-Pong. As we were joking around, we saw Tiny approaching the bus stop. Tiny had a face like a woman but dressed like a man. Though Tiny was about the size of a ten-year-old boy, he appeared to be a lot older. Everyone said Tiny was a hermaphrodite and had a weenie, a girl hole, and a butt

hole. Nobody but Bill, the owner of the diner across the street, ever talked to Tiny. The rest of us made fun behind his back. Brother Johnson arrived just before Tiny boarded the bus.

Looking over at Tiny, Brother Johnson said, "There but for the grace of God go I."

I answered "Amen" but I didn't have a clue what he meant.

The Goat Man

My buddies and I were sitting on the front porch when Mother rushed out to tell us that a friend had called from Germantown Hill to say the Goat man was coming our way. She estimated that he would be near the corner of Cephas and Buchanan in about a half hour.

Without even thanking her, we started searching for our friends and hollering, "The Goat man's coming! The Goat man's coming!"

People had already started to gather on both sides of Buchanan Street near the church. Darla was there with her brother and, for the first time, she spoke directly to me. Saying hello and asking how I was. I replied in the affirmative and said I was looking forward to seeing the Goat man. Several boys were riding bicycles up and down the street as a few cars passed by. A city bus picked up someone in front of the church and moved slowly up the street. The crowd included Brother Johnson and Bill, the owner of the diner, *Bill's Place*. Bill wore a paper hat, an apron and was smoking a cigarette. A police car drove slowly by.

A man said, "Ain't summer 'round here 'til the Goat man comes."

Several people agreed and laughed.

Voices were heard in the distance hollering, "Hey Goat man!" "You stink!" "Why don't you take a bath?"

Bill took a drag off his cigarette and said, "Damn! I think I can smell him from here."

Sorry, preacher."

Brother Johnson said, that was OK, he thought he could smell him too! Several people standing by laughed. As the Goat man got closer, the large cart pulled by nine stout Billy goats became visible. Walking alongside was the Goat man, a big fellow with a full nasty beard and wearing goatskins.

"My goodness, he looks like John the Baptist!" said a lady.

A man replied, "He sure don't smell like any Baptist I know!"

The people laughed. The Goat man and his entourage stopped. The bells and cans continued to rattle. Several baby goats could be seen inside the covered wagon.

"The name is Charles 'Ches' McCartney, known over the world as the goat man. However, I come here today in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord, and Savior. If you don't know Jesus, you don't know squat. If you don't know Jesus, you'd better get in that church right now, fall on your knees and pray in a loud voice, 'Save me, Jesus. Save me now; for I know the end is near!' I promise you, Jesus will be here soon. He'll be here before I can come back here again. Before next summer comes."

A voice from the crowd hollered, "Didn't you say the same thing last year?"

". . . and the year before," shouted the goat man. "And the year before that! In fact, I have been coming through here for over twenty years and every year I say the same thing. Keep in mind sinner, that one day, if you didn't fall on your knees when I told you . . . I'll be right, and you'll spend eternity in eternal damnation - which some call hell!"

The crowd laughed and began to slowly disperse. Some dropped coins into a bucket that hung on the cart. There was a sign on the cart that said: *Help feed me, so I won't have to eat my*

goats.

Billy Roy asked, "Goat man, why do you stink so bad?"

"When Jesus was in the wilderness, He didn't bathe for 40 days and 40 nights. If it's good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for me. Postcards only ten cents. Get one for your mama. Get one for your dad. Get one for your sister. Cause they need one . . . really bad!"

Though most people left, my buddies and I stayed around for the rest of his show, which included quoting Scripture. I bought a needle threader from him for Mother and a postcard with his picture on it for me. After the Goat man thanked us for coming and invited us back next year, I took the needle threader home to Mother and went to the willow tree. Looking real close at the postcard, the goat man didn't seem as old as the beard made him appear.

How would I look with a beard? It seems a sad life to me, riding around the country on a goat wagon selling trinkets. But Ches McCartney appears to like it. He said he was doing it for the Lord. Maybe someday I'll do something for the Lord, like the Goat man or Brother Johnson.

My mind jumped to Tiny: It is always difficult to tell the age of a freak. And what about the other neighborhood freaks like the a deaf-and-dumb boy, Wayne, who played pinball at Bill's Place? Or, my second cousin, Van Junior, who is a retard? Or, Tom Dorris, the queer who likes to play with other men's wee wees? Tiny is my favorite freak though we have never spoken a word to one another. Tiny is different. Sometimes Tiny comes into Bill's Place, orders a hamburger and a Coke, goes to the far corner booth, eats quickly, and leaves. Some mornings I see Tiny at the bus stop in front of the church. He's sitting under that large hackberry tree in the churchyard that shelters the concrete wall where you wait for the bus. I think he's there every weekday morning for the ten o'clock bus. When I'm there, I see Tiny walking briskly up the

street. Tiny walks with a priss – arms folded in front, looking down, with head moving slightly from side to side like a girl. I don't know how I know that Tiny is a hermaphrodite, but like everyone else, I know it. Born that way. Male and female and only God knows why. I'd like to see what Tiny looks like down there. I wonder if the girl hole is on top and the weenie is on the bottom or what? The only girl hole I've ever seen was in a magazine at the barbershop. It was a small picture, and all I saw was a patch of hair. I had to imagine there was a hole there.

Tiny looks smart as if he or she knows something the rest of us don't, kinda like Miss Etha. I don't mean the location of parts or what he, she or it could or couldn't do with them. I mean serious stuff. Tiny seems a little embarrassed that everyone knows about the hermaphrodite thing, but always has an air of confidence you don't expect from a freak. There is something high class about Tiny. Oops, I should never say that to anyone. They might call me a freak too or maybe even a hermaphrodite.

Thoughts continued to bang around in my head like pinballs: *Pinballs. Bill's Place. Wayne, the deaf and dumb guy. Wayne loves to play the pinball machine. People say Wayne is deaf and dumb. I get the deaf part, but I don't understand what being unable to talk has to do with being dumb. "Wayne," is one of a few things he says that I can understand. And he even says that funny, as though the corners of his mouth are sewn together. Sometimes Wayne tries to sell me a little card with sign language on it. He'd mumbles and wiggles his fingers. The card says something like, 'the sign language on this card will help you communicate with me. The money will go to my education at the deaf school.'* Two times I bought a card from Wayne for a nickel, even though I don't want to learn sign language. I swear both times he put my nickel in the pinball machine. The older guys teased Wayne by making a circle with the thumb and

forefinger of their left hand. Then, poking the middle finger of their right hand back and forth through the hole. Wayne says, "Ussy, ussy, ussy!" Then they give him a nickel, laugh and say, "What a freak!" But he doesn't hear them. I don't think they are nice.

My First Negras

The next morning as I was walking up the alley, I glanced to my left and saw a horse plodding towards me. Since that was unusual, I decided to wait and see what it was about. As it drew closer, I saw it was pulling a small cart with a large Negra man sitting in it.

I heard him holler, "Ragman. Buy your old rags. Ragman! Sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you, young man. I'm lookin' to buy rags."

He was a big fellow whose deep black skin glistened purple in the sun. He wore an old brown hat and overalls without a shirt. One bandana was tied around his head and another tied around his left wrist. This was the first Negra I'd ever seen up close, much less spoken to.

"I don't have any rags right now, but I can probably get you some tomorrow," I said cheerfully.

"Won't be here tomorrow, jis' come this way on Thursdays."

Not wanting him to leave, I asked, "Is that your horse?"

"Had him for fourteen years."

"He looks pretty old. Can I pat him?"

"Maybe next time, I'z got to keep on my rounds. See you next Thursday."

I watched the old Negra, the horse, and the cart go up the alley towards Buchanan Street, wondering: *Do Negra kids play cowboys and Indians? If they do, which ones do they prefer to be. . . Cowboys or Indians? Oops, I'm supposed to get those chores done before Dad gets home.*

A week later, I went to the alley with a bag of rags to wait for the ragman. He didn't come. Dejected I sat playing in the gravel and saw, what I thought was, a Negra boy's head peek up from behind the fence across the way.

I walked over to the fence and asked, "Who are you?"

A voice came from behind the fence, "I is Thomas."

"What are you doing back there in Mrs. Venerable's yard?"

He said his mama worked there. I asked him to climb up, so I could see him. He told me his mother said to stay in the yard where she could see him. After some minor negotiations, I saw his brown nappy head arise from behind the fence. I said my name's, Larry. He quietly said his name's Thomas as he looked around and climbed over the fence. We sat side-by-side in the alley and talked for over fifteen minutes. Thomas said he lived right behind the white Methodist church. When asked where he went to church, he said that a lady came by and took his mama, brother and him to some church far away. As we talked, I reached over and touched Thomas on the wrist to satisfy my curiosity about how Negra skin would feel. He did the same to me. I asked if Negra boys played cowboys and Indians.

He replied "We is Negroes and we sho do."

"Well, which one are you?" I asked.

Thomas said, "I likes to be the cowboy, but my brother is always an Indian."

Just then his mother called. He scampered back over the fence.

At supper that night, I told Mother and Dad about playing with Thomas, the Negro boy. Mother said that it was nice to have a "Negra" friend.

Dad said, "Never let that little "nigger" come into the yard. He'll steal everything that

isn't nailed down. Then he started in with "*Ten little niggers sitting on a fence . . .*"

Mother interrupted, "Please, not now Charles, not at the table."

Dad laughed, rubbed his nose and left the room. Always, the card

Showtime

By my sophomore year, I had developed an act of imitating famous singers. Mother, surprised by my talent, agreed to be my accompanist. My impressions included Al Jolson, Bing Crosby, Johnny Ray, Frankie Lane, and Nat King Cole. In my first competition, I won first place. Mother and I again received thunderous applause.

The principal and his secretary came backstage to shake my hand.

The principal said, "Larry, you are an asset to our school."

His secretary, Francis Van Deren said, "Larry, you have a wonderful voice. But I think you should sing like yourself instead of all those other people."

I took it as a compliment because she was also an opera singer.

I joined the citywide talent contest circuit; winning several first places and usually finishing in the top three. A highlight of my sophomore year was singing *You, You, You* with the pep band on an assembly program. Jesse Coles was the pep band's leader.

Though my singing was always well received, I had no close school friends. No students share my interest in big band music, musicals, and romance movies, or God. They mostly liked Rock 'n Roll or country music; preferred westerns and horror films.

During the year, I honed my singing impressions, adding Eddie Fisher to my repertoire. I also continued to regularly listen to my favorite afternoon radio shows like *Sergeant Preston of the Yukon* and *Tom Mix*. I recreated the programs and sound effects to amuse family and friends.

On Christmas morning, Mother and Dad surprised me with the tape recorder I had seen at Montgomery Wards while shopping with Mother. It cost \$100 dollars. I never thought I would ever own a tape recorder! When I turned it on and hit play, Dad's voice boomed out, "*Casey Jones said before he died there were five more things that he wanted to ride tricycle, bicycle, automobile, a bow-legged woman and a Ferris wheel.*" Mother reprimanded him as usual but had me play it for family members when they visited. When we played it, Dad would smile and rub his nose.

Jesus Calls Us

We had an interesting discussion in Sunday school about the *New Revised Standard Bible*, and how it was designed to make the Bible more understandable. I was informed the oldest parts of the Bible were passed along orally before they were ever written down and that it was around One BC when the Jews settled on their scripture. My teacher said that some of those older books were probably written twelve hundred years before and that it wasn't until 400 years after Jesus died that the scholars agreed which ancient writings would make up the New Testament. Mr. Sadler told us that a group of scholars decided which books should stay in the Bible and which should go.

I wondered what those other books said and if anyone still had them. Mr. Sadler then said that some of the Christian Bible was the same as the Jewish Bible. I thought, *where did I hear that Jews didn't believe in God?*

Though the other young people in my Sunday school class heard everything I did, they didn't seem all that interested. I was fascinated and wanted to learn more.

Following Sunday school, I went upstairs to robe for choir. The little ones were just

finishing up their Sunday school with a song, “*Red and yellow, black and white. They are precious in His sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world.*” For the first time I realized what that song was all about, and wondered if Thomas, the Negra or Negro, sang it in his church.

About a month later, to my surprise, I was elected president of the Buchanan Street Methodist Youth Fellowship. My job was presiding over meetings, leading worship and planning fellowship events. I borrowed an Episcopal Prayer Book from my grandfather from which to create the vesper services that followed each meeting.

The next Sunday, during the service, Brother Johnson ceremoniously gave me a key to the basement door so I could go there to plan events and arrange the folding chairs prior to our meetings. The key also meant that Rodney, Billy Roy, and I could play Ping-Pong anytime we wanted. Waking home from church, fiddling with the key in my pocket, I realized the basement could become my special hiding place. My private retreat from the neighborhood din. My new special place to be alone with my thoughts and get closer to God and Jesus. I saluted the old willow tree as I passed Etha Green’s house.

True Love

I went upstairs to the choir room to robe for the service. I really enjoyed singing in the choir, partly because of the viewing angle from the choir box of the three-dimensional picture of Jesus. It hung on the wall behind the lectern and was lit from behind. The picture had a three-way switch. You could light the whole picture or just the bottom part or the top. From the choir box, the picture looked even more three-dimensional than from the pews.

Since I had taken piano lessons from Miss Louise Wild, the organist/director, I could read music. Most of the choir could not. The old ladies choir members liked seeing a young man

doing something responsible and often praised me for it. I also enjoyed being in the choir because of Patsy Coomer. She usually turned the pages for Miss Louise and filled in for her on occasions. Patsy played exceptionally well for a twelve-year-old girl. I thought she was pretty, the prettiest thing I'd seen since Miss Haley. Rodney and Billy Roy said Patsy was "Holier than Thou with glasses."

Earlier in the summer, I had made the mistake of telling Rodney and Billy Roy that I liked Patsy and the kidding rarely let up when she was near. They thought she was homely and that I was nuts! Patsy was definitely not the kind of girl for which Rodney or Billy Roy would ever have the "hots." She was definitely not the "hubba hubba" type. Patsy was too shy and studious, as exemplified by her large cat-eyed shaped eyeglasses. Patsy's skin was as white as snow. Her hair was a silken blonde, her body slender, and her breasts small. For the first time, I understood the true meaning of the word, "beautiful".

One Saturday, alone in the church basement, I was searching through Sunday school literature for visual stimulation. Satisfying my now recurring prurient adolescent thoughts was becoming routine. I was startled by the muffled sounds of the organ upstairs in the sanctuary. It was Patsy Coomer practicing *Church in the Wildwood* for Sunday.

Since I knew a parent would be with her, so I opted to listen to Patsy play from the basement and went into the small restroom near the stairs. Turning off the lights, I sat on the toilet (lid down) to listened, until I heard them leave. I then turned off the basement lights, locked the door, and slowly walked home.

Good and bad thoughts crisscrossed, dodged and darted through my mind like butterflies in a flower garden. And there were faces too - Patsy, Darla, the Goat man, Brother Johnson, the

prison warden, Billy Roy and Rodney, my grandfather and the Episcopal priest who wore a collar, like the Catholics. As I neared home, I realized I was already wording the third verse of *Church in the Wildwood* in my head. About to enter the front door, I had a vision of me, as a preacher, delivering a sermon, and, Patsy Coomer, my wife, sitting in the congregation smiling at me.

Just before Christmas, I went downtown to buy Patsy an engraved identification bracelet. After selecting the bracelet at a jewelry shop, across from the Peanut Man's store, I took the bracelet to an engraver. I ask him to engrave *Patsy Coomer* on the front and *Larry Womack* on the back.

On Christmas Eve, our group went house-to-house, singing Christmas songs, and collecting money for a home for unwed mothers. Afterward, we returned to the church for hot chocolate, where I was able to briefly get Patsy alone and give her the bracelet. She was surprised.

Touching my hand, she said, "Thank you and Merry Christmas, Larry."

I melted, hearing her say my name.

For the Sunday Christmas service, I sang a Negro spiritual, *Sweet Little Jesus Boy*. Patsy accompanied me. Brother Johnson asked us to stand with him as the members left the church to hear the compliments. Patsy was wearing her bracelet.

Adults Always Let You Down

On Sunday after church, while standing outside talking to the adults, Mr. Boots Norton walked up. He greeted the assembled and shook hands all around, including mine. Mr. Norton was the most sophisticated man with whom I had ever talked. Everyone seemed to like him. He

was friendly, even to me. Inviting me into the circle of conversation, as if I were an adult. Mr. Norton wore a straw fedora, a blue-and-white pinstriped seersucker suit, white shirt and tie, and the pointiest-toed black-and-white shoes I'd ever seen. I thought: *I'd like to dress like Mr. Norton when I became an adult.*

Mr. Norton didn't live in the neighborhood. Someone said he lived in a big house on the river, just a few miles from the north of the end of Buchanan Street. I never saw him except on Sundays, but was always happy to see him. Once I asked Mother what Mr. Norton did for a living. She looked funny, paused, and then said she wasn't really sure.

Standing outside, the church one time, I asked Mr. Norton what he did for a living.

There was an awkward silence and then he said, "I am a businessman."

Mr. Norton looked strange, said goodbye, and scurried to his white Buick.

One morning as I was heading for the church basement, I heard Ada Bing, the neighborhood gossip, in the kitchen talking to Mother.

I heard her say, "Eva, do you believe it?"

Mother replied, it actually came as no surprise to her. She said she had heard rumors. Ada Bing told Mother the paper said he was making blue movies in his basement and had even recruited neighborhood teenagers to have sex in the movies.

Ada Bing said, "It's been going on for years!"

She then asked, "Didn't your sister, Harriet, date Boots Norton in high school?"

I was shocked, quietly left, and headed for the church.

Before entering the basement, I saw some of the guys standing across the street at *Bill's Place*.

Billy Roy hollered, "Larry, hey Larry, come here."

As I crossed the street, he continued, "Boots Norton was making fuck movies in his basement. Been doing it for years! They caught him and some of his performers in the act and took them to jail."

As I joined the gathering, one of the older boys said he had actually seen one of the movies, and it was hot. Another speculated the possibility of getting our hands on some of them. Bill suggested we get all that talk out of our system before coming back inside the diner.

Bill spit his cigarette butt onto the ground, wiped his hands on his apron and went inside. I was speechless over the news. As I mumbled something about going over to the church, Billy Roy asked if I wanted to see the movies when they got them. I replied maybe. I could hear the group laughing at me as I entered the church basement.

Instead of stopping in the basement, I went up to the sanctuary. The sunlight through the stained-glass windows cast colorful shadows on the pews. I lighted the bottom half of the backlit picture of Jesus and slowly walked to the communion rail. Kneeling before the mysterious backlit picture of Jesus.

I began to pray: *Lord help me make sense of life. If You want me to be Your servant, help me better understand the things going on around me. Like, was what Mr. Boots Norton was doing wrong in the eyes of God? I look up to Mr. Norton, Lord, and now, in some strange way, feel he has let me down. I wonder if Mr. Norton was just using church as a cover up for his sinning? I also wonder if he would be sent to hell when he dies? Jesus said just thinking about sinning was as bad as doing it. I want to understand the difference in the punishment for killing someone and coveting someone's breasts? God, why do you make freaks like Tiny, the*

hermaphrodite, Van Junior, the retard, and Wayne, the deaf and dumb guy? And why there aren't more people in this world like Brother Johnson, Mr. Sadler, Patsy, my grandfather, and me?

Looking up at the pulpit, I thought, I want to be a preacher, Lord, but I don't know what to say to those who are experiencing troubles or born freaky. Do I just tell them to pray and things will get better? That doesn't always happen for me. Lord, please help me understand and make the world a better place, especially for the freaks, Jew man Stein, and Mr. Boots Norton. In Jesus name, Amen.

When I returned home from praying, the newspaper with the story about Mr. Norton's arrest was on the kitchen table. I decided not to read it.

CHAPTER TWO: Coming Of Age

During my teenage years, I began to look at life in a more forward manner. Most of the time, thoughts of dedicating my life to helping others through ministry had the greatest appeal. However, success in area talent shows opened me to fantasies of becoming an entertainer; maybe even appearing on the Ed Sullivan Show. Upon hearing George Beverly Shay sing at a Billy Graham Revival I realized I might be able to combine ministry with music. As I mulled my future over and over, I often wondered what Patsy would like for me to be if we married.

The Grand Ole Opry

In October, Dad got me a job on Saturday nights at the *Grand Ole Opry* selling popcorn, peanuts and candy. I accepted the opportunity with mixed emotions. Selling peanuts was not on my list of things I wanted to do.

Though I had heard of the *Opry*, maybe listened to it briefly on the radio, I was not a fan of country or hillbilly music. I preferred big bands, crooners, Dixieland music, and Broadway or movie songs.

The *Ryman Auditorium* had a presence all its own. Highly polished floors and seats that were varnished and waxed. The backstage curtains reeked of memories of old theater sets, moldy velvet, stagehand sweat, and theatrical makeup. The back steps leading to the balcony and the concessions office smelled of popcorn and peanuts, spilled cola, cigarettes and aging wood. Dad introduced me to the man who ran the concessions, Elmer Cartwright. After about ten minutes of do's and don'ts's, Mr. Cartwright gave me a paper hat and a box containing sacks of popcorn,

peanuts, and candy bars. The box had a strap that I placed around my neck. Along with the other sellers, I went down the back steps and onto the auditorium floor.

We fanned out in different directions hollering “Candy, popcorn, peanuts.”

When the show started we continued on our rounds without announcing our wares.

However, when the curtain closed between acts we’d begin again, “Candy, popcorn, peanuts!”

The featured acts were Uncle Dave Macon and His Fruit Jar Pickers, Roy Acuff, and a funny lady named Minnie Pearl. I didn’t particularly care for the entertainment, so I found a dark corner where I ate two or three of the candy bars. Mr. Cartwright spotted me and motioned for me to get back out into the audience. At the final curtain, all us popcorn sellers stood in line to checkout. The two boys in front of me made eight and nine dollars respectively. I made three dollars and fifty cents and received a chewing out from Mr. Cartwright. On my second night at the *Opry*, I made five dollars. On my third night I was fired for being too lazy.

Mr. Cartwright said, “Larry, you couldn’t sell pussy on a troop train!”

While sulking at the bus stop and worrying about what my Dad would say in the morning, a car stopped and the driver called my name. It was Tom Dorris, the known neighborhood queer. He offered me a ride home. Here was an adult offering me a ride, but he was also a known queer.

I said, “Thank you, Mr. Dorris,” and got in.

He said, “Aw, you can call me Tom.”

He asked the usual questions about age, school, and summer. I answered them as politely as I could, given the circumstances.

When we arrived in the neighborhood, I thanked him for the ride and he said, “Any time,

any time.”

Walking home, I thought: *How does someone become a queer? Why he is a queer? There's Miss Etha's house and there is the willow tree in the back, looming in the shadows. I really want to go there, but it seemed too spooky this time of night.*

Mother was on the phone and not even aware of my arrival. No one ever asked how I got home that night and I never said a word about it.

During my junior year the courses seemed much harder, though I maintained average grades. Patsy became my accompanist at school events. We talked some at school. After school, I would occasionally walk with her to her grandparents' home next to the church.

Taking Up My Cross

That winter, I became more pious in my beliefs and more judgmental against those who held beliefs different from mine. The Gospel, as I learned about it from my Methodist teachers and my occasional visits to the Episcopal Church, made more sense to me than the sanctimonious Church of Christ rants or boisterous brags of holy rollers at Church of God down the street.

My talks about the ministry with Brother Johnson were encouraging, but sometimes it was as though he was trying to talk me out of it. He would point out the negatives in leading a congregation; listening to problems and dealing with deaths. I became active in district Methodist Youth activities, where I met youths from the wealthier parts of town. They were more sophisticated than my neighbors and schoolmates, and far more interesting.

Spending time with them elevated my confidence, and strengthened my resolve to serve the Lord. My new friends were more like those people on television, in the movies, and on the

radio. Until meeting the cross-town Methodists, the only sophisticated people I'd been acquainted with were Patsy, Mr. Sadler, Mr. Boots Norton, Brother Johnson, my grandfather and, sometimes, Mother.

I became increasingly involved in youth district work, so I could hang out with people of my age and interest from across town. Though Billy Roy and Rodney were in the MYF youth group at church, we basically stopped running together. They continued to regularly visit *Bill's Place*, the drugstore, and play neighborhood sports. My mind was elsewhere.

How Great Thou Art

In July 1955, I organized a group from church to go to the *Billy Graham Crusade*. I especially wanted to hear George Beverly Shay sing. He was awesome. Shortly after attending the *Crusade*, Brother Johnson asked if I would sing a solo at the next Sunday service. I agreed, suggesting George Beverly Shay's, *How Great Thou Art*. It was a difficult song but I knew I could do it justice. Patsy and I practiced it for several weeks. One of her parents was always there. I sang the song during communion. Several ladies in the congregation wiped tears from their eyes during my rendition.

After church, Brother Johnson again invited me to stand by him as the people left the church, so they could compliment me, and shake my hand. It felt really good to hear their accolades.

Little Drummer Boy

I entered the kitchen where Mother, was making doughnuts.

"Larry, be careful with the chocolate doughnuts. The icing is still hot," she warned.

When she handed me a glass of milk, I blurted out, "Mother, I want a snare drum."

“What on earth would you do with a snare drum?” she asked.

“Play it.” I replied.

The following Saturday, I visited my grandfather on his beat and went see the movie *Picnic* with Kim Novak. Kim Novak was no ditzy blonde actress. She was smart, sexy, and always seemed in charged. I was nuts about her. Coming out of the movie, all I could think of was Kim Novak, sophisticated, cool, and quiet. Once on the bus, I realized that in my daydreaming about Kim Novak, I had forgotten to make my usual stop at the window of *Miller Music Store* to look at the drums. Ever since I saw a movie short with Gene Krupa playing the drums, I stopped at the music store window to admire the drums, before catching the bus. I imagined myself playing, *Sing, Sing, Sing* like Gene Krupa.

Dad told me, however, no one else could play wild like Gene Krupa because he was a dope fiend. I wondered: *Do Kim Novak and Gene Krupa knew one another. They both lived in Hollywood. From the newsreels of Hollywood, it looks like everyone in Hollywood probably knows one another. I'll bet Kim Novak would have nothing to do with a dope fiend, though. She is way too cool.*

The following Friday evening my parents went out. As soon as they left, I was on the phone calling a girl I had met at a district youth group meeting. She seemed entertained with my stupid jokes and comments. However, when I heard my parents return, I quickly ended the conversation.

Realizing it was taking them longer than usual to get to the front door, I peeked out the window. To my shock, I saw Dad coming up the front steps with a large bass drum and heard Mother banging on a tom tom. By the time we unloaded the car, they had surprised me with a

nearly complete set of drums and accessories.

This was more than I could have imagined, a full drum set just like Gene Krupa's. My brothers gathered around and we all banged on the drums and the cymbal with our hands. Mother sat down at the piano and played a few songs to accompany our rhythmic chaos.

A fellow fireman had told Dad that his landlady was holding a set of drums as collateral for back rent. Dad offered her ten dollars for everything. She surprisingly agreed! And, they returned home with the booty.

Saturday morning, I hurriedly completed my window washing chores and caught the bus for downtown. My first stop was *Woolworth's* to buy the 78-rpm recording of Louis Armstrong's *Mack the Knife*. Next I entered *Miller Music Store* for the first time.

Mr. Miller, a small quiet man said, "May I help you son?"

I'm sure I told him more than he wanted to know about my newfound treasures, but he was cordial and patient. Mr. Miller put a pair of drumsticks and drum brushes on the counter and went into the back room. He returned in a few minutes with the other equipment needed to complete the drum set.

He said, "All this will cost you twenty dollars."

I said I only had fourteen.

He thought for a moment and said, "If you bring me the six next Saturday, you can take it all with you now."

I excitedly promised to do so.

"I always enjoy helping you young hep cats get started. It's good for business," he said.

I struggled my new accessories aboard the next bus for North Nashville. The bus driver

heard the entire story of my new musical adventure. I missed no detail.

Properly setting up the drums took over a half-hour. The whole time, Louis Armstrong's song played and replayed in the background. I brought a chair from the kitchen and sat down to play along with *Mack The Knife* at least thirty times.

About three in the afternoon, Mother opened the living room door and said, "You are doing fantastic! Would you like for me to play with you?"

I said, "That would be great."

We played *Cow Cow Boogie*, *Bugle Boy from Company B*, and *Blue Skies*. I really liked playing the drums and could feel, that first day, drumming was something I would do the rest of my life. I became determined that someday I would be a drummer to be reckoned with.

When my senior year started, I informed the high school band director I wanted to play snare drum in the marching band. After a brief audition, I was in the band. Though I already had a busy schedule with senior studies, choir practice, serving as president of the student body, as announcer for the football games, singing in talent contests, leading my youth group, and singing solos at church, I was happy to add marching band drummer to my list.

Since Dad worked most Saturday nights at the *Grand Ole Opry*, Mother took a job as the cashier for the Saturday night YMCA dances. Earlier in the year, she had taken a job as a secretary at the Downtown YMCA.

One night she invited me to join her to hear my first live dance orchestra. As the band set up their equipment, Mr. Dorney, the orchestra leader explained to Mother that, because of a mix-up the drummer had no drums.

I said, "Mr. Dorney, I have a set at home."

In a flash, I was on my way home with the drummer to get my drums. I was elated!

For the rest of the evening, I sat off stage, watching the drummer's every move. On the last break, I asked Mr. Dorney if I might play a song. He hesitantly agreed. I took my place behind the drums and we began to play *Sentimental Journey*. When the song ended, Mr. Dorney motioned for me to stay seated.

"You're doing just fine," he encouraged.

After the dance, Mr. Dorney walked immediately off the stage and talked briefly with Mother. He returned to tell me that Mother had agreed to bring me back on Thursday night to audition. I was dazed and have no recollection of the conversation on the way home.

Thursday I literally ran home from school. Before Mother had arrived from work, I had already disassembled the drums. We loaded them into the car and headed downtown to the Y.

On the breaks, Mr. Dorney and the others complimented my playing.

At the end of the evening, Mr. Dorney invited me to become the regular drummer for the band. I was astounded! He said I would receive \$17.50 for the next engagement Saturday night at the Old Hickory Country Club. I must have hesitated with my answer, because he asked me if that was enough money.

I replied, "Oh sure, that will be fine."

It was arranged that Mother would take me to the country club. The trombone player would bring me home.

All I knew about country clubs was from the movies. Country clubs were where rich people went for a night on the town – to dance, drink cocktails, and party. Next Saturday, I

would be putting on my Sunday suit, and playing drums for rich people to dance. It was like a movie come true. My world was expanding.

The Old Hickory Country Club was not as elegant as the clubs I had seen in the movies. It was nice, however, with colored streamers everywhere, and decorations on each table. A silver ball hung over the dance floor. In the movies, the nightclubs had elegant chandeliers, the women wore ball gowns and the men tuxedos. And, people generally drank champagne. This club was dark, people wore dresses and suits. They drank mixed drinks made with *Coca Cola*, *Seven Up* and liquor kept in paper sacks on the table. It was the first time I had ever been where people drank alcoholic beverages. The only time my parents drank, that I knew of, was at Christmas when they had wine. The Methodist church was ambivalent about drinking. The Church of Christ said drinkers would go to hell. The Episcopalians had a slogan, "Moderation in all things." Meaning drinking was all right, if done in moderation.

Playing with the orchestra that evening was the most exciting time of my life. On the way home the trombone player, Bobby Whiteside, said I had done a terrific job and asked if I was Lilly Craddock's grandson?

When I said yes, he said, "Boy," he said, "If it wasn't for me you wouldn't be here. When you were four or five years old, you fell into your grandmother's fishpond. I pulled you out!"

We were unloading the drums when Mother came out asking, "How did it go, boys?"

"Mother," I said, "This is Bobby Whiteside."

"Bobby Whiteside," she exclaimed, "I don't think I ever got the chance to thank you."

"I was happy to do it," he said. "Mrs. Womack, you've got a mighty talented son here."

"Why, thank you Bobby," she replied. "We are all real proud of him."

I slept until 9:30 the next morning, missing Sunday school, but getting up in time to go to church. I told everyone about my first dance job as a drummer in a real professional orchestra. My achievement was met with mixed reviews. It was communion Sunday, so when I knelt at the rail, I thanked God for letting me become a dance band drummer.

Throughout the winter, the band played a variety of venues including American Legions, VFWs, and some private dances in hotel ballrooms. We also played a couple of dances at the Knights of Columbus Club. It was a private club for Catholics, which I found intriguing. My first New Year's Eve dance was back at the Old Hickory Country Club.

Birth Of The Blues

Even when we were not playing, I continued to go to the Y dances to hear Papa John Gordy's Dixieland Band and G. L. Knight, an all-Negro blues band.

Papa John's band had received national acclaim for its Dixieland recordings. Johnny Shay, the bands singer, was a crooner in the Bing Crosby style. Occasionally he invited me to sing with the band.

The singer with G. L. Knight's Band was Joe Reed, a rhythm and blues singer of the highest order. Joe knew how to sell a song. He seemed to have lived every note and word he sang. Joe had just returned from three years in prison for aggravated burglary, so there was a lot of truth in my assumption. Joe took me under his wing and encouraged me towards blues and jazz and away from crooning. With Papa John, I'd sing once or twice during the evening. With the Knight Band, I'd sing at least once in every set. The band members would applaud my renditions and joke with me about being a white boy who could sing the blues.

Talk Of College

At home, there was talk of college. No one in my family had ever been to college. Mother was especially excited over the prospect of me being the first, though she had truly wanted that honor. Earlier, Brother Johnson had arranged for my parents and me to discuss my becoming a preacher with the president of Martin Methodist Junior College in Pulaski, Tennessee. The president, Brother Whitley, said he would arrange a scholarship and be proud to have an upstanding young man like me in the ministry.

I continued to appear regularly in area's talent contests doing my famous singer impressions. One such citywide contest sponsored by the public library. I won first prize, receiving a small-engraved trophy and a 78-rpm record album from *The Glenn Miller Story* movie.

At high school, I enjoyed concert band much better than the marching band; more variety in the music and more intriguing things to do in the percussion section. After rehearsal one day, Mr. Webb asked if I had seen the *Glenn Miller Story* and heard the *Saint Louis Blues March* as played in the movie? I said I had not only seen the movie and heard the rendition, but I had won the album in a talent contest and had memorized the drum solo he was talking about.

He said, "Great! We are going to play that song for the citywide concert band competition and you will be the featured soloist."

Our band came in third in the contest. As we were loading our instruments back on the bus, an older gentleman with red hair, a beard, and a mustache approached me.

He said, "I'm Lew Bodine, the band director at Austin Peay State College. That was some mighty fine drumming up there."

After I thanked him, he asked if I had college plans. When I told him I had a scholarship to become a Methodist minister, he handed me his card.

“How would you like a music scholarship to Austin Peay to become a high school band director?” he asked.

Mr. Bodine suggested I have my transcripts sent to the college as a way to apply for the scholarship. I said I would think about it. I did think about it and gave his card to the principal's secretary, Miss Van Deren. She encouraged me to seriously consider the scholarship offer. The option of going to college to study music intrigued me more than the high school band director part.

If I study music, I thought, I better my chances of become a successful drummer in a big band or a singer on television.

I had often daydreamed about singing on the *Ed Sullivan Show* with a full orchestra.

The Prom

The next Sunday night our youth group had a weenie roast at a state park where I asked Patsy to go with me to the senior prom. I was shocked when she said she would, if her parents would let her. The warmest most incredible feeling I had ever experienced cascaded through my being. On the way home, I thought about going to college and leaving Patsy and North Nashville.

My thoughts were bittersweet: *Martin College is way away in Pulaski, Tennessee. But Austin Peay is in Clarksville, just up the highway, no more than an hour from where Patsy lives. Musician or Methodist minister? Either way my life is about to make a dramatic change.*

Two weeks before the prom, Patsy and I were practicing alone at church. She looked direct at me, seemingly for the first time, and said her parents had agreed to let her go to the prom with me. There were, however, a few stipulations. They had to both know and approve the driver of the car, and the driver's date had to be someone Patsy knew to be a nice girl. We had to be home by 11:30 p.m., and I had to accompany Patsy into their living room when we returned.

I shared my excitement by touching her on the shoulder and exclaiming, "We are going to have a great time!"

My excitement made Patsy so nervous, she began to cough. I volunteered to bring her water from the downstairs kitchen, but she followed me there, still coughing. I grabbed a glass from the kitchen cabinet and placed it under the cold-water spigot. She drank almost the full glass and said, "Thank you." I leaned forward and kissed her on the mouth for the first time. We held the kiss briefly.

She pulled away and said, "Please don't do that. It makes me nervous, and my parents wouldn't like it. We'd better get back upstairs."

I savored the beauty of the moment, realizing it might never happen again, while relishing the fact that it just had.

After she left. I returned to the scene of the crime. Standing in the darkened kitchen, replaying the kiss over and over in my mind.

I thought: *That was the first time I'd ever kissed a girl, other than in a game at a party. So this is how love feels? I like the feeling. My life is becoming complicated: college, Patsy, singing, playing in orchestras, leaving home, becoming a minister, and doing the Lord's work. What next?*

All of Patsy's parents' criteria were met for the prom. She was beautiful in her pink dress, that I was told was taffeta underneath with transparent ruffles on top. Patsy wore high-heels and big spiderlike earrings that complimented her ornate glasses. She wore the corsage I bought her on her left wrist. I was decked out in a white sports coat, black trousers, a narrow black and white striped tie, with a black handkerchief neatly folded in a straight line in my jacket pocket. I sported a Bill Haley haircut.

We danced a few times to slow songs played on a record player. I kissed her on the neck. She smiled at me disapprovingly. We had our picture made in front of a frieze depicting a winding road. Patsy thought the decorations were beautiful. I said the decorations at the country clubs, where I played, were far more sophisticated. We had a late meal after the prom and returned to her parents' house fifteen minutes before the appointed hour. When we walked up on the porch, the light immediately came on.

Her father appeared at the door, asking, "Well, did you two have a nice time?"

We replied yes, and I thanked him for letting her go.

He replied, "You're welcome."

And closed the door on my most enchanted evening.

Final Decision

Two weeks before school was out, Brother Whitley, from Martin Methodist College, came to my home for the signing of my scholarship papers. I was to show up September fifteenth, next fall. My parents and I signed the papers. He led us in prayer and left.

At a dance the following week at the Old Hickory Country Club, I told Mr. Dorney I was leaving the orchestra to get ready to go to college. He said that with my talent, I would probably become his stiffest competition someday.

When I said I was going to be a preacher, he replied, "Oh, really?"

I was surprised when I was named the senior boy with the greatest ambition.

Nancy Green, the editor of the yearbook, wrote this attribution underneath my picture as outgoing student body president: *Larry Womack says he has adopted the words of Davy Crocket as his personal motto: Be sure you're right. Then go ahead.* Nancy evidently recognized something in my personality that I did not.

Graduation night was anticlimactic. I had already moved on in my head. A fellow graduate, Jim Phillips had a car and took our friend, Don McKennon and me to a drive-in restaurant for milkshakes. Don, a neighborhood friend and sophomore at North High, was the first person I had singlehandedly brought to the Lord. Don was more enamored with my graduation than was I. He kept talking about when he graduated in a couple of years, he was going to college to study business and become rich.

During the summer, Patsy and I talked a lot on the phone, because I didn't drive and she lived so far away. We occasionally met and sat on the wall in front of her grandmother's house next to the church. Since the summer schedule at church was minimal, Patsy and I rarely met to

practice songs. When we did, she occasionally let me get away with a light kiss on the top of her head.

Drummer, singer, preacher? Confusion had set in. It seemed as though I spent the entire summer in the church basement trying to decide what to do. Brother Johnson was on a summer sabbatical, so I couldn't talk with to him.

No one to talk to. Brother Johnson's gone. Mr. Sadler, my Sunday schoolteacher, lives across town. Mr. Boots Norton is in prison. Don McKennon is too young to discuss the matter. Bill Roy and Rodney are of no use and Mother said she'd support me either way. Dad won't give me his opinion. Which is a surprise because he always has opinions on things. Even things he doesn't know about. I am alone in my decision.

Once that summer, Patsy and I went downtown to see a movie, *The Eddie Duchin Story* with Tyrone Power and, of course, Kim Novak. Eddie Duchin had a famous society orchestra and played dances in New York at the *Waldorf Astoria Hotel*. His theme song was *To Love Again*, a popular version of *Chopin's Nocturne in E flat major*. We held hands in the movie. While downtown, we went to the music store, and I bought her the sheet music for the *Nocturne*.

We also had chocolate sodas at the *Candyland* soda shop. It was there I told Patsy that some day, when I become famous, I would stay at the *Waldorf Astoria Hotel* in New York City.

"I will probably have a beautiful apartment over looking Central Park, as well," I said.

She seemed impressed.

I talked Patsy into going over to the church, allegedly to hear her play the new sheet music. We lightly kissed a couple of times. When I told her I loved her, she asked me not to say that again, because we were too young to fall in love.

By early August, no notice about a scholarship to Austin Peay had arrived, so I assumed Martin College was my only choice. The people at church were excited I was becoming a preacher. I mentioned to Mr. Sadler I was disappointed at not hearing from Austin Peay. He suggested that everything happens for a reason and that the Lord probably had bigger and better plans for me.

Brother Johnson, having returned from his sabbatical, was concerned I had not thought the minister thing through as thoroughly as I should. He told tales of people in distress that he had counseled, including Boots Norton. When I asked if Mr. Norton repents of his sins, when he dies would he go to heaven, Brother Johnson said he didn't know. It was not the answer I expected.

Arriving home after my talk with Brother Johnson, Dad handed me a postcard from Mr. Lou Bodine, the band director for Austin Peay. It read: *Please come up and be measured for your band uniform on August 14th or 15th. Band practice starts the Wednesday after Labor Day and school starts the following Monday. You will be given more information on your scholarship, housing arrangements, and your classes when you arrive next week for your fitting.*

“Well,” Dad said, “Methodist minister or honky-tonk musician?”

I said, “I think musician sounds like a lot more fun!”

My quest towards the ministry had stalled. Not ended, just put on a back burner. I was just giving show business a chance. I hoped the Lord would forgive me.

Womack

Don't Save Me A Place In Heaven

CHAPTER THREE: On My Own

Saturday morning, September 8th, 1956, Mother drove me to Austin Peay State College in Clarksville, Tennessee. During the one-hour drive, through winding bucolic farmland, Mother talked about her life, thwarted ambitions, and desire to go to college. My mind raced back and forth from the past to the future and back again. Considering and reconsidering the choice I made to study music instead of serving God.

When we found my dorm, an older-looking student in an APSC sweatshirt introduced himself and offered to help with the move in. He asked what I played.

When I responded drums, he replied, "I wonder what our new tackles will look like?"

Once alone in my new home away from home, a range of emotions churned inside me and I began to cry. Here I am on my own: *Am I doing the right thing?* Reliving memories of home, family, school, the Old Hickory Country Club, and church brought me back to Patsy.

Will I ever see Patsy again? Will she forget about me? Will someday we be married?

At the first band meeting Mr. Bodine, introduced the new marching band director, Aaron Schmidt. We adjourned until Monday morning 7 a.m. Walking back to the dorm with several other band members, I felt like a grownup for the first time. No one to answer to, with no curfew I was on my own.

Entering my room, I spied the box Mother had packed with toiletries and other small necessities. It included stationary, envelopes, and stamps. Upon opening the box, I decided to write Patsy, telling her how much I missed her and expressing hope we'd someday marry.

Sunday morning, I went to First Methodist Church with a friend from the band. It was different from Buchanan Street; bigger, more impersonal, cold and kind of stodgy. The Sunday schoolteacher was an old lady who talked more about herself than Jesus or the Bible. In church, the preacher mumbled unintelligibly during his sermon. The choir was good but stiff like the preacher. The evening youth group was boring as well. That same old lady was the sponsor.

Since Elvis Presley was making his network debut on the *Ed Sullivan Show* that night, I left the meeting early. Walking to the dorm, I thought, *it's going to be strange not going to church on Sunday nights. I must keep the Lord forefront in my mind and not let college change me.*

The week before school started was rough. Schmidt was demanding, arrogant, and not likable like Mr. Bodine. Some upperclassmen band members called Schmidt an arrogant Jew behind his back and threatened to quit. None did because they were on scholarship. Every rehearsal began with the playing of the Austin Peay fight song, *Smash Bang To Victory*. Schmidt said he wanted us to be able to play it by rote in our sleep.

Too my great surprise and delight, Mr. Bodine invited me to join the Faculty Five Combo, as the drummer replacement for the retiring basketball coach.

On Wednesday, September 16th, I received a letter from Patsy. I sat on my bed and gently opened the letter. It was very sweet and chatty. I was pleased.

Lonesome Birthday

On the Thursday before our first away game and my eighteenth birthday, I contracted the flu. When I called home for some family sympathy, mother expressed sadness that I'd be

spending my first birthday away from her and home. Promising to send a birthday package to assuage my misery.

Saturday, alone in my room and mostly alone on campus, I awoke thinking about my birthday: *Eighteen and alone for the first time. No family. No friends. No cake. No candles. No presents. I hope mother's package arrives.*

Around noon, I dragged myself to the post office and found the package and a letter waiting for me. The letter was from Patsy. I shook the package. It sounded like gravel, but I knew it was my favorite, chocolate chip cookies, damaged in transit. When I reached the dorm lobby, I bought two half pints of milk and trudged up the steps and down the hall to my room. Flopping on my bed, I opened the letter. It was a typical *Dear John* letter, not what I expected. I felt as though this was the end of life.

What a time to get a letter like this, I thought, with the flu, on my birthday, and holding a box of broken chocolate chip cookies.

“Shit! Fuck! Asshole! Pussy! Piss and fart!”

That was the first time I had said those words aloud, adding them to the ‘damn’ I had said a few years before when I missed Darla’s back porch return engagement.

I prayed aloud: *Dear Lord, I'm afraid. This is an unfamiliar place. I'm all alone. My girl is gone. I'm sick. I never expected to spend my eighteenth birthday all alone. Please forgive me for saying the curse words. From now on I'll try to act like a good Christian. Amen.*

As I said the last sentence, the image of Darla’s tits darted through my mind, intensifying my anxiety.

I opened a container of milk and untied the box of cookies. Cookie dust spilled onto the floor. The cookies were in shambles. There were, however, a few small pieces. As I ate them and drank the milk, I intermittently sang a slow rendition of *Happy Birthday* out loud, and in a minor key.

College Life

Living in the dorm was liberating. The independence was great. However, having no one to whom to be accountable was challenging. My first quarter grades were so poor, the department head, said if I didn't bring them up next quarter I'd lose my scholarship. When I returned to my room with this ominous news, my roommate offered me a cigarette. I took it. It was the first time I had ever inhaled smoke of any kind, including corn silks or Indian cigars regularly consumed by my neighborhood playmates. I was immediately hooked.

My impressions of famous singers won the freshman talent show. Establishing me as a recognized campus personality.

Many of my waking hours were spent in the music building rehearsal studios, allegedly practicing my vocal and piano lessons. However, I mostly sat at the piano and daydreamed. The small room became my new hiding and thinking place.

Sometimes I feel as out of place here as I did in high school. I'm not arrogant, but these are not my people. I'm thinking Patsy isn't my people now. I like Aaron Schmidt. Maybe it's because he is a Jew, like Mr. Stein. I wish I'd gotten to know Mr. Stein better. I think I'd make a good Jew. Most of these people here are hicks. Not in a bad way. Just lacking sophistication. Several of the guys in the department are good musicians, but only David Hall, a sophomore piano player and I are in a professional group. What are these music majors going to do when

they graduate? I can't imagine four years of this. I question the wisdom of being here. Did I really make the right decision? God give me a sign.

My excuses for not dating were that my weekends often included dance jobs, and I was not over my high school sweetheart. My reasons for not dating were my shyness with girls and my weight. I now weighed about 250. Patsy and the girl I took to the prom my junior year were the only girls I'd ever asked for a date.

I went home for Christmas Day and the day after because I had several holiday dance jobs scheduled. And, it was easier for me to miss Patsy in Clarksville than in Nashville.

While at home, I kept my cigarettes in my shirt pocket so my parents could see them. I did not, however, smoke in front of them.

Shortly after returning to school, Ernest Nichols, the second queer person I'd ever been around, invited several of us to the palatial home of his grandmother to watch the *Ed Sullivan Show* on color TV. Tony Bennett was on that night, along with the little puppet mouse, Topo Gigio, and a man with trained chimpanzees. The chimps rode real little motorcycles. It was fascinating. Tony Bennett's performance reminded me of my dream to appear on the show

I wanted to hear Ed Sullivan say, "Tonight on our show, we have that new singing sensation, Larry Womack. Let's hear it for Larry!"

Before the spring quarter ended, I had become the clown prince of the student center, entertaining everyone with my antics, including members of the sports teams, music friends, assorted female students, and the only nonwhite students on campus, two guys from Iran.

Mr. Griffin, the drama coach, selected *South Pacific* as the spring theatrical event. I auditioned for the romantic lead but was chosen for the comedy lead, Luther Billis. Parading

around the stage with a coconut bra and a grass skirt, I received a standing ovation for my performance in *There is Nothing Like A Dame*.

Church attendance stopped because I rarely thought about God, or Jesus, or anything religious. My performances and future as a singer/musician had become paramount. Nearing obsession.

Where There's Smoke

Early on the Saturday morning after my freshman year ended, Dad came for me. On the drive back to Nashville, he lit a cigarette. Deciding it was time for me to smoke in front of him, I took a *Pall Mall* out of the package and lit up. Dad glanced over but did not say a word. After a couple of minutes, I flipped the ashes on the cigarette out the partially opened window. The wind blew the cigarette out of my hand into the back seat. We immediately smelled smoke. Without a word my father, the fireman, pulled to the side of the road, hurried around to my side, opened the back door, and dragged the smoldering shirt onto the road. He then stomped out the shirt and returned to the car.

After about ten minutes, he turned to me and said, "If you're gonna smoke 'em, you need to learn to hold 'em."

Always the card, my Dad.

There was no noteworthy conversation for the rest of the trip home because my ego had shrunk to an almost invisible size.

Once home, I became homesick for college. Dad fished on his days off, Mother was working full time at the YMCA, and my brothers had developed friends in our new neighborhood. Making me the odd man out.

Jigaboo Band

There were still dances at the YMCA on Thursday nights played mostly by the G. L. Knight band. Blues singer, Joe Reed, however, was back in prison for parole violation.

Mr. Knight told me about a group forming at Tennessee A&I State College that was looking for a singer. He arranged an audition for me at the all-Negro college band room.

When I asked my father if he would take me to the audition, he said, "Shit. What have you done? Got yourself all hooked up with a jigaboo band?"

Always the card, Dad.

Though he finally agreed to take me, but refused to come back for me and gave me two dollars for food and bus fare home.

The rehearsal was a little awkward at first. Some of the guys didn't go for the idea of a white singer, but I finally won them over with my rendition of Little Richard's *Keep a' Knockin*.

On the bus ride home, I fantasized on what singing with this band would be like and wondered: *Am I on the right track? I love my music, but I'm not sure if I'm good enough to make it. Should I revisit becoming a preacher? It seems like the simpler thing to do. And, the competition in preaching is nowhere near as great as the music business. When I see my favorites, Sinatra, Bennett, Como, Jolson, they are all skinny. I don't know any fat crooners. Sometimes I think I fit better in black music than popular music. That has to increase the difficulty of making it.*

I sang with the band until school started. Summer turned out better than expected.

New Old Friends

At the first band meeting of my sophomore year, I was joined by Jesse Coles, a familiar face from high school. Pipe-smoking Jesse, with a cherub face and thick horn-rimmed glasses, looked like “Mr. Peepers,” a comedic television personality. It was Jesse who invited me to sing, *You, You, You* with the pep band on that high school assembly program. Jesse, now the band director at a Clarksville high school, was there to finish his music degree.

Mr. Schmidt asked us to introduce ourselves. A few of the upperclassmen got laughs with their introductions.

However, when the skinny, big-nosed, blonde-haired freshman, Paul Garrison, stood for his introduction and said, “I’m freshman Paul Buchanan Garrison, a cottonpickin’ drummer from Goodlettsville Tennessee,” his humor was greeted with silence, punctuated by a few groans.

Patsy’s memory was fading, as my testosterone was rising. On a late-night return from an away game, with the girls drill team on board, I picked Bonnie (no last name to protect her reputation) to sit with. We were “carrying on” under my car coat when I began to smell smoke. Since I had just unhooked her bra, I tried to ignore the smoke as best I could. As the smoke thickened, Bonnie and I both began to cough. She fell back against the seat in front of us, revealing her breasts to Jesse, who was standing over us blowing smoke from his pipe into the sleeve of my coat. After the incident, Bonnie avoided me on campus. She was the first girl I had ever smooched with and hers were the first breasts I had ever touched, if ever so briefly. And only the fifth and sixths ones I had ever seen.

Once when Jesse's wife was out-of-town, he invited several of us guys to his apartment to watch blue movies. The movies were titillating until I realized they were the ones for whom my old

church acquaintance, Boots Norton, had been arrested and sent to jail. The movies then became erotically creepy.

Returning to my room, following the blue movie event, I lay back on my bed and thought: *There are so many emotions churning inside me. The movies were titillating but somehow seem sinful to watch, especially since Mr. Boot Norton made them. He went to jail. If Jesus were alive today, what would he have to say about blue movies. If God created everything, did he create blue movies? Who does one ask questions like this? Who would give you the right answer? Sometimes I miss Buchanan Street Methodist Church and that time in my life when the answers were simpler. However, the people there, in whom I placed so much faith, now seemed naïve. Since entering college, my religion is less important. Am I maturing or losing my way? Most of the philosophers we've studied in class don't even believed in God. Santa Claus! I once thought he was real.*

Just before Christmas break, Jesse and I formed a band, along with David Hall, and a local trumpet player, Jack Slaughter. We regularly played in Ft. Campbell military clubs, where there was drinking, boisterous behavior, and prostitutes; very different from my Dick Dorney Combo days. Though other band members drank alcohol on our breaks, I did not. I had mellowed considerably about my religion, but I still preferred to hold on to my so-called Christian values. The fact that I was becoming one of those Christian, who did not practice what they preached, however, continued to gnaw at my conscience.

Weekday evenings, my new roommate Jim Phillips, another friend from high school, and I often listened to music with the lights out and shades pulled. The only lights in the room were the green glow from the record player *on* button and the red glimmers from our cigarettes. We

especially enjoyed Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Joe Norton, Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughn. Our favorite, however, was Chris Connor.

The dark of the room and the deep tones of Chris Connor evoked nostalgia for what might have been for Patsy and me.

I wonder what it would be like to make love to Patsy, like in Jesse's movies. I can't imagine her doing anything like that! It would more likely be in a fancy New York hotel room, after a champagne dinner. She'd be wearing a filmy nightgown and satin pajamas. It would be on the same night that I first appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show singing a love song dedicated to her. There would be no way she could resist me.

Tragically Jim Phillips' mom and dad were killed in an automobile accident on their way to the campus. Jim left school and me without a roommate.

I missed Jim, but it was gratifying to have my privacy. I could lock my door and escape into my dreams and fantasies, or whatever. Sitting on my bed: *I can't image what it must be like to lose your parents like that. Any other weekend, Jim and I might have been with them. That's scary. Why does God let things like that happen? Maybe He is not in as much control as we give Him credit. It seems that bad things happen to good and bad people in the same proportion. That's not right. Maybe when we get to heaven, we'll find the answers, maybe not. It's weird.*

Old Time Religion

The only religion in my life was singing in the Trinity Episcopal Church choir, led by the music department chairman. The music, the liturgy, and the sermons were appealing. The Episcopal style of worship and theology was more reasoned and cerebral, reminding me of old St. Peter's where I occasionally attended with my grandfather. Less hellfire and fear, like from

Brother Estes, and more loving and serving, like from Brother Johnson. Sitting in the still of the sanctuary reminded me of my hiding places; the old willow tree, the church basement, practice studios in the music building, and my dorm room. Noting I had become lazy with the concept of a hiding place, I pledge to renew the process.

The priest-in-charge was Father Tucker, a stately man with the voice of God. Even his whispers roared with a heavenly presence. His homilies or sermons were smart, quietly inspirational, and lucid. He rekindled my thoughts of the ministry while at the same time set a standard I was sure I could never meet, as the leader of a Christian flock.

My experiences at Trinity helped me realize I had always been an Episcopalian at heart. While at church, Jim's parent's death often played in my mind, raising the question of God and how he works. It felt good, however, to be back in touch with Him again.

My First Atheist

When school was out for the summer, I often visited Mother at work in our neighborhood YMCA. At the Y I got to know the other staff members including the maintenance man, Gene Allen, He was a curious fellow; sometimes outgoing, and at other times withdrawn. Gene and I mostly discussed music. He was a jazz fan.

On one visit, Mother introduced me to Mrs. Schroder, a volunteer who attended Inglewood Methodist, across the street from the Y. The pastor there was an old acquaintance of mine from Methodist district meetings.

At the end of our discussion about the pastor, she said, "Larry, I can tell you are a thoughtful Christian young man. I need your help."

I wasn't sure I was sending such signals, but I encouraged her to explain.

“My husband, Paul, is sitting out front in our car,” she continued, “He is probably reading. Paul is an atheist, and it breaks my heart. He is a good man. Sometimes a bit brusque, but a good man nonetheless. I want him to be with me in Heaven, but he says he’ll have no part of religion. It breaks my heart.”

“I’m so sorry, but how can I help you?” I asked.

“I’d like for you to talk with him. Just go out there, introduce yourself and see if you can reason with him.”

“Mrs. Schroder,” I continued, “I don’t think a conversation with a stranger in the parking lot will do much good in convincing him to believe in God.”

“Maybe not one conversation. But anytime you see his car there, I’d appreciate you saying a few words to him. You never know when the Lord will work in a strange and wondrous way.”

I reluctantly agreed and went to the parking lot to talk to my first atheist about God. Mr. Schroder’s car was a dilapidated, grey (paint peeling), old Oldsmobile with a cracked rear window. He was a thin, unshaven, swarthy-looking older gentleman with a scowl, even as he was reading. As I introduced myself, I noticed he was reading *Silas Marner*, a book I’d studied in college.

I opened with, “Oh, I read that book in college. It’s about an old seaman who shot an albatross and brought bad luck to a ship and its crew. I really liked that book.”

“Young man,” he said, “How can you have gone to college and be so stupid.”

I was taken back.

“*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* of which you speak, is a poem, not a book, written by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. This, my unlearned friend, is *Silas Marner*, a novel from the pen of George Eliot. Who, before you make a bigger fool of yourself, is the pseudonym of a woman, Marion Evans. Now, did my wife ask you to come out here and interrupt me?”

I sheepishly answered, “Yes.”

“Did she send you to speak of God?”

“As a matter of fact, she did.”

“Well have your say and move along. I want to get back to my reading.”

At a total loss for words, I shamefacedly asked him to relate the plot of the book, which he did in a succinct manner. After a few additional attempts at conversation, I introduced myself and asked if he minded me speaking to him again when we were both in the area. He mumbled that would be fine and returned to his book. Walking to the bus stop, I thought: *That went well. Though he's a grumpy old man, he seems quite smart. I think I could learn more from him than he could learn from me. Are most atheists are smart like that, and if so, why?* After a few other conversations with him, I wondered if I might become a cranky atheist when I got old.

Amazing Chimps

I returned to Clarksville in August to help Jesse book our band, now called the *Holiday Dreamers*. I saw the *Holiday Dreamers* as my next step to stardom.

Jesse had scheduled a fundraiser at the county fair for his high school band with a “wild animal” show. The animals were rented from a local guy and I was to serve as the exhibits barker. The menagerie included a sullen spider monkey, a malnourished porcupine, a smelly jungle rat, assorted snakes, and a lethargic iguana lizard.

Wearing tan Bermuda shorts, a tan shirt, a pith helmet and carrying a wooden drill team rifle, I enthusiastically encouraged the fairgoers to visit the “wild animal” exhibit. On the morning of the second day, an elderly gentleman, in a tan fedora, dressed in authentic jungle attire, smoking a cigarette backhanded, and drinking from a large porcelain cup appeared. He watched me for about ten minutes and disappeared.

In the afternoon, while touring the midway, we saw a large sign promoting *Oscar Konyot and His Amazing Chimps*. We recognized Mr. Konyot as the man who had been watching my performance.

The next morning Mr. Konyot reappeared briefly and reappeared after lunch, this time introducing himself. With a thick Italian accent, he invited me to his trailer to *meet* his chimps. For the rest of the afternoon, Jesse and I speculated why this man singled me out for a chimp visit. I thought he considered me a colleague, and was just looking for conversation. Jesse thought Mr. Konyot was looking for a protégée.

Arriving at his trailer, Mr. Konyot greeted me with coffee cup in one hand and a chimp in the other. When he introduced Coco, the chimp jumped into my arms and planted a wet kiss directly on my lips. Other members of his entourage picked at my clothes and hair. Two chimps sat in small rocking chairs and one was at a table eating a bowl of cereal. Coco stayed in my arms. Occasionally gently slapping my face, and giving me kisses directly on the mouth. After about ten minutes of discussing the chimps, Mr. Konyot remanded them to their cages. The chimps shut the doors and placed pins in the latches.

“Larry, at some point I want to learn of your history, but let’s begin with mine. My name is Oscar Konyot from Livigno, a small town in Northern Italy.

He continued to explain that his many-generational circus family farmed and remained as neutral as possible during the War. After the War, they reorganized the Konyot Circus and played villages throughout Northern Italy and Southern Germany.

“In 1947, John Ringling North, of the *Ringling Brother's Barnum & Bailey Circus* came to see my unusual act of placing my head in a lion's mouth. Mr. North offered me a considerable sum to come to America with my lion. When I declined, he offered to buy my lion. A year later realizing the trick didn't lay in the mouth of the lion, he made an ever more generous offer for me to join his circus.”

He pointed to a giant poster of himself with his head in the lion's mouth.

I told Mr. Konyot that, as a boy, I had seen his act in person and, more recently on the *Ed Sullivan TV Show*.

“As the lion and I aged, my act became less dynamic. They wanted me to train another lion, but I was not up to it. In 1953, when Barnum & Bailey brought in a new lion act, I bought the chimp act from a friend. My boys and I have been performing together ever since. Come back at six o'clock,” he continued. “To watch us set up, and to see the show. In the morning have coffee with me in the performers commissary tent for a serious discussion.

I agreed to do so.

“Good. Boys say areva derchi to Larry.” The chimps waved and chattered as I left the trailer.

Jesse said, “I told you so! He wants you to take over the act when he retires!”

When I said working with chimpanzees was not a part of my dream to become a famous entertainer, Jesse jokingly reminded me that I always wanted to be on the *Ed Sullivan Show*.

Watching Mr. Konyot and his chimps setup the act was amazing. Afterwards, Jesse tried to convince me this was my chance of a lifetime.

The next morning, I met Mr. Konyot for coffee, surrounded by roustabouts, sideshow freaks, and carnies in the commissary tent. Mr. Konyot said he lived with his chimps on a two-acre compound just north of Sarasota, Florida. He said he was ready to retire in three years, and wanted me to take over his act.

“You are a performer and entertainer. I can see that from the way you handle yourself at the “wild animal” show. From what I can tell they aren’t even really wild animals, but you make the show sound inviting. I want you to come live with me this fall. If you decide you are not cut out for this work, at least you will have an adventure to tell your grandchildren.”

I agreed to meet him the next morning with my answer. After a nightlong discussion with Jesse, I respectfully declined Mr. Konyot’s offer.

A New Love

During the second week of classes, I was introduced to Nancy Gill, a transfer from David Lipscomb, a Church of Christ college in Nashville. Within a few days, I learned that Nancy and a friend were dismissed from the college for smoking cigarettes in their dorm room.

Nancy reminded me of Patsy - petite, pretty, quiet, shy, and intelligent. And, her smile was just as sweet as Patsy’s. Soon, Nancy and I became regulars on campus. However, the jocks also found her attractive. And, they had free weekends to date, as well as the good looks. Though I was daunted by the competition, I continue to flirt in the student center and walk her to classes.

I decided to go to summer school because Nancy was going to summer school, thus creating a more favorable competitive environment.

That summer, Nancy and I fell in love. Walked the campus hand in hand, had picnics on the lawn, and went to movie matinees. We stole kisses in hallways, in my practice studio, and smooched at night in secluded places. We went as far as her Church of Christ upbringing and my shyness would allow us to go. When summer school ended, Nancy went home to Guthrie, Kentucky.

Civil Rights

While home for a few days, I learned that my, now retired, grandfather had a minor operation and I wanted to see him. But, before going with my father to my uncle's house for the visit, I rode the bus downtown to see the civil rights protests and to put in my two-cents worth.

The several Negro students were sitting at the lunch counter at *Woolworth's*. They were not, however, being waited on. I entered the store, walked up to the counter, took a seat, and ordered French fries. The students looked disdainfully at me. When the fries came, I introduced myself to the young Negro man next to me and offered to share the fries. Together we finished the fries, shook hands, and I left to the jeering of the white kids demonstrating nearby.

When I told Dad, he was appalled. Arriving at Uncle Jack's, he told my uncle, who also shook his head in disbelief.

“How do you think your grandfather would feel about you doing something like that?”
Uncle Jack asked.

I said, “Why don't we ask, him?”

We walked into the room where my grandfather sat in his rocking chair with his spit bucket by his side.

“Come in boy! It’s good to see you.”

As I patted him on the shoulder, I asked about his health. He replied with no complaint.

I then asked, “Pawpaw, how do you feel about all this civil rights stuff that’s going on?”

He thought for a moment and said, “Well, I think the white man has had his foot on the Negra’s neck long enough. They ought to let him up to take a breath of fresh air.”

Dad and my uncle were surprised by his comment. I was not.

Christian Rejection

When school officially started, Nancy seemed glad to see me, but she was distant. In history class, she passed me a note: *We need to talk. Nancy.*

After class, I told her it was strange for her to pass me a note in class.

“Why don’t we just talk?” I said. “You don’t need to send me a note.”

“Do you have time now?” she asked.

“Of course I do. I always have time for you.” I replied. “Let’s go outside and sit on a bench.”

She found it difficult to get to her point. When she did, I learned it was about church.

She said, “I want to ask you something very serious. Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Savior?”

“What kind of question is that, of course I have,” I replied. “I was going to be a minister. What’s going on?”

“Over the break,” she said, “I recommitted myself to Christ. I really care about you, but I don’t think you take Jesus seriously enough. If you did, you would go to church with me to learn more about Him. I believe the Church of Christ to be the one true church, and I want you to join me in that belief.”

“Nancy, I believe there are many paths to Heaven. Some that aren’t even Christian. To me, it is vanity to identify one’s chosen path to be the only path,” I responded.

“But in the Bible...” I stopped her in mid sentence.

“I’ve read the Bible, and nowhere in it does it identify the Church of Christ as the only church. In fact, it says, ‘In My house there are many mansions.’ I think there will be Methodist, Episcopalians, Baptist, and even the Catholics and the Jews, who will go to heaven when they die.”

“I see this conversation is going nowhere,” she said, walking away. “I’ll see you later.”

“Well, it won’t be in Church of Christ Heaven,” I hollered, regretting the words as they left my mouth.

My Big Chance

Mr. Schmidt announced a fundraising event in March for the Collegians Jazz Orchestra with a guest trumpet virtuoso, Don Jacoby, former lead trumpet in the Ray Anthony Orchestra, and now the leader of the CBS Chicago staff orchestra. He was renowned for his stratospheric high notes. In preparation for the concert, Mr. Schmidt selected a Joe William’s song for me to perform with Mr. Jacoby, *Alright, OK, You Win!* A respected arranger from the Nashville music scene was hired to write the chart.

Don Jacoby arrived on campus two days before the concert to practice with our jazz band. He was the first top-notch professional musician I'd ever met. Mr. Jacoby was short and stocky. He had slicked-back hair and a small mustache. He dressed unusually natty, similar to Mr. Boots Norton from Buchanan Street Methodist Church. When we finished the first rehearsal of the tune, Mr. Jacoby complimented me and said he thought I had a great singing career ahead of me. I was floored!

The auditorium was packed for the concert. Even students and faculty from other colleges came to hear Mr. Jacoby play. Our number was particularly well received.

When the applause died down, Mr. Jacoby took the mike and said, "This cat, Larry can sell a song. Let's hear it for him one more once!"

The day after the performance, Mr. Jacoby searched me out, gave me his personal phone number, and invited me to call him when I graduated. It was, he said, for his further assistance with my career. He also asked for my mailing address. *Another step towards stardom and the Ed Sullivan Show of Shows*, I thought. School couldn't end soon enough for me.

In the spring, Mr. Jacoby's responded to my letter saying he had moved to Los Angeles and was in an even better position out there to help me. He gave me his new phone number and address of the home he was leasing in the Hollywood Hills. I was to call him a week before my arrival date.

When I informed David Hall of my good fortune with Mr. Jacoby. David said my luck continued because he was going to New Mexico State College at Portales to secure a scholarship to finish his masters. Dave said we could travel together cross-country, in his little Hillman Minx

Ragtop. We'd first stop in Portales, and then he'd take me to Los Angeles. California here I come!

First To Graduate

When I called home with the graduation date, my father answered. That was unusual. He informed me mother now lived with my grandmother, and he and mom were getting a divorce. Dad was despondent and discussed their twenty-five-year marriage. This was the first serious conversation I'd ever had with my father, about anything. He said he'd do what it took to save the marriage, but mother was determined for it to end. I told him I'd be home for a few weeks, before leaving for California, and would see what I could do. He gave me my grandmother's phone number.

My conversation with mother was more upbeat, maybe even manic. She said this was a good thing, and that after the drama cleared everyone would be better off. She also said she looked forward to coming to graduation, if she could find a way.

Mother came to graduation with my Aunt Harriet. We talked briefly. They hugged me and left. On my way back to the dorm, still wearing my cap and gown, I ran into Nancy. She was also alone.

When I greeted her, she, looked me in the eye, and said; "I don't know if I will ever forgive you for disappointing by not asking me to the prom. But, I will always love you. Goodbye."

"Nancy," I hollered as she scurried away.

I think I made a terrible mistake, I thought. She's the girl I probably should marry.

Lighting a cigarette, I could hardly wait to get back to my room, to beat myself over the head. *First Patsy, now Nancy. I'm not doing too well with the ladies. Maybe it's because I'm too fat. It can't be my personality. Maybe it's because I'm a clown. Everybody likes clowns, but nobody loves a clown. Graduation Day was a bust, as well; a less than celebratory day. Not much family, no girl and my only sense of direction pointing me west. Where I know only one person. And I have been with him for less than three hours. I have no idea what is in store. And, I'm scared.*

CHAPTER FOUR: Chasing Fame

After graduating there was no place to go, but home, until Dave and I left for California. It was not a pleasant place to be. Dad was depressed. I'd never seen him tear up before or so subdued. Mother, now living with my grandmother, was manic; too happy. She was also blaming the breakup solely on Dad, saying he was evil, as though she had no responsibility in the matter. To build her case against Dad, she reminded me of how he had "beaten" us boys. My memory served me differently. Though, as a child, I had been subject to his corporal punishments and harangues, they were mild compared to the parental punishments of some of my friends.

Dad thought my trip to California was a waste of time. He said I couldn't make a living in music and should look for a real job in Nashville.

I said, "If or when I return I'll think about your advice."

He said, "Boy. Always remember, you can't think your way into a new way of acting, but you can act your way into a new way of thinking."

I didn't know if I was maturing or Dad's advice was improving. What he said made sense, and me uncomfortable.

Dennis had become a pawn between the warring parties and conduit of hostile messages, designed to denigrate the other person. Mother and Dad passed him back and forth like the proverbial football.

Monday, June 20, 1960 at 2 p.m. we stuffed my belongings into the backseat of Dave's 1959 Hillman Minx convertible, squeezed my heavy frame into the passenger seat, and headed west towards fame and fortune. Dad and I hug for the first time since I was a little kid. It seemed

he actually wanted me stay. As we drove off, Dennis waved goodbye. I wondered if I would ever see my family again.

Dave drove the little roadster to Memphis, Tennessee. I drove the next 50 miles to Forrest City, Arkansas where we spent the night in a cheap motel. From Wichita Falls, we stopped at Shepherd Air Force Base to see brother Jerry before he deployed to Tin City, Alaska.

We stayed two days in Portales at New Mexico State University, while Dave made arrangements for his scholarship.

At Albuquerque, we hit the famed *Route 66*. The song, by the same name, had become one of my favorites to sing. After two or three renditions on the road, Dave said the next time I sang it, he would turn around and go straight back to Nashville.

The little Hillman had difficulty making it over the mountains into Albuquerque. The drive from Albuquerque to Flagstaff, Arizona was beautiful with painted hills and buttes, mesas, and deep canyons; the most unusual terrain either of us had ever seen. Our conversation through the desert was filled with hopes and dreams. Me of stardom, and Dave's of becoming a college music professor.

The Grand Canyon was magnificent but so similar to what we had driven though the day before, we only stayed a half hour. Around midnight, we saw the glowing lights of Las Vegas on the distant horizon. In downtown Las Vegas, Dave and I changed into dress clothes in a service station restroom and joined the revelers at the Golden Horseshoe. A knockoff version of the Louis Prima Combo was playing in the lounge. I was encouraged by the groups mediocre performance. It offered hope, I could find work out west. We stayed an hour, changed back into

our traveling clothes and set off for Hollywood - my future home. An hour out of Vegas, we pulled off the road and slept there until dawn.

When we awoke, I tuned in the famous KLA radio station to play us into the *Promised Land*. At 2 PM we arrived at Hollywood Boulevard and Vine Street. The famous *Hollywood Sign* on our right and the iconic, round Capitol Record's building visible out the windshield. After driving around a few blocks, just gawking, we found the Motel 55 at the corner of Sunset and North Cahuenga. It was a dump, but the price was right, and there was a pay phone next to our room.

After checking in, I called Mr. Jacoby. His wife answered and welcomed us to Los Angeles. She said Mr. Jacoby would call this number at 4:30 p.m.

"I'm just finishing a session with Ella," he said. "Give me your address and I'll pick you guys up in about an hour and a half. We're going to my place for dinner. And, don't call me Mr. Jacoby. My friends call me Jake."

Jake arrived a few minutes before 7 p.m. in a brand new dark blue Cadillac. After exchanging pleasantries, we went to the Farmers Market to buy the four largest tenderloin filets, and began our winding climb up the Hollywood Hills to his home.

Jake's wife greeted us at the door and ushered us into the most elegant home I'd ever seen. She offered us wine or a cocktail. I declined. David accepted a glass of red wine and took a Coke.

She said, "Why don't you boys go out by the pool while I prepare dinner, and Jake showers and changes for the evening?"

Dave and I walked into the mild evening to a lighted kidney-shaped swimming pool surrounded by palm trees, with a panoramic view of the lights of Los Angeles. The glowing Capitol Records Building was directly in front of us at the bottom of the Hollywood Hills. I had arrived. The Jacobys were the consummate hosts for a delightful evening. I hardly slept that night. The experience was more than I could have imagined or comprehended.

Trouble At Home

The next morning, before Jake was to pick me up and shepherd me around, I called home, first talking with Dad. He asked how things were going. I shared my excitement with him. Though he was delighted with my good fortune, he was obviously still suffering from the trauma caused by mom leaving him. He wanted her back.

Next I called Mother. The drama queen had shifted gears. She was now a basket case - screaming and sobbing. Saying Dad would kill her if she didn't go back to him. And, expressing that she knew he would kill her if she did. After a frantic ten minutes, she said my grandmother wanted to talk to me.

"Larry? This is your Mammaw," she started. "You need to get on back here. This is no time to leave your mother and father in a situation like this. Just quit that foolishness about being a singer and come back and help your family. That's all I wanted to say."

"Larry, this is your mother. I know how important this trip is to you. But it would be helpful if you would come back for a few weeks until things are under control. But, if you can't I'll understand."

I closed with, "Mother, we'll talk about this tomorrow. Bye."

I was as angry at her attitude, as I was devastated by the conversation. Their quarrels and problems were taking precedent over my career? It was not fair.

Big Chance

Even with the situation back home playing through my mind, I had a fantastic day with Jake. He gave me my temporary union card. We ate lunch in the commissary at CBS Television City, where he introduced me to musicians whose name I had read on the back of my favorite albums. Jake arranged for Dave and me to go that evening to the Sundown Club on Sunset Strip, where I would sing a few songs with Med Flores and His Orchestra at their early show.

During Dave's wandering around Hollywood, he discovered Peggy Lee was singing at Ciro's Night Club. It was in walking distance of the Sundown Club, where I was to perform. We decided to try to catch her show after my performance.

I donned my blue striped seersucker suit for my debut. When we arrived at the Sundown Club, it was obvious Mr. Flores was doing a favor for Jake by letting me sing with his band. The crowd was sparse. Though polite and complimentary, neither the musicians nor the crowd was particularly exuberant with my singing. I, however, viewed it as a foot in the door. We left the club with the butterflies still churning in my stomach.

Dave agreed it wasn't one of my better performances, but tried to console me with, "You were, however, a lot better than those singers in Las Vegas."

We worked our way through the crowd in front of Ciro's to the ticket booth to find a *sold out* sign. We were devastated. Our one chance to see one of our favorite singers and we were unable to get in.

Not willing to give up easily, I used the old, “You mean you lost our reservations” scheme.

The manager must've been a real nice guy because I don't believe I was that convincing. He escorted us to ringside seats. There was a \$10 cover charge and a 2-drink minimum. We ordered four screwdrivers. It was the first cocktails I ever ordered in my life. I drank one and gave Dave the other.

The band opened with a hot arrangement of *I Love Being Here With You*.

During the applause for the number, the rhythm section broke into a vamp and the announcer said, “Ladies and gentlemen! Peggy Lee!”

Peggy Lee walked onto the stage appearing as a blonde Egyptian goddess. Exquisite figure, turbaned hair, red sequined dress, pouty lips and eyes that cut through your soul.

She looked at me and sang: *Never know how much I love you, never know how much I care, when I put your arms around me, I get a feeling that's so hard to bare. You give me fever.*

“Dave,” I said, “She's looking at me. I think she loves me.”

The show was awesome.

Here I am in Hollywood, listening to Peggy Lee, after singing at a club down the street. This is the most exciting day of my life.

The next morning, I called home before Jake was to pick me up at 10 a.m. Dad was the same. Stoic, while holding back the pain.

He finished with, “Son, you have a great time and don't worry about things here. We can handle them.”

That was the first time I remember him calling me son with emotion. I could tell by his voice; he was unsure he could handle the situation alone.

My conversation with Mother was equally disturbing. She was distraught, even mentioning that life was just not worth living. She asked when I thought I would return. I said I wasn't sure.

The next day, Jake introduced me to several influential people and arranged for a couple of auditions. He said they liked my singing at the Sundown and had invited me back next week to sing for pay. Though it was another fantastic day in LA, the thoughts of home played heavy on my mind.

When I returned to the motel, Dave surprisingly informed me, he was leaving the next day. He was bored and eager to return to Nashville to spend time with his family before coming back for school.

I blurted out, "I'm going with you!"

"What?" he said, "You've got to be crazy. Things are going great for you. This is no time to leave."

"I'll come back when things settle down at home. Jake will understand. This time hasn't been wasted."

Jake did understand, wished me well, and told me to stay in touch. The trip back was uneventful, except for Dave and I being thrown out of a restaurant. It was breakfast time after the Arkansas gubernatorial election the night before. When we openly expressed our dismay that Faubus had been reelected, the waitress pointed at the sign, *we reserve the right to refuse service to anyone*, and said for us to get out.

A Fool's Errand

Back at home with Dad and Dennis, I devoted much of my time to calming the waters.

Dad was drinking a lot. Something I'd never seen him do before, so I suggested he see a psychiatrist. He said I was nuts. After considerable cajoling, he agreed to let me set an appointment for him. I went with him to the appointment in downtown Nashville. While seated in the reception area, he noticed the door was open to the hallway. He asked me to close the door because he didn't want people to see him sitting in a shrink's office. I told him not to worry; they'd just think he'd brought me.

Within six weeks, when the divorce was final, mother moved into an apartment with Gene Allen, the maintenance man from the East Nashville Y. They were married a few weeks later. The move and marriage caught me by surprise. It seemed the theatrics that brought me back from California was cover for a long-planned event. I was resentful.

Last Chance

I spent a lot of time in my small back bedroom listening to music, regretting returning to Nashville, and daydreaming about my future. It wasn't the best hiding place ever, but it worked. I also polished a comedy routine I had developed during my *Campus of the Air* days. It was too risqué for radio, but I did perform it for my friends. It's the story of Cinderella as it might have been performed at a small black radio station in Mississippi. My routine was a take on *Let's Pretend*, my favorite childhood radio program. My routine was called, *Ciderolla*.

I was now doing few radio commercials using my impressions of famous people and characterizations.

Dick Foust, a bass player friend, called with an offer to go on the road to the New York area. I jumped at the opportunity. There was still a chance, I might become a successful musician/singer. Though, New York was my second choice for stardom to LA, I knew: *if you can make it there, you can make it anywhere*. And, since my Hollywood try melted away, this was my last big chance. My cohorts in the *Holiday Dreamers* were disappointed I was leaving the group again.

At the Club Charles in Mapleshade New Jersey, I experienced the difference between southern racism and northern racism. When the manager saw me taking a request from a black couple, he called me aside to tell me not to cater to niggers. He couldn't keep them out, he said, but he could charge them double for drinks and not play their requests.

We next played Club 25 in the resort town of Netcong, New Jersey. The owner, Joe Debernardi, fed us my first real Italian food. It was nothing like the *Chef Boyardee* with which I was familiar. We stayed in a small area motel suite. I began to say my prayers each night, much like when I was a young boy on Cephas Street.

Just prior to my leaving, Mother had a stroke and was bedridden. My frequent calls home to check on mother's condition were disappointing, because neither Mother nor Gene seemed committed to doing the home therapy required for Mother to walk again.

In a phone call home, Dad informed me that he and Erbie Luna had married. I was happy for them. She was a nice lady with a rural background and interest similar to his.

On a Sunday night in Elmira New York my quest for music fame and fortune ended. Our group was invited to participate in a jam session. I was scheduled to be the fifth and last drummer in the rotation. As I listened to each of the preceding drummers, two were younger than

me, I had an epiphany - *I'm chasing the wrong dream*. As the evening progressed, my heart sank and sank until it was lodged between my liver and my stomach. Each drummer was far superior to me. I thought: *If this is what it is like in Elmira, New York on a Sunday night, what's it like in New York City, Chicago, LA and Miami?*

When it was my turn, I asked the current drummer to stay while I sang a song or two. Even though my singing was well received, in bed that night, I concluded I needed a plan B to show business and prayed for direction.

CHAPTER FIVE: The Beginning

1963 was my pivotal year. Most of my college friends were already on career paths, some with wives and families. At, twenty-four, I was still barely clinging to the hope that I could become a successful entertainer; having given up my quest for the ministry back in college. With few skills beyond those required to entertain people, my future looked bleak.

Upon returning from a tour of the New York area with my trio, I reentered the church. This time as an Episcopalian and was confirmed at St. James The Less Episcopal Church. A number of my Womack family attended there. My new stepmother was instrumental in getting Dad back into church for the first time in two decades.

Then most frightening and miraculous thing happened! I met Diane Van Deren, a lovely, diminutive, wise, determined, wondrous, young woman. From our first encounter, I knew my life was going to take a different and more challenging path.

All Who Wander Are Not Lost

Shelby Park was especially beautiful in the fall. Colors burst from every hillside and reflected in the lake. On days when I had not played a gig the night before, I'd often drive to the park around nine thirty to contemplate. I called it my "hiding place" after Brer Rabbit's hideout in the *Tales of Uncle Remus*.

Twenty-four and still working as a vagabond musician and part-time radio DJ comedic sidekick, my life seemed futureless. On this particular morning, I took the newspaper with me to search the classifieds for potential, legitimate occupations.

Sitting under a willow tree on a bench by the lake, I thought: *I need a career; most of my friends from college already have careers. And, they are either, engaged to be married or already married. There is no way, I'll ever meet and marry a nice girl, and do the picket fence and children thing on the piddling money I make. I also want to get laid. And, like it or not, the only way this fainthearted, traditional young man is going to get laid, is getting married. I've known that for a long time.*

I opened the classified section. There were sales jobs, jobs for accountants, factory jobs and the like. Nothing appealed to me until I saw: *Wanted. Chief Adjunctive Therapist at Central State Mental Hospital. Degree in mental health or the arts required.*

Now that sounds interesting, I thought, working with crazy people. Great title too! I'm not sure what the job entails, but I think I'll give it a try.

Rushing back home, I called and made an appointment for the next day.

There were many stories circulating, during my childhood, about *Central State*. Some parents, including Dad, threatened to send misbehaving children there for punishment. As far as I knew it was the only insane asylum, or funny farm (as Dad called it) in the area.

The three-story, undistinguished, brick building sat far off the road. The gate to the parking lot was open. As I exited my car and walked towards the front door of the hospital, I heard screams in the distance and wondered if I was doing the right thing by coming here. The lobby was dimly lit, giving the interior a grey temper throughout. The visitor seating area consists of two dilapidated sofas and some folding chairs scattered about. There were a few strange, morose-looking people in white coats carrying clipboards, shuffling through the lobby.

Walking to the front desk, I cheerfully announced, "I'm here to apply for the adjunctive therapist position."

A solemn lady in a nurse's uniform mechanically intoned, "Take this clipboard over there and fill out the form."

I replied, "Thank you." Noting the outline of an electric iron scorch on her faded uniform's left shoulder.

The old leather sofa to which she directed me was replete with stains, holes, and cigarette burns. I completed the form. On my return to the front desk, a frail, older gentleman, seemly in a trance, pushed a broom across my path without recognition of my presence, and disappeared down a hallway.

"Dr. Schwartzen will be with you in a minute. Take a seat," said the nurse.

During my fifteen-minute wait, I eavesdropped on several conversations that included words, like medications, restraints, and treatments. In the background, I heard continuous

sobbing, occasional screams and threatening comments echoing through the building. I, again, questioned my wisdom in being there.

Dr. Schwartzen, a greasy little man with a thick German accent, was all business. He said my degree in music, along with my education courses, were sufficient for him to consider me. He explained the job entailed providing recreation services to mental patients. Besides card games, sing-alongs, and bingo, there would be field trips for “those more manageable” to bowling alleys and playgrounds. Movies were shown once a week, never in the dark, but in a dimly lit visitors’ room. He said he’d make a decision in a few days.

Walking back to the car I thought: *The only thing worse than not getting this job, would be to get it. I’ve got to get serious about making money with music or doing something else.*

Instead of going home, I went to the park to cogitate.

I don’t take rejection well. Especially rejection for something I don’t want in the first place.

I never heard from Dr. Schwartzen. Considering that better than a direct rejection.

Delicate Flower

When I filled in for the drummer of a duo at the *100 Supper Club*, Bobby Jo Walls, the featured singer and piano player, hired me on the spot to play every Friday and Saturday night. The thirty-six dollars a week was not much, but steady income was comforting.

At a Sunday night party in the apartment of an old college friend, I met and started dating a pretty, blonde nursing student, who was lots of fun. We went to movies and out to eat. Smooched a little, but it was nothing serious.

On subsequent hiding place visit to Shelby Park, I reconnected with an old Methodist church friend. He was dating the former mayor's daughter, who also lived in our neighborhood. We decided to celebrate the Fourth of July by taking our girlfriends on a state park outing.

On July 3rd, on our way Shelby Park to play tennis, we stopped by his girlfriend's house, to retrieve his racquet. She suggested calling her friend Diane Van Deren to joins us to play mixed doubles. We reluctantly agreed.

The first time I saw Diane Van Deren, she was walking towards my car carrying a tennis racquet. Diane was wearing a white blouse and white shorts, accenting her becoming summer tan. She was diminutive and pretty, like a delicate flower. On the short ride to the courts, I made a few humorous comments to which she laughingly responded. To me, that was a good sign.

Following tennis, we went to a restaurant for conversation and drinks. Diane ordered a beer. I followed suite. It was the first beer I had ever ordered. It seemed the social thing to do. Late in the conversation, I told a slightly off-color joke. Diane laughed appreciatively.

I said, "I like you. You're dirty."

After dropping my friend and his date off at her house, I took Diane home. On the way, I asked if she was kin to Francis Van Deren, the principal's secretary at North High School?

"Yes," she replied. "She's my aunt."

I told her how much Miss Van Deren had encouraged my singing and how much I thought of her. As she exited the car, Diane said she would enjoy seeing me again and gave me her phone number. I honestly wanted cancel my date with the nurse on the Fourth and take Diane. But, she had already told me of her family's Fourth of July picnic plans.

The Fourth of July outing at the state park picnic was fun, but Diane was constantly on my mind. I called her that evening and was pleasantly surprised she accepted an invitation to a party the next night. That too seemed a good sign. Diane told me that her aunt sent regards and said I was a nice person. Another good sign.

Diane and I had a terrific time at the party and were together for the next few nights; just riding around and talking; then smooching in her driveway, until her dad turned on the driveway light.

When I told her I went to St. James Episcopal Church, she asked if she could go with me one Sunday. Although she was an active Methodist, she said she liked the Episcopal Church and was maybe interested joining it. I offered to take her with me the coming Sunday.

Church services were conducted in a two-story house in the neighborhood. The priest, Paul Pritchard was young, charismatic, and energetic. The church had about fifty active communicants. We sat with Dad and my stepmother.

After church, Diane and I went to a nice restaurant across town for Sunday dinner, then on to the *Cheekwood Botanical Gardens and Museum*. Diane wanted to see an art exhibit by a cadre of a modern artist from Paris called the Wolfpack. We both especially enjoyed a painting by Bernard Buffet – *Abstract Fruit*. When we started down the spiral staircase at Cheekwood, I took her hand. It was a magical moment. She looked at me and I at her. As we squeezed one another's hand, I thought, *there is no turning back from this*. The emotion was frightening and exhilarating.

On Monday, I dropped in to see Mother and my new stepfather, Gene Allen to check on Mother's rehabilitation progress from her stroke. I was disappointed when I realized that neither

Gene nor Mother seemed motivated to continue her therapy. It was too much trouble for their sedentary lifestyle. I resigned myself to accept that which I could not change. I told them I had met an exceptionally nice girl that I would bring by at the first chance.

A few nights later, while parked at Shelby Park, Diane and I went from virgins to lovers in a matter of minutes. As we rearranged our disheveled attires, a policeman with a flashlight tapped on the window of my car. He suggested we move along, which we did.

The next Sunday at church, with Diane on one side and Dad and my new stepmother, Erbie on the other, I replayed the preceding weeks in my head. Fear arose at the prospect of this being a serious relationship. The thought that I might become a husband was unnerving; a possibility for which I had made no preparation. Praying to the Lord for help, I placed my only dollar bill in the offering plate. And promised again to be a faithful servant.

Diane and I were inseparable. That is until Diane informed me of an upcoming, long planned annual trip to Florida with her girlfriends. The thought of her being out of my sight was frightening. I was afraid she'd find someone else. Or even more disconcerting, someone else would find her. I did not feel worthy of someone so beautiful, engaging, and smart. Diane agreed to call me while in Florida and to send me a letter. Hers was my first real love letter and brought me great joy, as well as exacerbating my fear.

A few days later, I took her letter to the park. While sitting at a picnic table near the site of our lovemaking, I wrote an awkward, yet poignant reply.

When Diane returned from Florida, we continued to see one another every night except for Fridays and Saturdays. When I told my duo partner at the club about Diane, she said it sounded serious to her. She even told the audience about it and sang love songs dedicated to me.

In fact, the love songs I'd sing, like *The Nearness of You* and *I'm in the Mood For Love*, took on a new and deeper meaning.

The first Sunday, after her return, I took Diane by to meet Mother and Gene.

The following is excerpted from Mother's unpublished manuscript, *The Funny Side Of A Stroke*:

For several weeks Larry had been mentioning Diane with increasing frequency, so it was not a complete surprise when, on Saturday, he told Gene, I'm going to bring Diane by after church for a short visit. When Larry was out of the room, we cast knowing looks at each other. Gene said this could be the girl. And I replied I have a strange feeling she is. Already running over in my mind, just what she would think of an invalid mother-in-law. Gene dressed me with great care in my laciest, prettiest pajamas and robe and fixed my face and hair. Just before time for them to arrive, he ensconced me in a big chair in the living room. I was as nervous as if Larry had said: I'm bringing home a bride today. Gene kept walking back and forth looking out one window and then another, to see if they were arriving. I am prone to make first impressions and abide by them, so I kept warning myself not to be too hasty in deciding whether or not I liked her. I could have saved myself the trouble, for when she came in with a shy, sweet smile and a soft hello, I felt a tiny warm glow inside me. Looking at Gene, I could see he was smitten too. They didn't stay long that first day. The minute the door closed behind them, a spate of words came pouring forth from both Gene and me; telling of things we liked about her.

The more serious our relationship became the more fearful I became. Marriage was definitely on the horizon and I didn't think I was ready. But I also thought I needed to move fast before someone more deserving took her away from me.

On September 10, 1963, around midnight, while sitting in her driveway, I told Diane I was not ready to get married. I said we should not see one another for a while, to get a better perspective on what we should do next.

Diane said, "Tell me you don't love me and I will get out of the car."

I said, "I can't tell you that."

"Why do you not want us to see one another for a while?" she asked.

I couldn't come up with an answer.

Diane said, "I'm not getting out of the car until you tell me you don't love me."

I said, "Well this is it. I'm leaving. Let's talk in a week."

She said, "I'm not getting out of the car."

I said, "Please get out. I need to go."

She said, "No."

"Well, I'm going for a drive to think about all this." I said.

She said, "Well great! Let's go."

"I don't want you go with me." I said.

"Sorry," she said, "You don't have a choice."

About the time we drove away, the driveway light came on. I said her dad would be worried. She said she didn't care. Those were the last words we spoke until we arrived in Cookeville, Tennessee, an hour and a half later. As we circled the town square, I pulled to the side of the road.

My first words were, "Ok, I'll marry you."

We kissed.

Diane said, "Ok, I accept."

We found a payphone to call her dad and saying we would return in about an hour and a half.

The next night, I went into her house and asked her father for her hand in marriage. Her mother and sisters were delighted. I think her father agreed with me that I was not worthy. We told them we had decided to be married after the first of the year. A week later Diane began confirmation classes to become an Episcopalian.

For my birthday, September 29th, Diane gave me a beautifully framed print of the Bernard Buffet, *Abstract Fruit*, we had seen at Cheekwood.

Wedding Bells

In early October, Diane and I decided not to wait and to get married on Halloween, The ultimate trick or treat.

I was scared. On one of my several visits to discuss the marriage, Mother suggested that I see her doctor for some nerve pills to calm me down. I did. The prescription actually read, 'Take three each day until one hour before the ceremony.'

Because of the priest's minor health issue, we moved the ceremony to the day before Halloween. Diane was nervous about my being nervous, so she had my brothers keep an eye on me to assure I made it to the ceremony. The service was simple, direct from the Prayer Book and ended with Holy Communion. There was a small, brief, family reception. Diane, in her beautiful peach suit, and I went to Mother and Gene's directly after the reception.

From Mother's manuscript: *Brothers Jerry and Dennis told me that as soon as the wedding was over, Larry and Diane rushed out of the church so fast, they hardly got a chance to look at the bride. As they left, Larry called back over his shoulder: We're going to see Mother! Fifteen minutes after the ceremony, they burst into my bedroom with such shining faces that happiness filled my room, encompassing me in its glow. To paraphrase an old cliché: I had lost an arm and leg, but I had gained a daughter.*

When we left Mother and Gene's for our rented apartment in the neighborhood, I noticed my brothers had used most of my gas. We stopped at a neighbor gas station with "Just Married" etched on the back window and cans dangling from the rear bumper.

When someone approached the car from the office, Diane said, "Oh my God. It's Bobby!"

Bobby was the fellow she was dating when she met me. He was a friend of the service station's owner.

"Filler up?" he asked.

"Nope. Three dollars," I sheepishly answered.

Looking into the car, he asked, "Diane, is that you?"

"Yes, Bobby," she replied. "How are you?"

"I'm fine."

"This is my husband, Larry Womack."

We shook hands through the window. I handed him the three dollars. He pumped the gas. We left. I was humiliated. My fears of not being able to provide resurrected.

A gigantic October moon lit the way from the gas station to our apartment. We stood briefly in the doorway admiring the moon, before I picked her up and carried her across the threshold.

My fears did not abate over the next few days. Each morning as Diane went to her secretary's job at the Methodist Publishing House, I stayed home to ponder my next moves. And, how would I handle these new responsibilities?

Hurt Feelings

One of our wedding gifts was an electric skillet. Diane, though lacking in experience, was determined to be a good cook. When she burned the spaghetti meat sauce during her first real culinary venture, I heard a bloodcurdling scream from the kitchen, followed with, "Oh. My God, the sauce is ruined!"

Rushing in to console her, I glanced back at the blackened skillet and snickered.

Diane pulled away and said, "I hate you. Making fun of my disaster. You should be ashamed of yourself!"

"You don't think it's a little bit funny?" I asked.

"No, I do not. Just get away from me," she continued, "Get out of my sight!"

As I went to the door, I angrily replied, "I'm out of here. I can't take any more of your foolishness."

She followed me out the door, still ranting. I headed for our recently purchased, 1953 black Chevrolet. I opened the car door, sat in the driver's seat, and slammed the door in anger. The window broke into a million pieces, crashing to the driveway. Diane laughed demonically and returned inside. After driving around for fifteen minutes and smoking three cigarettes, I

returned with a pound of hamburger and a deep apology. We exchanged our regrets in much the same way as we had exchanged our vows. She made a sensational spaghetti dinner. I helped wash the dishes. Something I had never done before.

Dark Day

On Friday, November 22, 1963, I was home alone watching the Channel Four *Noon Show*. The show was interrupted with the news that President Kennedy had been shot. That evening, Diane and I cried as we watched the follow-up stories. I stayed glued to the TV for several days.

My radio commercial work picked up dramatically during the first part of December. Diane was confirmed an Episcopalian. The church became the central part of our life together.

We had a fantastic first Christmas. I gave her a bicycle, among other things. She renewed my *Playboy* subscription, along with the usual Christmas fare. Christmas day, however, required our having Christmas brunch at 10 a.m. with her family; Christmas dinner at Noon with Mother and Gene; and Christmas dinner again at 1:30 p.m. with Dad and Erbie.

Career Move

Though I was making some money from recording sessions and voicing commercials during the day, to supplement my weekend gig, I felt grossly inadequate as a breadwinner. One morning searching the want ads, I saw a classified from *Sears* for a refrigerator salesman. I decided it was time for me to man up. Do something that would contribute to our future. I suited up, went to *Sears*, filled out the forms and sat for a half-hour waiting for an interview. The sales manger hired me to start the next day. I knew Diane would be proud. When she came home and started supper, I stood in the kitchen door of our small apartment.

“Diane,” I said, “I’ve got a job!”

She turned and with surprise said, “What? Where do you have a job?”

“At *Sears*,” I replied. “Selling refrigerators.”

She said, “No! You’ll do no such thing. With your mind and your creativity, you have a great future before you. You will not waste your life selling refrigerators at *Sears*.”

She came to the doorway, hugged me and gave me a loving kiss.

“We’ll get along just fine until you find your path,” she said, “I love you and things will work out. Just be patient. You ready for spaghetti?”

As she turned to go back to the stove, Diane stopped and without looking at me she said, “I am going to fall backwards. Catch me.”

She immediately fell backwards. I caught her. She then turned around, gave me a loving hug and kiss, and returned to the stove.

I went into the living room and sat on the couch, thinking: *During my high school and college years, I always felt out of place. I always felt that I should be somewhere else. Not until this moment do I feel a true sense of place. Early on, I was unsure why she would want to be with me. But now I see that prudent, responsible persons, like her, often chose to be with goofy people like me because of their own closet goofiness. Us goofys select people like Diane because, on some level, we know we need some light steering. I now understand what it means to “have someone’s back.”*

Christian Life

Diane made church a priority. At first, I just went along. But church quickly became as important to me as it was in my childhood. I still believed the same stories but believed them

differently. My more cerebral approach looked for the truths in the stories. Focusing on the message, with diminishing concern for the particulars of actual Biblical events.

At church, Diane joined the altar guild and became a volunteer for the coffee hour. I became a lay reader but did not join the choir because of my late arrivals from Saturday night dance jobs.

We were both particularly attracted to the solemnity of the Episcopal service and the weekly celebration of the Eucharist. But, Sunday school was our favorite church function. The discussions were lively, thought provoking and relevant to our lives. There was a variety of viewpoints among the participants. Father Pritchatt led the discussions, providing insight and context while honoring everyone's input and opinion, and teaching rather than instructing. His focus was on understanding how to put faith into practice, and how to live a life that was simultaneously full and appropriate.

My mind harkened back to my teen years at Buchanan Street Methodist, when I was concerned that people just thought about church on Sunday and forgot about it after Sunday dinner, until the next week. Christianity was beginning to make sense. Diane and I dove right in, taking our religion seriously.

Mother asked me to join the bible study group held each Monday night at her bedside. The attendees were Dr. Hudgins, her physician and pill pusher; his wife; another couple from Inglewood Methodist; Gene; and me. The first few weeks were enjoyable, but the approach to spirituality from the Methodist perspective now seemed naive.

At one meeting, Dr. Hudgins arrived late with what he called a message from God.

“As I was praying last night before going to bed, God suggested to me that Tuesday nights would be a better time for us to meet than Mondays.”

I could tell mother wasn't particularly fond of the idea. Though she didn't say anything.

I spoke up, “That's strange, I was praying last night, and God told me that Mondays are perfect.”

Mother smiled, as the others looked quizzical.

After a short silence, Dr. Hudgins said, “Well, why don't we leave it as is for the next few weeks and discuss it again?”

As the others nodded in agreement, mother gave me a sly wink.

Adam's Navel

One spring Saturday morning, I was in the backyard attempting to repair a window screen when a stranger appeared. He was wearing a tattered brown suit and carrying a Bible.

He said “Good morning” and asked if I were a Christian.

I responded in the affirmative, adding I was an Episcopalian.

He then asked the most important proselytory question in all of Christianity, “Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal savior?”

In the spirit of conviviality, I answered, “Yes.”

He asked me if I believed the Bible to be the true word of God? Not wanting any theological discussion, I answered, yes. He pressed on, so I put down my tools and moved closer to him. He held out his hand and identified himself as Wallace Reed, from the Riverwood Church of Christ. He asked if I had any questions about the Bible.

“As a matter of fact I do,” I said, “You know in the first book in the Bible, uh, uh?”

He helped with, "Genesis."

"Yes, thank you, Genesis," I replied. "There were two brothers who got into a fight and one killed the other?"

He said it was Cain who slew Abel.

I thanked him and continued, "And then, if my memory serves me correctly, the Bible says: *And Cain went unto the land of Nod, where he took upon himself a wife. Who was that lady he married?*"

The gentleman matter-of-factly told me she was his sister.

"You mean God condoned incest?" I asked.

His answer, "Yes, in those days the human race was pure, and it was all right to do that."

I thanked him for clearing up the matter and turned away.

Then, to appear as an afterthought, I asked, "Did Adam have a navel?"

He stood puzzled for a few seconds and said he'd be back next Saturday with an answer.

The next Saturday, shortly after Diane left to get her hair "fixed," there was a knock at the front door. I opened it to the smiling missionary.

Following an exchange of greetings, he pronounced, "I talked with my pastor. He said Adam did have a navel because his mother was Mother Earth."

I politely thanked him and closed the door, thinking, we are all merely the product of the stories we believe at the time. I could hardly wait to share this exchange in class on Sunday.

First Homily

Father Pritchartt phoned. He had been called out of town on church business and asked if I would deliver the homily on Sunday next. I happily obliged. I had been working on a concept about free will and the strains of mercy. Writing the homily would help me codify my thoughts.

Dressed in a cassock, I anxiously made my way to the lectern, welcomed the visitors, explained the absence of Father Pritchartt and began my homily:

"God, the creator, was free to create whatever. God chose to create man in His own image. And He chose to give mankind free will. So just like God, we are free to choose whatever. Being free to choose is a universal gift from God. Though some brethren limit free will to the choice of being good or evil, for God or man, my belief is those narrow thinkers place a lesser value on that gift than do I.

"I believe our choices are more complex and subtle than either/or. I also believe the impact of our choosing has little to do with our relationship to God. Let me repeat that, the impact of our choosing has little to do with our relationship to God. However, the choices we make have everything to do with our relationships with one another. Free will provides the potential to enrich our own lives, but more importantly, the lives of others. Our free will represents God's benevolence on Earth.'

"Another gift from God is personality. God is as universal in His benevolence as He is unique in his personality. And, like God, we are each one of a kind. No creature before, no person to come after, can lay claim to my personality. We are all different yet the same—free and unique. It is, however, how I exercise my free will and my personality that determines my relationship to my fellow man.

"Like most Christians, I've struggled with the place misery has in creation. The more I've thought about the matter, misery seems to be a consequence of freedom and a condition of the present, not something predestined by God. I do not believe how I live my life relates in any way to God's promise of eternal life. I do believe, however, that through my legacy I will live forever in the hearts of mankind. Some will remember me as caring, others as careless. Some will experience my mark without knowledge of me per se. The way those unknown to me used their free wills and personalities affected how I have lived my life.

"My future is not in God's hands. It is in God's promise. My acts have little to do with what happens to me when I die. God knows that we are not equal in birth or in life, that's why He gave us death. For only in death do we lose our imperfections and find equality and eternal life. Salvation, as we Christians call it, is for everyone.

"I am a Christian, not because of a desire to gain favor with God. I am a Christian because I desire to participate in Salvation right now. The Good News is by practicing the faith of my fathers now; I do not have to wait for death to be in full communion with the Lord. And living the principles of faith provides me the opportunity to make this a better world for those to come. When God intervened in my life through his Son/Himself Jesus Christ, he did so to bring appreciation for what a relationship with Him would mean both now and later. The Jesus event was to illuminate God. By having Jesus take all the sins of the world with him, we are no longer burdened with those sins. And can get on with the business at hand. The peace of the Lord be always with you."

The congregation, "And also with you."

This was the first time I stood as the celebrant at the back of the church. Shaking hands with congregants and visitors was moving. I received more compliments on the homily than I expected. Even Dad said, “Good job.” I thought of the many times, when as a novice Christian, I exited the service at Buchanan Street Methodist, anxious to shake the hand of Brothers Estes or Johnson. Remembering how much I wanted to be like them back, when my goal was to serve the Lord through ministry. I wondered how they would relate to my sermon.

Ad Man

Following a recording session of commercials for the *Automatic Transmission Company*, Travis Jones, an advertising account executive, and I had lunch. Travis, a shy, low-key, witty fellow, said the agency where he worked was too cutthroat and money-hungry for his taste, and he wanted to start his own. Travis intimated he'd consider me for his partner. I liked the idea and discussed it with Diane. She liked it as well.

A month later, Womack & Jones Advertising Agency was born. Its first client was *Automatic Transmission Company*. One of our first callers was a media salesman from WSM-TV, Elmer Cartwright. The same Elmer Cartwright who had fired me from my concessions job at the Grand Ole Opry years earlier.

Paul Garrison, an old college friend and former drummer with my combo, The Holiday Dreamers, dropped by the agency to say he was leaving Roy Orbison's band to get married. Both he and his wife were to become commercial artists. After seeing Paul's portfolio, Travis and I invited Paul to become our partner. Renaming the agency Garrison, Womack, and Jones.

That cotton pickin', freshman, snare drummer from college was now my business partner. It was difficult for either of us to imagine that we were businessmen, with a company,

and downtown offices. At first, we took no salaries from the agency and relied on the income of our working wives. Since the Holiday Dreamers, had become increasingly popular with area country clubs, our personal finances were improving.

On the first workday of the New Year, Don McKennon, a childhood, and high school friend, reappeared. He was now a travelling salesman for Pillsbury and wanted to secure a permanent sales position in Nashville. Shortly after Don's visit Travis announced his departure and Paul and I made McKennon our new partner.

When my salary from the agency exceeded Diane's from the Publishing House, I felt like a real breadwinner for the first time in my life. My confidence was shaken, however, when Diane said we should discuss starting a family. I longed for one of those nerve pills, prescribed by Dr. Hudgins, to get me through the wedding.

My desk became my new hiding place for thinking and dreaming. Each workday I would be the first to arrive. I'd put my feet on the desk, and commenced thinking:

Who would have thought it, me, president of a company! This is something I never expected. I don't think anyone in my family has ever been a businessman. Dad said you can't think your way into a new way of acting, but you can act your way into a new way of thinking. This is obviously a situation where maybe if I act like a businessman, people will think I'm a businessman. I don't even know what I don't know. I guess I'll just follow my gut, like I said in the high school annual, I'm a lot like Davey Crockett; be sure I'm right then go ahead. Wait, I didn't actually say that. Nancy Green, the editor, said I said that. The first time I ever knew about that quote, I read it in the annual. All I know about running a company, I learned from the movies. Though The Holiday Dreamers are doing well, Advertising is it for me. For the first time

in forever my long range plans do not include making music, much less a preacher. Aaron Schmidt said I had more unnecessary talent than anyone else he'd ever met. Mr. Schmidt, it's called advertising. I must mention that to him, next time I'm on the campus.

Within a few months, realizing that McKennon was probably fired from Pillsbury because of his drinking, I decided to look elsewhere for opportunities.

When I informed Diane that I wanted to leave the agency, she said “Good for you. I know things will work out just fine.”

As was her style, she turned her back to me and said, “Catch me, I’m going to fall back.”

Within a week, I became Assistant Creative Director at the Les Hart Advertising Agency.

That new job elevated my confidence. The agency had about ten employees including two account executives and one copywriter in addition to me. Mrs. Hart served as bookkeeper. There were three artists, a media buyer, and Patty. In most offices, someone spies for the boss when he’s away. Patty, the secretary, was that person. She had the complete confidence of Mr. Hart and Gladys. John warned me Patty could help me or hurt me. Patty began to flirt with me from day one.

Deciding to improve my health I joined the Downtown YMCA. My changing physique did not go unnoticed by Patty. She dramatically increased her flirtations. I did nothing to discourage her.

Sitting at my desk with my feet up, I leaned back in my chair and pondered: *Patty is a sexy little thing, who wiggles her short-skirted, rear end at every man she sees. I'd like to get into that. I'll bet she's wild in bed. Remember what Sellers said, she's Les Hart's hatchet man She*

has the complete confidence of the boss and his wife. Better be careful. A woman like her can get you in a heap of trouble. She can manipulate you out in a heartbeat.

Patty began standing at my door as we exchanged pleasantries and sexual innuendos. It wasn't long, however until she was standing beside me during these exchanges. The next thing you know, I was patting her on that cute rear end and rubbing up against her at the copy machine. One evening after an exercise session at the YMCA, I returned to the office to pick up something she was typing for me. She was still there.

"Here is the proposal I said I'd leave on your desk," she said, walking up extremely close. Pressing me to the door, I had just entered.

"Thanks," I replied, looking down at her.

With pouty lips, she asked, "Is that all I get?"

We kissed, embraced, groped, and panted there for several minutes. In the middle of a particularly passionate moment, I suddenly realized what a mess I'd gotten myself into. The chills I had been experiencing in my spine reversed. They were now going up instead of down. I knew, I was damned if I followed through, and damned if I didn't. She could take away my job if I didn't do what she wanted.

Giving her a playful kiss on the back of her neck, I said, "I'm not going to make love to you tonight."

The operative word was "tonight."

She asked, "What makes you think I had something like that in mind?"

I replied, "I didn't say you did, but I did."

We laughed. She went on her way.

I went home and told Diane about the episode and the events leading up to it. She was disappointed in my behavior and asked what I was doing next. I told her I would continue to flirt with the young woman while gradually extricating myself from the intimate part of the relationship. Diane nodded affirmatively and started into the kitchen. She then stopped.

“Come over here and catch me,” she said. “I’m going to fall back.”

Sermon On The Mount

Sunday, Father Keese, our new priest, began his homily with, “The words morality and ethics were once treated as synonyms. Gradually, morality has become the practice of ethics and ethics has become the philosophy of morality. The definition of moral became tainted by association with the opposite word, immoral, often interpreted as sexual misconduct.”

Diane looked at me and whispered, “How appropriate.”

He continued, “Today, many people operate with a business ethic different from their personal or spiritual ethic. Viewing the rules of business conduct as more permissive and flexible.”

I’m sure the rest of his remarks would have been useful. However, my mind drifted into hiding place mode:

Why does allegedly disreputable sexual activity feel so good? What’s wrong with a little playful flirtation? How far is too far? Jesus said that upholding the Spirit of the Law was just as vital as upholding the Letter of the Law. I’m not sure I agree with him on that point. Wow! Disagreeing with Jesus is something I never would have done as a Methodist. Darla tits? I haven't thought about them in years. Wonder what happened to her and where she is? Wonder

how her breasts look now? I wonder how Patty's breast look? Father forgive me for I know not what I do.

I smiled.

Diane whispered, "What are you smiling about? Are you paying attention?"

Father Keese continued, "The person who stands above unacceptable behaviors may find certain situations stressful, but will lose less sleep than one who tacitly condones such behaviors. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen."

"Good sermon," I said, shaking Father Keese's hand as we left the sanctuary.

"Glad you liked it," he said, "Diane asked me to preach it."

"Huh?" I said.

"Just kidding," laughed Father Keese. "Didn't mean to frighten you."

My plan at the office worked. Within two weeks, Patty was cavorting with another married employee. Three months later, he was fired for poor performance. I'm not sure by whose measures – Les Hart's or Patty's. A popular saying at the time was *never dip your pen in the company ink*. I'm glad I got the point before I dipped the quill.

CHAPTER SIX: Piety vs. Vanity

Holly's Birth

December 20th, 1968 began with a terrible ice storm. Just after dark, while we sat on the sofa playing Rummy, Diane said, "My water broke."

We rushed to the car with suitcase in hand. The weather was so bad; I wasn't sure if I could make to St. Thomas Hospital across town. We passed wreck after wreck. Then I spotted a fire chief's car and honked my horn vigorously.

As the chief's car pulled long side, the chief in the backseat rolled down the window and asked, "What do you need?"

"I'm Charlie Womack's son," I said. "And my wife is having a baby!"

"I know you, Larry. Just fall in behind me and I'll get you there!"

As he rolled up the window, his driver hit the siren. With the fire chief leading the way, we made it to Baptist Hospital in record time, given the weather conditions. At the emergency

room entrance, I rolled down the window and said, "We are going to St. Thomas." The chief gave me the thumbs up, and the siren whined again.

In the prep room, the nurse asked Diane if she had false teeth. Diane said yes. The nurse said she would have to remove them. Diane made me leave the room because I had never seen her without her teeth. When I returned she had pulled the sheet over her mouth.

In about an hour, the doctor said she was ready for the delivery room. I went to wait for the news - boy or girl?

Too nervous to stay seated, I wandered the halls until it was OK for me to see them. My emotions erupted and subsided, erupted and subsided. In a darkened hall, I came upon a nurse pushing a gurney.

"Oh, Mr. Womack, there you are," the nurse said. "Would you stand here with Mrs. Womack while I go prepare her room?"

Diane was still unconscious. I kissed her on the lips, told her I loved her and thought *she's going to be mad as hell that I'm seeing her without her teeth*. I had never seen her more beautiful – serene and smiling, with an air of accomplishment.

I leaned in close and whispered, "Holly's here."

Responsible Parent

At the Hart Agency the next Monday, I planned to give out *Tiparillo* cigars to announce Holly's birth. While at my desk I made life changing decisions to stop smoking and lose more weight. Because of my new responsibility for a child, I tossed the box of cigars in the wastebasket.

Holly's christening was a gala affair. Dad was there, rubbing his nose with excitement. My sweet stepmother, Erbie, was present, along with several of my aunts, uncles, and nephews. My cousin brought my grandmother from Mother's side of the family. Following a brief reception, the three of us went to Mother's for Sunday dinner. Because of her stroke, Gene had regrettably done most of the cooking.

As my size diminished from dieting and exercise, my reputation in the advertising business grew. When the agency creative director left, I took over his position. Though I still continued to lead the *Holiday Dreamers* on weekends, my interest in music was fading.

One afternoon, just before closing our staff of ten was assembled in Mr. Hart's office where he was standing behind his desk. Mrs. Hart was standing behind him, to his left, holding envelopes.

"I've called you here today," he began. "For a special occasion. Our account, er ah, I decided that since we're having a very good year, to give everyone a bonus. Now don't expect one next year."

Mrs. Hart stepped forward, handing each of us an envelope. As we opened them, there were oos and ahs. My salary was nine hundred dollars a month. The bonus check was for one thousand dollars!

I stepped behind his desk, put my arm around Mr. Hart's shoulders, got the attention of the assembled and said, "Mr. Hart, I take back everything I've ever said about you."

Les took a playful punch at me. The assembled laughed, thanked the Harts and left the room.

Career Progress

Two months later, I submitted my resignation, to join Erskine Bonds Advertising Agency. Erskine, an affable, blustery, friendly guy, was also the Richland Country Club's entertainment chairman and a big fan of the *Holiday Dreamers*. Over lunch at his club, he offered me a position as vice president of his agency.

Though the Harts were good people, I felt the success of the agency was limited because of his lack of understanding of the advertising business.

Erskine was a consummate salesman, who learned his craft as the sales manager of a television station. One flaw in his sales acumen was his inability to know in advance if we could actually perform to his promises. My first sales call with Erskine was to a local Buick dealer, a golf buddy of Erskine. At the meeting, Erskine amplified my creative abilities by reminding Mr. Waller that my band was the favorite at the country club. Though that may have helped a bit with the close, I think Erskine's regular finish was the icing on the cake.

"We can do a bang up job for you," said Erskine. "We have a great team to complement your team. Our agency can get the customer in the door. And, your boys can close'em all.

"And, as an aside," he added, "You know I have a little cripple boy at home. Muscular Dystrophy. His needs are very demanding. Securing your account will mean more than just another piece of business for our agency, it will also be helpful to Anne and me as we move forward in meeting the needs of our crippled son, Chris."

We got the account, and soon several others. I was happy with the move to Erskine Bonds Agency, though his sales close was a bit off-putting.

Last Applause

Erskine entered my office with, “We did it! We hired the Duke Ellington Orchestra for our fall dance. Your band will play his intermissions!”

On the big evening, the Club was elegantly decorated. While setting up the drums, I thought of my first country club dance at the Old Hickory Country Club. Observing that the Richland decorations were more in keeping with those I had seen in the movies.

Following our muted dinner music, waiters cleared the tables, as the orchestra began setting up. The Duke opened with *Take the A Train* and received a thunderous standing ovation. His band included screaming trumpeter “Cat” Anderson, and “Wild Bill” Davis on organ.

During the last break, I was singing a Joe Norton/Count Basie tune, *Alright Ok. You Win!* “Wild Bill” Davis, Duke’s organist, made it to the stage and joined in. Other band members followed suit, including Duke. The crowd, including the waiters, erupted in wild applause!

“Duke asked, “What’s your name, young man?”

Eddy, the maitre’d hollered out, “Larry Womack.”

There was another round of applause.

“Well get up here, Larry Womack,” Duke said, “That was some mighty fine singing. Join us for another song.”

I made it to the bandstand, thanked the Duke and said, “*Kansas City*, B flat.”

Counting “one, two, three, four.”

The organist, bass player, and drummer started the introduction and the horns set up a harmony riff. Halfway through the song the crowd began clapping on two and four. The country

club was rockin'. When *Kansas City* concluded there was more applause. I thanked Duke and the band and started off the stage.

Duke said, "I'm not letting you off that easy. What's your favorite ballad?"

I said, "*The Nearness of You*. F."

Duke counted off the song and played a piano solo as an introduction.

As Duke played, I thought: *This might not be the Ed Sullivan Show, but I am singing with Duke Ellington and his Orchestra. That's not too shabby. Mother will be so proud when I tell her.* It was an evening I didn't want to end.

Shaken Faith

Leading up to Christmas season and Diane and I were considering leaving St. James. We felt stalled in our Christian growth. The church and the community in which it was located was mostly blue collar. The congregation was either elderly or unsophisticated in thought or interest. There were few people at St. James with which to share our evolving concept of faith and our social interests. We, however, decided to stay because of family ties and did not want to withdraw our much needed financial support to the struggling mission.

At a laymen's conference, I discussed my concerns about St. James with the Bishop. He reminded me that St. James was established to serve a community that was predominately Church of Christ and Southern Baptist. The Bishop also reminded me that at a recent mission retreat at the Conference Center, I had identified St. James as "an oasis in a desert of fundamentalist conservatism."

"You said," he continued. "St. James is a place for those who are not finding connection between their social values and the religious expression of them. I agree, Larry, church is a place

for those seeking understanding of how to put faith into action and live a full and appropriate life, simultaneously. You and Diane are needed at St. James.”

The Bishop said he had an aspiration of me considering the priesthood at some point down the road. I was honored.

As I walked away, I thought: *Like all Christians, the people at St. James sometimes lose their equilibrium. But when one of us falls, he or she is often lifted up, not put down by our fellow spiritual travelers. We've got one another's back when it comes to faith. That's a critical role for a church to play, maybe more important than intellectual pursuits –especially in a neighborhood of fundamentalism.*

Blair Is Born

On December 4, 1971, Blair, our second daughter was born while I was on a bandstand at a holiday party. When I checked in at home, a neighbor told me her husband took Diane to the hospital.

That three hours of playing music were the longest of my life. I left my equipment for the others to pack and arrived at the hospital at 12:20.

In the waiting room, my neighbor said, “You’ve got another girl! Diane is doing fine. She’s in room 524.”

I didn’t even answer him as I rushed to Diane’s room.

“Blair is here!” she said, with tears running down her face. “Blair is here.”

When the nurse brought Blair into the room, I held her. I could not hold back the tears; that beautiful face; those delicate hands and feet.

“Thank you, God,” I said, “We are truly blessed.”

Diane beamed!

Turn Me Off

Shortly after Blair's birth Diane and I decided two children were sufficient and that I would get a vasectomy.

The night before I was to undergo the knife, Diane shaved the area of concern. We agreed it looked like a plucked chicken. Being on the operating table was my first experience with my feet in the stirrups. During the procedure, the doctor and I engaged in casual conversation. After suturing the left side, he moved to the right side of the table.

Starting the incision, he said, "Mr. Womack, after you have had sex four or five times, I want you to bring a specimen in for verification it works."

I asked, "What time do you open in the morning?"

The doctor was so taken back and laughed so hard, he knocked the surgical tools on to the floor and had to summons his nurse to bring in sterile instruments.

Always The Card

Going to church became our favorite family outing. Diane loved dressing the girls. It was with great pride and a sense of accomplishment, I drove into the church parking lot and unpacked the brood. Dad and Erbie enjoyed carrying the girls around and showing them off before church and at the coffee hour. Erbie, Blair's step grandmother, was especially proud when people said Blair look like her.

One day after church while holding Blair, Dad made one of his derogatory statements about "niggers."

I took Blair from him and said, “Until you stop talking like that I do not want you around my daughters. Understand?”

He rubbed his nose and went to his car. Erbie apologized. I explained that he had been my dad longer than he had been her husband, and that his behavior wasn't new. Diane and I hugged Erbie and left. It took Dad two weeks to come around.

Sunday School Teacher

Though I enjoyed occasionally teaching the adult classes, it was the junior high group that brought me the most personal satisfaction. Remembering the Sunday school classes of my youth, I decided to be less ridged than my old teachers. In the first session, I divided the students into two groups and assigned each one of the two creation stories in Genesis. The groups wrote the order of Creation as it was chronicled in their chapter. The kids were amazed when we compared the Creation stories and found that the order was different in each telling. The goal of the exercise was to present my belief that the *Bible* was created to identify the basic truths about God, Jesus and His creation, not to serve as a historical, factual document. “The purpose of the Bible, I said. “is to enlighten us as to why we exist. Not to explain how we came to exist. That is the role of science. There is no conflict between religion and science.”

I closed with, “Remember this, render unto science that which is science and render unto God that which is God's”

The Music Stops

Christmas with the girls was incredible with grandparents coming to our house.

The *Holiday Dreamers* didn't know it, but New Year's Eve would be my last official dance job. All the dates for the coming year were booked. I said I was taking two months

sabbatical, but I would not return. Twenty-seven years as a professional musician ended with no regrets.

Two Chairs, No Waiting

As the Bonds Agency grew, I took on more of the leadership and management roles. Our reputation was markedly enhanced when Rusty Criminger became our creative director. Before joining our agency, Rusty produced television commercials for a local TV station. He was a chubby, affable, funny guy with whom I connected right away. Rusty was a jack-of-all trade with a special talent for graphics.

On a convention trip with our premier client, Wayne Shumate, I shared that Rusty and I wanted to take over control of the agency, if his account would stay with us. He agreed. On my return, when informing Erskine of our plan, he too agreed. Erskine's interest in the agency was waning. Being replace by investment opportunities. Several weeks later, however, when Erskine was on a trip to New York, I discovered contingent liabilities of the agency that would be difficult to overcome. So, Rusty and I immediately resigned, and overnight, opened Womack & Criminger - *Two Chairs No Waiting*.

Shumate's company was also the sole distributor of *Speedo Swimsuits* products in the United States and a high roller. He said he wanted us to work as hard as he would work during the day and play as hard as he'd play at night. Expense reports were *not* to be itemized. Wayne said he would evaluate our work at the end of each year. If we'd been worth it, the project would continue. His fleet of aircraft, a DC-3, Bell Helicopter, and Learjet, were made available to advance the project.

On my first trip to New York on Wayne's behalf, Diane accompanied me. We stayed at the *Waldorf Astoria Hotel*, fulfilling a boyhood fantasy. We ate at the trendy *Gotham Bar & Grill* and saw two Broadway Shows. It was my first trip to New York since my musician days. But I knew it would not be my last.

Diane, the girls and I moved into our new home – a two story, three-bedroom house, just a spitting distance from our current home. The girls had the upstairs. Diane and I had the downstairs. The acre lot was what attracted Diane to the home. She immensely enjoyed gardening.

Surgery

During a routine physical, a knot was found in my throat, the next day, I was in a hospital for the first time in my life. The surgeon said the only way to know what it is, is to remove it. It could be nothing or it could be cancer.

Diane and I decided not to tell the girls and alarm them unnecessarily. In fact, we didn't tell anyone but Rusty. The operation took place in the afternoon. Diane was told I probably wouldn't be fully awake until the next morning. After the drip began working its magic, I drifted into dreamland. I was back at the willow tree:

Everything is going to be all right. Don't anyone tell Billy and Rodney about this. They'll call me a sissy. Dad will tell me about the time he had an appendectomy, played football and scored the winning touchdown. Mother will love the drama of it all. She'll call everyone she knows. Diane looks stoic, but she is as afraid inside as I would be, if it were she. The faces of my girls. I love them so much. I have to be here to take care of them. Even if the news is bad, Rusty will have something funny to say. I like that in him. I wish his wife knew how great he is. God,

it's between you and me now. I know I have your Grace and someday will be in Heaven. God only knows what it will look like. The first thing I want to do is see my grandfathers. If people have faces in Heaven, I hope I recognize grandpa Walter. I won't see my duck. We ate him. That was stupid. Always the card, my Dad.

The next morning, the surgeon said a biopsy was sent for review, but everything looked just fine, and to call Diane to come for me.

Smoking Weed

Diane was a flirt beyond all competition, even though she'd deny it. She often used her ebullient and bubble personality to establish relationships with service people, a talent that served us well. The garbage men loved her. She brought them water on hot days. They would take anything she put out for them. The plumbers and electricians loved her. Always going an extra mile to please her.

Bobby Murphy, the vegetable man at the Kroger where she regularly shopped, always ensured she got only the freshest of vegetables. They developed a relationship extending from the oranges up front to the potatoes in the back. But no further.

On one visit, Murphy asked her if we would like to join his wife and him at an opening of a new restaurant the next Saturday night. Diane suggested that I go to him for the details.

When I accepted his offer, he asked if we smoked marijuana. Though we never had, I said we did. He invited us to meet at their apartment before the opening to take a toke or two.

For over a year, I had begun thinking about trying marijuana and had read two books on the subject. It seemed an OK, fun thing to do.

Monday at the office I told Rusty and our copywriter, about my upcoming first adventure with weed. They counseled me that it was not a good idea to try it the first time with strangers. The copywriter said he would bring me a couple of joints to try at home on Friday night. Rusty said I'd find sex especially good under the influence, colors brighter, music better, and food more delicious. I was anxious for Friday to come.

About an hour after putting the girls to bed in their upstairs bedrooms, Diana and I sat on the floor at our Japanese coffee table. We lit incense and had wine and cashew nuts as we smoked the weed and watched the *Tonight Show*. Johnny was particularly funny. I refilled the cashew bowl three times.

Diane had never even smoked a cigarette. She had a little trouble with her first inhales but got the hang of it. We smoked both joints with seeming little affect. In the bedroom, the lovemaking seemed on par with the usual. As we drifted off, I think we were both a little disappointed.

The Murphy's apartment was what one might expect from a junior produce man at Kroger – a long Naugahyde sofa with an ornate Mediterranean coffee table. The room was mostly lit with candles. A *Pink Floyd* album played in the background. I sat in a chair next to the music. Diane sat on the sofa to my right. Bobby's wife sat in a chair on the opposite end of the coffee table from me. With, Bobby on the sofa next to her. We were served Paul Masson Rose in a heavy, ornate wine glass.

After exchanging a few pleasantries, Bobby said, "Well you ready to light up?"

When I agreed, Diane nervously cut her eyes towards me.

Bobby opened a small wooden box that sat next to a large bowl of Hershey mini-candy bars. He removed a joint, lit it, took a hit and passed it to Diane. She took a drag and passed it to me. I inhaled a big hit and stood to pass it across the coffee table to Bobby's wife. As I reached across, I felt as though I had spiraled and floated to the ceiling. The sensation was magnified ten times to what I had felt the night before. By the time I had realized what was happening, Diane was taking another hit. I wanted warn her but did not. Since I no longer had judgment, I took another hit as well. As I sat back from passing the joint across the coffee table, Diane let out a bloodcurdling scream!

"I'm going to die," she cried. "I'll never see the girls again."

I quickly moved to Diane's side to comfort her, allay her fears, and temper her screaming and crying. I had the same fears, but knew better than to reveal them.

"Are you OK?" she pitifully asked.

"I'm fine. No problem. Everything is under control." I lied.

Bobby's wife suggested some food might calm Diane. "I'll make her a toasted cheese sandwich."

She returned shortly with the sandwich on a plate and a small glass of milk. Diane took half of the sandwich, as did I. The sandwich consists of two pieces of toasted white bread with an American cheese single in between. It was so dry a drink of the milk had no effect.

With a smile, I looked at Diane and quipped, "This is delicious. You should get her recipe."

Diane looked at me. Her eyes said not at a time like this. You're crossing the line with your humor.

The dinner date was cancelled. It was several hours, however, before I felt I could drive home. On the way we passed Shoney's restaurant.

Diane said, "Oh, wow! Some onion rings would taste great right now!"

I wholeheartedly agreed and turned the car back to the restaurant. I ordered a large onion ring, but quickly changed it to two, then three. At home, sitting at the Japanese table, with the girls spending the night with grandparents, Diane and I agreed, those were the best onion rings we'd ever had.

At the communion rail the next morning, with heads still buzzing and the stale taste of onion rings lingering in our dry mouths, we smiled and touched shoulders. When returned to our pew and knelt, Diane looked at me and mouthed, "I love you."

Spiritual Compass

I liked the new priest the first time I met him. Father Gorday was a genteel, bearded man, reminiscent of the backlit picture of Jesus at Buchanan Street Methodist – the one I loved so much in my youth. He had an infectious laugh that complemented his studious demeanor. Father Gorday was also an academic theologian; well versed in the Bible, in a non-thumping way. Though I had heard the mantra of the Episcopal Church – moderation in all things - many times over the years, I learned the depth of its meaning from Peter Gorday.

On my way home, following a discussion with Father Gorday, I thought of: *Be sure you're right, then go ahead. That saying was under my student body president picture in the annual. I guess I do sometimes appear arrogant. Sometimes I am arrogant but only on topics for which I am well-versed. Good or bad, once I'm convinced I'm right, I brace my left forearm over my face and charge into the belly of the beast.*

Diane and I became ever more involved in the life of St. James after Father Gorday's arrival; teaching Sunday school, working in the nursery, serving on boards and committees, hosting events, raising funds and promoting praiseworthy deeds in the neighborhood. We were being of service and living like kings.

Worldliness

At St. James, Diane and I had developed a close friendship with a younger couple. We dined out with them on the weekends or in our homes. The husband and I regularly played tennis and golf. We all also smoked weed together and consumed copious amount of wine, usually just prior to disco dancing, at both straight and gay clubs. One night, the husband and I talked the girls into streaking naked around our yard. They agreed if we would follow them. We all stripped and sent the girls out the front door first. The guys locked them out and re clothed, as the girls banged on the door for us to let them back in.

As our relationship with the couple grew closer, it became more novel and investigational. Because of our naiveté, Diane and I thought we were just pushing the relationship envelope, with two like-minded modern adults. People with whom we had a close friendship. Dancing in the dark, under the influence of weed and alcohol, with someone else's spouse, was titillating. So was stealing a kiss, copping a feel and sexual flirtation. Because of our childhood religious convictions and shyness, Diane and I had not experienced the salacious indiscretions of youth.

Saturday nights were dedicated to worldliness, Sunday morning to piety. We felt we had a delightful balance of the two. We discovered, however, the other couple did not have the same emotional commitment in their marriage that Diane and I had in ours. They were actually

looking to disengage. Diane and I felt the tomfoolery would strengthen our relationship and serve to make up for what we missed out on as teenagers. And, for the most part it did.

Thirty-seven years old; doing well, and looking good. For the first time in my life, women were finding me attractive and sexy, something totally unexpected. This newfound attraction went to my head and my pants. I became more flirtatious, as I felt more powerful. I was now conducting business in cities I'd dreamed of as a movie-going adolescent. And I was often recognized from my TV commercials appearances and radio commercials. Life was good.

I joined the exclusive Nashville City Club where my, now disbanded combo had once performed. The assistant manager now served me instead of me working for him. Though I did not lose my sense of humor or respect for others, I did have a haughtier air. I was now "big time." There were several waiters who had been at the club for years and were friends from my performing days. They gave me special VIP treatment in the dining room and brother bumps and handshakes when we met in private.

My discussions with Father Gorday were helpful in keeping me somewhat grounded. I approached life as an exciting balance between piety and worldliness. Sometimes I'd recognize the need to rebalance. Sometimes, however, I ignored that need, and wallowed in self-gratification.

My Theology

Father Gorday called to asked me to fill in for him next Sunday and deliver the homily.

"You have an interesting perspective on suffering," he said. "I'd like for you develop your views into a homily on that subject.

I agreed.

On Sunday, after reading the Epistle, I stepped to the lectern and said, "The peace of the Lord be always with you."

The congregation response, "And also with you."

This morning, I will explore - why would God include suffering in his plan and how can God allow misery? When it comes to interpreting the Gospels, I'm never sure when to use reason or when to use faith. Whatever the fact, I do not buy that some of us are predestined to the good life, while others are preordained to eternal damnation. God may know what will happen before it does? But I don't think He decrees it. If He did, then God would be the author of misery.

Suffering or misery is caused by human choices and is, in no way, indicative of God's favor or judgment. Tragedies are merely misplaced human priorities, misunderstandings, ignorances (both chosen and unknown), and misuses of creation by man. Suffering occurs because of the combination of God's gift of free will, the personal choices we make, and the legacy of our fathers. Suffering is not an invention of God. It is a byproduct of our irresponsibility and lack of personal accountability. Once he brought us into the process and made us caretakers, His creation became awash with our imperfections and ignorance.

Often suffering begins at birth, the most obvious and wondrous manifestation of God's creation. Birth begins with conception. Conception is an event that requires the participation of two imperfect beings. No two individuals have ever been conceived or born under the same circumstances—parentage, location, or condition. Each day, thousands of children come screaming into the world in locales as diverse as circumstances. From the shifting sands of the deserts, the cities of emperors, and the clod caves of China. Each newborn must find his or her way into the world with varying degrees of nurturing, sustenance, and counsel. Simple

observation tells us that all persons are not born the same, will not live the same, and can, therefore, not know or come to know God the same. God may be omnipotent but is not a puppet master. If he was, many things that happen would not.

God does not predetermine suffering. Suffering comes about because God allows us to participate in His perfect creation. Suffering began when God's gift of free will was introduced. That's when imperfection entered His creation. Our imperfections are the sole sources of our sufferings.

I concluded with, "But now that we are here, let us thank God and serve man."

New Collaborator

After Rusty decided to move back to his hometown, Chattanooga., Paula Hensley and I formed the Madison Company. We set up shop in downtown offices above a piano store. Paula was attractive, smart, and a hard worker. She had that special quality to make any client feel as though he or she was our only client. Because Paula had previously been employed at Genesco, we quickly secured several Genesco's shoe accounts that required frequent trips to New York; Paula's favorite city, as well as mine.

Anti-Christ Apostle

Shortly after Paula and I joined forces, we secured an assignment with the United Methodist Publishing House to shift its publishing philosophy from an editorial focus to a marketing focus. The CEO said we would meet with resistance from some longtime employees but that he had my back and would support my efforts all the way. He appointed his vice president, Gary Vincent to be my liaison.

Potter said, "Gary knows where the landmines and the bodies are buried."

The project began with me serving as interim advertising manager. Since our first goal was to restructure that department, working a few days a week inside would give me a better perspective of personnel and potential barriers to progress.

In less than a month, I realized the only value of the project to my religious interest was a different perspective on how some Christians abandoned their faith at work. The Publishing House was a hotbed of backbiting, secret alliances, deception, lies, and “win-at-all-cost” agendas.

Abingdon’s chief copywriter who attended a non-denominational fundamentalist church, called a secret meeting with her copywriting staff. She informed them I was to be viewed as the enemy because I was a liberal Episcopalian, and my job was to replace everyone in the department. When the first catalogue, developed under my leadership, was sent to the printing department, there was an error on the cover. She caught it, but told her people not to identify it. If it had not been for an old high school friend who worked in the plant that alerting me, her plan would have worked, leaving me embarrassed.

She told her staff I was the *Apostle of the Anti-Christ*, and Gary Vincent was a *Minion of the Devil*. She even had off-site meetings to plan my demise. I found out the details because a young man in her department thought what she was doing was evil. He wanted to stop the madness, even if it meant losing his job. With this information, Gary Vincent and I hatched a plan. On a day when I was supposed to be in my Abingdon office, Vincent appeared and asked for me. Someone said I had not been there that day.

In a voice, loud enough for the copywriting department to hear him, Vincent said, “Well when you see the *Apostle of the Anti-Christ* tell him the *Minion of the Devil* would like to see him.”

The chief copywriter did not appear at work the next day. She called in to announce the beginning of her two-week vacation, from which she retired permanently without ever returning.

Questioning Faith

Back at the Oasis, St. James, Father Gorday and I met regularly – he to mentor me in the tenants of my faith, me to counsel him on temporal matters. Through these discussions and my readings, questions about Christianity, in general, and my faith, in specific, continued concern to shift from dogma to reason.

Each morning I arrived at the office early, to think at my desk:

Thinking that Christianity is the only path by which we can return to God is presumptuous. In China, God is illuminated through the appearance and teachings of prophets strange to our faith, Buddha, and Confucius. Are we, Christians, the chosen people or are the Jews? And what about those who practice Eastern belief? If they cannot know our God and Christ, is there no hope for them? If the different societies of humankind are not equal in heritage and in life, then how can we all attain or even aspire to the same fullness in God that he allegedly promises Christians? There is more than one way up the mountain. I'd like to discuss these things with my new friends at the Methodist Publishing House, but no one is interested. In my youth, the only talk of religion from my friends and adults in the community took place at church on Sunday and sometimes on Wednesday night. And what about Boots Norton, the well-dressed porno guy? Did he let God down or had the church let him down?

Old Love Returns

A couple of weeks before a planned New York trip, I called a local employment firm to hire a new receptionist/secretary. The person asked if I was the Larry Womack, who had attended Austin Peay. When I said yes, she asked if I knew Nancy Gill?

"Nancy lives in Queens and teaches English and business skills at the local college," she said. "Would you like her number?"

Later that day I call Nancy, my old college sweetheart.

When she answered, I said, "Hello Nancy."

She immediately replied "Larry Womack! Where are you?"

We had a pleasant talk updating the past 14 years and agreed to meet for dinner on my impending visit to New York. I called a supplier friend in New York and had him suggest the most romantic restaurant he knew of. He suggested Café Nicholson's, a small bistro in Manhattan at the foot of the Queensboro Bridge.

When we arrived at our suite in the Waldorf, Diane and Paula had a field day razzing me about my upcoming "rendezvous" with my old college sweetheart. They both knew all of the background of our brief relationship.

We all met Nancy for drinks at the hotel bar. After about twenty minutes of conversation, Diane and Paula departed for their night on the town. Nancy and I left for Nicholson's. The rendezvous was romantic, revealing, and poignant. We moved back and forth and among the three emotions all evening long. I shared my life, which, to that point, had been all positive and exciting. Her life had been both darkness and light – health issues, insecurities, and social

deviations, acclaim in her teaching profession and another recommitment to her Church of Christ heritage. She found a more contemporary version of her Church in Manhattan.

Over dessert, she confided that she had never married because of her love for me. And in her words, from the inability to find anyone who measured up. She said knowing I had enjoyed my life with Diane and my daughters brought her peace. After dinner, I took her dancing. We walked hand and hand through Manhattan in the rain, occasionally stopping for a romantic interlude. We sat in her car in Central Park, we kissed, fantasized of what might have been, and parted.

My conversation about the evening with Diane and Paula over breakfast was markedly tempered by Paula's inquisitorial presence. Later I shared with Diane the details of the night, including how much we talked about her.

A month later, I received a letter from Nancy asking me to thank "Diana" for allowing our encounter and announcing her impending wedding. Nancy was marrying a Church of Christ ministerial counselor.

Diane said, "That was nice that you and Nancy talked about me during your romantic interlude. But you might want to remind her that my name is Diane, not Diana."

Church Work

Over dinner one night, my client at the Publishing House asked if I would allow him to nominate me to become the head of United Methodist Productions. I was surprised and honored. I told him that my desire to more closely integrate my beliefs with my work had been growing. I confided that I occasionally daydreamed about becoming an Episcopal priest. I discussed his offer with Diane. She thought it was a great idea.

Curtiss Chambers, head of United Methodist Communication, and chairman of the search committee called to say the search had been narrowed to three, me being one of them. A final review was scheduled in Chicago in two weeks.

When I sat before the committee, Chambers began with, "Larry, there is one question we must ask before possibly offering you the job. This is the only post in our department that requires the appointee be a United Methodist. If you were chosen, it would be acceptable for you to hold membership in both the Episcopal Church and the Methodist Church. Are you willing to do that?"

"No," I said, "I am not. It would not be faithful to my beliefs."

A committee member from Texas, said, "Because we have come to know you, that is the answer we expected. Though we cannot hire you for this position, please know that when God closes a door, He usually opens a window. There will be a place for you in our midst. Later, if not sooner."

A few days before Christmas, I got a call at home from Curtiss Chambers of United Methodist Communications, the organization that considered hiring me.

"Larry," he asked, "Have you ever heard of Pacific Homes?"

"Didn't I see something on 60 Minutes about some Methodist homes for the elderly that went bankrupt in California?"

"That's it," he said, "We need to talk."

CHAPTER SEVEN: Asshole Years

National Stage

Word got out, the Methodists were looking for a media relations firm to assist with their Pacific Homes crisis. More than twenty companies began vying for the account. After weeks of discussions and presentations, the search committee narrowed the media relations' competitors to two. Hill & Nolton, an international firm headquartered in Chicago and the Madison Company.

The selection committee included both Curtiss Chambers and the individual from Texas, who said God would open I window after closing the door to my directorship of United Methodist Production. The Madison Company got the contract.

The undertaking focused on managing the national media crisis surrounding bankrupt homes for the elderly, operating under the aegis of the United Methodist Church. There was a class action lawsuit against the denomination for almost a billion dollars. Our fee was sufficient for me to devote the majority of my time to the endeavor. It required extensive travel, national media management, and authoring talking papers for church officials. The leader of the Los

Angeles Methodist Churches was Bishop Charles Golden; a small, elderly, soft-spoken, gentle black man with lingering, emotional wounds from the civil rights era. Bishop Golden was concerned that I was an Episcopalian because Methodist bishops have more administrative responsibilities than do Episcopal bishops. He, however, quickly came to trust me. Even giving me power of attorney to speak on his behalf. Charles Cappleman, the CEO of CBS Television City, was my Methodist Layman direct contact.

You Can't Go Back

On one visit to LA, unable to catch my usual afternoon flight to LA, I arrived at my hotel at 10:00 p.m. Since the dining room was closed. I ordered a cheeseburger, fries, and a glass of red wine from room service. After undressing, I place a towel on the bed, turned on the TV, fired up a joint, and began watching the Soupy Sales Show. The cheeseburger and fries were the best I'd ever had. Soupy Sales was also a lot funnier than I remembered. While showering the next morning, I thought, that might be the most fun I've ever had alone.

After a grueling three days, I caught the red eye flight back to Nashville and realized an airplane had become my new hiding place for dreaming and thinking:

I really don't like running a company. It gets in the way of my work. When it comes right down to it, I don't like being in charge of people. I like working with people who are in charge of themselves. Every time I've changed careers, it's been because I wasn't learning anything new from my peers. I never again want to be the smartest person in the room. This account is a real opportunity for me to advance my career and resources. What will Paula do when I decide to change again? She is too dependent on me. Diane needs to plan a getaway for the girls with me.

Maybe take them to Florida after the first of the year? They are all sun worshippers. I'm not. But I would enjoy seeing all my girls having a good time.

“Excuse me miss,” I said to the stewardess. “I’d like a glass of white wine.”

A few weeks later, my regular flight to LA wasn’t available again, so I took the late flight. Arriving in my hotel room, I immediately ordered a cheeseburger, fries, and a glass of red wine. Salivating at the memory of my last experience of dinner with Soupy Sales. After the food arrived, I spread the towel on the bed, undressed, fired up a joint, and turned on the TV. To my dismay, Soupy Sales was not on, but the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson was - a reasonable substitute.

As my mood mellowed, and the food reach a culinary high, I spotted the biggest roach bug I’d ever seen. It creeped up from behind the dresser where the TV was sitting. The gigantic bug was also winged! I grabbed a newspaper, rolled it up as a weapon, and slowly stalked towards my enemy. Thinking I must look like an ancient aborigine in an herbal fog, advancing on his prey. I swung. I missed. The giant roach disappeared. I returned to the bed. He appeared again. I attacked. He retreated. He appeared. I attacked again. He flew to the top of the TV. I sat and watched him crawl down the TV, across the dresser, and back to his lair.

The evening ruined by this evil predator, I carried my half-eaten meal to the bathroom, secured it in a towel, and closed the bathroom door. Back in bed, I turned off the TV. As I reached to turn off the light, the devil reappeared. I tried sleeping with one eye opened and the light on, shuddering with paranoia that the large, winged predator would fly onto the bed, crawl under the cover, and bite me. I may have dozed, but I didn’t reach a sound sleep all night. Lesson learned? You can’t go back.

Back on the red eye flight back to Nashville, I began to reflect on my shifting spiritual life:

Boy I'm glad I didn't become a Methodist minister back then. In relationship to my Episcopalian years, Methodists seem naive and shallow. It's now obvious that even then I was trying to make Episcopalians out of my Methodist brethren, using the Prayer Book at my youth vesper services. Through this experience, I have, however, come to appreciate how many people in Methodist congregations are gentle, loving souls, unlike the denomination's bureaucratic hierarchy. While I struggle with the miracles and explore the truths of the faith, those nice Methodist people in the pews just live out their lives believing that someday they'll be reunited with loved ones. It seems the more I learn and study, the less comfortable I am with what I know or believe. Is there a Heaven? Did Jesus really turn water into wine? What is the difference between myth and the truth?

Father Gorday had me on a spiritual path. Father Yandell seems to have more doubt about stuff than I do. I wonder how much different I would feel if I had gone to a Methodist seminary? I can see myself becoming an Episcopal priest if I make enough money to retire. That is, if I can resolve all these loose ends of the faith.

When I was a kid and fantasized about becoming an adult, this was not what I had in mind; selling advice, flying around in jet planes and eating at fine restaurants. I thought I'd be singing for the fancy people who did such things or preaching to them. I had no idea I'd become one of them.

To the stewardess, "I'd like a gin and tonic, please."

In March 1980, the Pacific Homes class action trial opened in San Diego. With firms from San Diego, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and New York representing various official United Methodist agencies. Representing the residents were three ACLU-type young lawyers, one female and two males. The trial ended with the church offering a twenty-million-dollar loan to the bankrupt Pacific Homes.

Over lunch, Bishop Golden told me he was retiring and that a new bishop would soon take his place. Sorrowfully, he reported that he had expected the appointment to lead the California Methodist Conference to be the crowning triumph of his career. He said it had been otherwise. You could see the weariness in his eyes and his demeanor. Two months later, a retirement event was held for Bishop Golden at the Wilshire Hyatt. He invited me to sit with him on the dais. I considered it a great honor.

When the Pacific Homes contract ended, it left more than a financial void. My work there had defined me for the last three years. During the early days of the project, I felt a sense of power. As it progressed, however; I became humbled by the responsibility.

Reluctant Leader

Father Gorday invited me into his office and said, “We are growing here at St. James, but our leadership focuses too much energy on temporal matters and not on spiritual things. I want you to become senior warden to help adjust our focus. Would you do that?”

“Peter,” I replied. “My work schedule is busier than it has ever been. It is not a position that I would seek. Surely there is someone else?”

“Larry,” he said. “I need you.”

“OK,” I said. “If you put it that way.”

At our council retreat, I was elected senior warden and began the planning process with this question, “Peter, what are your personal plans?”

“Well,” he stammered, “I guess this is as good a time as any to tell you guys that I have accepted a position in Atlanta. I start in May.”

I was stunned.

After everyone left, I asked, “Peter, what have you done to me? Why didn't you tell me this before I accepted the senior warden position?”

“I was afraid you wouldn't accept. I thought it was important to have someone in leadership who takes his faith seriously. You are my main man.”

At Father Gorday's bon voyage party, a friend asked if Diane and I would like to go with his wife and him to a strip club to see a highly publicized striptease act. The act included both a man and a woman. We agreed. The entourage eventually became a party of twelve! When we arrived at the club, the doorman was surprised at our number.

He said, “That will be fifteen dollars each.”

I replied, “We are all from the same church and would like the church rate.”

The fellow said, “No one had ever asked for the church rate before, but you got it! Ten bucks a piece.”

For a few of the female parishioners, it was their first time in a strip club. One older lady refused to believe the performers were actually naked.

This was not the first of our wild nights. When I was home from the rigors of travel and working with the Methodist, it was like a bacchanal. We partied most every weekend with friends from church, friends from the courthouse where Diane now worked, and friends of the

Madison Company. Drinking, along with a little weed, disco dancing, copping a feel here and there, and adventurously pushing the party envelope.

In June, we welcomed our new vicar, Reverend George Yandell, a stocky fellow with a preppy manner. At our first meeting on a Saturday morning, he wore a blue button-down, Oxford cloth shirt outside his khaki shorts. And, no socks with his penny loafers.

When I handed him a copy of my personal theological statement he was surprised.

“I expected the first thing I would receive from a senior warden would be the parish budget,” he said.

I invited him to a Sunday afternoon parish hall building committee meeting that I also chaired.

At the meeting, there was great furor over the size of the air conditioning unit that the architect had recommended. Randy, who flew private aircrafts for a living and had worked one summer for an HVAC company, considered himself an air conditioning expert. Randy ranted on about the unit being too small and, in his anger, accused me of being a stooge for the architect and the builder, even intimating I might be on the take from them.

Finally, Randy cooled down. The meeting was adjourned. The young priest and I went to his study to debrief. He expressed his astonishment and appreciation for my calmness during Randy's vitriolic tirade.

I said, “George, I realize that this is your first parish assignment. These things occasionally occur within the temporal life of the church. You must remember the Church is the Body of Christ. And for the body to function, it must have all its parts. Randy is our asshole.”

After recovering from shock and laughter, the young priest said, “I don’t think I’ll ever be able to say the Body of Christ again without thinking of Randy.”

Parrish Status

At the celebration of the completion of the new parish hall at St. James, I realized my personal spiritual compass was wavering. I began to more aggressively explore Eastern spiritual thought like Buddhism and Hinduism. But given my proclivity for the “good life,” I found it difficult to internalize those austere philosophies, though I connected with them intellectually.

There is a big difference between a universal truth and the facts of life. I was unable (or unwilling) to make such a grand leap. I was drifting from Christianity into unknown waters. I had little confidence in Father Yandell as my spiritual mentor. This was a journey I must make alone. I thought, “*Where is Father Gorday when you need him?*”

When I discussed my spiritual confusion with Diane, I found she, in her own way, was experiencing the same questioning. I took comfort that we were on similar paths.

Diane and I enjoyed the community of the church, the admiration of being church leaders, and the esteem of being Episcopalians. I was, however, beginning to look down on churchgoers per se, instead of up to them. Former arguments about matters of the faith like the virgin birth, miracles, and Jesus rising from the dead seemed inane. My balance between piety and worldliness was continuing to shift towards worldliness.

When St. James reached parish status, there was great celebration. The congregation could now call its priest rather than have him appointed. They, as is customary, called Father Yandell. He, however, didn’t stay long and the first female rector called by a Tennessee parish, Mary Ann Shahan came to lead our flock. I was chairman of the search committee.

Stepfather Dies

My grandmother called to tell me that my stepfather, Gene Allen, had a heart attack and died.

On the drive to Mother's over, I thought: Poor Gene. Mother just wore him out with her drama and her demands. He was a sweet man and a loyal soul. He deserves eternal rest more than anyone I've ever known.

Brothers, Dennis, and Jerry, were already there when I arrived. Mother had taken a sedative and was not as theatrical as I had expected. I agreed to go to the funeral home to make arrangements. Dennis and Jerry walked me to the car.

"What are we going to do with mother?" Jerry asked.

"I guess we'll have to put her in a home," I answered.

"No way," he said, "We can't put our mother in a home."

"Well then," I came back. "I guess she'll have to move in with you."

"She can't move in with us," he replied. "We don't have enough room."

"Well, Dennis," I said, "That leaves you."

"No way," he said, "She can't live with us. You've got the big house. Move her in with you."

"She'll go to a nursing home, where she can get the care she's needed for years," I answered.

"Let's get someone to stay with her," suggested Jerry.

"OK, if we hired a babysitter and paid two dollars an hour times twenty-four hours, times three hundred sixty-five days, that's" I replied and left for the funeral home.

Leaving them to do the math.

Gene's burial was in the Veteran's Cemetery just a few blocks from mother's home. Mother didn't attend because of her frailty and her emotions. When the graveside service started, I sneaked away to mother's house. Her doctor, under my orders, had given her a sedative. I struggled my unconscious mother into her wheelchair, dragged her into the backseat of my car and drove her to Imperial Manor a few blocks away. Nurses' aides were waiting at the front door to take her to her room. She did not awaken during this ordeal. I then rushed back to the cemetery, arriving during the last two measures of Taps.

I leaned over to Diane and whispered, "The deed is done."

After the service, Jerry and Dennis came over to me and asked if we were going to mother's house. When I shared she was not there, but at Imperial Manor, they did not receive it well.

Benediction

At church, I was in a quandary. Diane and I continued to be involved and regularly attend services and events, but church was becoming a chore. Father Yandell announced he was leaving. The Parrish called Mary Ann Shahan to be its next priest. Diane and I, again, discussed leaving St. James but decided to see what the new female vicar might bring. She didn't last long.

On the first Sunday after Christmas, 1986, Diane and I attended St. James Episcopal Church for the last time together. That Sunday is often referred to as Low Sunday because it falls at the end of the holiday season. Attendance is always sparse. There were few cars in the lot when we arrived. The new priest, our least favorite of our twenty-seven-year tenure, greeted us. He was a dull man, with shallow theological interest, and long sermons. Over the years, we had

become accustomed to short, thoughtful homilies from learned priests. We sat on the opposite side from where the celebrant would deliver his predictably boring elucidation.

The service limped along with the help of a substitute organist. Instead of the usual lay readers, the priest read the lessons leading to his sermon. On our way home, I thought: *This is the church where Diane and I were married; from which my father was buried; our daughters confirmed, and at which I had served in every lay capacity. Is enough is enough?*

As we turned into our driveway, I said, "I've decided to take a three-month sabbatical from church."

"Why?" she asked.

I answered, "During the homily, I was mentally making a list of why I wanted to be there and a list of reasons why I didn't. The 'didn't' list was considerably longer than the did."

Diane continued for a few Sundays without me, but soon followed suit. After about six weeks, Diane decided we should try a different Episcopal church. Our first stop was a struggling inner-city Episcopal Church. We knew some of the parishioners there. Following the homily, the priest-in-charge announced the daycare was closing for lack of children. He said, the vestry was looking for ideas on how the space could best serve the aging community. During coffee hour, a friend introduced me to the Senior Warden and told him I was exceptionally creative and might have some innovative ideas for using the space. I suggested the church might start a comedy club for the homeless. The fellow didn't find me at all humorous. He walked off without saying another word. On the way home, I shared the episode with Diane.

She said, "I guess we'll mark that one off the list."

We tried several other Episcopal churches but had no luck. We were definitely weary of the environment. All the symbols had lost their meanings for us.

Over the years, we had heard that the Episcopal Church was often the last church for those ending their Christian journeys. Many just quit, subscribed to the Sunday New York Times, and became fans of CBS-TV Sunday Morning with Charles Kuralt. We were no different.

Apparently our shift from 'God the Creator' to 'God the created' didn't come about through an epiphany. It just gradually morphed into a different shared consciousness on spirituality and life. When we chose to no longer deify God, we also determined not to vilify God either. God had been a good thing in our life.

Diane and I had come to believe our failures, problems, joys and successes were mostly in our own hands, and affected by the relevance of the stories we believed at the time. We also accepted fate. The concept that there are outside forces over which we have no control that impact our lives, like the forces of nature and the decisions of other human beings, not God. Together we discovered the best way to have favorable outcomes in life was to place ourselves wherever desirable results would most likely occur . We no longer turned to prayer.

We came to believe that good works and concern for others existed long before Christianity and, over the ages, survived negative Christian influences. Though downgrading God to a wondrous invention of man, we continued to feel most of those compelling forces Christians identify with God - awe, wonder, welling emotions, sympathy, and empathy. In fact, those feelings became even more intense. The source of our sympathy and empathy emotions was our connection to the rest of humanity and appreciation for the wonders incumbent in an evolving universe.

Diane and I came to view life as a joy, death as the end, relationships as significant, and morality definitely in the eye of the beholder. After we accepted who we had become, we still seemed to celebrate and enjoy life more than most of our Christian friends. We sought intellectual and emotional nourishment from masterful literature from every age; the expositions of great thinkers and sages; the rational, yet brilliant unfoldings of scientific discovery; and the artisans – from Mozart to Miles. Once we reached the point of life without dependency on religion, we became aware most of our Christians friends were extremely uncomfortable with our position and would often redefine our statements in ways acceptable to their beliefs. They wouldn't take no God for an answer. Many of them opined we would eventually come back to our senses and return to the faith. Probably in some time of tribulation.

New Rules

Though no longer attending church, I continued to reflect on my spirituality and remained close with my Christian brothers and sisters, including Father Will Holt. When he came to Nashville from down the road, in Dickson, Tennessee, he always visited me. We had stimulating discussions, but neither of us ever changed his mind about anything. He said that I was experiencing the absence of God but would eventually return to the fold. Father Holt and I had served on committees with the presiding bishop of the diocese, George Reynolds. We both had run-ins with the Bishop over temporal matters. Many of the other parish priests also found the Bishop to be naive on matters outside the ecclesiastical realm.

A few days before a visit from Father Holt, Bishop Reynolds died suddenly from a brain aneurysm. When Father Holt stopped by, on his way to a clergy conference, I asked if he had been listening to the radio. He said he had not.

I said, "I have some good news and some bad news for you. The good news is Jesus is back. The bad news is he's brought Bishop Reynolds with him."

Will told me later that my joke had been the hit of the clergy conference.

During a discussion with Father Holt, I argued that the Ten Commandments did not provide a useful roadmap for leading a principled life.

"Too vague," I opined.

I did agree, that except for the first four the Commandments were somewhat useful.

I said, "Most Christians don't have a clear understanding of their meanings."

Father Holt said, "Well, if you don't think the Ten Commandments are good enough, why don't you write your own rules to live by?"

Though there was a tinge of mockery in his statement, I decided it was a great idea.

After he left, feet up, chair leaning back, staring at a blank computer screen, I began the process of creating the canons for my moral code.

Each of us has a personal moral code, whether it is stated or not.

Mine will be written, I thought:

My grandfather Walter said: be in service and live like a king. Through the years, I've learned that serving those you know is more challenging, yet more rewarding than just giving alms to strangers. Being a servant is more than giving arbitrary handouts to street people or donating to charitable causes. Being a servant is finding ways to directly and passionately provide meaningful support, aid and comfort to those around you - at home, work and in all the other venues one frequents. Being in service will top my list. Somewhere on the list I will include moderation in all things. To me that's avoiding excesses but delighting in second

helpings. This I learned from my grandfather Womack and other Episcopalians. Enjoy beauty made the list. No one enjoyed or enjoys beauty more than mother and my wife. They always saw beauty in everything and everyone. If Diane met Hitler, she would say, "But he does have a nice mustache."

Self-importance Grows

Earlier in the year, I left the Madison Company and joined Tennessee Governor Alexander's former Chief of Staff to form the Ingram Group. When the front page business section of the local paper featured the announcement and a large picture of Tom and me shaking hands, I knew I had arrived! My vanity was overtaking my piety. I was becoming an influential in local, state, and national politics.

I donated my current wardrobe to Goodwill Industries. Bought seven, new Italian-cut double-breasted suits, and began wearing colorful socks as my signature fashion statement. Now thinner, wiser, and contemporary, my ego advanced in concert with my income.

Besides the Republican governor, we signed Nashville's Democratic mayor. I began writing speeches for the mayor to be approved by Tom. Tom was writing speeches for the governor to be reviewed by me. I had completed the first draft of a State of Metro address for the mayor that included an idea for an education celebration program. The mayor liked the idea I had included and invited me to flesh it out before he made the speech. At that meeting, the mayor asked if we could get the governor to make the kickoff address for the education program. The mayor then asked me to write a letter from him to the governor making the invitation. I agreed and a few hours later faxed the draft to the mayor's office.

On my way home, I stopped at the nursing home to see mother.

“What have you been doing today?” She asked after I kissed her on the top of her head.

“Writing a speech for Mayor Fulton,” I answered.

“Did you know, your grandfather Walter wrote speeches for Mayor Hilary House?” she asked.

“No way,” I replied.

Thinking, how much of who we are depends on who our ancestors were? Also crossing my mind was his favorite saying: Be a servant and live like a king. That thought was followed by: I must remember to do more for the less fortunate.

Mother Dies

Diane and I decided we would do the New Year's Eve thing in New York on Times Square. She booked us in the Windsor Hotel a few blocks from the celebration and bought tickets to a Dizzy Gillespie's appearance on Fat Tuesday the night before. Mother was more excited about our trip than we were. Mother loved New York but had never visited there.

As I was leaving mother's room at the Imperial Manor, her new doctor, Dr. Lee stopped me in the hallway.

“Mister Allen,” he said, in his broken English, Asian accent, “I must talk with you. Privately.”

We moved to the unoccupied lobby.

“I am so sorry to tell you; your mother has Pancreatic Cancer. It has progressed very far. There is not much we can do for her, but make her comfortable for the next few months.”

After further discussion, I asked Dr. Lee not to tell mother or anyone else about the cancer. Explaining to him Christmas was mother's favorite time of the year. Since she only had a

few months to live, I wanted her to enjoy her last Christmas. I said I would tell her when I returned from a trip, right after the first of the year. He agreed. Diane and I had a fabulous time in New York. We decided, however that Times Square on New Year's Eve was an only once in a lifetime event.

On the first Sunday after our return, I stayed after church for choir rehearsal. Afterward, I went to the nursing home. Mother's thinning, yet still beautiful grey hair had been recently combed by one of the aids. And she had on fresh lipstick, all in preparation for my visit.

Mother greeted me with a beautiful smile and asked, "Where's Diane?"

"Oh, she's at home. I came from choir practice." I said.

"I'm so happy you started singing in the choir. I remember those days at Buchanan Street. I was so proud seeing you up there. Just like me when I was your age. And, when you'd sing those solos, all the ladies would cry."

"I'm enjoying it again. We have an excellent organist and director. I'd like to bring you to a musical event sometime."

"Oh, I'd love that but I have so much trouble getting around."

"Well, why don't I just bring the choir to you," I replied.

She said, "If anyone could pull that off, it's you."

Sitting in the chair beside her bed and propping my feet up on the rail, I said, "Mother, I have some good news for you and some bad news."

"Oh, my goodness. Which are you going to tell me first?"

"Mother, you have Pancreatic Cancer and the doctor gives you about two months to live."

With a shy smile, she said, “Oh my, I presume that’s the bad news. What is the good news?”

“The good news is we are not going to let that get in the way of us having a good time until the end.”

I stood, leaned over her and held her close as we cried together.

She pulled away and said, “Great, I’m going to get to see Gene sooner than I thought. That too is good news.”

On the way home to tell Diane about what happened, both pride and tears welled up in me. I realized again just how much joy mother always held in her heart. She was appreciative of everything and everyone. She lived a sometimes hard but always joyful life, worthy of imitation.

Most days after work, I’d drop by to see if mother needed anything.

Once as I walked into her room as she say to herself, “The Lord is in his holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before Him.”

My entrance startled her.

She asked, “What did I say?”

I repeated the scripture.

She said, “I’m afraid that I won’t make it to that holy temple.”

“Why?” I asked.

“I haven’t been good enough,” she replied.

“Mother,” I said, “Isn’t that what the Good News is all about. No one is good enough. Therefore, all get in. But if you get there and you have a problem with Saint Peter, just tell him you are Larry Womack’s mother and you’ll walk right through the pearly gates.”

We were laughing when Diane walked in.

She asked. "What are you two laughing about?"

I told her.

Diane then walked to mother's bedside, patted her on the forehead and said, "Eva, if I were you I'd get a plan B."

Two weeks later, mother died with her mother by her side.

On my way to be by their side, I thought: It makes no different how old one is to see your child die must be exceedingly difficult.

When I arrived, my grandmother was standing Mother's bed. At ninety-four, she was already known as the incredible shrinking woman, she looked even smaller standing there in the quiet. We hugged.

She wept into my chest, "She is still my little girl."

The next day, I went back to the nursing home to collect mother's things. Rose, the nurse's aide, walked into mother's room ahead of me and turned on the light. I surveyed the surroundings.

"Mr. Womack," said Rose as she picked up a blanket, "I just want you to know how much your mother meant to all of us around here. Miss Eva, God rest her soul was an inspiration to us all. Her two years with us were a blessing. She was always so cheery even with all of her afflictions."

"She loved you too Rose. She told me that many times." I replied.

"Mr. Womack she loved everybody. You know, Miss Eva and I saw eye-to-eye on many things, including the Bible. When I was on my shift, sometimes we would sit here at two or three

o'clock in the morning and read our favorite scriptures. Her favorite was Philippians 4:11: I have learned no matter what state I am in to be content. Miss Eva said that ever since her stroke, she always tried to live by that verse. And, God bless her soul, I believe she always did. She is now in heaven with her Lord. Hallelujah, Praise His Name!"

"I want to thank you for all you and the other people here at Imperial Manor did for Mother. You took excellent care of her." I replied.

"Mr. Womack, your mother did more for us than we did for her. She was always listening to our problems and giving advice. God love her."

As I took a large picture of a kitten down from the wall, Rose said, "And you know she loved you and your brothers with all her heart."

"Yeah, she did Rose," I replied.

"Why you know how she always talked about her love for her late husband, Mr. Allen? Well I'm sure she wouldn't mind me telling you now, but she loved your daddy too. And they'd been divorced for 25 years."

"Yes I know Rose, I continued, "Mother and I talked about that several times."

Rose Stanley, please come to the nurse's desk is heard over the intercom.

"I gotta go Mr. Womack," said Rose placing the folded blanket on the bed. "Now, you come back and visit us. Let us know how you're doing. Is Miss Eva's mother still holding up okay? How old is she?"

"She's ninety-four, Rose. Doing just fine."

The voice over the public address system repeated: Rose Stanley, please come to the nurse's desk.

“Lord Almighty I better get there before I get into trouble.”

“Thank you again for all you did for mother. You were a good friend.”

“I miss her so much,” added Rose, standing in the doorway, “If there is ever anything I can do...”

As Rose left, I continued packing mother’s stuff. I picked up the telephone and listened to it. It was dead. I unplugged it, wound the cord around it, and placed it in a box. Looking around, I sat on the bed. Rose’s words, is there anything else I can do played over and over in my head.

No, Rose, there is not much anyone can do now. We’ve hauled her away in an aluminum box and will bury it in the ground in the Veteran’s Cemetery, next to Gene Allen She will remain there in some discernible form for many years. There’s not much any of us can do now.

You know, Rose, I think it would be a big mistake to just remember the joy. Rose, let us not forget the suffering as well - hers and ours. And, the irritations and the frustrations. Rose let’s not just remember Miss Eva as a saint. Let’s remember her as a sinner, too. God rest her soul. And Rose, God bless the soul of mother’s telephone. May it rest in peace. Lord knows, it got no rest during her earthly life. Why, in the last two years, mother must have made ten thousand phone calls. All her many friends thought they were the only one she called regularly. And Rose, God bless the call button over her bed. It would be impossible to calculate the number of times she pushed it. Most of the time it was for legitimate reasons. But often, just to hear a voice, friendly or not.

And Rose, God bless her books. One night when we were reflecting on my childhood, I mentioned memories of walking several miles to the branch library in our neighborhood. Mother said, Yes, I loved that library, but when you were about twelve I started going to the library

downtown. When I asked why, expecting some falling out she had with the librarian, she said it was because she'd read all the books there and that was probably true.

And Rose, God bless her Pilot Razor Point Ballpoint Pens, the only pens with which she allegedly could write. But Rose, most of all God blessed her journals and her diaries - a storehouse of family memories. Collected by one of life's most illustrious observers. I'll treasure these as I learned to cherish her in those last few weeks we shared together.

These were her things. Now they belong to no one. Once treasures, now trash. Once worth protecting with one's life; now difficult to give away. How much is this picture of a kitten worth? To her the world; to you maybe a dollar in a yard sale. Yes, Rose, God bless everything that was hers including Philippians 4:11. "I have learned no matter what state I'm in to be content."

I pushed the cart out of the room and turned off the light.

Fortuitous Fling

Ingram Group office manager, Janet, walked into my office and said, "I'm about to do something against my better judgment."

Janet was a serious practicing Baptist and a person of high morals. Janet, however, found my eclectic, bawdy communication style delightfully engaging – from an arms-length perspective. She also knew that Diane and I had great affection and respect for one another.

Janet informed me Tom Ingram was home with the flu, and that, as a favor for a friend, he had scheduled a meeting with a young woman to discuss her quest for a marketing position.

"I should know better than to have her talk with you," she said.

"Why?" I asked.

“Because she is your fantasy girl. Even though I know that your kidding around about women is mostly harmless chatter, I am afraid you might lose your sense of decorum over this one.”

“Send her in!”

When Mollie Williams walked through the door, I knew my life had changed forever. I didn't know how, but I knew my life would be different with her in it. Almost six feet tall with long raven hair, she had a creamy, flawless complexion, sensuous lips, and large green eyes that would melt any man's heart even at a passing glance. She was the most physically beautiful woman I had seen, including Miss Haley in the third grade and Patsy at church.

She wore a powder blue suit and a white silk blouse. Her skirt hung fashionably short, just above her knee. Black stiletto pumps and a matching leather handbag completed the perfect package.

“Hello, I'm Mollie Williams,” she said, extending her hand and looking me straight in the eye. “Thank you for seeing me.”

Scuffling up from my chair and sucking in my stomach, I said, “Oh, no problem. I'm sorry Tom isn't here. I understand he has the flu.”

I extended my hand. The touch of her skin sent energy through me like I had never before experienced or have since. I also felt a wave of anxiety that I might have held her hand too long and given away my euphoria.

“Have a seat,” I offered.

The conversation progressed in typical interview fashion for twenty minutes or so. Possessing the ability to multitask in my mind, I used the skill to its utmost potential. The surface

conversation, regarding her quest for employment, was as expected. But, in another region of my mind, I was also visually exploring the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. I was simultaneously calculating just how I could keep her in my life forever.

She was at once secure, confident, and naively vulnerable. The combination of traits I most admire in a woman. I wanted to manipulate her into trusting me to become her mentor and friend. And, in fantasy, her lover. I thought of my oft-quoted Kierkegaard line, “The most difficult task a man faces is to conceal part of the truth, for all of the truth to be made known.”

The conversation ended with me arranging for her to visit a local celebrity entrepreneur to discuss her job needs. I asked her to call me the following day to let me know how her interview with him concluded so I could recommend a next step for her. In my mind, that next step would be to discuss her progress over a cocktail.

When she walked out of my office, looking just as magnificent leaving as she did coming in, I realized I was sweating. Wiping my brow, I sat down and turned to see if I could watch her leaving the building from my mezzanine window. I couldn't.

After a few quiet moments, I hollered, “Thank you, Janice.”

“You're welcome, Larry,” was her reply.

Mollie and I became close friends. She was thirty then. I was almost fifty; the same age as her father. Mollie did come to trust me. Our love and affection for one another grew.

We occasionally met for cocktails that sometimes extended to dinner. Mollie grew to be the second most important woman in my life. Sometimes, in fantasy moments, she was number one.

Diane reluctantly and tacitly indulged me and allowed my relationship with Mollie to flourish. Diane was not intimidated or threatened by it though it was disquieting for her. And Mollie had several love interests and relationships outside our unique friendship.

Though Mollie Williams and I did continue to engage in flirtatious behaviors, she assured me she would never make love to a married man. I enjoyed trying to push the envelope.

Even challenging her with, “Actually, I can seduce you anytime I get ready.”

Diane had a business trip to Denver for a convention of court case managers. I was to join her for the weekend. I arranged with Mollie to bring dinner to her apartment while Diane was gone. She reluctantly agreed. Warning me to behave myself.

I made a mix tape of her favorite songs and ordered carryout from her favorite restaurant including the chocolate bomb cake. When I arrived she greeted me with a light kiss and we set up a table in the living room near her balcony, overlooking the city. I asked her to supply candles, which she did. I started the music and poured us each a glass of her favorite wine. Three songs into the tape was Barry Manilow’s *When Love Is Gone*. Her favorite. We danced. I kissed her on the neck. She gave me a frown and a smile.

Mollie was particularly cautious with her wine over dinner. The lamb chops were magnificent, the mood romantic and the conversation light. After dinner, I ushered her to the sofa, cleaned the table, opened the champagne and served the chocolate bomb cake. Most of the candles had dwindled. Only the lights of the city illuminated the room. We toasted with champagne as I fed her the chocolate cake.

The music stopped. The room was quiet. After pouring her another glass of champagne, I placed my arm around her shoulder. We sat quietly for several minutes. I gently pushed her head to the arm of the sofa and moved over her. We kissed passionately.

When we released from the embrace, I said, “One, two, three you’re out. You have just been seduced!”

Mollie said, “You S.O.B.!”

We engaged in a familial hug. I left with our friendship intact. But our surreptitious relationship continued.

Dad Dies

My stepmother Erbie called in a panic, “Your father is having a stroke. Get over here right away. I’ve called the EMTs!”

When Diane and I arrived, Dad was sitting in his chair trying to open a pack of cigarettes. His face was drawn on the left side. Dad became angry with me when I took the cigarettes from him, and he tried to stand. As I placed him back in the chair, he became angrier.

“You can’t tell me what to do. Back off before I knock the shit out of you!”

When the EMTs arrived, he became more docile and cooperative. They quickly hauled him off to the hospital. Erbie rode in the ambulance with him taking the living will they had prepared to indicate no resuscitation. Diana and I went home to quickly change into more appropriate clothes, after reminding Erbie of Dad’s no resuscitation orders.

Dad had suffered a broken hip in a fall fighting a fire a few years earlier. He had diabetes, was legally blind and had other ailments as well. In fact, his health was so poor prior to the

stroke, we were concerned he might take his own life. He had been depressed and extremely unhappy for months.

By the time Diane and I arrived at the hospital, Dad's sister and sister-in-law had arrived. They had convinced Erbie to hook him up to all the life-continuing machines. Erbie, being the malleable person she was, allowed that to happen. Even though it was against her better judgment to do so.

Diane, whom Dad loved as much as anyone ever in his life, was upset and asked why they allowed him to be resuscitated in his condition. My aunts were appalled Diane would question their actions. Even accusing her of being unchristian. Dad remained in a coma for several weeks under the close watch of my aunts before he died. On hearing of his death, I thought, I don't want to be king. But in the role of eldest son, one becomes the one in charge, whether wanted or not.

When Diane and I arrived at the funeral home, I stopped out front to talk with my brothers. Diane went inside to find Erbie. A few moments later she came out in tears.

When she had walked up to the casket to greet Erbie, my aunt said, "Well, I guess you're glad he's dead?"

We let the matter drop given the circumstances, through the knowledge that arguing with ignorant people never gets you anywhere.

At the funeral home, my grandmother was holding court. She had not seen most members of Dad's family in years. Someone asked how old she was. She proudly replied she was ninety-six.

I said, "Well I guess there's no reason for you to go home. Is there?"

She hit me across the legs with her cane and let out a hardy laugh.

The Fall

When David Furse, CEO of a market research firm and former professor at Vanderbilt University's business school approached me about joining his firm, I was immediately seduced. A music major at a small state college being asked to become a partner of a prestigious business school professor? Who wouldn't be?

After lengthy discussion with Diane and the reassurance she had my back on this, I joined David. Tom was surprised.

On my first day at NCG Research & Consulting Group, I assisted David and his lawyer with writing a letter to a former business partner threatening a lawsuit. Was that a sign? I hoped not.

In less than six months, I realized I had made my first real business blunder. This situation would forever be unbearable. What had I done? David was the most controlling person I'd ever met. He even had the office manager spy on the other employees during his absences. She would actually call him at his hotel in the evenings with her interpretation of what happened at the office during the day. And, she was an awful interpreter. Decisions were made based on her erroneous elucidations. It was a disaster. But I honestly tried to make it work.

To add to my anxiety, Mollie Williams called and asked me to join her for a drink after work. There she said she had decided to move to Los Angeles. I was disappointed, but I helped her with her arrangements. We had a parting event at her apartment. Standing on her balcony, I pointed at the moon.

I said, "You know that the moon in California is the same moon as here?"

She took my arm as she agreed.

“When you look at the moon,” I continued. “I want you to see me. I’ll be looking at the moon as well, but I’ll be seeing you.”

Parting really is such sweet sorrow.

The holidays were extremely difficult for me. It was hard to hide my depression over the situation with David. Hundreds of scenarios regularly played in my head. Diane was aware of my lack of attention to holiday festivities. She was kind and forgiving. I vowed to solve the communication problem with David.

On the first day back after New Year’s, I was sitting in David’s office listening to another of his ever changing plans. I noted that instead of scribing the details of plan d, e, or f, I was drafting a resignation letter on my yellow pad. I resigned at that meeting. David said he would not honor our agreement and give me the three months severance pay.

On My Own, Again

At home, Diane said even though she was scared of what the future might hold, she was glad I had quit. After dinner, I carried our dishes into the kitchen to Diane at the sink.

She said, “Catch me. I’m going to fall back.”

I caught her and turned her around. We kissed. Held one another close. Confirming everything would eventually be all right. For the second time in our marriage, Diane was the primary breadwinner.

Here I am fifty years old with no future prospects, no income and in the middle of a recession. I fully realized I had created this mess by allowing myself to become the “irrelevant in the room.” Sometime several years before I had quit learning and begun coasting.

Like in our honeymoon days when Diane went to work, I sat in the living room trying to think ahead instead of back. There is no future in the past, kept playing over in my head. My “Ah Ha” moment came ten days into my one-on-one deliberation. I came when I created a structure from which to move forward: 1) address present issues in the morning; 2) beat myself up at lunchtime over the past; and 3) reeducate myself for my future in the afternoon.

I bought popular business books and took copious notes. I re-subscribed to those business magazines, I subscribed to before but never read. We borrowed thirty thousand dollars against my insurance to live on for six months.

I warmed to the working from home concept quicker than expected. It provided a welcome respite from years of unnecessary meetings, ass kissing, dealing with arrogant business people, politicians, and endless boring cocktail parties.

Within three months, I had secure clients and paid back the insurance loans.

While working on a marketing engagement for a beverage company from Mississippi, I was introduced to their Texas investment banker. He passed my writings on to Dan McArthur. Dan had served as the head of the consulting arm of the accounting firm Coopers and Lybrand. Dan read my writings and we formed a relationship.

From my daily discussions with Dan, I surmised he was Buddhist. Without discussion, I reread my books on the ancient philosophy and began weaving concepts and allegories from Buddhism into the articles I was writing to publish under our names. Dan was duly impressed, as were the editors of the magazines. Saying the allegories gave our writings a unique personality.

Reading Buddhist thought rekindled interest in my spiritual journey. I learned new ways to think, like critical thinking and the scientific method. When I apply those disciplines my old

spiritual constructs, I gained a new appreciation for life and a more balanced understanding of who I want to be. My new rational conclusions regarding religion became just as uplifting as my youthful by-ins.

God is not needed to enjoy life, to write a beautiful poem, to sing a rousing anthem, to appreciate the beauty that surrounds us, to achieve success, to paint a glorious picture or be in service. God does not cause the drought or bring the rain. God doesn't let some people die to teach others a lesson or smile on some and not on others. God makes no sense. However, many of the principles and values to which I was exposed as a Christian remain meaningful. And I will continue to be grateful for the valued counsel, useful examples, and wise cautions that many faithful Christians have given me over the years. Episcopalians taught me to live life to its fullest, in consideration of others and through the moderated enjoyment of the array of foods, drink, culture, writings, music, art, and other pastimes. Methodists taught me fellowship and that healthy relationships with friends and family lead to a longer life, more fun and peace of mind. And that bad relationships are like the plague and should be avoided at all cost.

I did not become rigid in my new position on faith, but I did becoming steady.

I continued to codify my real values, and began to seriously act on them.

Outcome Management

Dan McArthur became my mentor. He secured several consulting clients and I provided him support. I joined him at workshops at the Motorola School in Chicago. He put me on a salary. Diane and I began to financially breathe again.

Glaxo Pharmaceuticals became our largest and most prestigious client. Over drinks in the bar at the Grove Park Inn in Ashville, North Carolina, Dan declared we were ready to write our

book. Suggesting I devote most of my time to organizing the information for the manuscript and writing chapter drafts based on our published articles.

Within three months, we had five publishing offers to publish for *Outcome Management, There is no future in the past*. We selected the American Management Association (AMA) and I began to write.

Jesse Coles Reappears

Just before the book was published, as I was about to close shop one afternoon, Jesse Coles crossed my mind. I had not talked to Jesse since 1968 and had no idea where he was or what he was doing. I called information in Columbia, South Carolina and asked for Jesse A. Coles, Jr. She gave me his number.

Jesse answered, "Hello?"

I said, "Jesse?"

He immediately responded with, "Larry Womack, where are you?"

It had been twenty-six years since we had talked, yet he identified me through one word, his name.

"Jesse," I said, "I called you with a surprise. I am about to publish a book."

"I'm not surprised that you are publishing a book," he said, "What's it about?"

I replied, "Business."

Jesse said, "Now that surprises me."

I learned that Jesse had recently retired from fifteen years as the treasurer of South Carolina, and was now the president of a nonprofit foundation that gave away a million dollars a year. I asked Jesse to be our fourth attribution for the book. He agreed.

Just as the book was published, Dan discovered a business partner was stealing for him and we parted company. But I wasn't starting over this time. I had developed personal clients in the aerospace industry in Huntsville, Alabama. And, Jesse Coles put me on a nice retainer to provide marketing and business advice to his foundation.

Abiding Love

Diane and I saw Good Will Hunting. The movie provided a profound truth that explained the constant joy in our relationship. In Good Will Hunting, the psychiatrist explains his relationship with his deceased wife to a young male patient who is falling in love. We were so touched by his perspective on our anniversary, I gave Diane a small picture frame containing his poignant words. Our expectation was that she would have it to remember me after my death:

Those are the things I miss the most. Those little idiosyncrasies that only I know about. That's what made her my wife. Oh, and she had the goods on me too. She knew all my little peccadilloes. People call these things imperfections, but they are not. That's the good stuff. And we get to choose who we let into our little world. We're not perfect sport. Let me save you the suspense. This girl you met, she's not perfect either. But the question is whether or not you're perfect for each other. That's the whole deal. That's what intimacy is all about.

At Christmas, Diane gave me a snow globe of New York with a whimsical Broadway show skyline and the ball poised to drop into the year 2000. We loved New York, especially in the winter. We talked of maybe living there some day if we could afford it. As with most Americans we also followed the Y2K panics reported by the media. We did not, however, fill our bathtub with an emergency water supply. New Year's Day was on a Saturday, my scheduled

tennis get-together day. When arriving at the center, someone asked how Diane and I had celebrated New Year's Eve. I said we went to a friend's see if his pacemaker would explode.

Blair's Marriage

Diane spent many hours on the phone with Blair, planning her coming nuptials. Blair, who was the first non-Catholic cheerleader at her Catholic high school, joined the Church and regularly attended with Sean and his family. The wedding was held at St. Ann Catholic Church in downtown West Palm Beach. It was a joyous and posh affair. Befitting the beautiful princess and her prince very charming. Sean's family are delightful caring people. We knew she'd be in excellent company for the rest of her life. That was most comforting to Diane and me. As I presented our youngest daughter to the groom, I turned to see Diane waiting for me to join her in the pew. I was overcome by Diane's radiance, our joy and our recollections. My love for her grows with each day.

Watching the moving ceremony, I thought:

If I ever became a Christian again it would be as a Roman Catholic. I have high regard for many of its learned theologians and its good works throughout many centuries. Oh, yes, there are heathens, perverts, opportunists, and otherwise evil persons in the Church. As there are in all religious institutions. Given the number of Catholics in the world, the Church spreads far more good than it perpetrates evil. Sean and the entire Coughlin family represent all that's good about the Catholic Church. They are spirited people who enjoy life and express the true meaning of service to others. I'm glad that Blair is now one of their own.

First Love Returns

Diane decided that we must do something about the gluttony of the holidays like join a fitness center. She chose an exercise center at a local hospital. The center was managed under the capable hands of Keith Putman and his sidekick Wil Embry. Admittedly, Diane was more committed than I to physical improvement. I did, however, participate. I especially enjoyed bantering with Keith and Wil. So much so, that Diane and I went to the center in separate cars so I could hang around with the guys after our workouts. One morning Keith asked if I were originally from Nashville? I said yes, and that I had attended North High School.

Keith said, “No way. My parents attended North High. Mother was Patsy Coomer.”

I said, “I took her to the prom!”

“There is no way I could ever imagine you and my mother together,” he continued.

The next day, I brought the picture of Patsy and me at the prom that had hung on our “wall of shame” for over thirty years.

Keith made the sign of the vampire cross and turned away from the picture, saying, “I don’t want to see it! It’s impossible that someone as crazy as you and my straight-laced mother could appear in a picture together!”

A few weeks later, Patsy and I reconnected at a 5K event sponsored by the Center. She was as beautiful and fragile as ever. Diane knew every detail of my relationship with my first love and was as excited with the reconnection as was I.

Diane won her age group in the 5k. I knew I was in trouble when someone riding a stationary bicycle passed me on the backstretch. At that same event, I learned that Keith’s

sidekick Wil had attended St. James as a baby and that I had once changed his diaper. Small world.

Bad News

Jesse called saying, "Larry, I need to go in the other room."

Lowering his voice, he said, "Bad news. I have lung cancer, and it has metastasized to my bones. There is not much hope that something can be done about it. I will do chemo, but the chances of it working are slim. My family, as you know, are dependent on me. I'm going to need you to help both them and me see this through."

"Got it, Jesse," I said, "I'll be at your place on Tuesday, and we'll develop a plan of action. Love you, man."

"Love you too. See you Tuesday."

I went into the bedroom and lay on the bed:

The path of life is a winding road. Sometimes even turning back on its self. I never thought I'd connect with Jesse again and again, but I have. Each time we reconnected, it was though we'd never been apart. I expected that this time Jesse and I would have at least ten or fifteen more years together. I imagined us, feeble, sitting on a park bench reliving old times. But, expectations along the way don't always work out - circumstance change, people change. You meet a fellow traveler, share the road for a while, then either you or they disappear because of apathy, conflict, divergent goals or death. You thought they'd be with you all the way. Jesse is the most different person I've known. Though he remains true to his secular view of life, most of the people in his personal and business world's assume he is a God-fearing, church-going Christian. It is because of his demeanor, empathy, generosity and gentle persuasiveness. Even

those who have participated in his countless lustful dalliances have only kind words for him. I have never heard one soul, in all my years of knowing him speak a disparaging word about Jesse. I will miss him more than any other dead person I know.

When Diane returned from her run, I told her of Jesse's situation. She sat on the bed and held me as I cried.

CHAPTER EIGHT: Starting, Starting Over

Happy Banter

January 2003, I was standing in the kitchen door watching Diane prepare supper.

I said, “And another thing, don’t kiss me on the top of my head. The first time you kiss me on the top of my head, I’ll know my days are numbered. You’ll begin thinking about sending me to a home.”

“I’ve never thought about sending you to a home,” she replied.

“Remember, a couple of years ago, when Gus wasn’t feeling well and we let him sleep here in the kitchen, instead of his doghouse. Sometime during the night, he crapped on the floor. That morning you made me clean it up. While I was doing so, I thought, first time I do this she’ll send me to a home.”

Diane said, “Anyway, I think you’d enjoy living in a home, as you call it. For one thing, there would be a bigger audience for your routines, including some residents with Alzheimer’s for whom your old stories would be new every day. You’d like that!”

“I wouldn’t like the smell,” I replied. “When I visited Mother in the nursing home, I’d sometimes hear my old college fight song, Smash Bang to Victory, in my head. At first I couldn’t figure out why; then one day it hit me. The nursing home smelled like my old college underwear.”

“That is gross! Tell me you didn’t wear underwear for weeks at a time when you were in college. No wonder you didn’t date much.”

“You know I didn’t date much because my band was busy on the weekends. It had little or nothing to do with the state of my underwear. Enough about my underwear, back to the top of my head. Some men might think it’s a sign of affection. To me, a head kiss is an acknowledgment of old age. The only thing worse is a pat on the head. When they start doing that you know the end is near.”

“The end will be near around here if you don’t clean up that mess in the bedroom. Why don’t you hang up your clothes?”

“That’s what I got you for,” I said, “It’s the main reason I got married!”

“Don’t start with those diversionary tactics. Please get in there and clean up your mess.

Boy, if I die before you, this house will be a mess.”

“No, it won’t. I’d keep it nice and spotless.”

“Why don’t we sometimes pretend I’m dead?”

“Aw hell, I do that all the time now.”

Just then the phone rang. It was Blair in West Palm Beach.

Diane screeched, “Blair is pregnant!”

This was their third in vitro fertilization effort. Diane and Blair talked for more than an hour. Mostly about their shared favorite subject – clothes. This time, baby clothes. Within hours, Holly called to tell us that she, Ed, and my namesake grandson, Larry, were looking to buy their first home and to share Blair's exciting news with Diane. It was a great day for our family. We were immensely excited for our daughters and ourselves.

There was another 5K race at the fitness center. Diane again won her age group. It had long been recognized that my vertical speed exceeded my horizontal speed. I did, however, finish the race and was greeted at the finish line by Diane, Keith, Wil, and Patsy Coomer Putman.

Keith said, "We sure are glad you made it before dark, and we had to go looking for you."

Devastation

Monday Diane and I went to Dr. David Heusinkveld for physicals. We liked him because of his straightforward, pragmatic approach to medicine. He's the doctor who told me that man was designed to be eaten by a saber-toothed tiger by the time he was thirty-six years old. Any life thereafter is a bonus.

Dr. H said that everything looked positive and said he would call with the results of the blood test in a few days. On Wednesday, his office called during the day, saying he needed to talk to Diane.

She called him from her office and then called me. "He said that a particular marker in my blood was elevated to a level one might expect for a runner. But he still wants me to go tomorrow for a CAT scan and a liver biopsy as a precaution."

We went early the next day. Following the procedures, we delivered the film to his office. On Friday morning, his nurse called and told Diane he wanted her in his office immediately, and to bring me along.

Without preliminaries, Dr. H touched Diane on her knee, looked her directly in the eyes and said, “Diane, you have Cancer of Unknown Primary that has metastasized to your liver. There is no cure. I’m sorry.”

“How long do I have?” she asked.

“Months,” he replied. “I do think there is a possibility that chemo might extend your life for a few extra months. My wife’s best friend is Dr. Ruth Lamar. She is an oncologist at St. Thomas Hospital and can start treatments Monday morning if you like.”

The meeting lasted less than fifteen minutes.

We sat quietly holding hands as I drove home.

I broke the silence with the stupid remark, “Now I know what ‘today is the first day of the rest of your life’ means.”

At home, we lay on the bed, held each other and cried. We also struggled with how to share the grim news to our daughters without shattering their good news. We decided to emphasize the hope of remission. Later that day, I scoured the Internet for information on Cancer of Unknown Primary that had metastasized to the liver and discovered the average life expectancy after discovery was two months. I was devastated but kept the information to myself.

Dr. Lamar was as practical and down to earth as Dr. H. She offered no false hope. She said selecting a chemo treatment without knowing the type of cancer she was dealing with was a guessing game. Diane made it clear to the doctor that she didn’t want to be a poster person for

some new experimental treatment. All she wanted was to live long enough to see our new grandchild, to visit Holly's first house and to see our grandson, Larry, enter junior high school. She also made it clear to the doctor that she only wanted treatment covered by insurance.

"Do nothing," she said, "That would require utilizing our investments and savings."

When I shared the news of Diane's cancer with Jesse on one of our weekly calls, all he could think to say was, "Oh, shit!" His plight was not improving, and he knew I could no longer devote as much attention to his issues because of what we were struggling with here. Jesse and Diane occasionally talked ; laughing and planning a pity party that I would M.C. I attended a retirement party for Jesse in Columbia, SC. It was the last time I saw him.

My old friend, Don McKennon called. He was slowly recovering from a stroke and had decided to check into a nursing home to give his family a break. I agreed to visit him once a week.

The once every two weeks chemo sessions dramatically slowed tumor growth. When Diane complained about a lack of appetite during an office visit, I suggested marijuana to the doctor. Dr. Lamar said that might work, but she'd prescribe Marinol, the synthetic version of weed. As the physician left the examining room, she looked at me, over her glasses, and said, "No sharing."

Diane continued to work at her office four days each week and with her weekend yard work, including cutting the grass. Our grandson increased the length of his weekend stays. He was a trooper. Taking it upon himself to lift spirits, provide words of encouragement and to serve as a light in our dark time.

Jesse's son called to tell me Jesse died. I was an honorary pallbearer but did not attend the ceremony.

Why Not?

I was standing in the kitchen watching Diane put the dinner dishes away.

She turned, looked me directly in the eyes and asked, "You won't forget me, will you?"

It was three days before our fortieth anniversary, two months before she would die, and six months since her diagnosis.

On the refrigerator, by which I was standing was a Hagar the Horrible Viking comic strip that had graced its door for years. We both looked at it. Hagar is in a small boat in a horrific thunderstorm. He looks to the heavens and shouts, "Why me, Lord?" The voice from the sky booms back, "Why not?" We laughed, held one another close and sobbed.

One evening, when I had just returned to the living room with two glasses of wine, Diane looked up and said, "I'll bet the first thing you'll do after I die is get rid of this ugly sofa."

"No," I replied. "First, I'll find me a woman to have sex with. Then I'll get rid of the sofa."

We laughed and hugged. In fact, we laughed a lot more than we cried during those last nine months.

Christian friends asked if they could pray for a miracle to save her. We thanked them for their prayers but respectfully informed them we had experienced our miracle. It had lasted for forty years. Though no longer God worshipers, we continued to value our Christian heritage and hold our Christian friends in great esteem. We did not want to offend anyone with our views, but we were determined this experience would take place in the context of our shared perspectives

on life and death. We knew that when it was over, it was over. I would go on to live the good life without her and continue to savor the memories of our good life together with no expectation of seeing her again.

The End

For our 40th anniversary in October, Diane gave me a small silver medallion for my keychain engraved: YOU . . . Love, me, along with the date. That was the way we each signed every anniversary, birthday and Valentine card we exchanged. I gave her a greeting card with the picture of a small boy and a small girl on tricycles looking at one another after a slight accident. Inside the card read: I'm happy I ran into you. YOU . . . Love, me. On that same anniversary day, granddaughter Lily Diane Counihan was born. Just a month before, grandson Larry crossed the milestone from an elementary child to a middle school boy.

Diane decided to stop chemo on December 17th when the oncologist said the current cocktail was no longer working. She quit her work as a judicial clerk at the same time.

On Christmas Day, Diane experienced holding and feeding our new granddaughter, while attending the open house at Holly, Ed, and Larry's new home. On December 26th, Blair, Sean, and Lily returned to West Palm Beach. That evening, I asked Diane what she would like for supper. She said she wasn't hungry. I knew this day would come. My heart sank with sadness. She had decided she'd enjoyed as much of the pain and suffering as she could stand. She was ready to die. And, I was prepared to support her decision.

The hospice nurse came the next day. From the 27th through January 5th, I cared for Diane at home – striving to keep her comfortable, giving her morphine, and assisting her with her personal needs. I'd often thought of my joke about her sending me to a home if I crapped on

the floor. We both imagined it would be me in this circumstance instead of her. That I would go first. My most difficult times were when I was not with her, like the evening I went to the grocery to buy adult diapers and not knowing her size. I stood in the aisle and sobbed.

By January 4th, her condition had deteriorated to the point I could no longer meet her needs. On January 5th, she was carried to a hospice in an ambulance. I followed. That was the lowest point for me, following her in the ambulance on our way to the hospice.

Knowing I would return to be forever without her. It was then the reality hit me that we had done all those things for the last time – for the last time. To everyone's surprise but mine, she died three days later. Though we never discussed it, I knew she was starving herself and determined to take control of her dying process. She had a powerful will in that dainty frame, and she was using it.

Grandson Larry, twelve at the time, who had been a mainstay during Diane's illness, and I was home watching *Pirates of the Caribbean* when the call came from hospice that she had died. We went there to retrieve her wedding ring and a family quilt. He sat in the waiting room while I went to her bedside. The image of her lifeless body evoked little emotion. The love of my life was dead and gone forever. I was disappointed I was not with her when she died. But we had already said goodbye so many times and in so many ways during the nine months since her diagnosis, another goodbye would have been redundant.

I asked the hospice nurse if transportation from the medical school was on the way for their anatomical donation? She assured me they had been called. My grandson and I went to the car, called family and returned home to our movie. Every ten minutes or so we would pause the

movie, hold one another and cry. Sharing that pain and sadness with him is a treasured memory I often replay.

My first night alone after Diane died, I lay in bed and thought:

These last months of Diane's dying are my most treasured memories. She was at her most beautiful when she was dying. Her eyes sparkled even more radiantly than before. Even through the tears. Her patented walk was even more rhythmic, her voice more lilting, and her physical presence a joy to behold. Closeness became closer, her laughter more infectious, and moments with her more precious. She was enchanting. As always, we went to bed at the same time most nights. Sleeping together was our great elixir for all ills, especially as we neared the end.

Over the years, neither of us ever questioned the wisdom of a purchase the other made, even when it proved later to have been unwise. If I bought a new electronic toy, she'd watch me assemble it and be there when it first performed its function. If she came home from shopping with new clothes, I insisted she model them for me. We never argued over things, only over emotions.

Her color was fuchsia. When I bought her something to wear, chances were, it would be fuchsia. I only recently learned the word fuchsia. Back then it was just called my favorite color. She loved to garden and grew many beautiful and varied flowers that graced our home inside and out. When performing her beloved yard work, she'd wear baggy pants, a long-sleeved tee shirt, and a straw hat as protection from the sun. I'd bring her water in a plastic glass and kiss her grimy cheek. She'd give me the most winning smiles I had ever seen or will ever see.

Then a line from the Shadowlands movie, that Diane and I particularly enjoyed, popped in my head: The things that bring you the most sadness today will eventually become memories that will bring you the most joy later on. I hope so.

After her obituary had appeared in the Sunday paper, I received calls from several friends including my high school sweetheart, Patsy Coomer, and Nancy Gill, my college sweetheart. Nancy had moved back to Nashville to retire after her husband died. We agreed to meet for dinner soon. On Tuesday, I moved my upstairs office to the dining room. Basically abandoning the upstairs. On Wednesday, I was in the living room playing my newly purchased drums while wearing earphones. Suddenly my old friend Gere Carter peeked from around the front door. I removed the earphones. We hugged.

“I’m so sorry about Diane,” he said. “But I was also surprised when I heard you playing the drums. I expected you to be a bit more solemn.”

“Oh, I’m grieving. But when I think back to before I met her, I remember how happy I was without her. And how she was her own person long before she met me. Our life together was rich and beautiful, so there’s not much to grieve about. She is dead. I am not. Now I have a new life of wonder and mystery, and it’s all the better because of her. To moan and groan would say that I don’t accept life after her death. Diane is no longer in pain. I honor that and will move on.”

When I returned home from a business trip to Florida, my answering machine was blinking.

The voice on the machine said, “You, how are you doing? Call me back. I am so sad about Diane.”

She left her number. It was Mollie Williams calling from California. Though we had occasionally communicated through emails, we had not talked for more than three years. Prior to her engagement to the man she married ten or more years ago, I counseled her to be patient with his attempts to resolve the interference of his old love interest in their affairs. Those issues resolved, they married and established a new life together.

Admittedly, after Diane died, thoughts of Mollie had occasionally pass through my mind. Mollie started calling me weekly to see how I was bearing up, and to encourage me to think as much of my future as I did of the past. Her love and warmth were most helpful in dealing with my loss. When Mollie went to California, she dropped her first name and began to use her second name – Diane. In emails and on greeting cards, she began to sign: Love, Diane #2.

One evening, while sitting in the dark in the living room with a glass of wine, I thought about those well-meaning friends that were attempting to comfort me with, “Someday, you’ll see her again.”

It's strange the living actually wants to see dead loved ones again. I don't care to see Diane again under any circumstances. To see her again would be anticlimactic. Even if there were a heaven, to see her and my other deceased family and friends would be a bizarre occurrence. Diane now only resides in my mind, my heart and my musings. I don't want her back, for that would also mean revisiting the sad times and the painful moments we shared and inflicted on one another and others. I choose to remember the good times. I'm glad she's dead. In much the same way, that Christians are joyful Jesus is dead. Her death gives me new life. I will move on, make new music and delightful acquaintances, experience new joys and even make some of the health changes Diane so desperately wanted me to make.

I went to the kitchen, poured another glass of wine and returned to my new thinking place – my chair in the living room.

Shortly after Diane's death, I received a call from Father Gorday. I had not seen him since a visit to Atlanta soon after he moved there in 1978. I learned that he was no longer a parish priest and had become a family counselor. He said he wanted to visit with me but would not be available until Memorial Day weekend. Peter was the most significant ecclesiastical figure in my life. Hearing from him brought me great joy. He came. We spent the weekend at my home where we drank wine, waxed theological, and discuss my future. His visit was rejuvenating and inspirational.

When school let out, I took my grandson Larry to the west coast. It was for a holiday and for a personal tour of CBS Television City to be conducted by my friend Charles Cappelman. Knowing Larry wanted to pursue a career in video and film, Capp was quite generous with his time and most encouraging to him. Over lunch, Capp also praised my work with the Methodists, giving me more credit for the outcome than I deserved. That night Larry and I had dinner with Mollie. It was wonderful to feel the warmth of her presence and the touch of her hand.

The following day, grandson, Larry and I flew to San Francisco for the Fishermen's Wharf, Peking duck and sushi in Chinatown, and the Golden Gate Bridge. Next day we drove to see the sequoias, spent the day in wine country and lunched on the porch of the Vineberg Grocery and Deli. Larry was a delightful traveling companion. Together, we soothed our saddened souls.

Back home, with my wine, I sat in my chair and thought of Diane:

There are times when I can't recall her face and other times when I can make out every feature as clear as if she were standing before me. Sometimes, I can touch my hand, and it feels like her hand. She laughed at my silliness; she tolerated my rants and made me feel like Prince Albert. That's Prince Charming and Albert Einstein rolled into one. She cared how I felt; she worried about my health; she encouraged my work; and forgave my stupidity over and over again. And she asked me while we stood in the kitchen, "You won't forget me will you?" How could she ever think such a thing? Afraid I'd forget her? During the nine months of her dying, we drank coffee in the mornings and feasted on the dawn. At midday, we would share a sandwich and glorify in the fragrance and colors of the garden. In the afternoons, the sunsets and the wine warmed our hearts and sanctified our souls. At night, we consumed one another in quiet comfort and bottomless peace until morning came again. Afraid I'd forget her?

During those last months together, Diane taught me everything I needed to know to run a tight household, except how to get spots out of wine glasses and how to fold fitted sheets. She even filled a notebook with the names of her preferred service providers - instructions for honey-do jobs, birth dates, and special events. We also had several conversations about my need to replace Diane as the caregiver for my stepmother Erbie. Erbie lived in the Maybelle Carter retirement home two miles away, next door to Diane's mother's apartment. Diane had arranged for them to live close for several reasons including timesaving for her.

Don McKennon's son called to tell me Don had died. I thought of our first meeting at Bill's Place in North Nashville. He was just a shy, sweet kid. That's the memory of him I choose to cherish.

My stepmother, Erbie, called to tell me she had Hodgkin's Lymphoma. I immediately went to her apartment in the Mabel Carter Retirement Home to assure her not to worry. I'd be there for her and take her to treatments.

CHAPTER NINE: Rules To Live By

During Diane's illness, we often lay in bed talking about my future without her. We discussed finances, where I might move, household routines, and even future relationships.

One evening while identifying women with whom I might develop a relationship, Diane said, "Remember, Mollie Williams? You seemed to have a thing for her. You might want to check her out."

"I did already," I replied. "But she doesn't like sushi."

Diane gave me that look, to which I had, long ago, become painfully accustomed.

Diane resonated with my rules to live by and encouraged me to stick with the process. She also provided helpful insights for improving the iterations of them.

Diane said, "I'm sure your rules for living will be self-adjusting, like your moral code. But, without me to guide you, you'll need these constant reminders until someone else like me comes along."

In no way do I recommend you follow my rules. My hope is, however, religious or not, you will set personal measures, and refer to them periodically. The process works quite well for me.

Servitude

It is better to serve those you know than to just give alms to the poor.

Though my Grandfather Walter Craddock died when I was four, his legacy as a servant lived on for decades. I'm told he was an imposing and influential political figure who served in a variety of government positions, including Vice Mayor of Nashville, Tennessee. My grandfather was an influencer rather than a man of power. Usually working behind the scene as a champion of the people.

One of his constituents placed several hundred dollars in her oven for safekeeping, then later turned it on to bake a pie. Hearing about it, my grandfather sent the ashes, along with a well-crafted letter, to the U.S. Treasury Department. Within weeks, the grateful lady received seventy-five percent of her losses back from the government.

His favorite saying was, "Be a servant and live like a king."

Being a servant is not just giving arbitrary handouts to street people or donating to charitable causes. Being a servant is finding ways to directly and passionately provide meaningful support, aid, and comfort to those around you - at home, work, and in all the other venues you frequent. Find worthy causes, decent people and supporting them. My career was assisting business leaders develop successful business strategies. I continue to use those skills to assist individuals, mostly friends, in achieving personal and business goals. Several people call

me each weekday for advice, and to play catch with ideas. I refuse compensation for my assistance. It would obligate me to attend meetings.

Though Diane and I had long refocused our spirituality, we had not stopped being faithful to the Golden Rules. We had always viewed service as a reward, not a duty. While I usually took a more cerebral approach to service, Diane was more hands-on. During one of our nightly sessions, she made me promised I would try to devote at least twenty percent of each day in service to others. Some days, I fall short. Most days, I keep my promise.

Adaptability

There is no future in the past.

When people would play ‘*what if*’ with her, my former business partner, Paula Hensley, would say, “Yeah, and if a frog had wings, its ass wouldn’t bump the ground when it went from place to place.”

Paula also created a needlepoint that hung on the wall behind my desk: *No decisions are final*

Like Paula, I’ve never been a big fan of nostalgia. Therefore, her words often play in my mind, when people glorify the good old days.

When advising young people about career or education choices, I tell them, “Please don’t listen to old people. They’ll have you making buggy whips!”

A Möbius Strip is a continuous one-sided surface that can be formed from a rectangular strip by rotating one end 180° and attaching it to the other end. Moving a finger along the strip gives the illusion that one is covering new ground, until one returns to the starting point and discovers one is back at the beginning. For the Möbius traveler, all ideas, observations, decisions, and judgments are drawn solely

from the past and the present. Covering the same ground again and again creates a false sense of advancement.

In my business career, I was known for continuously plowing new ground, even before harvesting the crops from the old plantings. It was a blessing and a curse for me, and sometimes for my associates.

Going over the same ground again and again causes me anxiety. A life of repetition holds little interest for me. I like going off the beaten path, whether it's a hike, a drive, a movie, TV shows, music, books. Or, theater, my writings, restaurants, conversation, the Internet, or even sitting and thinking.

Remembrances of the past with meaning for me are straight-head jazz recordings and some refrigerator art, produced by my daughters and grandchildren. I also have a few special greeting cards shared with Diane, a shoebox with family pictures, and a small plastic baby's hairbrush. My grandson gave it to me when he was four years old. He's now twenty-two. I say keep it in the glove box of my car for combing emergencies. Those who have seen me know better.

There is no future in the past has been my motto for over thirty years.

Thoughtfulness

Thoughtfulness expressed is worth more than treasures given.

Though my wife appreciated my remembering significant dates, like birthdays and anniversaries, it was the little things she appreciated the most. Like remembering how she liked her steak prepared and her favorite wine. The best lovemaking I ever had was taking care of her and not thinking of myself. She more especially appreciated being asked how things went at the gynecologist that day and other daily life experiences.

Thoughtfulness is the most important virtue for living the good life. Understanding the goals, aspirations, desires, and needs of others, then responding to them, advances the wellbeing of the recipient. Thoughtfulness is the characteristic the majority of people appreciates most in others.

I have always preferred the company of women to men. Men are boring. They mostly talk about sports and women. Never good at sports, I chose to be good at women. It is my joy and sometimes my curse. Most women find me charming and pleasant to be around, because they intuitively sense that I genuinely like them, and truly enjoy the pleasure of their company.

Admittedly through trial and error, I learned that the characteristic that women appreciate most in a man is thoughtfulness. Not the remembering important dates kind of thoughtfulness, but remembering to ask about daily, personal events and circumstances.

Men respond to thoughtfulness as well. But men often do so with a twinge of guilt because they realize that they would never have thought to be thoughtful. Thoughtful expressions are more powerful and rewarding than selfish motives and actions. And, a lot more pleasurable.

Insightfulness

Valuable insight always comes from learning something new.

My father, Charles Chester Womack Jr., was the smartest uneducated person I've ever known. During World War II, Dad served as Fire Chief at Berry Field (Nashville Airport). As a young boy, I was privileged to spend nights with him at the airport fire hall and play among the fire engines, bombers, and fighter planes. It was there I learned how much others respected his insight and wisdom. Dad had an eighth grade education but never stopped learning.

One of the wisest statements I ever heard him impart was: *You can't think your way into a*

new way of acting, but you can act your way into a new way of thinking.

As a businessman, my mantra became, “An uneducated opinion is a dangerous resource, especially if it’s your own. It too, was drawn from my Dad’s insight.

Learning something new each day is important to me. Most evenings I reflect on what I learned that day, and if I come up short, tomorrow’s learning becomes even more intense. Once during my career, I stopped learning for about five years and suddenly found myself to be irrelevant. It took me several months of reading, studying and conversing with knowledgeable people to get my career back on track. I vowed then to never again let that happen. I read and listen to books and podcasts, converse with my acquaintances, watch TV, traverse the Internet, and advance my technological skills in an intentional way, and on a daily basis.

Improving one’s insight comes more readily to those who admit that it is a lack of new information holding them back. Some of my older friends say it is their age preventing them from career advancement. I contend it’s because years ago they determined they knew all they ever needed to know, and stopped learning.

I was promoting my quest for new insight to my late friend Jesse Coles when he said, “I don’t need to learn anything else. I already know a lot of stuff I haven’t used yet.”

Friendliness

Be nice to everyone. Pick close friends and cohorts wisely, and cherish them.

My daughter, Blair, is my role model on this life rule. She never leaves as a stranger to anyone she meets. Never forgets a face, a name or a personal story. Everybody. . .haves and have nots; creed or creedless; up or down is enriched by Blair’s presence.

Live for people, and people will come alive for you. My cadre of friends include people of varying sizes, shapes, ages, and demeanors. Some of my friends who are dead include a policeman, some music buddies, several relatives, a dwarf, and my beloved wife. I still love them, none-the-less. It's not their fault, or mine that they are dead. My living friends entertain, edify, and educate me. And, hopefully, I do the same for them.

There are, however, two dogs I care about. Gus is an old Black Lab and Lucy is his faithful middle-aged companion. They sleep on my back deck. Once when I was in a business funk, not able to go back to sleep, I went out on the deck to think and wallow in misery. Gus sat and put his paws on my legs and Lucy curled at my feet. The misery part went away.

Responsibility

Do unto others as you say you will do. And, do the same for yourself.

My first pastor, Brother Estes at Buchanan Street Methodist, rephrased the Golden Rule during a sermon in a way I never forgot. His message has played and replayed in my mind for over six decades. In fact, I patterned my business career on that phrase. Though I often failed, I consciously committed to delivering services on time, arriving on schedule, and being prepared. Both my wife and I lived by this canon in our personal lives as well.

People have numerous methods for abdicating responsibilities. The most egregious to me is blaming God. Though never mentioned in ancient religious texts, many people use, everything happens for a reason to excuse or explain negative things that happen to themselves and others. Ask why and they will probably tell you it is in the Bible.

The reasons bad things happen to me is I'm not paying attention. I've either chosen to be ignorant on the subject or the circumstances are beyond my control (shit happens). My favorite

Shakespeare quote is: The fault dear Brutus lies not in our stars but in ourselves that we are underlings.

Many irresponsible acts are committed out of pure selfishness like tardiness and eating the last donut without asking permission. I'm guilty of both.

I drive too fast and have had several tickets for doing so. I'm working on it. I have driven under the influence but stopped years ago. I hurt other peoples' feelings but not near as often as they hurt mine. Being responsible is very closely related to being thoughtful. One's wellbeing depends on one being responsible. Most of the times when we're irresponsible, it affects others more than it does self.

Moderation

Avoid excess but delight in second helpings.

My Grandfather, Charles Chester Womack, Sr. was a traffic cop and a devout Episcopalian. He embodied the Church's admonishment: *Moderation in all things.*

Too much of a good thing is better than too much of a bad thing; though not by much. The only regret I want in death is for the things I did not do. The only things in life that are off limits are those things that bring pain to others. All the rest are fair game under the appropriate circumstances. If it feels right, do it!

To explain to conservative Christians why Episcopalians drink, party, dance, gamble, and eat rich foods, Episcopalians adopted this motto: Moderation in all things. Not only does it provide certain liberties, the motto is very attractive to individuals from other denominations who do those things, have been told they were sinful. Moderation in all things is a great recruitment tool for the Episcopal Church.

I am a stress eater and drinker. After Diane's death, I used food and drink to dull the pain. Recently I recently lost forty pounds, now workout, and better watch my diet. A recent, previous love interest is a vegetarian. She was most helpful in improving my food choices. I still eat steak, but in moderation. I still drink wine but in moderation. As I age, however, I find that my moderation is constantly being readjusted. Much like my moral code.

Adventurous

Try most things once, some things twice and many things never again

Some who know me will be surprised that my lovely, elfin, angelic wife was the true adventurer in our relationship. She led me into adventures, both virtuous and mischievous, much more often than I did her.

Years ago, Diane and I made a conscious choice to experience all the world has to offer and to approach each day as an opportunity rather than a challenge. Believing that those who fear life get the least from it.

I learned from her to taste life, not to fear it. To go where my wandering spirit leads me; seek wisdom wherever it may be found; and immerse myself in culture and indulgences until my heart, mind, or body tells me to stop.

Live adventurously is a declaration I made to my wife when I became fifty. I told her that I had decided to become less responsible. Not irresponsible, but less responsible. Our girls were basically out of the house; we had achieved financial stability, and I no longer felt the need to be an example of reliability and dependability. I made a conscious choice to consider all the experiences the world has to offer and to approach each day as an opportunity to try something new. Though no one has ever accused me of living dangerously, I am guilty of living

adventurously. Smoking marijuana and eating raw oysters for the first time is adventurous. Not buckling one's seatbelt and using hard drugs is dangerous. Performing as the white lead singer in a black blues band in black nightclubs during the civil rights era was adventurous. Riding a motorcycle with or without a helmet is dangerous. Eating street food in New York City is adventurous. Not getting a colonoscopy at my age is dangerous.

Once, while, in the LA airport, I saw Mohammed Ali with his entourage. Ali, in the early stages of Parkinson's, and I share a mutual friend.

I walked up to Ali and said, "John J. Hooker told me that if I ran into you, I should kick your ass."

Ali got me in a headlock and said, "You tell John J. that nobody can kick my ass. I am still the greatest!"

We had a laugh and Ali sent his regards to our friend. That was an adventurous thing to do.

Appreciation

See beauty in everything and everyone.

Mother, Eva Womack Allen, was the most appreciative person I've ever known. She loved music, art, theater, movies with great passion, and passed her passions on to me. My favorite pastimes as a young child were listening to radio shows and going to movie musicals with her. Fortunate for her she eventually married, Gene Allen, who shared her love of music, drama, and gentle demeanor. They had twenty-five appreciative years together.

For me, my water glass must be always half-full and my wine glass half empty.

Appreciating beauty seems to come more easily for me as I age. Many of my older acquaintances, however, seem to go in the other direction. Their motto is things ain't like they used to be.

If I were a God person, I'd say, "Thank God to that!"

As a believer in humankind and nature, I revel in the beauty of the earth and the splendor of the skies. Music, poetry, art, thought, fashion, and all the visceral experiences, both old and new, inspire my mind and heart. The beauty of the earth warms my being, especially on long drives and bike rides when I commune with nature, and with memories of Diane.

I like pretty things, music, places, food, people, clothes, and ideas. I revel in the beauty of the minds and hearts of people I know, people I meet, and people I just brush up against. I don't need a god to thank. The world alone is wondrous enough for me.

Happiness

Make someone happy every day, and you will be happy too.

For dramatically different reasons, Mother and my wife were the two happiest people I've known. Mother (and Dad) provided a happy home for me and my brothers. There were tensions, arguments, and disagreements, but she always had a comforting smile for us boys. Even after her stroke, Mother continued to always greet me with a happy disposition after she married my stepfather. And, even during her dying in the nursing home.

Diane, too, kept a happy home. Besides her smile and attention to our families needs, our living spaces always featured fresh flowers and provided respites from the storms of life. Her coworkers lauded her for her upbeat personality at work at the courthouse. When she died, twenty-five Nashville attorneys made donations to Alive Hospice in her honor.

There is a sweet spot in the brain that is exhilarated every time one feels happy. The more one strives to make others happy, the happier one's life will be. Happiness cannot be sustained. It is a passing feeling. Each happiness event has a shelf life. If one is in a constant state of happiness, one probably needs counseling.

I was standing at the kitchen window, looking at Diane asleep on the trampoline, with our four-year-old grandson Larry, also asleep, lying on her stomach. When I experienced and when I relive that poignant memory, happiness abounds. And, I smile.

Once I helped a non-English speaking tourist on Fifth Avenue in NYC find his way. The act made us both happy. The way most acts of kindness titillate both the giver and the receiver.

When I reflect on where I've known the greatest happiness, the answer always lies in people, never from things. My happiest moments are when I share the beauty of the earth, enjoy or remember experiences with special people and provide an unrequested, unrecognized serendipity to a stranger.

Though most happy events are serendipitous, happiness does, however, seem to pop up on a regular basis for me. Maybe it's always there, but, unlike many people, I intentionally look for it. Or, maybe it's because I was raised and mentored by two of the world's greatest merchants of happiness – Mother and Diane.

Evening Vespers

A copy of my ten rules for living the good life sits on my bedside table. Most evenings I review them. Though I often fall short on one or more of the canons, I am a better person for engaging in the process.

EPILOGUE

I have lived an extraordinary, ordinary life in peace, joy and love. Over the last twenty-five years, I've lived it without a church. Over the past decade, I've lived it without God though my primary mentor and confidant has been Richard Rodgers, a lifelong practicing Roman Catholic. During Diane's last days, Richard was dealing with the coming death of his younger brother. We shared many thoughtful moments together over lunch and long rides. Richard is the most spiritual being I've known who has little or no piety. Piety is an amoral trait in many Christians. They piously link morality directly to Christianity. Morality precedes Christianity.

Most of the world has functioned with a moral code since the first flash of intelligence passed through the mind of a homo sapiens. Even some lower animals operate with a moral code. Most of the moral beings in the world are not Christians.

Just as the laws of gravity and inertia have always governed us, so has the law of morality: Intentions and behaviors that affect the wellbeing of conscious creatures in a positive way are good. Intentions and actions that do otherwise are bad.

Genuine, direct concern for the wellbeing of one's self and other living creatures requires no mystical explanation. Belief in transcendent spirit-driven sources through which to live a virtuous life is a pointless exercise. For there is no future ephemeral spiritual or tangible rewards for being good. The advantage of being good is immediate and earthly. It has always had been in one's self-interest to avoid behaviors that cause suffering to one's self or others.

As time passes, expanding knowledge of what is good or bad gives us a better grasp of what wellbeing truly means. There was a time when bloodletting through leeches was thought to bring wellbeing. We learned that was not true. So we stopped doing it. We have a great deal more to learn about wellbeing through the sciences and other rational disciplines but not from religion. Religion can, however, bring enlightenment to some and provide, through fear or love, motivation to others to be good.

Eight thousand years ago we shared a common ancestor with monkeys. We also shared a world where self-preservation and individual wellbeing were the basis of the law of morality. Over time, both man and monkey learned more about what it takes to ensure one's wellbeing. Both species discovered that it included directing some energies to the wellbeing of others.

What separates us from the apes is not a soul; it is the evolution of our prefrontal cortex. As that section of our brain continues to evolve and scientists discover more about its workings, our understanding of what wellbeing means will advance.

Religion, especially the religion of my youth - Christianity, has always had a hard time determining which things in this world genuinely address the wellbeing of self and others. Christianity has always devoted disproportionate resources to controlling devotees, proselytizing converts, protecting authority and succession, maintaining territorial dominance, and defending Biblical interpretations. Those manifestations of wellbeing like virtue, temperance, charity, diligence, patience, kindness, and humility are often given the short shrift.

No religion advances my wellbeing, improves my contributions to my fellow man, or enhances my stewardship of the flora, fauna, and other resources here on earth. Though I am not rigid in these opinions, I am firm. I have the spirit of a Jackrabbit, the heart of a Golden Retriever, the brain of a homo sapien, and the soul of a monkey. I like who I am. I like who I was. Though the journey has been eclectic, for the most part, it has also been joyful, chocked with surprises, laughter provoking and personally fulfilling.

I still, however, regularly gain new insights from religious thinkers. I'm not throwing the baby Jesus out with the Bathsheba. For example, my friend Richard introduced me to Anthony de Mello, who became my favorite spiritual writer. De Mellow, now deceased, was a Jesuit priest and psychotherapist with profound and extraordinary insights on life, some from a Buddhist perspective. A favorite de Mello thought is: Happiness is not something you acquire; love is not something you produce; love is not something you have; love is something that has you.

Love has had me for over sixty years. Since those days of my youth in North Nashville when my life was ahead of me and death was something that only happened to old people. Back

then, relationships were casual, and all the morality I needed to know about was found in the Good Book.

Now life is in the moment. Death is peacefully eminent. Relationships are more important than ever. My self-adjusting moral compass continues to serve me well. I am a hopeful pessimist and a pragmatic optimist, who still joyfully greets each day with expectation for new adventures.

I start every day with gladness, knowing I am still alive and appreciated by some. Each morning I think, *what will I get to do today?* I live each day with enthusiasm and more in service than ever before. And, I end each day at peace and in reflection, though my virtues for living. Life is good.

With allegiance only to nature and my fellow human beings, I have escaped the bonds of religion and am free to do, as I will. My will be done. There is, however, no significant difference between my will and the will of God. I am benevolent, caring, loving, and supportive of all – red and yellow, black and white are precious in my sight. The difference between God and me is that my love is dispensed without the requirement that you love me back or do my will. And I will not punish you if you don't love me as I love you.

The stories on which my current precepts are founded confirm that all life is sacred - worthy of respect, venerable. That death is the end. Relationships are crucial for survival. And, morality is often in the eye of the beholder.

I celebrate the worth of every individual, especially those I once called freaks or strange - Tiny, the hermaphrodite, Van Junior, my mentally challenged second cousin; Tom, the neighborhood gay guy; Wayne, the deaf-mute; Thomas, the Black kid; Mr. Stein, the Jewish merchant; Mr. Norton, the porno guy, and the Goat Man. I also celebrate the contributions that

humorists, artists, healers, teachers, inventors, discoverers, religionists, philosophers, merchants and even rogues make to the richness of our being.

One can't help but be bedazzled by humankind's inventiveness, like the chromatic musical scale that can be infinitely rearranged by a Mozart or a B. B. King, to evoke pleasure and emotion. Or, George Washington Carver coming up with 101 things to do with a peanut. It was caveman ingenuity that brought us the wheel and fire. Charles Darwin unlocked nature's deepest secrets. Human beings resolved all these and countless other mysteries, apparently with no assistance from a supernatural source.

In his credo, *This I Believe*, written in 1930, Albert Einstein wrote: The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead, a snuffed-out candle.

I resonate with Einstein's thought that experiencing the mysterious is the fundamental emotion behind man's quest to explain the unexplainable, to see the unseen, and to hear the hitherto unheard. I do not, however, believe God has hidden the ultimate answers as prizes in a galactic treasure hunt. I think the answers are just not yet known. For God to be the creator of the mysterious and the author of discoveries would make a mockery of human ingenuity and achievement. Discovery would be merely another of God's parlor tricks or a grand game of hide and seek.

Despite widespread belief that laws of nature are somehow "God-given," there is no scientific or philosophic validation of it. The laws of nature - gravity, inertia, thermodynamics, and the like are simply definitions of occurrences everyone, rich or poor, black or white, smart or

dumb, religious or not, can take to the bank. Tuesday comes every seven days because some emperor wanted it that way. God couldn't have rested on the seventh day because there wasn't a seventh day until much later.

And what about the joy and sustenance received from life other than humans - plants and creatures? I like trees and flowers. I love the gardens. I like corn, wheat, beans and barley. I love dogs, tigers, giraffes, cows, and pigs, And, sheep, especially medium rare lamb chops with mint jelly. Of all the bounty of the field, I love the grape the most - Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Grigio, Chardonnay and dark earthy Zinfandels.

Life, though wondrous, is far from fair. Witness the poverty, misery and anguish we've created and have let continue. And I take issue with the Declaration of Independence: All men are not created equal. Each may be theoretically born with certain inalienable rights, but life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness regrettably are not readily available to all. I weep at the pain we suffer and inflict on others. I also sometimes do something about it, like help out with my time, my talents and, when the situation warrants, my wallet.

Without God, my life is in my hands. When I need help, I ask for it from people. When thank you's are appropriate, I thank others and myself. When courage is required, it comes from within and from centuries of lessons learned. Putting things in God's hands never worked for me. I suspect it doesn't work for others.

This is the happiest time of my life, though I do sometimes wish Diane was here to enjoy it with me. I continue to benefit from her wisdom and frugality. It is because she wisely managed our resources that I have a comfortable lifestyle. To some, my life might appear austere. To others, it looks like I live like a king. To me, it is just right.

For several weeks, I regularly transported a friend from Nashville, Tennessee to Elizabethtown, Kentucky to see her aging and ailing parents. Each time, coming and going, we passed a sign that asks, *Where Will You Spend Eternity?* The answer that most often came to my mind was: pushing up daisies. Death is the end.

When it's over, it's over. Everyone, no matter his or her circumstance or belief, is the same dead. Dying, the ending of life, is unfair. Everyone suffers the slings and misfortunes of dying differently. But death is experienced the same by all. I do not fear death, but I do hope my death comes quickly for my sake, and for those who love me. Watching a loved one suffer is a terrible experience – worse than death itself. I know.

On Christmas 1999, Diane gave me a snow globe of New York with a whimsical skyline and the ball poised to drop in the year 2000. We loved New York, especially in the winter. Besides snowing after a good shake, the snow globe is also a wind up music box that plays “Auld Lang Syne.” It sits on a shelf near my desk. The other day I wound it to hear the music and to reminisce. The delightful music began in an upbeat tempo, and as it played, the tempo slowed. Before finishing the last full chorus, the music abruptly stopped. That's the way I want to go.

I will be whisked away from my abode and used by academics improve life for others. Then planted in the ground. According to the findings of archaeologists and anthropologists, I will rot there, become absorbed into the compost of deceased humanity, and end up as the pistil or stamen in a beautiful flower or the pit in a delicious piece of fruit.

Will I be remembered? Yes, for a while. Someone may be browsing through a used bookstore and find one of my tomes and say, “This looks interesting.” Maybe a descendant will

tell a tale I once told, and think of me for a moment. My spirit and my DNA will influence some of my progeny, and for some of them, it will not. I'm not so vain that the prospect of being forgotten worries me.

And remember friend, "Don't save me a place in heaven. I won't be coming."