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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 for 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 more insane than you already are. With "The Dead Armadillo" story, it is purely meant to be entertaining, but it also includes a few subtle but positive messages once in a while for all my readers to grasp on to, to be enlightened, or not.

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 has 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 along the way. I share with you, the bits and pieces of hardship and struggle, and the ability, that we all have, to overcome extremely negative circumstances that so many people face in life.

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 as we go along for the ride.

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 power-pole-top transformers, and the even more interesting sound, hum really, of one lonely 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.

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 different colored, mostly deflated balloons lying limp, you know, all the helium had leaked out, some had just enough helium left in them, that they were still sort of round, and not totally out of

gas, constrained by the string that bound them. Two of the balloons were still defying gravity and were floating just a little.

Well, look at this one! Brand New Shiny Red 1968 Malibu Super Sport with the 396 emblems on its front fenders. I peered in the driver's side window. Cool! It has a 4-speed Stick! A few minutes later I was at the back of the building, crawling through an open window. You know, the industrial kind of window that cranks open from the centerline. Window WAS already 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, I washed it all down with some Jack Daniels & Dr. Pepper. I decided to explore a little further. In those days, auto dealers didn't have the sophisticated gadgetry and electronic doodads to monitor and control all the keys to all their vehicles. Nope. Just a big peg board with pegs of car keys hanging, new & used. No Nobel Prize for new technology here.

I went back out to the shiny brand new 1968 Malibu with pencil and paper in hand, (I didn't find ONE ink pen). They hadn't invented Post-It pads yet, otherwise I would have used one. So, I 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 paper 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. Was the owner of the dealership Scottish? (how much do paper tags cost anyway). Then came the exciting sound as I first listened to the revving of that 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 trip through the window and back inside one more time and snagged one of those mechanical adding machines and put it in in the trunk with the typewriter.

Down the road I go at three-thirty in the morning, heading south to Florida, only now I'm not walking. In the headlight's glare ahead of me I could see the wooded areas, then open areas, then wooded again then open, wooded, open, wooded, open, etcetera. I couldn't really tell what the open areas consisted of because by the time the scenery was zooming by on either side of me, (in my Red, 1968 Chevrolet Malibu, 396 with a four-speed-on-the-floor), it was dark again, i.e., no longer in the headlights. Three miles to the state line that sign just said? Folkston is the last small town off U. S. Highway 301 before crossing over the St. Mary's River into Florida. I was 54 miles from Jacksonville, Florida.

I had a map when I drove away from Folkston. I'm on a Southern Georgia two lane country road at now 3:45 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. I did see one alligator crossing the road early in my drive. I guessed correctly that some of those open areas at the sides of the highway were swamp.

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 it to take a closer look. This thing was slowly crawling in its quest to cross the road, in spite of having the headlamps of my car probably blinding it. 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.

Chapter Two – I'm just a "Farm Boy" from Minnesota

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 "Red" 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 the car. They will certainly let that creature out of the trunk when they get it back to town. Maybe they'll sell that creature 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, "Five Dollars for the antique adding machine? That's fine. Is five dollars the best you can do? What about the slide projector? Seven dollars? I'll take it" 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, Georgia three miles, 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 the 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 Three - "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 know.

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 (maybe they attended the same church?). He asked me a few 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" and 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 Four - "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 about a 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 were butt-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.

After twenty months when I was transferred to Augusta for the "Work-Release Program" I left the Wayne County Prison Farm 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 hand-rolled cigarette 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 playing poker.

Chapter Five – “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 smuggled-in Playboy and other soft-porn magazines, to Reader’s Digest. 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 in my whole life, 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 had 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 to protect their property.

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 “pawned” a TV that I had from another job, and got a pretty good idea of wether 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 usually just fall away. Take the goodies out of the safe, which 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 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 and the Army Cot, which was now on the floor.

Still the entire building was silent as a funeral, waiting for Chief to pummel me into unconsciousness or death. As I prepared my mind for what I thought would BE certain 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, then the entire place broke into laughter, as I reached my hand down and helped Chief get up 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 Six – 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 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 Seven – “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 her Father had told me, probably to put me off from pursuing her.

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 and sneaking in 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-change 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 at 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 twenty dollars a day. I know that doesn't sound like much, but the money was great because Betty and George paid 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 Eight – Bullets flying everywhere, goodbye Trenton, and goodbye 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, a 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 500 temps for set-up and take-down, and at least a 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 at a County Fair in Maine. I met them quite by accident one day (I’m lying, I like looking at female tits and ass as much as the next dude). Trenton was the largest fair for me and it 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”, an 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, the manager for the Black Review not only paid me well for helping them with setting up their tent, they gave me five free tickets to their show. 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 were 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 very 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, known 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 Nine - 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 forty 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. 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 was still awake when the dude that had been attacked that night 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 after that, like I said, it wasn't an "Ebony & Ivory" kind of thing.

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 with a lot of various skills (I know how to destroy a door on a safe, thanks to Chief). A person not only comes out trained in how to 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 and the Horse you rode in on" when you eventually come out.

There were hard-core career criminals like Chief that didn't know any other way of life, dudes that had short sentences, like six months for DUI or some other misdemeanor, and a few that should have been in a asylum for the mentally-fucked-up, for going on a "Serial Killing" spree. Regardless of who you were, prison of any kind was not a healthy place to be. In those

days, prison was NOT for your “Rehabilitation” to prepare you for your eventual return to society. There were no “On-Line” College courses in Philosophy or “How to become the person that everybody loves”. Prison and everything about it was strictly to punish you for your crimes against society.

Chapter Ten – Tree Stumps, Rattle Snakes and “Suck and Spit, Suck and Spit”

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 some convict dude 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 the beginning of an almost two-year “Life-Experience” that would eventually set me straight, wake me up, and be a Good Karma thing for me. 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, like sometimes really easy work doing handyman/home repair type jobs for him and a few of his relatives, close friends, prison staff, and local politicians. The warden's house was just outside the main gate and maybe fifty yards or so west of the main road. I never did figure out why, but one time his wife actually asked for me by name, to help her blow up and hang a bunch of balloons and other decorations in their house for the Warden's surprise birthday party. My

cheeks hurt for several days after that. She gave me two cartons of Marlboros when I was finished that day.

Most of the time, our School Bus crew was out on regular assignments just like every other crew, re-paving roads or turning dirt roads into asphalt highways. Cutting the weeds along the roads was a major pastime. Swing-Blades and Bush-Axes, that's what they were called. Swing-Blades to cut the normal weeds, and Bush-Axes for the weeds that had become small trees alongside the highways in and around Wayne County. With the Swing-Blades, we would all be lined up in a row from the top of the road to the bottom of the usually sloping sides of the roads, on both sides. Swinging and cutting, cutting and swinging our Swing-Blades, methodically walking almost in a rhythmic fashion, a lot of times singing some old black spiritual song from a time not so forgotten when slaves sang their songs as they were doing what slaves do. "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot", or "Follow the Drinkin' Gourd", or "Go Down Moses". These were songs that took your mind off of the grueling hot Sun, and put you in another place in time. It was those days when we would be singing and harmonizing, that I recognized that I had a better than average voice and really got into the "Spirit" of it all.

One day, our School Bus Crew and another crew from Section Two was assigned to "pull" tree-stumps on some vacant property that belonged to the Warden's brother, who was a Jesup Town Councilman. This area we were about to clear was going to be a road at some point. The tree-stumps that needed our excavation skills were pretty large, old remnants of what had to be beautiful Oak Tress at one time. Five stumps in all. In those days people didn't use tractors or dynamite, to get rid of stumps, especially if they had an in with a local prison farm like ours. We

used axes, shovels, rope, and muscle. First you dig out the ground around the base of the stump. If the stump was ten feet in diameter, you had ever-growing hole around the stump that was twenty feet in diameter, in other words, you had to dig around and down in order to expose the root system of the tree. Then using your typical Abe Lincoln Axe, you would chop away at the root system until you had enough of the root system removed that you could use rope and in our case twelve of us pulling on the rope, pulling the stump over and out of it's nesting place it had comfortably sat in for a hundred years or so. Sound easy? It's not. It's what we did though, because we didn't have a tractor or bulldozer, or a stick of dynamite.

There was one tree-stump that I will never forget. Did I mention yet that I hate Snakes? Well, while this stump was having a tug-of-war match with twelve other inmates, myself and "Chief" was on the opposite side, chopping at the remaining roots that refused to give up. When the inmates won, and the tree-stump lost, the stump was pulled over and mostly out of its home in the ground, exposing this huge area that had been like a small cave directly beneath the center of the stump. No longer a cavern, it was now a bigger hole in the ground than the one we had dug out around the tree. Guess what. It was filled with hundreds of baby Rattlesnakes, middle-school Rattlers, and several adult-sized rattlers, and they all were withering around, hissing, with their tales wagging, most of the new-born with just their birth button as they are called, and many of the older but not quite adult Rattlers, and the fully-grown adult Rattlers "Rattling" their "Rattles".

At that precise moment, as the stump was finally pulled over and partially out, Chief and I stood there momentarily, gazing down into this massive hole filled with snakes, (both of us were

already three feet down in the hole because we had been in the excavation portion of the hole doing our “Root-Chopping”), he said, “Minnesota, step up, out of the hole”. Too late. I was bitten by one of those Teen-aged medium-sized Rattlers while Chief was finishing his short dissertation about getting out of the hole. It sprang at me and bite me in the side of calf of my left leg.

Now you can imagine, if you are a well-prepared Boy Scout, exploring the wilderness with a bunch of other Boy Scouts, you would have what’s called a “Snake-Bite-Kit” in your back-pack. I never was into scouting when I was younger, and Chain-Gang work crews did not carry snake-bite-kits everywhere they went. I screamed, Chief pulled me the rest of the way out of the hole, and dragged me, literally, several yards away form the den of snakes. Chief calmly asked where I had been bitten, and pulled a small pen-knife from his pocket (Section Two inmates were allowed to possess/carry small pocket knives). I had already pulled my pant leg up above the slightly bleeding obvious spot on my calf where that Rattler had just bitten me a few minutes earlier, and Chief cut a small X on the small puncture mark on my leg. Now I’m bleeding slightly more and I have the shivers, as Chief started sucking and spitting, sucking and spitting. That’s what you did back then with a poisonous snake-bite, you sucked the poison out and spit it out.

Two things that were a positive, well three things. One, is that the Rattler was not a full-grown adult. Two, remember I said “Puncture” as in “Singular, I had been bitten by a “One-Fang” Rattler and Chief commented later that one fang is better than two fangs any day. He also said that sometimes snakes break off a fang. I was taken to a local clinic in town where they gave

me a shot of whatever anti-venom. The doctor said it appeared that the Rattler had not given me a full dose of venom when it bit me. The third positive thing, I didn't have to work for a week after that snake had bitten me. The nausea lasted for a few days and my calf was swollen and bruised. I hate snakes.

Chapter Eleven – Why does it smell like “Cookies” in here all the time?

So, after almost a year of working on the School Bus Crew, and living in Section Two, I was transferred to Section One and became a “Trustee” and worked in the prison laundry for “Scottie”. Scottie, the Laundry Manager was certifiably one crazy-ass mother-fucker who I worked for in the prison laundry for six months. Serving three life sentences for killing three dudes in a bar one night with only a small pocket-knife and his bare hands. I can just see the scene in the bar that night, three dudes with Crocodile Dundee size knives, and Scottie, with a pen-knife the size of toe-nail clippers. One dude says to Scottie who had just pulled his tiny folding knife out of his pocket, “You call THAT a knife?”. The dude was dead a minute later, according to Scottie.

Scottie was cut up pretty bad, (his scars were there for all to see whenever we were lifting weights, shirtless). He was defending himself, according to Scottie. Broke the first dudes neck, and he cut/stabbed the other two in strategic enough areas to cause their deaths. Brutal. I really believe that justice would have been better served if they would have put him in a mental institution instead of prison. I remember the first time I actually had a one-on-one conversation with him when they first transferred me to Section One, where he also bunked, he had a look in his eyes that told the whole story, before I even knew what he was doing time for. You know, that crazy look some returning combat veterans have. I’m just glad that I never was in a situation where I was on the receiving end of his anger, like I said, I really believe that justice would have been served properly if they would have put in the Looney-Bin.

Working in the prison laundry was nice in that we had the freedom to walk about, back and forth around the prison grounds, and between the main building and the small building that housed the laundry. We also had it pretty nice in that our work-day was much shorter than working on a road-gang/crew. We usually had time to sit and play cards, chess, or lift weights while waiting for clothes to wash and/or dry. Yes, we had our own set of weights, and for at least an hour a day, we were working out. Scottie was “Pumped-Up” not grossly pumped like a professional bodybuilder, but pumped-up enough that you could see the physical results of years of lifting. Me? Scrawny dude trying my best to impress. I actually did see more muscle in my arms, shoulders and legs after working out every day for three months.

Doing the laundry for the inmates was easy. Throw it in the four industrial-strength washing machines and wash, then throw the clothes into the two huge dryers, easy. No ironing, no folding, back in the large gunny sacks. Inmate clothing, the shirts and pants, were marked with their names with a stencil. The T-Shirts and Boxer-Shorts had their names hand-written with a black, felt-tip large magic-marker. Inmates laundry was divided up by Section in that we collected the large sacks of laundry individually from each section. Section Three’s laundry was washed and dried once a week, on Monday. Section Two’s laundry was washed and dried once a week, on Wednesday. Section One’s laundry was done once a week as well, and done on Thursday.

The guard’s uniforms are a whole different story. We took care of the guard’s uniforms whenever they brought them in, 24/7, all the time in other words. The memorable thing about taking care of their light-gray uniforms, shirts and pants, is that in addition to washing/drying, we

ironed them, including their underwear. Here's the memorable part. For starch, we used "Corn Starch" mixed with water in a spray bottle, and it had to be the precise ratio of water and Corn Starch to get it just right. Too much starch combined with too hot an Iron, and the result was the smell of cookies, sort of. Too little starch, and the pleats in the clothing article just did not have that smartly-creased, can cut you like a knife pleat or creased edge. It took me a few days to get it just right. If you fucked it up, shirt or pants, you had to wash and dry them all over again. Needless to say, that first week, the laundry room smelled like a bakery, and I was re-washing a bunch of uniforms every day.

Chapter Twelve - Don't eat the Warden's Favorite Ice Cream and why I hate Peaches

I loved Sunday dinner, especially the last Sunday of each month. Along with a better meal than our typical weekday dinner, that one Sunday a month we had ICE CREAM, in addition to whatever Sunday specialty the cooks had come up with, like Southern Fried Chicken, Mashed Potatoes and veggies, Black-Eyed Peas, Fried Okra, etcetera. We had Vanilla, or Chocolate ice cream, and once in a while Strawberry, but that was seasonal. Chocolate was my favorite. The last Sunday for two months in the Summer when they were harvested, we had Peach Ice Cream made with peaches from our own Georgia Cling-Stone Peach Trees.

As I quickly found out, this was the Warden's favorite, he loved his Peach Trees and he loved his Peach Ice Cream, and most of the convicts loved it as well. The first time I experienced the Warden's Peach Ice Cream just happened to be my fourth Sunday there, at the end of my first month. When you walked through the serving line in the chow hall, everyone got a small scoop that was plopped onto your military style aluminum tray. It was a randomly plopped scoop of ice cream that sometimes ended up on top of your mashed potatoes, collard greens, fried okra, succotash, or cornbread.

That first time for me, I happened to sit down next to Chief. I was excited to try this "Wardens Peach Ice Cream", and as I took my spoon and pushed the little ball of Peach Ice Cream off of my cornbread, I was almost to my wide-open mouth with my spoon to lick it off when Chief said, "I wouldn't do that if I were you, wipe your spoon off with your napkin". As he said this with my spoon an inch away from my mouth, I momentarily stopped and asked, "What do you mean, Chief" as I thought perhaps there was some prison etiquette involved or some kind

of protest going on because it was the “Wardens Favorite Ice Cream”. “Just trust me on this one, don't lick your spoon”, Chief said to me. Chief looked across the table at this dude whom he had already given his own scoop of Peach Ice Cream to, and said, “Minnie doesn't want his ice cream”. The dude said, “great, I'll take it”. Then Chief grabbed my tray and scooped my Peach Ice Cream off of my tray and onto the dude's tray. I was still thinking to myself, “What the fuck. I wanted my Peach Ice Cream”. Chief repeated himself, “Trust me, you don't want it”. I noticed at a few of the other tables, four or five other dudes were giving away their Peach Ice Cream, but I really didn't think too much about it at that time.

The following month I found out why Chief was so adamant about my not eating the Warden's Favorite Ice Cream. The dude that made the ice cream every week was a trustee by the name of Ross. He was the prison farm's mechanic, and worked in a big barn-like building, which housed a few farm tractors and equipment. This was the building where prison vehicles were worked on when vehicles needed things like oil changing, tires replaced, engines tuned, etcetera. The equipment barn/garage had a room/office in the front where this industrial-sized ice cream maker was kept. As I found out, it could produce ten gallons of ice cream at a time, and I guess Ross was the dude that made the ice cream instead of one of the cooks because the ice cream machine was in his building, and not in the kitchen. I had already worked in the kitchen one day and could see that there wasn't enough room for the machine anyway. Based on that, originally, I had just figured that the ice cream that we had was “store-bought” ice cream instead of homemade.

Ross the mechanic was a squirrely looking convict in his early fifties. He was skinny, had really crappy teeth, sunken eyes, and a quiet almost feminine voice. The following month after that first Peach Ice Cream Sunday, I had just finished taking a shower after a long day working out on the road. It was early evening, and Mr. Jefferies, one of the guards on duty that night, had called me over to the gate/door and told me to follow him to the “Barn” as we called it. As we were walking, Mr. Jefferies explained to me that Ross the mechanic needed some help making the ice cream that evening for that weekend’s Sunday dinner. Okay, I thought, maybe I’ll get a little taste of ice cream when we’re done.

As we approached the door to the equipment barn, it opened and a convict, Johnnie, young dude like myself, was walking out, carrying a carton of cigarettes in his hand, and Mr. Jeffries took him back to the main prison building and I went in. Ross was standing there and said, “Come on in kid, thanks for volunteering” (I didn’t volunteer). Now Ross and I are sitting there in the office/storeroom where the Ice Cream Machine was already churning away. Sitting next to the machine was a bushel of ripe Peaches which Ross indicated that he needed help in taking the skins off and cutting them up for the ice cream concoction that he was in the middle of making. “Would you like a brewskie”? Wow! I thought, beer. “Sure, sounds good to me” I responded.

Now, I had heard that there was a certain amount of drugs and booze that was available in prisons, but I assumed it was prison hootch and drugs smuggled in somehow. As I took a big swig of my beer, Ross was rolling what I first thought was a cigarette. As he lit it up and took a drag, from the smell, it quickly became obvious that it was “Weed”. Wow! I thought. This dude is smoking a fucking joint. He took another hit and reached over and offered his joint, not saying

a word. I said, “Are you for real? Aren’t you afraid of getting caught?”. Ross had been holding in his toke/breath when I said that, and then blowing the smoke out responded with a smile on his face, “I get this shit from Mr. Jefferies. No worries, go ahead, take a hit”, which I did. We talked for a bit and as we were discussing the weather or whatever, I noticed that Ross had a lot of magazines laying around. Stacks of them on his desk, on the floor, everywhere. Along with a lot of Playboy magazines, Ross had magazines like Dude, Rogue, Gent, and he also had a lot of magazines like Physique, (porn for gay men). We finished the “Joint” and I asked Ross what he would like me to do to help him with the ice cream.

“Mister, I’m not a Faggot”. Ross had just politely asked me if he could suck my dick. “I’m not into that shit”, I said. Ross in a calm voice said “I didn’t think you were, but I am, and I promise you it won’t hurt, and it will be our little secret”. Then the thought occurred to me that the young dude that was leaving as Mr. Jefferies brought me over to the barn, was one of the dudes that was giving away his Peach Ice cream a month ago. In fact, as I thought about it for a second, the other four dudes that I saw graciously giving their Peach Ice Cream away, ALSO were my age.

“I’ll slip a condom on you just before you cum”. I struggled with that thought of my penis in this dude’s mouth, and I still thought it was disgusting. “I really would prefer to go back to my section now. There’s a poker game starting in a little bit”. Ross said in response to my plea for mercy, “Minnie (my nickname for Minnesota), I can make your life here better than normal, or hell on earth. Just give it a try. You’ll see. In fact, I think you’ll like it. I’ll also give you a carton of ready-rolls”. I gave in, and Ross lit up another joint, asked me to stand up. He undid my belt,

pulled my pants down, and there he was, on his knees, cupping my balls in his hand, gently pulling on my limp penis, trying to get me to an erection.

I tried, really tried hard.....to get hard, but I was just too embarrassed. After about five minutes of fondling and kissing my dick and balls, Ross gave up and said "Let's cut up some peaches". We shared another joint, drank another beer, cut up a bushel of Peaches and I guess an hour or so had gone by and Ross said it was time for me to leave. As I was leaving, just before I opened the door I asked if we were "OK" and Ross said, "Don't worry about it kid, you tried. We're good" (I didn't get a carton of cigarettes, but he did give me five packs). Ross must have had a stopwatch timing my visit because just as I opened the door to leave, Mr. Jefferies was about twenty yards away, approaching the door with another young stud, Josh. As Josh and I passed each other, he had a big "Cheshire Cat" grin on his face. Mr. Jefferies asked me how I was doing as he escorted me back to the main building. Guess where all that collected condom-filled jizz went. You guessed it, into the ice cream machine. I reckon at least five young studs contributed to the Wardens Favorite Peach Ice Cream that night. THAT'S why I hate peaches to this day. Oh, and I sold that five packs of Camels for poker money that night.

Chapter Thirteen - Swimming with really smart Beavers, and how long did you say YOU can hold your breath under water?

Most of the roads around Wayne County were two-lane black-topped roads. Near swampy or marshy land, the various roads had these concrete culverts going under the roads from one side of a marshy or swampy area to the other side in order to provide proper flow/drainage, preventing the water from overflowing and covering the road, especially during the late winter / early spring rainy season.

Occasionally, as I found out, some of these roads did get swamped over with water, sometimes a few feet deep preventing or making it a real nuisance and sometimes impossible for vehicles to pass through. This was due to the marvelous ingenuity and engineering on the part of beavers. When beavers chose to build their dam in a culvert under a road, they didn't do so at one end or the other, they built their dam directly in the center of the fucking culvert, which was directly under the center of the road. Our job was to eliminate the blockage by tearing the beaver dams apart.

I participated in this effort and I particularly did not enjoy it. Imagine if you will, a beaver dam far inside a culvert under the road, and mind you, totally filled with water which also was covering the road. Wading to one end or the other, two teams, one on each side, by time we reached the culvert, the standing water already was over your head. With a grappling hook on a rope, I swam under water, no scuba gear by the way, until I reached the beaver dam which usually was at least eight feet wide at the base. The process of setting the grappling hook at the top of the dam, swimming back out, under water that was full of debris, leaves, twigs, frogs,

garbage, and sometimes snakes, was the worst part of the job, probably the most insane thing that I have ever done in my life.

Although I had a few encounters with Water Moccasins, luckily, I was never bitten. Thanks for volunteering "Minnie", a fucking Navy Seal without his scuba gear would have refused to do what I was "Volunteered" to do. This process had to be repeated many times until enough of the top of the beaver dam was pulled away that the standing water began to flow. Once enough of the water had receded, at least we no longer had to swim under water, and we could wade in with the water chest-high to continue setting the hook and finish tearing the beaver dam apart. Sorry beavers, I know it's a sucky job, but somebody had to do it. Since I was a "Navy" dude, and from the "Land of 10,000 Lakes" everyone thought I was a Jacques Cousteau or Mike Nelson (Lloyd Bridges) in "Sea Hunt". After three beaver dams I actually became quite good at my assigned job. I also developed a hell of a lot of respect and admiration for Beavers.

Chapter Fourteen - "The Bridge Too Far"

The work we did was typical of the "Chain Gangs" in the Southern United States, like cutting weeds along the main highways, re-paving, or paving new asphalt roads that were out in the middle of nowhere, or picking up trash along the highways. Some of the work was absolutely miserable, like the three times I was "Volunteered" to assist in the tearing down of those fucking Beaver Dams in culverts under flooded roads.

One such job which took us a week to finish, everyone included in the category of miserable. We all called this job the "Bridge Too Far". This bridge was only ten miles from our prison camp, but it may as well have been in Timbuktu. It was in an area that was part of the Penholoway Swamp off the main road going southeast from Jesup to Brunswick, Georgia.

This bridge, or what was left of it, was on land owned by one of the Warden's close friends, Mr. Alder. Built originally in the mid-1800's as a railroad crossing over a creek, this bridge and the entire area, including the old rail line, had long been abandoned and forgotten, until one of Mr. Alder's sons and a few of his buddies discovered it one day while hunting alligators.

The story we heard was that the bridge had been blown up by Union Soldiers during the Civil War leaving scattered timber and railroad ties. What remained of the timber deck and the rail line was partially submerged in the swamp.

Okay, I understand why Oak was used for the deck of this bridge, for strength and all that, being a dense, hard wood, as we all were soon to discover, that even Georgia White Oak as dense as it already is, will absorb water over, let's say, 70 years or so since the swamp had

claimed it. This friend of the Warden, Mr. Alder, wanted that timber, and our crew of six and one other crew of five was assigned to extricate his timber from the swamp.

The mostly intact deck, was constructed from massive Georgia White Oak timbers about 14" by 14" square, averaging around fifteen to twenty feet in length. At least half of the deck was slightly submerged in three or four inches of swamp water, it was sort of like dipping your Oreo Cookie in a glass of milk. That submerged portion of the timber had become water-logged over time, and the upper portion, the part we walked on, was dry, at least that first day we worked on it. It rained for three days out of the five that we worked on that assignment, which did give us a little relief from the Summer Sun.

So, getting to the "Bridge Too Far" first via an abandoned road and then walking along what was used to be a rail line, was an arduous adventure to begin with, getting all those enormous timbers up and out of the water, and out of the swamp was the real adventure. The large timbers were fastened together side-by-side with enormous iron spikes that surprisingly had not rusted much after a little over a century. We used these six-foot long "Spike-Remover" pry-bars, a kind of "Crow-Bar" on steroids, to pry out these huge spikes that had been hammered in at angles to connect the timbers, (picture a railroad spike, only a bit longer). Then one by one, timber by timber, we lifted each water-logged timber up onto our shoulders and carried them back the way we came in, about a quarter of a mile to a flat-bed utility truck waiting on what was an impassable road.

Picture a team of eight to ten dudes like myself, first lifting those huge partially water-logged timbers up and onto our shoulders (think Navy SEAL training here), then

walking/stumbling under the heavy load, down the tracks to the road that was overgrown with plant-life, like a jungle, then to the truck, and placing the timber on the truck, maneuvering the timber around with our pry-bars until we had each timber placed in what eventually became a stack of timbers six-foot high.

Have you ever had to remove large wooden splinters from your shoulders? We did have gloves on, but even with some of us taking our shirts off, rolling them up and using them as a pad on our shoulders, we all managed to get a few splinters or two, or more, embedded into the flesh of both shoulders, which had to be pulled out frequently. Each night after the day was done, we all went back to camp with bloody shoulders. My right shoulder actually got infected from a piece of wood that was still under my skin. Eventually I cut it out with a knife from the kitchen. I still have that scar.

Chapter Fifteen - "Wow! This is awesome! Let's party!"

I'm guessing that a lot of people that end up in prison say that they really are not the "Criminal Type", even though they know full well that they DID commit a "Criminal Act" that resulted in their imprisonment to begin with. "Oh, I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time". Seriously folks, that one doesn't wash, or, "I was a victim of circumstances", now that one I can fully understand because of my own experiences.

I wasn't a bad kid, maybe a little off because of the shitty environment that I was raised in? Later in life I did realize what PTSD was all about, and mine was what I call "Childhood PTSD". There are millions of us. I did have a little bit of a mischievous streak going for me and on rare occasions did things that you just should not do but that ornery part of your psyche triumphed over reason, like a particular incident when I was in the 3rd grade, now that's a funny story.

From 1st grade through 5th grade, I attended the Glen Cary School near Ham Lake, Minnesota, an old country school until the new school, Johnsville Elementary opened for business. Glen Cary was what was typically called, a "One-Room School-House", that had originally been built in the late 1800's. Kind of like a "Little House on the Prairie" school if you remember that TV series, with one bathroom, so the boys & girls AND the teacher had to share that one single-toilet bathroom.

Outside there was still an old outhouse which we all used when we were at outside during recess. The plumbing and the inside toilet came much later in the school's history. Our school had six grades, 1st through sixth. There were six rows of desks facing the teachers' desk with each row being a grade, i.e., first row was 1st grade, 2nd row was 2nd grade, and so on. This

whole thing I'm describing right now began with the teacher wrongly accusing me of masturbating in the bathroom. The problem is, Billy, this sixth grader/masturbator forgot to lock the door while he was doing his thing and this 1st grade girl, (Susie I think) had walked in on Billy much to her shock and his dismay.

I suppose that Susie was shocked enough, that she waited until the following day to rat on me. She had confused me with Billy and told the teacher, "Yesterday, I saw Tommy touching his pee-pee, Mrs. Hathaway". All of us dudes sorta looked alike in those days, being that we were all farm-boys with crew-cuts, but shit, Billy was a bit bigger than me being a sixth grader and I was a 3rd grader. I guess it was "Hard" for Susie to distinguish the difference since Billy was probably sitting down at the moment she opened the bathroom door.

The rule was that when you were finished going to the bathroom, you were supposed to leave the door open, for the convenience of others, and I also think to sometimes air it out. Farm kids, with our healthy diets left really smelly shit in the toilet sometimes, either forgetting to flush, or deliberately leaving the surprise for the next person. Everyone also knew that IF the door was closed because someone forgot to leave the door open, the next obvious thing was to knock on the door, which apparently, Susie didn't do.

Billy told me a whole month later that it was him and we laughed about it all the time because the teacher never did unravel that mystery of who actually jacked-off in the bathroom. Anyway, I wasn't even at school that day, so I WAS innocent, but the teacher was really distressed, and just on Susie's eye-witness testimony I was "Guilty-As-Charged". I guess Mrs. Hathaway didn't think of looking at her "Roll-Call Sheet" from the day before, that's the

document teachers mark with a check next to your name first thing in the morning when the teacher calls out your name, and you respond with “Here” or “Present, Mrs. Hathaway” or whatever.

Had she looked at that Roll Call Sheet, or just remembered for God's sake that I was absent the day before, when the "Spanking of the Monkey" incident occurred, she would have realized that in fact, I WASN'T in school the day before, and that I WAS innocent of the charge. In her mind I was guilty, and I ended up cleaning the blackboards for the next four days while all the other kids were outside for recess. Mrs. Hathaway also gave me a note to take home to my mother, but somehow, it was eaten by my dog, Shakespeare.

It was the during recess on the 4th day of this "Blackboard" detention when I decided to take a dump on her desk while she was outside supervising the other kids. Don't ask me why, I guess it was mostly anger that made me do it. The funny part is my thought process as I was wiping down one of the blackboards, feeling the urge to “go”. The workings of an eight-year-old boy's mind, “Should I take a break and go to the bathroom? Or just take a shit in the middle of her desk”. I decided on the desk.

When recess was over and the other children came running in, I was nonchalantly finishing up with the second blackboard, as if nothing was wrong. Some of the kids happen to pass by Mrs. Hathaway's desk and spotted this semi-hard gift that I had left on her desk still letting off a little steam, still pretty fresh. Giggles and outright laughter greeted Mrs. Hathaway when she came in the room. All Holy Hell broke loose as soon as she approached her desk and saw the four-inch turd. I have to admit, I tried my best to keep a straight face and deny any wrong-doing

on my part but based on my inability to hold back the smirk on my face, she whacked me with her ruler and ordered me to go stand in the outer hallway with my face/nose pressed up against the wall where we kept our jackets and coats. Then she called Mrs. Sandersen, the principal who came about an hour later. Mrs. Sandersen basically was a "Traveling Music Teacher/Principal/Librarian" who actually believed me with regards to the masturbation incident after looking at the Roll-Call Sheet, which proved my innocence of the penis massaging incident four days earlier. I actually did get a half-assed apology from my teacher that day for accusing me of something I didn't do. Before she left, the Principal did scold me for the "Crap" that I did confess to. I surely would have objected to DNA testing of my shit had DNA testing been invented and used back then. And, another note to Mom was eaten by my dog.

From the onset of this situation four days earlier, even though I knew that I was not the alleged "Masturbator", I had not told my Mother about that or my blackboard punishment out of fear of getting beat with the "Razor Strop" by my Step-Father. I was always getting beat for shit I did or didn't do. Plus, to further hide something that I did not do, my dog somehow "Ate" the teacher's note that first day. After I was exonerated, I did tell my Mother, and at some point, later, she did have some choice words with the teacher. She also kept the "Shitting on the Teacher's Desk Incident" a secret between the two of us, because of HER fear at what my Step-Father would have possibly done to me, a secret the two of us kept forever.

The rest of the year I was a hero to all the other kids, and the Mrs. Hathaway? Her and I never did see eye to eye after that, and I think that little discussion between her and my Mother had something to do with Mrs. Hathaway leaving me alone after that. By the time the school year

finished in early June of that year, the "Story" of the "little kid who shit on the teacher's desk" had begun to spread far and wide, to maybe five other schools? I can't remember. That reputation carried with me all the way to 9th grade. Every now and then, some other kid, or a teacher would ask if I was the kid that had crapped on the teachers' desk way back in the 3rd grade. Nothing to be proud of, but looking back, I think it was absolutely hilarious.

When my mother died in her hospital bed as a result of years of physical abuse (beatings) by my stepfather, it was already on top of 11 years (since the age of 4), that I lived in a nightmarish, extremely violent home. When the final incident happened, and she died in the hospital several months later, it sealed my PTSD fate and it would affect me for a good portion of my life after that.

I know it still sounds like a lame excuse for the things that I did wrong, but I sincerely believe there IS a difference between a real "Career Criminal Type", and someone like myself. I'm sure there are a large percentage of people in prisons, some doing hard time like 20-30-40 years that ALSO were "Victims of their Circumstances".

It's these people that deserved a second chance, and because of the color of their skin, or other differences from normal white folks, like being white or ANY color, but unfortunately just too poor to afford proper legal representation, they ended up in prison with improper adjudicated trials, convictions, and most importantly, extremely long prison sentences compared to their actual crime that they committed.

I'm a white dude, farm-boy from Minnesota. I committed a crime, non-violent, but still a crime. I did my time. And here's the difference between a white dude like me, and let's say, the

average person of color the same age that I was at that time, 19. I served 20 months of a 3-year sentence, a young person of color probably would have received a ten to fifteen-year sentence of which he/she would have had to serve probably five to seven years before even being considered for release on parole.

Another huge difference, I was granted parole my first time up. Being that it WAS Georgia, AND I was a "Fucking Yankee" as I was often called, I was told by experienced inmates that in Georgia, a person NEVER made parole first time up, and even then it normally would take at least a \$5,000 payoff (bribe) to the Parole Board to even be considered for parole first time up.

This is true with many of my fellow inmates that had been denied parole several times. I not only made parole with no cash up front, or legal help, after four months on parole, while living in Augusta, Georgia, they granted my request for "Parole Transfer" to Minnesota. Go figure, either I was just one very lucky dude, or they recognized that I really WAS a victim of my "Circumstances". Fun fact that I need to verify, I believe, because I was told that Jimmy Carter, our 39th President of the United States, was on the State of Georgia's Parole Board at that time. If I can find my parole document, I sort of recall that his name was on my parole papers.

Almost forgot to mention, before making parole, and while I was still incarcerated, I was put on Georgia's newly created "Work Release" program. What's interesting is that I was the second person in that new program's beginning that was given/granted that status. The first person was a person of color, younger than myself, that was put on "Work Release". Amazing. He also must have been a "Victim of HIS Circumstances", instead of the "Criminal Type".

I felt inspired to share this in my book because I truly believe that our justice system needs a thorough overhaul. There are way too many rich white dudes that really deserved harsher punishment for their crimes, but got off with a slap on the wrist. There also are too many non-white people being sentenced for unjustifiably longer sentences than normal.

The "Scales of Justice" are certainly out of balance and need to be changed. I guess you could call this chapter the "Social Commentary" portion of my book, and perhaps the last chapter. There was only one other time when I was incarcerated, and that first time was a month after my mother's death. Without getting into too much detail, the infraction occurred in Lubbock, Texas. I spent three months in the city jail, was never actually charged with the crime, and I should have been. Although at fifteen-years-old I would of, should of, at the very least been sent to a "Juvie" (incarceration for juveniles), I was released to my Great-Uncle Chuck and Great-Aunty Wilma who happened to be returning to Minnesota from a Catholic Church convention in Phoenix.

Okay. I do have a few interesting experiences about that 90 days in the Lubbock City Jail. First, I was in jail the day JFK was assassinated. I remember that day clearly. I was playing Dominoes with three other dudes, drinking coffee out of a tin-can, and "rolling my own" cigarettes with a mixture of Prince Albert and Bull Durham.

All of us were deeply shocked, and saddened when we heard the news on the radio. We were in Texas, so most of the dudes obviously knew what an asshole LBJ really was, and they expressed their bitterness and anger at LBJ becoming President that day. Some in fact, were

convinced that he played a central role in what we call the "Deep State" conspiracy to eliminate JFK just so he could become POTUS.

All these years later there are still many folks that believe that LBJ connection, except now the fingers are pointing at the CIA, MOSSAD, and the Zionists because of JFK publicly announcing that he wanted to break up the CIA, shut down the Federal Reserve and Israel's Nuclear Weapons program.

I remember one of the other dudes that was playing dominoes with me that day we heard the news about JFK on the radio. A Hispanic dude, Jose, with only one arm, (an early 1960 casualty from the war in Vietnam). I remember him for how he could use his one hand to fold a match over the striking patch of the matchbook, and with his thumb, strike the match, ignite it, and light his cigarette. He also rolled his cigarettes one-handed. Over the years, I would nonchalantly and arrogantly use Jose's little match-trick that I learned from him to impress my friends, and sometimes chicks that I sat next to in bars. I still can't roll a cigarette or a joint one-handed. I use a bong anyway.

Another interesting factoid that comes to mind as I'm writing this chapter, is Christmas Eve, December 24th, 1963. The month before, (the day before Thanksgiving), the Lubbock Sheriff let everyone in his jail go home for the holidays. About ten other dudes, all of them in jail for minor offenses, like public drunkenness, non-payment of Child Support, Drunk Driving, or other non-felony infractions of the law, were released upon their promise to return on January 2nd of the new year to finish out their sentences. I was the only dude left in the jail.

My solitude lasted almost a month, until just a few days before Christmas. I pretty much had the run of the jailhouse and cooked my own meals in the kitchen for those lonely weeks. Grits, Cornbread, Eggs, I became a world renown Chef in my own mind. I still love Grits and I can prepare Eggs twelve different ways.

Two days before Christmas, another dude named "Joe" who appeared to be in his early thirties, was locked up with me. Of course I was just a little bit curious what "Joe" was "In" for and when I asked him, , he responded by telling me that he was in there for robbing a bank. How naive I was, I really believed his bullshit story, and believed it for another ten years.

Christmas Eve came, and boy, did the two of us party. Joe, the "Bank Robber" and I, (or whatever his real name was), got shit-faced drunk that night, let me explain. Joe and I had full access to the jailhouse, the kitchen, and the outer corridor that surrounded the "Cell" portion of this single-story jailhouse that had been built in the late 1800's behind the courthouse.

The outer walls of the corridor around the cell block had windows, on all four sides of the jailhouse. These windows rolled up and down like regular windows. Each widow had vertical bars about an inch in diameter. Attached to the bars at each corner top and bottom, were U-Bolts that held a thick metal mesh screen with the nuts to the U-Bolts on the outside.

A few days had gone by, "Joe" and I played a lot of poker and dominos, and on that Christmas Eve, Joe says to me, "Hey, come over here and help me carry some of this shit". Here we were, standing at a window, another dude was on the outside standing there in the dark, taking the nuts off two of the U-Bolts, pulling the metal screen back far enough to pass shit through the bars to Joe and I.

Potato Chips, some kind of Dip, Candy Bars, two Turkey and two Ham sandwiches, a bottle of Jack Daniels, a bottle of Vodka, several joints, and several porno-magazines. After Santa Claus had left us, I thought, "Wow! This is awesome! Let's party!"

Here's where the night gets even more bizarre. Right after we both ate one of our sandwiches, and had a few shots each of JD, Joe whips out a large tablespoon that on the end of the handle he had either used a file or something other means to notch a "Key".

In so much that I immediately thought he made that "Key" to escape, after all, he WAS a bank robber, to my surprise, when he unlocked the main door with the "Spoon Key", we grabbed our "Christmas Presents" and sat on the hilly portion of the grounds surrounding the jailhouse (at midnight)....and commenced to get shit-face drunk/stoned, at least I was.

Up until then, for that almost three months, to everyone, the other inmates, to the various Deputies, and the Sheriff, I was a 20-year-old dude named Sam or whatever, (I can't remember what name I used), and I was from Connecticut, or whatever.

After our little Christmas Eve party, (I don't have a clear recollection because at 15, it doesn't take much alcohol or weed to get totally wasted), I woke up in my jail cot/bed the following day. My guess is either I had stumbled back inside the jail under my own power the night before, or "Joe" had carried me in and put me to bed.

Five days later, on December 30th, much to my surprise, I was picked up by Uncle Chuck and Aunty Wilma for the road trip home to Minnesota. Now, sometimes it only takes a few minutes to put two and two together. For me, it took about ten years.

When the light-bulb finally did come on many years later, I had figured out that my pal "Joe" really was one of the deputies, and NOT a bank robber. The whole thing was a ruse to get me to fess up to who I really was, and where I was from.

The moral of this little story is that the Sheriff had obviously known all along that I was a minor, he just didn't know how to contact family in order to see REAL justice done.

That REAL justice was his compassion, and common sense, his proper use of his authority, to know that I wasn't the "Criminal Type".....to realize that I WAS a "Victim of Circumstances", to let me go back home after they got me wasted enough to tell "Joe" my "Story".

Today, that same compassion and common sense probably IS being used in very limited and isolated situations like mine was, I just think it should be the norm and not the product of "Being in the Right Place, at the Right Time".

Only a few times in my life that this special kind of compassion, mercy, and common sense was used for my benefit. Someday, perhaps the justice system will be changed so that everyone has a chance at a good life, especially those folks that are/have been, "Victims of Circumstances".

As this book is still a work in progress, I'm not sure if this chapter or a portion of it does end up to be my final chapter of this book. For now, I'll just leave it here where it is.

Chapter Sixteen – A back-story: My Baby-Brother and coping mechanisms

I add this chapter here that describes in part, my early relationship with my brother, what he and I both had to deal with early in our lives, and the very different coping mechanisms that we had. Also, what I write here is in no way an excuse for either my circumstances or behavior or my brother's. Through life's "Ups and Downs", I have been able to recognize my short-comings and how I had to learn from my mistakes. Learn. Not just recognize my failings as a human, but recognize the difference between "Good" and "Bad" traits, personality flaws, "Circumstantial Insanity", and make the necessary changes to bring myself in line with "Normal" expected behavior, and a good life. A life that I can say has been fulfilling and "good".

A vast majority of our species has to suffer and cope (or not cope), with much worst shit than my brother and I had to deal with. God knows, just look at the millions of children, and people in general, in war-torn parts of the world, with the suffering THEY have to experience and try to cope with. The majority probably don't cope as well as I did.

Part of this book, if you read "between the lines", is my efforts in sharing my story, how I survived, in spite of. Anyone who is reading my book that happens to think of themselves as a "Survivor", will understand, and appreciate that part of what I am writing, in a sense, is a "Survival Guide", with the key message of "Forgiveness".

As I write this tonight and add this chapter about my Baby Brother Johnnie, I am recalling a wonderful day today, June 21st, 2020 Father's Day. I had a wonderful Father's Day today, received wonderful acknowledgement of this day dedicated to Fathers everywhere. Here' a new quote which I turned into a Meme for Facebook earlier today: "I may not be the World's "Most

Perfect Father”, or have great wealth to bestow upon my two “Adult Children” or any other type of legacy to leave them, if “Perfection” was gauged only by the measure of LOVE that I have for my children and my Grandson, “My Cup Runneth Over”, and that is the only legacy or wealth that truly matters”.

My brother Johnny and I were as close as brothers could possibly be, up until they buried our Mother that is. Let me explain. I was fifteen, and Johnny was six years old when Mom died. I have always said that at the time of her death, Johnny was young enough, that although her death did have an effect on him, he was young enough to just not quite understand it all emotionally or mentally for that matter, i.e., it went completely over his head, so to speak.

For myself it was a radically almost insane departure compared to Johnny's coping mechanisms, because at just a few months past my fifteenth birthday, I WAS old enough to fully comprehend, but NOT old enough to cope, at all. I think anyone at that age would have suffered in the same way that I did, a suffering that stayed with me for a very long time.

We shared the same Mother, but we had different fathers. Mom had divorced my father when I was three and she married Johnny's father, my step-father, when I was four. Eight years later she gave birth to my "Baby Brother". I loved that little dude, however, it was a real "Love/Hate" relationship about the time he turned four, because he enjoyed watching me get a whipping, and he was always making shit up, "Tommy hit me Daddy".

I never EVER touched a hair on his little head. Sometimes, something would get broken, like the time he tried to ram his little tricycle thru the back-porch screen door. Who can forget the time he took a shit in the middle of the kitchen? "I swear Dad, that's NOT my poop". Guess

who got blamed for everything? Me of course. Many broken yardsticks.....broken over my ass, (mom threw the "Razor-Strop" in the trash early on when I was about five).

After the funeral I was living with Ed and Johnny, but that only lasted about a month, as my English teacher, my first class of the day, was the first to notice how badly beaten I was, so she sent me to the Nurse's office. Besides my dual black eyes, I had huge welts across my back, two cracked ribs, and a fractured left arm. Needless to say, I was escorted home by two deputy county sheriffs to pick up my shit. Luckily for them that Ed was at work. I ended up in three different Foster Homes, until the day after my 17th birthday, the day I stood with about 30 other dudes at the Hennepin County main courthouse in downtown Minneapolis, raising my right hand, swearing to defend the United States for enemies both foreign and domestic as I joined the U. S. Navy.

My real father, Harold Saxe, signed the paperwork at the Navy Recruiting Office since I was "under age", and he died two years later, beaten to death by a few other bums, fighting over some woman is what I eventually was told. Although it was obvious that he was beaten to death, the coroner listed his "official" cause of death as Sclerosis of the Liver, that's what they did back then and that's what they still do, if you are just some "John Doe" homeless bum, and the evidence shows that you were murdered, they are NOT going to waste their time investigating your death, period.

I would later find out that he told the authorities that it was I that was abusing him and he was just defending himself, what a fucking joke. Ed was around six foot three, and I was about 5'10" at that time. Hears a "By the Way", he lied about how mom was injured, telling the local

constable, who was also an Elder at our church, that mom had fallen down the stairs, which were about 25 steps up to the second floor where Johnny's and my bedroom were.

A little further with this "By the Way". Over a period of eleven years, from the time I was four until I was just turning fifteen, Ed had put her in the hospital five different times. Spousal abuse back in the 1950's was not prosecuted like it is today. He liked to hit mom in the stomach because it was easier to hide the damage as there usually wasn't much to see as far as physical damage/evidence, unlike a black eye or two, or a bruised and swollen face.

Two of the times she was hospitalized, there was major internal damage. One time the doctors removed her Spleen, and another time her Gall Bladder. There certainly was damage to other organs as well, just not damaged beyond functionality like her Spleen and Gall Bladder. I wasn't given the gruesome details for a few years, and it was Aunty Alice that had explained why mom had died at so young an age. She died at Saint Mary's Hospital, the same hospital where she was born. Johnny and I both were also born there.

Basically what the doctors had told all my aunts and uncles, was due to the fact that mom had to have her Spleen and Gall Bladder removed years prior to this last "She fell down the stairs" bullshit, this time a Kidney was badly damaged, but the doctors could not operate or do any more "damage control" because due to the years of abuse, "Her insides had so many issues like massive blood-clotting, that they could not do anything to prevent her from dying. She died on the third day of her hospitalization.

I remember that night. Johnny and I were staying with our Great-Uncle Jim and Great-Aunty Erma. That third evening we were taken to the hospital to see Mom. It was late, like 10 in the

evening, and as soon as Johnny and I walked into Mom's room, I knew that something was up because EVERYONE was there in the room, aunts and uncles, some older cousins, and out Pastor was there.

There had to be twenty people crowded in there, assholes to belly-buttons as the saying goes. The room was dark and sort of surreal with only the light above Mom's bed lit. Everyone else were like shadowy figures, and no one spoke a word. Johnny sat on one side of Mom's bed, and I sat on the other.

My vivid Memory of her was a look of peace, almost Angelic. We talked, but the only part of the conversation that I remember, was my asking her, "Mom, when are you coming home?" To which she replied, "I'm going home tonight Tommy". It would take me a few years to figure that one out. No, she wasn't giving me false hope, which subconsciously for a few years angered me, she was telling me exactly how it was for her, that she WAS going home, to that magical, mystical, heaven that she believed in.

My Mother was a sincere, and humble Christian, Sunday School Teacher, and loved by EVERYBODY in our little farming community around Ham Lake. When she was buried at the Glen Cary Lutheran Church cemetery, there had to be two hundred people in attendance. Of course, all my relatives were there, which had to be thirty or forty of them, so I figure the entire community was there to pay their respect. Mom WAS loved, as I said.

What happened to Ed, my Step-Father you might ask. His parents ended up committing him to a mental institution for about the fifth time for what they called in those days, "Shock Treatments", goggle that, it's just a mild form of electrocution. The parts of the brain they fry, the

brain tissue, is destroyed and never re-generate. It's not wonder he got crazier and crazier over the years.

Back to the earlier part of the story. That day that I was escorted home to get my "stuff" as I said earlier, Ed was at work. Johnny was at school, so the last time I saw him was breakfast several hours earlier, before school, and we did not see each other again for twenty years. We both had parted company abruptly, and we took different paths. I survived in my own way, and learned how to cope, spending the next few years in three different Foster Homes.

The amazing part for me which I have described in other essays, is that twenty years after Mom's death, somehow, someway, overnight, I found forgiveness in my heart for my Step-Father, Edward John Elavsky. For two decades, I had sworn to myself, vowed, that if I ever saw him on the street, I would kill him with my bare hands, (and I had added a couple of inches to my height, and beefed up a bit). I would have torn him apart. He died, drunken and froze to death up in the snow-covered mountains above Lake Elsinore, "Popsicle Ed, Frozen til' Dead".

BUT WAIT, THERE'S MORE!! One day I woke up from a deep night's sleep, and the first thing that popped in my head, and stayed there all day, FORGIVENESS! Go figure! There IS more to that story, but you will have to just go looking for the rest of that story in one of my previous essays. It's Ed's story of how he was tortured by the Nazi's in WW2 for being a spy behind enemy lines, (actually discovered and captured in Berlin). Too long a story for this post, about a true American Hero, you'll find it elsewhere on my website.

Back to Johnny, well, this next part is also about Ed. Twenty years had gone by, and I found Johnny. He was living in Orange County, and I was in Ventura County (California), so we were

within driving distance. I drove down one day around lunch time to his apartment in the city of Orange, and we talked, and we talked, AND we talked, for hours, and hours, AND hours, emptying a bottle of Yukon Jack and smoking about three bong-loads. We talked into the evening, thru the night, until the Sun came up the following morning. Of course, we reminisced about our childhood, that's all we had, other than "What kind of work do you do"....."What do YOU do for a living, Tommy?" I could share the entire conversation with my readers, but that would take a whole other chapter.

I started this chapter with a description of our very different coping mechanisms, and how my brother and I managed to survive other Mother's horrific life and death, our own horror stories, although at his young age, and me filling in as the ultimate example of a "Scapegoat", the ending of this chapter IS about Johnny. I'll make it brief so you, as the reader, can fill in the blanks.

Although Johnny was pampered and spoiled by his father as a child, he did not escape his own bout with evil. That night when Johnny and I met for the first time in twenty years, fueled, and liberated by a few bong-loads and an entire fifth of Yukon Jack, one of the stories Johnny shared with me in gruesome detail was how he and his dad had been living in their car at some park in Long Beach, when Ed had dropped him off at some friends house, telling him that he would return for him in a few weeks. Johnny was twelve years old at the time.

The two weeks turned into two months which eventually turned into two years. That's two years as a captive. "Kid, your dad is not coming back for you. Bob and I bought you. We paid your father \$250 for you". Yes, they were a couple of scumbag pedophiles, sharing my Baby

Brother, in every way. He was never allowed out of the house, and there was always one of them home while the other asswipe was out shopping or whatever.

Johnny told me that he was a few weeks shy of his fourteenth birthday when he finally escaped. No need here to describe how he was able to escape, but I can guarantee you that my brother shared enough of a detailed story to convince me. Use your imagination folks.

Bottom line for me is not who, what, and why, of the pedophiles, it's the fact that Johnny had an equally horrific experience compared to our Mother's life and death, and he survived. Johnny died twenty years ago of a sudden Aortic Aneurysm. Moral of the story, a vast portion of our species has had to deal with terrible, horrific chapters in their life, and for many, the suffering continues.

Many, like my brother and I, had absolutely no help in trying to cope AND survive. In spite of my own horror story, I was able to cope, and overcome. Without any help, Johnny was able to cope, somewhat. When he died, the Riverside County Coroner told me that along with his obesity, (he weighed 390 pounds), his habitual use of illegal drugs also contributed to his overall health and sudden death.

If you feel like you cannot cope with whatever you are dealing with, reach out for help, because going it alone much of the time, fails. For me? I guess I was just one of the fortunate ones, my grief and anger was so intense, I was blind to those around me that were reaching out to ME. So, if you are able to recognize that you DO need help, reach out to those who already have their hand reaching out for yours.

What kind of father would sell his own child to a Pedophile? In Ed's case, there IS more to his story, which I get into in another chapter. His life, and why I was able to forgive him.

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Dudes I knew well and not so well

“Chief” was a Seminole Indian from Florida. BIG Indian, about six foot six, 250 pounds with very low body-fat. If you have ever seen “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest” and remember the huge Indian, THAT was how big my friend “Chief” was.

“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, I think for his protection from a few dudes in Section Three.

“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 negative relationship with. I managed to co-exist and work with Poppy that week without getting beat up or fucked in the ass.

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Ross, the mechanic

Dogboy

Mr. Swanson