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THE DEAD ARMADILLO

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FOREWORD

Why do people write, and why do people read what other people have written? In the case of a book or story for children as an example, about a mythical dragon discovering what true kindness and compassion is all about. It's entertainment, and at the same time, it includes that positive message/lesson or two that the author is trying to convey to his or her young readers.

With most subject matters, the writer is hoping to intrigue the reader enough that the reader just can't put the book down. Make the dragon purple, oh, and it loves marshmallows. Or maybe it's a story about "Ralph the Mouse" and his family's journey through a treacherous and seemingly impossible maze of circumstances, but it still contains a message/lesson for the children that the author purposely has included.

It's not a technical presentation like in a scientific or medical journal meant to inform other scientists or medical professionals of a better "mouse trap" or break-through discovery for a new cure to a disease. It's not a "How to change the spark-plugs on your Harley" manual or video, and it's not the directions on a bottle of some opiate drug that has been prescribed to make you sane once again. With "The Dead Armadillo" story, it is purely meant to be entertaining, but also includes a few subtle but positive messages for all my readers.

With a fictional mystery novel, the writer has laid out clues along the way, the little bread crumbs, hoping that the reader will be intrigued enough, curious that is, to continue reading because the book is so masterfully written. Written in such a way, that the reader is excited to try to figure out the "Who did it" and why that person or persons did what they did. Or perhaps the reader solves and correctly answers some big question, no matter what that question may be.

As in the case of many successful writers like Stephen King and the "Horror" genre, as an example, the process of scaring the shit out of you, as you read one of his novels or watch one of his movies is in his style of writing, i.e., how he presents his story, and how he captures the reader's attention is what made him a successful writer. It's entertainment, if you like horror stories. I don't claim to be another Stephen King or even another Ernest Hemingway. I just hope that my writing style IS entertaining enough to cause you to keep reading, and not put the book down.

With "The Dead Armadillo" I have attempted to write it in such a way that all the pieces of the puzzle come together over the course of the story, to entertain you, and also to convey a message or two. I share with you, the bits and pieces of hardship and struggle, and the ability, that we all have, to overcome extremely negative circumstances.

With this book, I share my life's difficulties similar in many respects to what we all face in one way or another. I have included messages of hope and persistence, forgiveness, and compassion, which ultimately transformed my life, and I sincerely believe it will transform your life in a positive way as well.

Ultimately of course, I want my readers to be entertained by my story. It will be wonderful if they also "get" the messages of forgiveness, persistence, hope, and what true success in life really is all about.

Chapter One - Murphy's Chevrolet, sign "Humming" above me

I was one fucked up dude. Childhood PTSD is real. I was AWOL from the Navy. Working for a Carnival Midway at the New Jersey State fair putting up the “Hootchie Cootch” show tent for a once famous stripper that I had hooked up with several County Fairs earlier beginning in Maine. I ended up hitchhiking south for reasons that I will get into.

It was about 2 o'clock in the morning. I had been hitch-hiking for three days from Trenton, New Jersey and was now walking through a small town of Folkston, Georgia. No skyscrapers, and you couldn't find the sidewalks because they rolled them up at midnight. Quiet, so quiet as I walked down the main street of town. The only sound being this interesting sound of electricity coursing through the pole-top transformers, and the even more interesting sound, hum really, of one neon sign, humming, "Murphy's Chevrolet". Bugs. You also could hear the night time bugs. The large bugs flying around the six street lights, mostly moths, the other bugs, like the crickets, who apparently, we're suffering from insomnia as well.

Not like there actually was a brick and mortar "Downtown". There were no tall buildings to leap over in a single bound, and I didn't run through it like a speeding bullet. I certainly wasn't more powerful than a Locomotive, just a very tired, very hungry, scrawny teenager walking past Murphy's Chevrolet, sign "Humming" above me. Well, not quite past. I ended up walking around the lot with all the new cars lined up in three or four rows. Dead balloons. I remember all the mostly deflated balloons lying across the cars, limp but constrained by the string that bound them, mostly deflated, like all the helium had leaked out, many had just enough helium left in

them, that they were still round, and not totally out of gas. Two of the balloons were still defying gravity and were floating just a little.

Well, look at this one! Brand New Shiny Red Malibu Super Sport with 396 on its front fenders. In the back of the building, I found myself crawling through an open window. You know, the industrial kind of window that flips open from the center. Window already was open. I never would have entered the building, i.e., never would have broken a window to get in the place. The window just happened to be cranked wide open, inviting me to explore further. Raided their refrigerator.

Leftovers of every imaginable kind. Did I mention I was hungry? Actually, I really hadn't eaten a decent meal in two days, so yes, I was hungry. I ate someone's leftover tuna salad sandwich, 2 bananas, some soup, and what was left of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. After this wonderful gourmet meal, washed down by some Dr. Pepper, I decided to explore a little further. In those days, the dealers didn't have the sophisticated gadgetry and electronic doodads to monitor and control all the keys to everything on this lot. Nope. Just a big peg board with pegs of car keys hanging, new & used. Whoever designed their system should get the Nobel Prize for Stupid.

I went back out to the shiny brand new 1968 Malibu with pencil and paper in hand, (I didn't find ONE ink pen, that dude was Scottish). They hadn't invented Post-It pads yet, otherwise I would have used one. Wrote down the special code that was written on the front glass on the driver's side. 68Mr4. That stood for 1968 Malibu Red 4 Speed. It took me a minute or two to figure out the coded location on the pegboard. There was a total of 40 pegs. Thirty pegs had keys

dangling, ten pegs were empty. Ahhhhh, see? Simple. As I grabbed the keys with the correct code hand-written on a small circular tag in pencil, I noticed that this tag was almost worn out. Codes had been written and erased so many times, many of the tags were dying of overuse. Anyway, not exactly a clever system, and like I said before, the owner has to be Scottish, (how much do paper tags cost anyway). Your very first listen to the revving of a 396 V8, putting out 350 horses.

Along with two bottles of Dr. Pepper, which I had stuffed in my pockets along with all the "desk" change I could find in the unlocked desk drawers, I had grabbed some bags of potato chips, cigars & matches, and a typewriter. OK! This was exciting! I made the typewriter trip one more time and snagged one of those mechanical adding machines and a slide projector and put it in in the trunk with the typewriter.

Down the road I go. Heading still, to Florida, only now I'm not walking. In the headlight's glare ahead of me I could see foliage on either side of the road, cut back to trees and open areas. I couldn't really tell what the open areas consisted of because by the time the scenery was even with my 1968 Chevrolet Malibu, 396 with a four-speed, it was dark again, i.e., no longer in the headlights. Three miles to the state line? Folkston is the last small town off U. S. Highway 301 before crossing over the St. Mary's River into Florida. 54 miles to Jacksonville.

I had a map when I drove away from Folkston. Southern Georgia two lane country road at 3:00 AM, almost to Florida. Beautiful starry sky, nothing but dark on either side of the road. No other headlights in sight that time of the night, well early morning. It was not a deer in the headlights I suddenly came upon. To me it may as well have been a dinosaur, or some creature

from Mars. Seeing it from a distance, this strange creature was big enough to notice, and sat there, frozen in the high beams like Bambi.

I stopped in the middle of the road about ten feet from this strange creature, got out of the car, and walked up to take a closer look. This thing was still moving forward a little, in spite of having the headlamps of my car probably blinding it momentarily. I picked this odd beast up and walked back to the car. Putting this monster in the trunk, I thought to myself, "Gee, maybe I can sell this thing to a zoo when I get to Florida". Try to guess what I almost ran over? No, it was not an alligator.

At some point, if not now, one has to be just a little bit curious as to what this 19-year-old farm boy from Minnesota is doing in Southern Georgia at three AM driving a brand new 1968 Chevrolet Malibu SS (Super Sport) with a 396 and a four-speed. The story begins in Minnesota in October of 1963. That strange night and equally strange creature happened in the late fall early winter of 1967, four years later. Remember, I'm a farm boy from Minnesota. I really had never seen this creature, not even in a book. Our school was too backward in time to believe that something like an encyclopedia would have an influence on our education. In junior and senior high, I didn't spend a whole lot of time in the school library, and the mention of this creature must have been on a day I stayed home from school. Honestly, in my stupidity, I had absolutely no idea what the fuck this thing was.

Back to the 1968 Malibu Super Sport with a 4-Speed. Dealers in those days, in order to prevent or negatively affect your little joy ride to a mile past dinosaur, did a few things recommended in their Dealer Ownership manual. The needle on the gas gauge was just a hair or

two above empty. Rule number one in your ownership manual "Security" section, don't leave a lot of gas in the tanks. Instructive advice number two in that same section, disconnect the alternator or generator, so the only thing running the spark-plugs on the car is the battery, which dies shortly after you ran out of gas, and out of ignorance, left the radio on, which worked great for a while, catching some cool jazz from a station in Jacksonville, Florida, to slowly dying radio signal.

No, you idiot! Slowly dying battery! Count Basie is down to a whisper for less than a minute before fading out to totally dead battery. Soooooo tired. It's about beddy-bye time. It's more than just spooky to be on a two-lane road, three miles from town. Dead battery. No lights. And now, no radio. You start to hear all the sounds, almost like jungle music with monkeys and everything, as you climb into the tiny back seat to try to get some sleep. Remember, you haven't slept in two days, and you really are seeing too many things in the dark that probably aren't there. Other than the jungle sounds, there eventually wasn't any sound coming from the trunk where the "Creature", one typewriter, one adding machine and one slide projector were sitting.

I said eventually. When I first tried to fall asleep, the "Creature" from Planet X possibly believed it could claw, like through dirt, through the floor of the trunk. After about fifteen minutes of clawing by that thing from Mars, it stopped clawing, and I finally fell asleep. I was abruptly awakened to a loud, tap tap tap of the barrel of a six-shooter on the driver's side rear window. Said six-shooter was in the right hand of the local sheriff. I immediately rolled that rear window down as he said, "Good Morning, son".

I wasn't his son, but that's how they talked back then. Think about this. I've been sleeping so soundly, that I thought he was going to break the window, he tapped so hard. I wonder how many taps on the window it actually took before I heard it? No gas, no battery, no license plates, no driver's license and registration. He asked a few lame questions. I told him that I had to pull over to sleep, as I did not want to fall asleep while driving, and possibly put other drivers at four in the morning, in grave danger.

He didn't ask me to get out of the car. After I told him that I did not have the required by law, documents, you would normally think that the Sheriff would politely ask me to get out of the car. "Yes sir! I would NEVER drive if I even thought for one minute that I was too sleepy to drive, that's why I'm in the back seat, and there's a box on the front passenger seat containing a stolen Nuclear Bomb. And that hand cranking antique adding machine in the trunk is for counting up all the dead people after I leave this Nuclear weapon at the Pawn Shop in Jacksonville". I obviously didn't say all that, I thought it, but whatever conversation that took place between the Sheriff and I was strange enough.

No. Instead we said our goodbyes. He drove away, waving goodbye. When he was out of sight down the road, I grabbed the stuff in the front passenger seat, the one remaining Dr. Pepper, the Slide Projector, and the old pull handle adding machine from the trunk, sitting next to a very still monster from Planet X, put the cigars in my shirt pockets and started walking, in the opposite direction, hitch-hiking/walking to Florida. I knew I couldn't take the typewriters AND the "Creature" to Florida, and dummy me didn't think of letting the Martian out of the trunk either, sadly. Actually, I did think of it, but I had already walked about three miles before I

thought of it, and I was not going to walk back to that, car. They will certainly let that creature out of the trunk. Probably sell it to a zoo. What do you think?

My last ride was all the way into Downtown Jacksonville. "Hello, my name is Johnny Racket", kinda said with a Johnny Cash accent. No, not "Rocket", Racket, like in tennis. "Yes, I'm A tennis pro in Jacksonville. Where do I teach you ask? I teach at the tennis courts. Where? Like specifically? All over really, any tennis court that will take me. The slide projector? I use that to show my students pictures of my last tournament at "Widdlledumb". That was my conversation with the old couple that gave me my last long ride into Jacksonville. First thing I did was have lunch at McDonald's, with most of that loose change from my pockets. I used up all the quarters and fifty-cent pieces and all of the dimes and nickels. I think I had 23 pennies left to my name.

At a randomly picked Pawn Shop, "Ten Dollars for the typewriter? That's fine, what about this antique adding machine? Is two dollars the best you can do?" The Pawn broker gave me the twelve dollars and I headed out the door. At the same time, he starts dialing the Charlton County Sheriff's office to notify them that you have just left his store, and they in turn radio Sheriff Jackson. In those days, whenever there was some sort of theft or burglary, all the pawn shops within a two-hundred-mile radius was notified by telex/teletype of what was taken from each theft. Well, Sheriff Jackson, you know, the dude that had tapped on my window and woke me up, was waiting for me as I walked across the state line into Georgia. Yes, I got turned around. Thought I was walking south, but I was actually walking north, back towards Georgia.

Duuuuuu!!! No map, shitty, actually, deliberately false directions, means you are not heading farther south into Florida, it's noon. The sun is up there in the middle of the sky. You really can't tell East from West or from North to South as you are walking along.

Now sitting handcuffed in the back seat of the Sheriff Jackson's police cruiser, he's laughing his ass off about my lack of direction, and more so, laughing at the fact that the Pawn Broker gave me directions that would intentionally get me heading north towards Georgia. You really didn't pay attention to the highway signs that said things like, during that one nice long ride that took you to the driver's turnoff just before the state line.

Sheriff Jackson's vehicle was nowhere in sight until you were about a hundred yards into Georgia. Then he pulls up from behind you, driving ever so slowly in reverse, as you are sorta walking backwards, looking south, when you thought you were looking north, i.e., you are mostly walking backwards when cars are approaching, so you think the cars coming toward you are heading to Florida. Walking backwards with your thumb out precludes a person from seeing the signs like, ten miles to Georgia.

Once I turned and saw the "Welcome to Georgia" sign, everything happened so quickly. You realized that you were an idiot, and Sheriff Jackson believed that you were an idiot. The welcome sign was NOT on the exact line. It was a hundred and thirty yards into Georgia. This wasn't some major border crossing like into Tijuana from San Diego, this was a highway crossing a state line in the middle of nowhere, not at the state line in Lake Tahoe. Jokes on you, you thought you were headed towards Miami.

First words from Sheriff Jackson? "Welcome back to Georgia, son". I wasn't his son. I sort of felt relieved. I look back now and realize it was all good karma. What was in the trunk along with the typewriter and adding machine? We will reveal the "creature" shortly.

90 days later, still sitting on the lot is that beautiful 1968 Chevrolet Malibu SS with a 396 and a 4-speed, a salesman was opening the driver's side door to show a young couple the car, and the stench of rotting flesh, that dead dinosaur, had filled up the interior from the unopened trunk. The salesman immediately closed the door and calmly walked back into the office, asking everyone within earshot, "Isn't that the vehicle that kid took off the lot three months ago?" Well yes, George said. Bob the salesman who was trying to show the car, said, "I think we need to call the Sheriff, I think that kid left a dead body in the trunk".

Yes, everyone thought, dead HUMAN body. The Sheriff along with three other officers, the Fire Department, and an Ambulance shows up for the "Opening of the Trunk" along with a news crew from Atlanta that happened to be in the area, about thirty minutes away. The "Opening of the Trunk" could not take place until the news crews from Atlanta and Jacksonville showed up to film it (where's Geraldo Rivera when you need him).

Finally, drum roll please, after about thirty minutes of speculation and waiting for CBS Channel 46 out of Atlanta to show up, and another fifteen minutes for the news crews to get set up, one of the reporters is telling the TV audience, "They are about to unlock and open the trunk". Who will it be? What will they find?"

By now of course everyone is obviously thinking it's a dead person. Rumors are going around that this kid from Minnesota was high on Marijuana and killed his partner in crime. Flash

forward to when the owner of the dealership had visited me in the cell at the county jail a few days after the "Opening of the Trunk". "Tommy, we all feel sorry that your mom died and everything, and quite honestly, you know we care because Jesus cares (Mr. Murphy was a Born-Again). We were potentially going to let the Navy take you back, but if it wasn't for that fucking dead Armadillo in the trunk, I would have let them take you. You have to be punished, and you will be punished, not by the Navy, but by the State of Georgia. We had to total the vehicle. Cost me \$2,300.

Yes, good karma. Had the U. S. Navy got a hold of me, it could have been 10 years or more in a Brig. Instead, the Wayne County Prison Farm in Jesup, Georgia was my next home for what was supposed to be three years. A "Chain Gang", like the Paul Newman movie, "Cool Hand Luke" if you have ever seen it. Lucky me, I made parole first time up, which was a miracle in itself, after 22 months, two months shy of two years.

Jesup is close to Penholoway Swamp Wildlife Management Area, or as George Carlin would say, "The Penholoway Alligator, Snakes, and Other Lethal Creatures Management Area". At just under 5,000 acres, it's a much smaller swamp than the Okefenokee Swamp at 500,000 acres. Which Carlin probably would have renamed, "The Okefenokee Lots More Alligator, Snakes, and Other Lethal Creatures Refuge Area". Both swamps are places you do NOT want to get lost in, day or night, and they built the Wayne County Prison Farm in the early 1920's purposely backed up to the Penholoway.

Chapter Two - "Don't I get a Defense Attorney"

After the suspenseful "Opening of the Trunk" and the discovery of the rotting carcass of the Dead Armadillo, and two days after the owner of the dealership paid me a visit, I was taken to a small nondescript office building in Folkston. This was the office of the Charlton county appointed Judge who was, as far as I could tell, just a local attorney that had been appointed to the position. I was seated in his office, with the sheriff, Mr. Murphy the owner of the Chevy dealership, and a few other dudes that I did not recognize.

Mind you, this was not a courtroom. It was this lawyer/judge's normal, sort of plain old ordinary looking office. Could have been the Dog-Catcher's office as far as I knew. Not wasting time, they were very polite, and the judge, Mr. Brown, whom I guess had been told about the trauma regarding my fucked-up childhood and my mother's death, spoke to me in a very sympathetic manner, telling me like Mr. Murphy had, how sorry he felt for me. He asked me a few questions basic questions which I can't remember, and then read off three charges.

Breaking and entering, which I didn't do because the fucking side window was open, burglary, which was correct I'm thinking to myself, I had stolen a typewriter an adding machine, slide projector, some loose change, a few cigars and of course, that beautiful 1968 Chevrolet Malibu Super Sport, with a 396 and a four-speed ". The theft of the vehicle was the third charge he read.

It's funny that when he was reading off the items for the burglary charge, he included some of the food that I had taken and eaten from the refrigerator, plus the four Dr. Peppers, one Milky Way Candy Bar, and three packages of Potato Chips. After he read the charges, I asked him,

"Don't I get a Defense Attorney?", and the Judge responded, "Son, Mr. Williams sitting over there will be your "Court Appointed Attorney" this evening. Right after that he asked me how I was pleading to the crimes and without hesitation I said remorsefully "Well sir, I AM guilty of all of it, so I guess I plead guilty as charged". As soon as I said that, my attorney got out of his chair, and without a word, left the room. As he was leaving, I commented, "Where you going, Mr. Williams, sir?" He was gone without saying good luck, good bye, nothing. Mr. Brown, (the Judge) immediately answered for my attorney who had just walked out the door closing it behind him, "Well, you see Mr. Saxe, down in these parts, if you plead guilty like you just did, we figure you no longer need legal representation".

Several minutes later, some papers were being signed, and I received my sentences. Not guilty for the "Breaking and Entering" charge, guilty for the "Burglary" charge, three years, and guilty for the "Auto Theft" charge, three years, both sentences to run concurrently. That meant that I was going to spend three years instead of three plus three equals six years in prison. Whew, that was a plus. Fifteen minutes later I was back sitting in my cell at the city jail.

It's six in the morning the following day, and I was being transported, to where, I had no fucking clue. Jesup, Georgia is 55 miles north of Folkston, heading towards Savannah. That's where we were heading the Deputy said. It took us a little over an hour to get to Jesup, which was a much smaller town than Folkston was. As we got closer, I noticed that part of the scenery looked a little swampy.

We arrived at what I soon found out, was the Wayne County Prison Farm, bluntly, a "Chain Gang" kind of place, but being just a poor farm boy from Minnesota, I had no clue what a "Chain

Gang" was. The movie "Cool Hand Luke" had just been released and I did not have the opportunity to see it yet, and I didn't know that the movie existed at that point. I eventually saw it for the first time on television several years, maybe even ten years later. I think I was living in Southern California when I saw it with some friends. Boy, did THAT inspire some conversation that day.

After stopping at the gate, I was removed from deputies' vehicle, and taken into a small building that looked like an add-on type of construction to a much larger, main building. The Wayne County Prison Farm. The main building, which I will describe for those readers who have not seen the Paul Newman movie for which he received an Oscar Nomination for his role as "Luke", I'll try to describe the prison farm in as much detail as I can remember as I write this chapter. For those of you that HAVE seen the movie, this prison farm was very similar to what you saw in the movie.

Inside the little add-on building I met my first inmate, who was part of the intake processing staff, well, just him, and a prison guard. I was given my prison outfit, a towel and a washcloth, a pillow, (which I found out later I only got the pillow because I was a white dude). I also was given an old, what appeared to be, an Army Blanket from the Civil War. I lost possession of the pillow AND the blanket that night.

Okay, I can say I was a scrawny little teenager, and he was an African-American dude, twice my size, and twice my age. I did not put up a struggle. It was in the middle of Summer so it was pretty hot at night anyway, no dire need for a blanket

Chapter Three - "I'll see your three cigarettes and raise you five"

My first week in, I was hired by another convict, a white dude named Jack, to make cigarettes. For every pack I rolled, he gave me a choice of payment of either ten cigarettes, or 10 cents. Sometimes I took the cash, sometimes I took the cigarettes, since I was a smoker. The cash doesn't sound like much, but after a brief tutorial on the hand-held rolling machine, I quickly became one of the fastest "Rollers" in the whole "Camp" as some of us called the place. I could roll twenty packs an hour, and that was good money, \$2.00 per hour. The drawback was that Monday thru Saturday from six in the morning until sometimes as late as seven at night, we ALL were working. My big money day was Sunday, putting in at least five hours, and I usually rolled for a few hours every work-night while everyone else was kicking back from a hard day of labor.

My cigarette rolling money amounted to an average of \$30 to \$40 dollars a week. Within two months I had enough money to buy my own rolling machine, papers and tobacco. That dude, Jack, that I had rolled for? He sold those packs of cigs for 75 cents a pack. He had one other dude besides me rolling for him, and I figured he was clearing at least \$200 dollars a week because there were 200 hundred convicts in that camp, and most of them smoked. There also were two other cigarette manufacturing operations, but Jack's business was by far the biggest, I tend to believe that was because I rolled really good cigs for him, and everyone wanted MY cigarettes as opposed to someone else's.

It's a great thing when you are incarcerated, to have a steady income from a business like rolling and selling cigarettes, or leather work like hand-tooled wallets, purses for women, belts you know, the belts that have some dudes name embossed into the leather in the back, so the

bikers know which cowboy they're fucking, well that's if you have taken your buck-knife and cut a gaping hole in his jeans right where his ass is. There were dudes doing oil paintings, water color paintings, and other small crafts. Every Sunday during visitor's hours, you could really make some dough if you had something to sell because half of the visitors we received were not there to visit their husband or brother, they were there to buy shit from the entrepreneurial dudes like myself, because in addition to eventually owning my own cigarette rolling business (three hired rollers at one point), I also had a leather tooling business. So about eight months in, I was making some serious coin.

When I was finally paroled after twenty months, I left there with \$684.73 My mother would have been proud. A sizeable portion of that Dinero was my poker winnings, which leads me to a poker-related story about the one and only real fight that I got into while I was there. I had only been there for a few months and the poker games that I played in literally were penny-ante games. There were much higher-stake games that I would eventually get into, but in the early days all I could afford was the smallest-stake games. The smallest games you could bet with singles as we called them. Single cigarettes, both hand-rolled on a little machine, or what we called ready-rolls (short for all ready rolled) like Camels and Marlboros. The ready-rolls were worth three times what a handroll was worth.

Now we come to the reason for my chapter title. Poker. Need I say more? I was good, really good at Texas Hold-Em. Within my first six months I probably made an additional \$200 just from poker.

Chapter Four – “Yeah, they call me the Minnesota Kid, and I’m.....”

Sunday was our only free day to do whatever we pleased, as long as it did not violate the “Rules”. Some dudes spent their time immersed in reading. Reading all kinds of different things, from paperbacks to Playboy Magazines, and everything in between. Some dudes slept. Some dudes, (many of them) were out in the “Yard”, playing basketball, pitching horseshoe, lifting weights (we did have a pretty good selection/variety of weights, and a similar variety of dudes lifting them. Scrawny dudes like myself, when I did try lifting a few times, more than once, with the Arnold Alois Schwarzenegger types, in Black and white (race wise), along with the average dudes who were serious about becoming an “Arnold”. Some dudes were working on their cigarette manufacturing biz or leather tooling biz, and some dudes were playing various table games amongst themselves, like Monopoly, Checkers, Chess, etcetera.

My game quickly became Texas No-Limit Hold-em Poker. Thanks to my Great-Great-Grandmother who taught me the game when I was five-years-old, I came to that Chain Gang at a much higher skill-level than the average convict. One day I was playing with three other dudes, and we had an incident that would forever change my status while I was there.

We had been playing for about two hours one Sunday afternoon, and I was up about nine whole dollars, and THAT was a whole lot of pennies, nickels, dimes, and cigarettes. During this one particular hand, I caught this dude cheating. The dude was twice my size, built like he had been frequenting the weight lifting equipment in the yard for most of his sentence (he had been there for two years). “Chief” as he was called, was the biggest fucking Indian I had ever seen, the movie, “One flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest” didn’t come out until 1975, so when it did, from my

memory I could compare “Chief” to Will Sampson, the 6-foot-7-inch actor who played the silent Indian in the film.

Chief was bigger. A Seminole Indian from Florida, Chief was a Safe Cracker. Not your typical run-of-the-mill safe cracker however, Chief’s Modis Operandi was way different. The first time we played poker, he shared a little of his story with us. Back in those days, stores and pawn shops, and other places of business did not have fancy burglar alarm systems. Doberman Pincers, Pit Bulls, or German Shepherds, that’s what the store owners used.

Chief went on to explain the secret of his success as a “Safe Cracker” (not telling us how he got caught, yet). “Boys, it’s quite simple. I would first case a place out, you know, go into let’s say, a Pawn Shop in a small town like White Spring, (I generally worked in Georgia and then went back home to Florida after each job). So, I’ve “pawnd” a TV that I had from another job, and got a pretty good idea of wither that pawn shop was worth my time and effort. In this case, yes, it was worth my effort, plus they only had one dog, which is always better than trying to subdue two or more dogs. I gave up the idea on a liquor store once just because they had two really vicious looking Dobermans. Anyway, what you do with the dog like in this case, is bring along a piece of raw beef (with the bone), tainted with some shit that puts them to sleep. You only have to wait about ten minutes, and when the dog doesn’t bark anymore when you knock loudly on the back door, that’s when you know it’s safe to gain entry. Having gained entry, I would walk over to where I knew the safe was, and roll it out to my pick-up truck”. Almost all of the stores in those days had these safes on wheels.

Chief continues, “Once I have at the backend of my pick-up truck...” “Let me guess, Chief, you simply picked it up and placed it in your truck”, I interrupted. I had just won the last hand, and Chief continued with his story, “Yeah, you’re right Minnesota”. There’s a favorite place in a swampy area that I go to, and once there, I take the safe out of my truck, place a logging chain around the safe with a 25-ton railroad jack between the chain and the safe’s door, and crank away. Usually five or six cranks of the jack, and the door has crushed in and off the hinges. I remove the chain and jack and the door’s always just fall away. Take the goodies out of the safe, which usually besides cash, is the most valuable shit like diamonds, Rolex’s and so forth. One time, out of a safe from another Pawn Shop, I pulled out a set of “Choppers”. I guess they were in the safe because some dude thought it was cute to have some gold teeth instead of the carved ivory that older dentures had, and the dude pawned them (because of the gold) I suppose. Then I throw the empty safe into the swamp, and drive home. Simple”.

So, I catch Chief cheating. I’m sure the other two dudes who were playing with us that day, observed him cheating, but they were wise enough to keep their yaps shut, and take their losses. Me? I was pissed. This type of visual reaction to something like this was completely due to my PTSD, plus I was a crazy fuck anyway. So, what did I do? I not only accused Chief of cheating, but I stood up!

Now, that was pure insanity on my part. Chief stood up with a growl on his face, denying any guilt, and I yelled, “You fucking Indian! You cheated us. I saw what you did!” Approximately one hundred and 40 inmates quickly went silent. You really could hear a pin drop, along with a few whispered comments like, “Chiefs gonna kill that kid”.

Right about that moment, Chief swung and slapped me open-handed across the face, but not hard enough to knock me off of my feet. I immediately reacted with what had to be, what they call a rush of adrenalin, I picked Chief up damn near above my head, turned slightly and slammed him down on the Army Cot that we had been using as a card table. The legs on both ends of that cot splayed outwards resulting in Chief lying face up on the mattress, which was now on the floor.

Still the entire building was silent as a funeral, waiting for Chief to pummel me into unconsciousness. As I prepared my mind for what I thought would be certain death (my death), I looked down, and Chief for a moment did have the look of my death on his face (my death). Then all of a sudden, a slight uplifting from the corner of one side of his mouth, then the other side of his lips lifted up and he was now grinning slightly, then as a full smile began to emerge, Chief started chuckling, and then broke into a full-blown laughter as if he had just heard Red Skelton tell a joke. I laughed, the entire place broke into laughter, and I reached my hand down and helped Chief get to his feet. "Sorry kid, you caught me fair and square. No one's ever been brave or stupid enough to do what you just did".

From that day forward, Chief and I were best friends, and NOBODY fucked with me, if you know what I mean. I wasn't his "boy", I was his friend. Besides, Chief wasn't into fucking other dudes anyway, as he was really a pretty nice guy with a wife and three kids at home. "Yeah, they call me The Minnesota Kid, and I'm one crazy-assed mother-fucker that you don't want to piss off". In reality, no one fucked with me because of my friendship with Chief. There's more to the story about my good friend Chief, which is coming up in another chapter.

Chapter Five – “The Pool Hustler and the Stripper”

Everyone has a story to tell of how they ended up at the Wayne County Prison Farm. This was an “Equal Opportunity” prison farm. By that I mean, the population consisted of dudes that had committed heinous crimes like murder on one end of the rainbow, to dudes that were sentenced to spend six months of hard labor for refusing, or just not being able to pay, child support payments, and everything in between. I shared my “story” one day while playing poker, but a different day from my brief "fight" with Chief.

Here's my story, prior to Chapter One. I was AWOL from the Navy. It began at the Naval Hospital at the Great Lakes Naval Training center in North Chicago, Illinois. I had been in the Brig for a few weeks, sent there from the Naval Air Station Twin Cities at the International Airport in Minneapolis, Minnesota after I had turned myself in. My back had been injured, compression fractures of three vertebrae, partially paralyzed, the Captain in command of the Brig, just to be responsible I guess, had me transferred to the hospital, where I was placed in a guarded wing of the hospital.

They didn't have fancy devices like MRI machines in those days, just X-Ray equipment. After much testing and Doctor's analysis, it was decided that there was not enough to my back injury to preclude me from going back on limited-duty status. From the hospital, I was transferred to a barracks, only this time, not under guard. We were free to walk around the base, free to go on Liberty, which I partook of a few times (another story or two).

Our barracks was full of every kind of medical excuse there was. Most of the other dudes were really fucked up due to injuries to their psychosis from having been to Vietnam, coming back home, and having to deal with their trauma. It was fun while that lasted because we had no real duties except keeping our barracks clean. We had two Pool Tables so I played a lot of pool during the day.

After about four or five weeks in this barracks, I was summoned to the Clerk's Office. Orders had been cut to send me back to Vietnam. I immediately thought, "This is BULLSHIT"! That evening I snuck off base, caught the "L" to Chicago, and kept on going, out of Illinois, into Indiana, then Ohio, down to Tennessee where I hooked up with a traveling carnival group.

The "Carnival" was a great place to hide. If you were a criminal on the run from the law, or a dude like myself, working/doing whatever job you could get hired for. It was great because you got paid in cash, no W-4 form to fill out, and you were constantly traveling from town to town, County Fair to County Fair, sometimes a State Fair, and traveling state-to-state. A perfect gig. For me, I lucked out right off the bat and was hired by a Hoochie-Couch stripper and her husband/manager.

Chapter Six – “Let’s see you do that with a Quarter this time”

She was no "Gypsy Rose Lee" the really famous stripper from the 1920's. She was very well known in her younger days however (according to other Carny folks who knew her). Her husband/manager was a skinny dude in his late fifty's early sixties. I guessed the once famous stripper, who I will call Betty, was around sixty. Her and her husband/manager, I'll call him George because I can't remember his name either, had a daughter named Susan "Susie". I remember her name because I thought I was in love with her at the time. It was astonishing to me that Susie also stripped in their traveling "Hoochie Cooch" show, at fourteen years old. At least that's how old she said she was.

Susie didn't snatch Silver Dollars stuck in a crack in the wooden floor boards like her mother did, but oh man, the few times that I actually saw her doing her fully-naked dance on stage I was awestruck. Typical for a young teenaged girl, she had still developing titties and a small, delicate looking bush. Red hair she had, and she was a real redhead.

The reason that I only had the opportunity to catch a few eyefuls of her doing her thing was because her mother and father had given me the riot act about their daughter. I was not allowed inside the tent when she was performing. The two opportunities came as a result of my guard duty outside and along both sides of the tent. Guard duty to keep dudes on the outside, from lifting up the tent for a free show. Twice I had to chase some dudes away with my baseball bat, and twice I lifted the bottom of the tent up because I knew that my boss, George, was working the ticket booth in front of the show.

I wasn't restricted from watching Betty, the famous stripper, do her thing. The first time that I watched a healthy portion of her show was when I was on a break. That's the first time I discovered that a woman could, with the proper training, snatch a Silver Dollar that was stuck in a crack between the two-by six floor boards of the stage. Incredible to behold for a teen-aged farm boy from Minnesota like me.

I sold tickets in the ticket booth quite often, mostly at times when Susie was dancing. I learned how to short-range the drunks which was so easy to do. I also accompanied George on periodic trips to the main office trailer where we took the money and ticket counts.

On a good night in an average County Fair crowd, we pulled in two thousand dollars at four dollars a ticket. That's a five hundred horny dudes a night, seven shows on average, seventy or so dudes per show. There were horny dudes everywhere we went. The owners of the Carnival group got a thousand dollars per night and Betty, George and Susie kept a thousand dollars. The average fair lasted eight or nine days, so we made seven-five hundred dollars a week, tax free I might add.

Well, I didn't make that, Betty, George and Susie made that. For my help, I received twenty dollars a day, plus a percentage of the "Drunk Skimming" which usually was an additional ten dollars a day. I know that doesn't sound like much, but they did pay for my meals/food, plus I slept in the trailer.

The trailer by the way, was a forty-foot trailer especially built with a front stage/platform the entire length of the trailer that folded down with welded steel legs on the front and side edges to hold up the stage. Many different types of shows utilized the same type of trailer. This front

stage in all these shows is where the Carnival Barker would advertise his show, wither it was the "Fat Bearded Lady", "Snake-Skinned baby" or a "Sword Swallower", or like in our case, Hootchie Cooch girls.

Once you bought a ticket, you would enter the tent through an opening on either the right or left side of the front stage/platform. The tent was fifty feet wide, ten feet wider than the trailer/front stage, with an opening flap that lifted up and was secured, as the entry into the tent. From that "doorway" flap, it was thirty or so feet from the stage.

Chief interrupted my story at that point saying, "You can tell us more another time, Kid, it's late, and I think we're going to have a rough day tomorrow. Mr. Cooper said that our crew is going to be removing a bunch of tree stumps somewhere".

Chapter Seven – Bullets flying everywhere, goodbye Trenton, and Susie

During my career as a Hoochie-Cooch Carny, I would frequently still feel pain in my mid to lower back. Not the dull achy kind, but the “Bolt of Lightning” combined with a huge needle-like pain in T-11, T-12, and Lumbar 1 area of my spine. Betty and George knew this from the very get go when we had first met. Every set-up and every take-down required that we hire temps. This seemed to be like an ordinance or law in every single town we did business in. Made sense to me I thought. Help the disadvantaged and so forth.

Betty and George both understood my condition, perhaps feeling sorry. Maybe they saw a son in me, a son they could never have to replace their first-born. His name was Brian. Brian died at the age of seven of some heart issues, few years before Susie was born. Whatever the reason, Betty and George especially made sure that the temps would do most of the heavy work, set-up and breakdown, and most of the time, I felt like I was a Boatswain’s Mate, walking around with a beer in my hand.

Trenton, New Jersey was the location for the State Fair in 1967. A huge Fair, a huge Midway, that lasted 9 days in August. The Midway alone hired 2,000 temps for set-up and take-down, and at least three hundred temps were kept on to help run the rides, work the shooting-galleries, knock the pins down games and other games of chance/skill, sell tickets, and anything else that a Carny required help with. I had been with Betty, George and Susie for five months, first meeting them and getting hired when I walked up to their Hoochie-Cooch ticket booth, quite by accident one day (I’m lying, I like looking at female tits and ass as much as the next dude). Trenton was fun. In addition to the six or seven various Hoochie-Cooch shows, the Midway had

2 tents for the “White” Paris/Broadway type of shows and one tent for what they called, “The Black Review”, and all black show obviously. Compared to our measly audiences of fifty to sixty horny dudes per show, the two large white shows were almost twenty times the size at nine hundred and fifty people “Fire Marshall Approved Capacity” The black show was even larger at twelve hundred people for each show. All three had shows from noon until five o’clock in the afternoon. At a show per hour, they had five daytime shows and then at night they had five shows from seven until midnight. This was HUGE bucks coming in every day.

This State Fair did not have county fair prices, which I thought was kinda high to begin with. Shit, our little show charged six dollars a ticket instead of the normal four. I made a lot more money as well, from the drunk skim, and my salary was increased because I had to supervise two temps that we had hired as additional tent guards. My back seemed to be doing pretty well that week, so I helped set up one of the “white” tents, and the really big one for the Black Review.

For my labor, and I think for being a farm-boy with my lack of the typical white kid racism, they not only paid me well, they gave me five free tickets to their show, and I used two of the tickets for myself and saw the show twice, and I gave Betty, George, and Susie the other three tickets. George and Betty had trusted me from the beginning, and I could understand why they did not want me to watch Susie do her thing. Looking back, if they DID look at me as sort of a son, they surely would never allow Susie’s brother to watch her dance naked. Makes sense.

In any traveling show like a Carnival Midway with all its splendid diversity, drugs where everywhere. You could buy any illicit drug that was available on any street corner in America,

Heroin, Coke, Uppers and Downers, Crystal Meth, and Weed. Myself? I was Hippie so I stuck to just Weed. I never did have enough curiosity or stupidity to try harder shit. Also due to its nature, these traveling shows had a fair share of crime. Fights between Carneys and “locals” as we called them were common.

The Midway for the New Jersey State Fair was like a small city in itself. Two Carny woman gave birth that week. Seven people that I knew of had to be transported to the local hospital. The State Police raided some dude’s motorhome/meth factory, and I suppose some visitors to the fair went home with food-poisoning. When we were working a fair, 99% of our caloric intake was from food booths on the midway. Besides the normal fair food, we had foods that were specific to the cultures/populations in the area. My favorite was the ready-made to-order “French Fries” with Malt Vinegar sprinkled on them. At the Lawrence County Fair in New Castle, Pennsylvania I tried the Dutch Funnel Cakes, four times.

I wouldn’t remember the star of the “Black Review” until several years later when she became a real star, know to the whole world. The first time that I saw Ike & Tina Turner was on some television show in the mid-seventies. I was blown away by the fact that the first time that I REALLY saw her and her husband at the time, Ike, performing, was that “Black Review” in 1967 in Trenton, New Jersey. It’s was one of those things many years later that I could say to friends, “I knew her before she got famous, in fact, she shared some Southern Fried Chicken and Cornbread with a few of us Carneys one day”.

Chapter Eight - Emancipation Proclamation? What's that? And what a beautiful butterfly

A couple of things first. This was NOT Minnesota. This was the Deep South where there had been several hundred years of slavery of people of a color other than white, plus all the racism that for endless generations had festered and grown into a real cancer upon society. This was 1967, and I had just been sentenced, and now was in the "Chain Gang".

Upon my arrival, and processing, I was placed in what was known as Section Three. Big point here, this was two weeks after the desegregation of the Wayne County Prison Farm. Integrating blacks and whites does not produce gray. The arduous process of desegregation in schools full of children is one thing, integrating a prison full of mostly non-white dudes is a whole different ballgame. Mixing the two colors black and white, instead of getting gray, you get violence.

The building was divided into three sections. Section One was small, housing twelve or so white dudes. These convicts were what were called "Trustees". The Trustees were free to come and go as they pleased, anywhere within the fenced-in perimeter of the "farm". Section One was home to the three cooks, the dude who managed the laundry, a few drivers, and the dude that worked in the intake/new inmate processing room.

The building was approximately sixty feet wide, five hundred feet long. It had a slightly-pitched roof about twenty feet high along the center-line and fifteen-feet high at the outer walls, with exposed beams internally to hold the roof up. Section One was forty feet long by the sixty feet wide, with single cots/beds with nobody in a bunk above you. Section Two was approximately eighty feet long by the sixty-foot width, also, with single beds/cots. There were

twenty dudes in Section Two, fifteen whites and five black dudes. Consisting of seven drivers, two laundry workers, and six work/gang dudes that could not be housed in Section Three because they were potential targets of terminal violence. I later found out that one dude in particular that probably would have been killed if he had been housed in Section Three, was this white dude, Andy, a pedophile that had raped his five-year-old niece some five years ago. He was serving a thirty-year sentence. I didn't like the dude at all, but I had to work along side of him for several months on Section Two's "Road Crew".

In between Section Two and Three was a catwalk raised about five feet off the floor. This was where a prison guard sat, at the end in a chair, watching all the shit that went on in the evening. Along the five-foot wall on both sides of the catwalk was a row of about seven toilets. With no partitions separating them, when you took a shit, the whole world was watching. The shower in both sections, fitted with two shower heads, was at the end where the guard sat, five-feet above you, watching you. Section Three, approximately three hundred feet long, was all bunks, upper and lower sleeping arrangements. Section Three's population was about eighty blacks and ten white dudes, (after integrating the population).

My first night there in Section Three, two black dudes opened up a can of whoop-ass on a white dude. The other nine white dudes, including myself, stayed in our bunks like good little boys, and watched the shit-kicking that went on that night. I realized that night what having a very large pad-lock for your footlocker really was for. For lack of having a pair of brass knuckles, a large padlock was the next best thing as a weapon. You stuck your "Fuck You"

finger in the space between the lock and the U-Shaped shackle, and swung it, used it, like you would with brass knuckles.

The fight only lasted for a few minutes or so. It wasn't really a fight. The victim woke up about an hour later. I was still awake, listening to all the sounds of the late evening, the sounds of dudes "Spanking the Monkey", snoring, oh my God, the snoring. The combined sound of twenty or more dudes snoring was in a way, almost like a hellish symphony, a sound not quite worthy of a Grammy Award. I watched as he literally crawled to his bunk-bed, and climbed in. Lucky for him I figured, that his bunk was the bottom bunk. There were fights almost every day.

You don't go into any prison anywhere as a caterpillar and come out like some beautiful Butterfly. You might go in completely innocent and naive, but if and when you do come out, you are a trained criminal in a lot of various skills. A person not only comes out trained in how to, let's say, crack a safe open with a logging chain and railroad jack, your attitude towards life and especially towards authority is dramatically and negatively changed as well. From a "I'm sorry" when you first go in, to a "Fuck You" when you eventually come out.

Chapter Nine – Tree Stumps, Rattle Snakes and “Suck on it Chief, suck on it”

We built roads, the old-fashioned way, unplugged drainage culverts under the highways that were plugged up by Beaver Dams, cut the sometimes-three-foot high weeds along the highways and byways. I think the words *labor* and *laborer* were invented by a convict in some Chain Gang somewhere. I spent three very cautious weeks in Section Three. Cautious, because I didn't know from one day to the next, if or when some “Big Black Bubba” was going to beat the crap out of me, or rip me a new asshole, or both. I escaped Section Three unscathed, as they transferred me to Section Two.

In Section Three, all the road crews were transported by Paddy-Wagon-Style trucks. When you were closed inside those window-less trucks, being transported to a work-site, it was dark, sweaty smelling, and a pain to one's pride if there ever was such a thing. I quickly developed a strong desire to get moved to Section Two, as it had a road crew that traveled in an old school bus, with WINDOWS.

Section Two's “School Bus” crew sometimes did work that the warden could only trust us to do.

3 X 5 Cards

The "Creme de la Creme" of criminals in with some dudes like myself

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Dudes I knew well and not so well

“Chief”

“Gramps” was a sixty-something old black dude who had been in prison all his life. When he was just thirteen, Gramps had shot some white dude that had raped his mother several times. I would think that would be called “Justifiable Homicide”, but because he was black, and his victim was white, he was sentenced to life without parole. Gramps was a nice dude, nice enough I guess that he was always kidding when he asked me to “pick up the soap” whenever he happened to be in the shower stall at the same time that I was. Gramps was a short chubby little dude, about five-foot tall, and mostly bald with sparse white hair. Gramps was part of the “School Bus” crew in Section Two.

“Poppy”, as he was called, was a thirty-something black version of Arnold Schwarzenegger. A dude that I worked with for the first week in Section Three, he was someone you did NOT want to have ANY type of confrontation or relationship with. I managed to co-exist and work with Poppy that week without getting beat up or fucked.

Scottie, the Laundry Manager was certifiably one crazy mother-fucker who I worked for in the prison laundry for three months. Serving three life sentences for killing three dudes in a bar one night with a pen-knife and his bare hands, I really believe that justice would have been better served if they would have put him in a mental institution instead of prison.

Dogboy

Mr. Caltranci