**AN OWNER’S MANUAL FOR**

**CONSCIOUSLY**

**EVOLIVING YOUR**

**CONSCIOUSNESS**

**Prepared by Don McCrea-Hendrick**

Plus

 **The Novel, ROMANCING THE ABSURD**

**A Mystery Novel Based on Reinvented Reality**

**By Tony T. Trueblé**

**With Don McCrea-Hendrick**

**Dedication**

**This book is dedicated to Tom Steyer, Marianne Williamson,**

**both candidates for President in the 2020 election.**

**Tom is receiving this dedication because as a billionaire**

**he is using a portion of his holdings to help people in need.**

**Marianne is receiving this dedication because she is running for President using love as a key message; and to Barbara Max Hubbard, the person behind bringing the idea to the world that we can consciously evolve our consciousness. I also dedicate this book to my former wife, Leilani Francis Hendrick (nee Jones) and to our son, Richard Francis Hendrick and to my wife, Nancy Louise McCrea-Hendrick (nee Longaker) and to our son,**

**Louis Madison Longaker.**

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**AN OWNER’S MANUAL FOR THE**

**CONSCIOUS EVOLUTION OF YOUR CONSCIOUSNESS**

*The Next Stage in the Evolution of Humans:*

*How to Purposely and Voluntarily Evolve Your Own Consciousness*

**PREFACE**

This Owner’s Manual does not have all the answers. Its intent is to jump start the process for you to work on recognizing that you have unlimited potential if you focus on intent, action, and results.

All you have to do is read the newspaper headlines to conclude that human behavior is often individually and collectively insane. As a minimum, humans are guilty of bizarre and self-defeating behavior.

 It seems to me that the cure for this human insanity is to identify a driving concept that will benefit all individuals, cultures, religions and global society. I suggest that driving concept is *Enlightenment*—which I define as an axiom that states *Enlightenment* is the recognition that individual humans like you can purposely and voluntarily evolve their own consciousness provided, they have the intent to do so and are willing to take the necessary action to evolve. **Not enhance consciousness, but evolve it!**

How you presently define God can initially represent the highest level of consciousness towards which you can evolve, recognizing that the actual definition of God cannot be known until that definition is reached by you—in this lifetime or perhaps another.

I believe that the common goal of evolving our individual consciousnesses can change humanity’s focus from competition to the positive evolution of the individual, recognizing that when one person evolves the consciousness, it benefits everyone else from a global and universal viewpoint.

To evolve your consciousness, you need not change your religious beliefs. Under the *Axioms of Enlightenment*, you can keep your present religious beliefs (or non-beliefs) intact, using those already established beliefs as a base line or foundation for beginning the process of evolving your consciousness.

However, conscious evolution itself does not need to be dogmatized in a religious setting—or in any other way. People need to be shown how they might evolve, not told what to think or how exactly they must evolve. As soon as someone tells you what to think or do, you need to question the source of that information, recognizing that when you are told instead of shown, you are most likely receiving information that is based on conjecture, opinion, or outright guessing, or COG as I call it using the acronym.

To evolve your consciousness, you need only be shown the possible pathways of “Ways to Evolve” and the possible “Attributes” of an evolved consciousness. The choices of how you want to evolve, and what you expect to get, are then up to you provided that you follow the pathway of: intention—action—result.

I stress that what I am presenting here is only information that I have gathered from my research and personal experience. I am not telling you what you must do to evolve your own consciousness. My intent is to show you what has worked for me and others with the idea that it might work for you and everyone else. All you need to do is “take the best and leave the rest.”

This book is a work in progress. The information herein represents a synopsis of what I have learned so far. My next step is to continue to develop a list of Ways to Evolve one’s consciousness and a list of what the Attributes of an evolved consciousness might look like. The details of how this idea evolves will be part of the process of evolving our consciousness: individually and collectively.

If you have further interest in this subject, type into your browser “conscious evolution of the consciousness”. You will be surprised about the number of articles that exist related to this subject. Some of the best summaries are contained in Barbara Marx Hubbard’s 2008 article, *An Evolutionary Synthesis* and Ervin Laszio’s 2009 article, *Healing the Planet*.

If you would like to participate by contributing knowledge you have or obtain, by all means email me the information you’ve acquired to trueble@aol.com. I, of course, will give you appropriate credit in any book using any of your submissions.

**John Lennon’s “Imagine”**

Imagine there's no Heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us only sky
Imagine all the people
Living for today

Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace

You may say that I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will be as one

Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world

You may say that I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will live as one

**The Brain and How to Use It**

In order to consciously evolve one’s consciousness it is a good idea to start with having knowledge of how the brain works and how it can be used to your benefit.

The study of the brain falls under the category of neuroscience. One of the subsets of this science is called neurogenesis which is the study of how we can grow new stem cells in our brain so as to create new neurons, dendrites, axons, synaptic connections and new neural pathways in order to “**boldly go where no man has gone before**” –i.e. Star Trek.

I recommend that you start with a book entitled “*The Brain-The Story of You*” by David Eagleman. As stated by *Nature* this book is “An ideal introduction to how biology generates the mind…Eagleman’s answers are consistently clear, engaging and thought-provoking.”

By the time you finish reading this book you will have a clear picture of the brain you are carrying around in your head.

Now once you are clear about what your brain is and what it does, the next step would be to learn how you utilize this previously unknown thing you have carried around in your head since birth.

That next step is how do you learn to use your brain?

A clear answer to that question is in a book by Leonard Mlodinow entitled *“Elastic-Unlocking Your Brain’s Ability to Embrace Change*”. This book will teach you how to move from an analytic thinker to an elastic thinker, one who can think outside the box by using idea generation, interactive thinking, pattern recognition, divergent thinking, and imagination, using bottom-up thinking instead of top-down thinking.

Let’s face it: How could one possibly consciously evolve their consciousness if they knew nothing about their brain and how it can be used by you to actually consciously evolve your consciousness utilizing the techniques herein.

**Ways to Purposely and Voluntarily Evolve Your Consciousness**

**Assumptions**

 Human behavior is often irrational, if not outright insane.

 Humans have an instinctive desire to progress during their lifetime.

 As a cure for irrational human behavior, humans need a driving concept that will give them an individual and collective life purpose that benefits all individuals and world societies.

Humans generally have a concept of a definition of God

Our consciousness is evolving whether we like it or not! So, we might as well take charge of the process and direct it towards our best benefit—individually and collectively.

Evolving a consciousness is an ongoing process rather than an end result because it might take close to an infinite amount of time to reach the definition of God as described in *Axiom Number Two* below.

**The Axioms of Enlightenment**

**First**, *Enlightenment,* as I define it*,* is the recognition that you can purposely and voluntarily evolve your own consciousness provided you have the intent and the willingness to take the necessary action to evolve.

**Second**, for now the highest level you can evolve yourself is to target your own concept of the definition of God, which will remain unknowable until that definition is reached in this lifetime or the next—assuming existence continues after death.

**Third**, global society will evolve as more and more individuals evolve. ***Placing the Needs of Humanity First*** (over national interests, etc.) is the first Attribute of an evolved global society.

**The Beginning Steps of Evolving Your Consciousness**

In order to consciously evolve one’s own consciousness, it is necessary to first raise one’s existing level of consciousness. These steps are geared towards that end, however, each person should recognize that everyone exists at a different level of consciousness, so the application of these ideas is flexible depending on how conscious you feel that you yourself are.

**Step One is to Utilize Love as the Basis for Your Existence**. Yeah, I know what do you mean Love? That sounds pretty hokey. Here is the key to using Love: get out of the abstract use of the word love; instead visualize how you would show Love. Personally, I show love by imaging that I am hugging or kissing the person or thing that needs to be loved, such as freeway speeders or freeway tailgaters.

When you find yourself in a negative situation, send Love in the form of a vision, such as a hug or a kiss, that shows you loving the negative situation along with all the people involved in that situation. When you find yourself judging someone, send Love to them in vision form. When you find yourself being judged by someone, send them Love in vision form.

If sending a vision of your hugging people doesn’t work, I have found that sending the thought, “Have a happy life!” to everyone you encounter or pass by works just as well. Better yet, I have found that actually saying, “Have a happy life!” to everyone I encounter during the day has an amazing result. Sending the thought or verbally expressing it acts as an expression of my love for others; and I assume that it will have the same effect for you.

Before you start to read the following steps, send out love visions to yourself and all humanity, as you should do constantly, in order to establish an inner sense or condition favorable to you.

**Step two is Forgiving Yourself for Past Negativities**. As negative thoughts penetrate your consciousness, simply forgive yourself for the situation behind those negative thoughts. This will begin the process of eliminating those negative situations related to the past that recur again and again in your thoughts. If the negative thoughts continue to penetrate your mind, forgive yourself for not having been able to forgive yourself and love yourself for your negative thoughts. In this way you will have shifted your focus away from your recurring negative thoughts. After forgiving yourself, release your negative situations or recurring thoughts to the Sun to be burned to a crisp nothingness.

**Step Three is to Forgive Yourself and Release Present Negative Situations and Thoughts as They Occur.** Forgive yourself for those negative thoughts. If they continue, forgive yourself for not having been able to forgive yourself and love yourself for your negative thoughts, shifting yourself away from the negative thoughts.

**Step Four is to Stop Judging Yourself**. Give yourself a hug, then accept and love yourself for who you are—an evolving consciousness unaffected by the negative situations of your life, past and present.

**Step Five Is to Stop Judging Others**. The key is to recognize when you are judging someone, which often occurs unconsciously as we tend to judge others from afar just by their appearance.

When you find yourself judging someone, forgive yourself for judging them and then show love for them by mentally sending out a vision of hugging or kissing them, or better yet, learn to send people a hug or a kiss as soon as you see them and before you can unconsciously or consciously judge them. Notice, Don’t Judge!

**Step Six Is the Control of Your Self-Oriented-Ego**. You need to get your self-oriented-ego out of the way. Placing Humanity First and working to collectively evolve our consciousnesses will move you away from a self-centered viewpoint. Right or wrong, never try to justify your behavior to yourself or others since nothing will be gained by doing so.

**Step Seven is to Take Charge of Your Emotions and Instincts**. You can’t control your emotions but you can control how you react to them. Use the process in Step Two and Step Three to reverse negative emotional and instinctive reactions or behavior. Be sure to send love visions to others that may have triggered your negative emotion.

**Step Eight Is to Have a Passionate Intent to Continually Take the Action to Learn**. You just

 can’t beat continued learning as a method for evolving your consciousness.

“Google” subject matters that you find interesting. Print the material, read, underline, and make notations on the pages. Enter the marked information into a computer file. Then print, reread, and highlight the computer file summaries. Study and mentally integrate the separate files with each other, determining what makes sense and what does not. Note the differences between factually supported information and conjecture, opinion, and guesswork (COG).

Use the reading process as a way to generate new thoughts in your consciousness: Every time you read or reread, notate in the margins, or in a separate notebook, any thoughts or questions that arise—basically you should be having a dialogue with what you are reading: This is a basic “Way to Evolve” that you need to incorporate in anything you read. I have used this process in preparing these excerpts, reading and rereading the excerpts multiple times, each time realizing the need for more and more changes and improvement. Read the book, “*How to Read a Book*” by Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren, something I read in my freshman year at George Washington University in 1965.

**Step Nine is To Live in the Present**. Learn to accept yourself wherever you are right now.

**Step Ten is to Laugh at that Which Bothers You**. If you’re still having trouble with eliminating or controlling your thoughts, emotions, and instincts, you need to bring in the big attack dog: LAUGHTER. Negative situations and thoughts cannot stand to be laughed at, so when they come up, after you first send love visions, laugh at those negativities. Then release them to the Sun to be burned to a crisp nothingness. Throughout the day, remember to put a smile on your face as research shows that purposeful smiling has a positive effect on the brain. Smile, Laugh, Feel Good!

**What are the first indications you have that you are actually working towards consciously evolving your consciousness?**

You recognize that you can purposely and voluntarily evolve your own consciousness, i.e., you are *Enlightened*.

You have and are forgiving yourself for the negative situations in your past life.

You have and are forgiving yourself for negative situations in the present as they occur.

You send love visions, such as hugs, kisses, or whatever expresses your understanding of love, to everyone you encounter, especially those you find yourself judging. You love yourself!

You say hello and acknowledge everyone you come in contact with during any given day.

You say to everyone, “Have a Happy Life!”

You accept and love yourself for who you are; you accept and love others for who they are.

You are spending a lot of time smiling and laughing.

**The Law of Giving and Receiving**

Many of the people who are formally working on the evolution of human consciousness use the Law of Giving and Receiving as a guideline. Often this is related to money and tithing and relates to the circulation of money (although that is only one aspect of the theory): When you put money into circulation, you can expect to receive money back. For me it seems more important to circulate love and receive love back as that helps free one’s consciousness from the insignificant negativities of life so that the focus of the mind can be geared to the conscious evolution of one’s life. Giving and receiving anything has to be a quid pro quo process: Both parties must benefit!

Use the idea of saying, “Have a happy life,” and give the idea to others by example and/or by suggesting they do the same. Begin circulating the words so that they can become part of the collective consciousness, opening everyone individually and collectively to free consciousness to pursue the greatest good while reinforcing in the collective consciousness that we should all have a happy life.

**Self-Oriented Ego**

 The Self-Oriented Ego, assuming there are positive parts to the ego, is the negative part of ego that causes you to always act in your own best interest, regardless of the results of your action and regardless of any negative impact on others. It is placing you first, by you, above everything else, which can include family, friends, and others that you interact with.

 The self-oriented ego is responsible for generating negative thoughts and negative emotions.

 The conscious evolution of your own consciousness will not happen if you let your self-oriented ego control your mind.

 One of the first steps in consciously evolving your consciousness is to take control of this part of your ego since it is that self-centered ego that keeps you unconscious. As I pointed out earlier, in order to consciously evolve your consciousness, you must first become conscious, or at least conscious enough to start the process.

 Ego will do everything it can to keep you unconscious because it feeds off of negative thinking and negative emotions.

 My research indicates that some people believe that there are no positive aspects of the ego and that all egos are self-oriented, but I disagree.

 Where does ego come from and why does it exist? Possibly the answer to that question is that ego arose in the human mind as part of the survival syndrome.

 In my own opinion, I believe that the ego is an energy source that can be tapped as a positive source of consciously evolving your consciousness once the self-oriented ego has been challenged and controlled. If ego, in fact, is part of the survival syndrome, then it makes sense to me that eliminating the self-oriented ego would increase one’s capability to survive assuming that the ego is under control. The chances of human survival will increase as consciousness evolves as we develop survival techniques that will work better because an evolved consciousness will also evolve survival techniques.

**Ways to Evolve**

 My research results ended up with a long list of Ways to Evolve. I’ve gathered some of those ways under three scenarios; the one you use being related to where you feel your evolution currently stands. Ways to Evolve still needs a lot work, a lot of thought, and a lot of organization to gather together to summarize the numerous information available.

**Beginning Evolutionaries**

Starting is easy: Just accept the *Axioms of Enlightenment*; then use the following types of Ways to Evolve as you see fit based on what you find are the most effective ways that work for you.

General: Always structure your processes using the formula: intention—action—result. Be passionate with your intentions and assertive with your actions. It’s okay to aim high for the results you wish to obtain.

Be patient: Stick to the processes until results have occurred. The more you progress, the more you will learn to open up to the results you desire.

Intentionality is the bottom line as we act, create, accomplish, and love in accordance with the depth of our intentions. Be passionately interested in that which you do not already know.

Gratitude: Practice being grateful for the things you have and the things that happen in your life.

Stop judging your views as being right or wrong because by doing so you block the input of new ideas.

Ego: Do not let your self-oriented ego interfere with your intentions and actions by simply remembering to love your ego as you love yourself.

Be expansive in your thinking: In order to evolve your consciousness, you need to be open to evolving your level of consciousness about yourself and your surroundings.

Motivations: Find something that motivates you, something you strongly desire to have and incorporate what motivates you into your process of consciously evolving your consciousness. Develop micro goals to go along with the macro goal of evolving your consciousness. You will become more motivated as your consciousness evolves.

Develop a mental attitude geared toward evolving your consciousness: Believe that you can purposely and voluntarily evolve your consciousness by accepting the *Axioms of Enlightenment* as a guide to evolving your consciousness. Recognize and accept the fact that you are now *Enlightened* meaning that you have a greater purpose and meaning in your life that overrides everything else that enters your consciousness.

 Recognize that you are what you think, so think big.

Begin each day by creating in your mind the way that you would like it to be based on longer-term intentions you have identified. Put your long-term intentions down on paper; revise these intentions over time based on your accomplishments.

Believe in yourself, love yourself and your capabilities; believe that you have the mental powers to consciously evolve your consciousness.

Tell yourself when you lie down to sleep that you feel good now and will feel good in the morning. When you wake up, tell yourself that you feel good before you get out of bed. Throughout the day, tell yourself you feel good (even if you don’t, remembering that you are what you think; love yourself for not feeling good, if necessary.). When you feel good, good things are attracted to you (under the law of attraction). Feel good about the purpose of feeling good.

Use love as a tool to reverse bad feelings by “loving yourself for the way it is”. Bad feelings are the result of a chemical reaction in the brain. By loving yourself for feeling bad, depressed, or whatever, you can reverse the chemical reaction. Make sure that when you love someone or something, find ways to show love such as visualizing yourself sending someone a hug, a kiss, or whatever you find expresses your love. As a minimum, tell people you encounter to have a happy life. You can keep love abstract in the macro world, but you need to detail love in the micro world. You can read more about love in Thaddeus Golas’ *The Lazy Man’s Guide to Enlightenment* and Eric Fromm’s *The Art of Loving*.

 Be realistic in your intentions. Money is not going to fall from the sky because you think that it will.

 Learn to meditate (See Section Below)

 Learn to Chant (See Section Below)

 Open your consciousness: Be willing to conceive of anything and everything. As an affirmation, say daily until it is ingrained in your consciousness: “My mind is open, my consciousness is open. I conceive of anything and everything.”

Insignificant Negativities: Recognize when negative thoughts enter your consciousness. Remember that most of these negatives are “insignificant negativities” that aren’t even worth bothering with. Affirm this with yourself until you are in absolute control of these insignificant negative thoughts.

**Moderately Experienced Evolutionaries**

 Examine your beliefs: Are they yours or someone else’s?

Be focused. Develop concentration which is crucial. Develop concentration by writing, which forces one to think. Writing helps harness brain cells to produce thoughts.

Have a goal of sharp, clear-cut, and definite thinking.

Develop visualization techniques: Pretend that you already have what you want, feeling as if you have already achieved that desire. Visualize yourself in possession of what you want and feel it as if it is already there.

Don’t let the mind be in control by creating emotionally reactive behaviors.

Be virtuous by avoiding the sins of man: killing; sexual misconduct; taking what is not given; lying; slander; abuse; idle gossip; malice; avarice; false views; a mindset that denies fundamental truths. Use the self-forgiveness steps to clear your mind when you can’t live up to these standards of avoidance, then move on after releasing your “sins” to the Sun to be burned to a crisp.

**Experienced Evolutionaries**

 Help plant the seeds that humans can purposely and voluntarily evolve their consciousness. Stay focused on the evolutionary process you need to continually follow. Show others how they can evolve their consciousness, which will benefit your own evolution. Further the idea of the collective, societal consciousness evolving through the evolution of the individual members of society. It’s all part of the quid pro quo.

 Differentiate between the macro world and the micro world.

 Use music as an evolutionary tool.

 Allow infinite possibilities into your life. Evolving your consciousness is not a passive activity.

 The subconscious: You come into a relationship with your subconscious by consciously desiring contact. Contemplate daily the existence of this second mind. Affirm to yourself on a daily basis that your subconscious mind is your partner in life. Include the evolution of your subconscious as part of the evolution of your consciousness.

 Dialogue with your subconscious by telling it what you want to create. Visualize yourself sending waves of love to your subconscious. Say to your subconscious often that your consciousness is connected to your subconscious mind and vice-versa.

**Some General Types of Ways to Evolve**

Evolution is a spiritual phenomenon. Developing the spirit evolves the consciousness.

Have a belief that whatever the mind of man can conceive, it can achieve.

Avoid pain; seek things which are pleasurable

Learn to love yourself and accept the person that you are.

Love the world and the world will love you back.

Do not feel bad when you make a mistake. Use self-forgiveness and move on.

 Be eager to expose yourself to a variety of information and opinions.

Trust yourself and have the courage to follow your intuition.

Be grateful for your life, family, and friends; be grateful for all the good that happens to you in

life; be grateful for just being alive (after all, the probability of being born could be almost zero); be grateful that you have a consciousness and that you can consciously evolve it.

You can unleash your infinite powers, when you believe so deeply that it

 creates a level of intensity in your thinking so that your desire becomes a burning obsession. Visualize it and emotionalize it vividly.

**Some Attributes of an Evolved Consciousness**

 Recognizing that one can control their own evolution by using the fundamental concepts of evolution, instead of being driven by them. Understanding and accepting the evolution of the consciousness as evolution itself and the awareness that we can voluntary evolve our own consciousness i.e., *Enlightenment.* Recognizing that the level and ability of the communication we are using here is an evolution of our past abilities to communicate, which is societal in nature.

 Longevity.

 Increased memory abilities.

 Longer peak working years.

 Growth of brain size and complexity.

 Increased brain size with more connections.

 Ability to improve one’s own brain.

 More efficient at information processing.

More resistant to disease/pollution and better at surviving/preventing war. [societal evolution]

 Rapid information intake and retention/access/processing.

The ultimate attribute is reaching the concept of one’s definition of God.

 The next step in the evolution of man may be the emergence of something greater and more complex than human consciousness.

 Physical evolution: maybe a fourth brain in our body cavity to give us more brain power. A brain could be grown on the top of our head, but would be limited by the ability of the body to carry the extra weight unless there is a leg evolution at the same time, or being bound to a wheel chair turns out to not be a disadvantage. Growing gills so that we can also live in the oceans. Growing wings to fly. Growing photosynthetic cells on our skin so that we don’t need so much food.

The unnerving ability to draw exact replicas of intricate structures, buildings and landscapes—virtually anything one lays one’s eyes on.

 Being able to feel numbers in terms of texture, shape and color.

 Able to change one’s body temperature with one’s thoughts.

 Being able to solve complex formulas inside the head.

 Crossing one’s senses for more intense pleasure such as being able to see and taste music.

 Increased memory capabilities such as being able to remember complex musical scores and whole lists of names just by reading them once.

 To quote William James, “We are making use of only a small part of our mind power. Deep down inside of us are vast powers we know nothing about. There may be no limit to the human mind. If man’s power is infinite, his creative powers may also be unlimited.”

 Telepathy, psychokinesis, extrasensory perception, faith healing. Powers beyond the five senses to detect the thoughts and feelings of others. (But are these evolutions of consciousness attributes or more psychic mind type wishful thinking?)

An increase in the ability to perceive and react to ever more kinds of stimuli.

 An evolution of one’s emotions and feelings to some greater level.

 Improvement in communication and relationships, developing skills, sensory evolution, free flow of thought, appreciation of nature, and growth in inner strength and well-being.

 Placing Humanity First (and maybe all living creatures) above all other considerations.

 Increased learning and artistic capabilities.

 Heightened creative insight; states of high genius.

 Connection and integration with the subconscious mind.

 Wholeness and unity with all humanity and nature.

 New structures, deeper perspectives, and higher potentials. Calm, alert and relaxed.

**Meditation**

 There are many ways to meditate. Type meditate into your browser to get information about different types of meditation.

 Personally, I have practiced Transcendental Meditation since 1967. I was given a mantra which seems like it could be any sound as long as the sound has no meaning so that you can internally hear the mantra, not be distracted by the meaning.

My mantra consists of two syllables, so let me invent a mantra for you to try. For example, you might choose for yourself as a mantra “e-yang”. Sit in a chair, get comfortable, close your eyes and start repeating the mantra in your mind and see what happens. Overtime, you will find that you don’t need to say the mantra to start the meditation. If you sit there for 30 seconds or so and pay attention, your mantra will suddenly start on its own without any effort on your part.

Never pressure yourself to hear your mantra. It is not about focus or concentration. It is about deeply internal listening. You will find while you meditate that thoughts will enter your mind as the normal chatter starts its process. That’s okay and is part of the process. The key is that when you realize that you are thinking thoughts instead of being aware of your mantra, you simply cease thinking and let your mantra resurface.

**Chanting Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo**

 I have been chanting since 1972 having said my first chant on my 30th birthday when I was stopped on the street in West Los Angeles by a group of chanters who asked me to say Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo, which I did. They invited me to a meeting, but I was on my way to a pick-up bar, the Oar House, located on the border of Venice and Santa Monica and that was a priority for me at the time since it was my birthday, and I was single and did not have a girlfriend.

 But being a spiritual seeking agnostic, I agreed to come to a meeting later. The chanting was part of a Japanese Buddhist church, Nichiren Shoshu Temples. At the meeting, people sat around chanting and then shared the results of their weeks chanting activities. Most people seemed to be chanting for money, jobs, cars, and other material things, which I thought strange. From the beginning I chanted for confidence, self-fulfillment and other psychological benefits.

 At this time in my life, I was unemployed and needed a job, but I did not chant for a job. Instead, I chanted to have the confidence to adequately present myself during a job interview. Within three days, I had three job offers, all of them a result of increased confidence in myself. After I had told him that I had lacked confidence in my prior jobs, the interviewer for the job I eventually took responded, “You don’t seem unconfident to me.” This was proof to me that chanting was working in increasing my confidence level.

 I haven’t researched other types of chanting since chanting Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo has inwardly and outwardly worked so well for me, but I suppose there are other chants available if you want to research it on the web, so look around if you’re curious.

But I have to say of all the processes that I have experienced, including everything else within this Owner’s Manual, chanting Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo is the most effective tool that you can use to Consciously Evolve Your Consciousness. Hard to believe isn’t it! How else can you find a way to focus on your desires, on your unlimited potential? To this end, I now focus in my chanting to consciously evolve my neural pathways, the most significant aspect of the subconscious mind. You can too!!!

**Comment on Meditation and Chanting**

 Chanting seems to me to be a form of oral meditation or perhaps meditation is an internal form of chanting. Either way, they both work for me in working to evolve my own consciousness.

However, I confess that one of my weaknesses has always been discipline. One is supposed to meditate twice a day for twenty minutes. One is supposed to similarly chant twice daily. While I complied in both instances for several years, as time went on, I lapsed, but I did and do continue to meditate and chant throughout the day in my own ways. I always meditate when I lie down to take a nap (a benefit of being retired). You’re not supposed to do this because it relaxes one so much that you easily fall asleep. Never-the-less, I have found the meditations wonderful as my mind responds with varied interesting results; the same with chanting. I often chant while I drive my car or while I walk. In this way I am still able to chant for specific things I want to accomplish such as my own conscious evolution.

For now, I am chanting to consciously evolve my brain, my consciousness, my subconsciousness and neural pathways, and to strive to consciously evolve the collective consciousness of humanity as those are my main focus in life in its present incarnation.

Of course, I should be chanting to be more disciplined in my endeavors, but then I wouldn’t be chanting for the evolution of my consciousness, for the evolution of my subconsciousness and neural pathways. Perhaps as my consciousness evolves, I will become more disciplined in my meditation and chanting, and more focused on the Ways to Evolve.

Doing anything towards self-evolution is better than nothing so I recommend that you use what you can in your own life, taking the best and leaving the rest. As I’ve said, be flexible with what you use. And certainly, don’t get into judging yourself as that is counter-productive to any goal that you might have.

**Discussion About the Conscious Evolution of the Consciousness**

The model for evolving one’s consciousness requires Intention (passion), Action (Ways to Evolve) and Results (Attributes). Without passionate intention and assertive action to get results, progress will be slow. It all comes down to the basic “you reap what you sow”. So, sow your life with an *Enlightenment* viewpoint that you too can purposely and voluntarily evolve your own consciousness, giving yourself a purpose in this life, and possibly the next, that benefits both you and our global human society.

The amount of time you spend is up to you, but do spend time. You can start by agreeing to the *Axioms of Enlightenment*. Participate first by becoming *Enlightened*; second, by starting to evolve your consciousness, by participating in the implementation of this idea, by bringing it to the attention of others, or perhaps by sending emails or postings on Facebook.

 Be willing to not always receive positive feedback. The first reaction of many people will be, “what’s he been smoking?” The idea will most likely be attacked by fundamentalists of all religions who might be missing the point that this idea is for all of us—regardless of our personal belief in God or the afterlife. Send your comments out with hugs and kisses, and when you receive negative responses, send the negative commentators love with more hugs and kisses, or whatever you might think expresses love.

 There is no need to get upset or angry with those who oppose the idea or have alternative ways to view the idea. As I learned in writing fiction, life without any conflict can be boring—the key being to learn from the conflict without getting into that fearful “us against them” attitude that often leads to violence or war. To be trite, learn how to “agree to disagree”.

I’m sure you and others will have no trouble finding additional Ways to Evolve and Attributes beyond the ones I’ve outlined herein. Send what you can to me along with a list of articles you think I should incorporate into this project. That way we will be able to build a collective process that leads to evolving our consciousness together instead of separately by ourselves, although you can certainly elect to do that or take any paths or ways you desire. It’s all up to you what you define for yourself, for your intentions and actions, and for what results you want to achieve. I only suggest that you use the ideas in this book that work for you. It’s okay to not use the rest.

Please furnish any and all related ideas that you have. Both negative and positive criticisms are welcome as I recognize that no one person can develop the answer to what we are going to need to do to get humans to start behaving rationally. Frankly, I’m apt to be wrong quite as often as I’m apt to be right—it seems to be something intrinsic in human behavior—so expect your thoughts to have enough rightness in them to significantly help. Even wrong thoughts will help by providing a counter-point to ensure that we are on the right track. It is often the challenge to an idea that helps the idea develop into viability.

Be cautious with the evolution of this idea. If the idea becomes dogmatic or starts to stand on its own as a religious organization or is intended as such, the idea is going in the wrong direction. It must remain your free-will choice and that of others. Only you and all individuals can make the determinations as to what works best for you or them. Keep in mind that what works for me or for you might not work for others, so don’t be judgmental of the paths that others take to get their intended results.

I do believe, in order to get this idea off the ground, we are going to need a foundation so money can be raised for implementing the idea individually and collectively. Ideally, the foundation will be funded with money from those who have it and see the idea and foundation as reasonable ways to spend their money from a charitable standpoint. One thing I am cautious about is that many of the spiritual sites seem to be selling products. If someone, including me, asks you directly for money,” run as fast as you can to the nearest exit” (unless you are one of those well-off people). But if you agree to an idea and are asked for your time, give it freely as this is another step in Ways to Evolve your consciousness.

My personal goal is to donate some of my net proceeds from my novel *Romancing the Absurd* and *An Owner’s Manual for Evolving the Consciousness* to start a foundation. I also buy lotto tickets with the same purpose in mind to donate a major portion of my lotto winnings.

**Some More on Wishing People a Happy Life**

One of the best responses I’ve received was from a young man who prepared my latte for me in a Starbucks café in Chico, California. He responded with, “No one has ever wished me a happy life before,” as he moved his arms and hands up into the air in an enthusiastic expression. He went on to further verbalize how important it was for him to have received this communication from me.

Another response I liked was from a lady in Colville, Washington where my great, great grandfather, the chief farmer for the Hudson Bay Company at Fort Colville, lived in the 1860s. As I stood in line talking to the librarian, the lady came up to the desk to check out a book, which we allowed her to do so because we were incessantly talking about the history of Colville. When I said to this lady, whom I had never before laid eyes on, “Have a happy life,” she immediately outstretched her arms and gave me one of the most loving hugs I’d ever had, let alone from a stranger.

The feeling of receiving love from the young man and the lady stranger was immense as in both cases I could feel the love circulate through my body, sending shivers throughout. I was amazed and still am how such a gesture could get such a response from strangers. Both responses reinforced for me that I would myself have a happy day and more importantly a happy life.

I also find that as I do my daily three-mile walk, some of it on the streets, I wave a friendly greeting to cars coming my way to show love. 95% of the cars coming my way results in a friendly wave back from the drivers and/or passengers of the cars, each wave giving me a feeling of satisfaction and happiness.

**Some Thoughts on the Probability of Being Born Which Seems to be Zero**

An extreme number of universal events had to happen in order for our earth to exist. Then an extreme number of events had to happen on earth for human life to form, especially conscious thinking humans. Then an extreme number of events had to happen exactly as they did for any one human to exist. Every single thing done by any and all of our ancestors had to happen for the sperm and egg that created you to connect so that you would be born. Had one ancestor done one thing differently than they did, the entire chain of ancestors would have radically changed. Even if it was only one of your parents that did something different, you would not have been born.

Ergo, the probability of you or anyone to actually be born is zero—yet we were born with the specific brain we have. I call this “**ultimate synchronicity**”. You could go further and say that for you to exist as you do today, physically and consciously, you would be different than who you are, depending on the significance of the events prior to your birth and during your life. Scratching or not scratching a nose would not have changed a future consciousness, but an ancestor going to Europe or not going to Europe would have changed who you are today and who your descendants will be in the future if you yourself made that choice.

If the probability of being born is zero, how did we get here? Was the ability to be consciousness an evolutionary event or did it occur because our brain was implanted with the specific consciousness that makes you, you? If so, was it God (which one, Christian, Jew, Muslim, etc.) or some space alien; perhaps it was a space virus or some other type of something that floated through space until it reached Earth.

We don’t know how we got here, but we do know that we can now take charge and create what our consciousness will be in the future within this life time, or perhaps in another lifetime yet to come. Maybe we will become the seeds that travel through space until we create consciousness on another world. There are an infinite number of possibilities which further supports that the probability of any one person being born is zero.

The bottom line is that everything we do today will impact future lives, so we should do the best we can by consciously evolving our consciousnesses to some higher level in order to benefit the future of humanity. I would also suggest that the purpose of life is to create souls with self-evolution being the way to optimize the best possible soul.

**Some Thoughts on the Afterlife**

Human Beings have the ability to make their own existence by the choices they make during their lifetime. Use of one’s own thought patterns to develop one’s consciousness beyond the influence of the external environment is touted by most of the New Thought churches and organizations.

 Once we learn, and while we are learning, we can basically call the shots. If we want spiritual or material things, we can simply get them by thinking of a specific intent and taking the action to turn that intent into the desired result—everything is based on the conscious use of our thinking abilities. Even if we do not consciously utilize our thoughts to obtain specific results, the results that occur in our lifetimes are always a result of our thinking.

That thinking can be based on the conscious use of our thinking to evolve our consciousness and existence, or we can simply allow our thinking to be created by the external events of our lives, including but not limited to the words of others, whether it be parents, siblings, aunts/uncles/cousins, in-laws, girlfriends/wives, the newspaper, books we read, movies, TV, and other media input or whatever. In that case our existence is based on how our thinking responds to these external inputs—with those external inputs of others actually becoming the thoughts we think—the danger being ending up controlled by the negative inputs of others.

But not only do we make our own existence, I suggest that we may also be making our own Life After Death when we develop core beliefs, consciously (internally) or unconsciously (externally).

It may be that the after-death scenario we develop from internal or external sources is the afterlife we get because the universe responds to our thoughts treating all of them objectively as if they were all conscious thinking.

The core belief of many new thought organizations during your lifetime: If you develop your thinking consciously and you think, “I want a pizza,” you will get a pizza. If you unconsciously muse about getting a pizza you will get a pizza. In either case, your thinking communicated to the universe that you wanted a pizza and the universe responded. If you consciously think positive or negative thoughts, you get positive or negative results. If you unconsciously think positive or negative thoughts, you get positive or negative results.

I suggest that the next possibility is that in terms of the specific afterlife, you might get whatever you consciously choose or whatever you unconsciously choose. If you believe there is no life after death, you get no life after death. If you believe that there is a heaven where the angels sing, you get angels singing. If you believe in reincarnation, you get reincarnation.

Obviously, then if you are going to get a life after death, you must consciously think about the life after death you want or you may wind up with an undesirable afterlife or no afterlife at all.

Therefore, one must be creative and think big while alive! Anything less may mean total disaster for your afterlife prospects. In this instance, what I propose is conjecture, opinion, and guesswork (COG), so only take this information as a potentiality, not a sure-fire fact.

**Education**

Now it is time to take a deeper look at the brain. In order do that, Read, *The Secret Life of the Brain*--Unlocking the Mysteries of the Mind, by Alfred David.

This book details the brain using excellent graphics to depict exactly what is going on in that brain of ours. Its detail is not hard to read or understand, although it will require your attention.

**Spiritual Philosophy**

Educating yourself in the areas of Spiritual Philosophy will increase your brain’s ability to perceive “what’s it all about?”.

I can only attest to the one I follow. But remember to distinguish between conjecture, opinion and conjecture (COG). Including that which I have to say herein.

When one deals with philosophy, concrete beliefs are often hard to distinguish between fact and fiction.

I have taken six classes per year for the last ten years, always trying to grab what works for me, “taking the best and leaving the rest”. I have difficulty, however, in recalling details of all these classes I have taken, although I do recall the overall processes.

I’m not sure a brain is capable of 100% recall anyway. My goal is to remember the macro elements of a philosophy leaving the micro elements behind.

I take these spiritual philosophy classes through the Centers for Spiritual Living, a group of new thought organizations that functions like a church in that they meet on Sundays, the traditional day of rest, but isn’t really a traditional church. There are approximately 400 of these organizations throughout the United States.

The organizations are based on Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emma Curtis Hopkins and Thomas Troward (in the 1800’s) and Ernest Holmes who studied these philosophers in the early 1900’s, expanding the thoughts into a book, entitled Science of Mind, which is utilized by all of these Centers for Spiritual Living.

These are non-dogmatic organizations in that no one is telling members what to do or what to believe, although the philosophy practiced by members is based on the Science of Mind book, along with other philosophies such as that penned by Deepak Chopra, Marianne Williamson, Wayne Dyer, Neale Donald Walsch, Greg Anderson, and many others.

These organizations very somewhat depending on who is in charge of a particular group. Keeping in line with traditions, they are called Reverends, however, they are really philosophers

To sum up some of their beliefs:

Where people live according to spiritual truths.

 Where humanity rediscovers personal creative power.

 Where we believe in the unity of all life.

 Where we live as one global family.

 Where unity and connection are emphasized.

 Where love and forgiveness are the norm.

 Where spiritual guidance is valued.

 Where there is peace, harmony, and justice for all.

 Where communities are meaningfully involved in service to the world.

 Where there is a renewed emphasis on beauty, nature, creativity, art, and aesthetics.

 Where we believe that heaven is within us. We experience it as we become conscious of it.

 Where we believe the ultimate goal of life to be a complete emancipation from discord.

 Where we believe in goodness and loving kindness.

 Where we do not believe there is an evil element in the universe.

The members consist of Christians, Muslims and other religious believers looking for alternatives, agnostics and atheists, and all people searching for what life is all about.

To my surprise, members held multiple individual beliefs. However, love and forgiveness are central to the philosophies. Everybody loves everybody and they accept everyone for who they are so the “congregation”, for lack of a better term, consists of heterosexuals, gay men and women, blacks, Orientals, whites and many others. Oddly, the women seem to substantially out-number the men, making me wonder what is it about men who seem less apt to seek out spirituality of any nature.

I’m sure this is not the only way to seek out “spiritual philosophy”, but it is a reachable way for you to do so because of the fact, with 400 groups, you will find an organization close to where you live.

**Neuroplasticity and Neurogenesis**

Neuroplasticity is the ability of the brain to adapt and change. Plastic refers to the modifiable nature of our brain and nervous system. The brain is plastic at all ages, so you can learn and create changes to your brain throughout your lifetime.

Neurogenesis is the growth of new brain cells. The key is how does one do this? My belief is that we can take charge of our body, moving unused stem cells from our spine to our brain and/or use unused stem cells already in our brain. Personally, I chant Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo daily, while I speed walk, to utilize new or unused stem cells to grow new neurons, etc. I also chant to consciously evolve my neural pathways, which along with the neurons make up most of the brain.

Both approaches require a suspension of belief that one cannot change the brain, let alone grow new stem cells. Simply put, “you are what you believe”.

So, because you have read *The Brain* and *Elastic* you are ready to explore new ideas. Make two of those explorations be the plasticity of the brain and the ability to grow new stem cells.

“Change your beliefs, change your life” is one of the new thought philosophies espoused by the new thought philosophers and Ernest Holmes, founder of Centers for Spiritual Living.

In summary, run or speed walk daily (aerobic activity is linked to neurogenesis); have sex; eat blueberries and drink green tea; eat omega 3 fatty acids; smile and laugh; avoid stress; have an active social life; limit calories and saturated fat; eat more fruits and vegetables; eat six small meals a day instead of three meals. If you’re going to eat sugars, indulge in dark chocolate which contain flavonoids, keys to neurogenesis. For that reason, red wine is better for you than white wine because it also contains flavonoids.

The hippocampus is the region of the brain responsible for learning and storing long-term memories. Continued learning will keep your brain active and will create new stem cells, neurons, dendrites, axons, synaptic connections, and neural pathways. Drop into the Science Section of any bookstore and look for related books to purchase and study.

If you really want to study the brain, purchase *The Secret Life of the Brain* by Alfred David. This book is full of graphic drawings that illustrate what the brain parts look like and do. You will be amazed by the number of things going on in your mind. After all, there are 80 to 100 billion neurons in our brain and 10,000 synaptic connections for each neuron, meaning that we have a quad billion things going on inside our head.

**E Prime and COG**

There is philosophy on the internet that suggests that we should not use the “verb to be”. An important part of the discussion concerns the fact that the use of the “verb to be” often results in statements being absolute when “is” or other forms of the “verb to be” are used. There are so many statements in articles that I have read that uses the word “is” when making statements that are not factual, but fall in the category of conjecture, opinion, or guesswork. I have tried in my writings on the conscious evolution of the consciousness to use “seems to” or “appears to” to let the reader know that something I have suggested is my own conjecture, opinion, or guesswork; but I’m sure I missed a few points that may appear factual when they are not. My apologies should you discover any statements I’ve made that appear to be factual when they are not.

 As I’ve read articles, I marked many paragraphs with the acronym, HWYK, meaning “how would you know” as there seem to be many statements writers have made that seem impossible for them to know that they are factually true. So be careful what you read. Just because a writer uses the word “is” does not necessarily mean that the statement is true. As a guide, always ask the question, “How would you know?” before accepting statements as factual information. Let your intuition guide you in making your decision to accept or reject anything you read as potentially possible.

**COULD THE SUN BE GOD?**

One last thing to consider in determining who and what is behind our evolved and evolving consciousness, subconsciousness, and our physical bodies.

It is a scientific fact that all life on Earth has been created by the Sun. Without the Sun we would not be having this discussion, in fact, we might be one of the other type of planets in our solar system due to distance or whatever.

The Sun is a very complex entity. It is so strong that it not only sends out massive amounts of energy, but massive amounts of other types of energy. Yet we take the Sun for granted. It’s there, it gives us light in a variation of twelve hours per day, less in winter, more in summer. It lights up the moon in ever changing ways.

If we consider “God” as the creator of all human life on Earth and the savoir of our souls, where and what is the supposition of this entity?

I surmise that perhaps it is the Sun who is the “God” that the religious believers and religious organizations have grasped onto.

A “God” of the universe which has 100 hundred million galaxies, with each galaxy having 100 billion stars, has no scientific proof to support its existence, yet we can scientifically prove that the Sun does exist and it has in fact created all life on Earth.

What more can we ask for than to find a deity, a creator, than the Sun itself instead of some far-off unknown entity that encompasses the entire universe, yet remains scientifically unverifiable.

This does not take away from the belief that Jesus Christ was the son of God, nor does it not mean that Jesus was not brought back from the dead. The only difference is that the Sun “God” is local to the solar system in which we live and is verifiable provable as the creator of all life on Earth.

Take a look at our brain, then take a look at the internal make-up of the Sun. If we can be sentient creatures, certainly something as powerful as the Sun must also be sentient. The Sun is millions of times more structured and powerful than anyone of us. Isn’t that how we perceive God, something that is far beyond the scope of our existence?

Now the question is, “is the Sun “God” or is it a vehicle used by a universal God to create life on Earth?”. All considerations in this area are based purely on conjecture, opinion or guesswork (COG). I don’t really know the answer to this question, but I believe that we need to give the Sun its due until we find scientific evidence that there is a God of the universe.

Perhaps the answer is in a poem I wrote:

The Sun God, powerful, high above us, created life below.

It watched the vapid action, was not entertained.

Excited by life, its awareness aroused, the Sun God desired more.

The Sun God created intelligent life for itself to be perceived

for an unobserved God cannot be known.

So, the Sun God’s light brought us life,

creating our intelligence through the process of evolution,

and remains the energy behind our souls.

Frankly, I do not worship the Sun, but I do praise it for having created all life on Earth.

And that is enough, so join me in praising the Sun as creator of all life on Earth and let us assign to the Sun all the qualities we have given to the supposed existence of God.

I do believe that the above discussion consists of fact instead of conjecture, opinion, and guesswork (COG). Frankly, I see only two choices: one on death to send my consciousness to the Sun; the other is to send my consciousness to an unborn or recently born child, both of these choices pure COG.

**THE CONSCIOUS EVOLUTION OF YOUR SUBCONSCIOUS**

I drive from Sherman, Texas where I live, to Dallas (55 miles) and back four times a week, chanting Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo the entire time, as that is the location of my “church” CSLDallas, the closest location for a Centers for Spiritual Living. The speeding cars and tailgating has been irritating me beyond necessity. During a recent meditation and discussion period on a Wednesday night, I had a spiritual revelation:

Why don’t I chant to send love and forgiveness to all the other drivers, which I did on the way home that evening, and have done so coming and going for several nights. And low and behold, sending love and forgiveness put me in a position to no longer be irritated by the speeders or tailgaters.

This shows you the possibilities that are possible to you as you evolve your consciousness. Think big! Think out of the box!

On a later drive back from Dallas, it also occurred to me that I should be chanting to consciously evolve my ability to find the mutual love of a women, to consciously evolve my ability to market this book, and to consciously evolve my ability to list other areas that I can consciously evolve. Ultimately, this will probably result in a very long list.

As a daily practice, I have kept on rereading *The Brain* and *Elastic* for the third time as I prepare the outlined manuscripts to be typed-up as a memory device for my 77-year-old brain.

On my first read, I outline the manuscripts in yellow. On the second read, I outline the outline in pink. On the third read, I outline the outline of the outline in blue, each time reducing the manuscript to a series of bullet points, and that is the point where I begin typing, which I’m just about to do.

This process provides me with a synopsis of the manuscript that I will use as a memory device, or call it a study guide. There is a lot of good information to remember, so this process ensures that my brain is clear on all the concepts and by studying those concepts I will, in fact, know my brain and how to use elastic thinking.

As I point out earlier in The Owner’s Manual, chanting is a useful tool in evolving one’s consciousness. I presently speed walk three miles per day, which I started doing on my arrival in Sherman from California in late July, 2019. Sherman is my birth place which I left when I was one year old. There is a beautiful alley that is 90% shaded forming a tunnel of trees and shade for me to walk in.

I chant Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo for a multitude of things as I walk, one being to consciously evolve my consciousness. However, a recent walk filled my brain with related Owner’s Manual thoughts that I believe are important to add to the manuscript that has been accepted for publication by Page Publishing in New York, NY.

I came to an understanding while chanting that the subconscious consists of all brain neural pathways and synaptic connections where there are a quadrillion-interactions as pointed out in the book *The Brain*. At this point during my walk I realized that the subconscious is a physical thing consisting of these quadrillion-interactions where the consciousness is a spiritual thing, something that lives beyond the brain’s physicality, although we are not quite sure about the physicality of our consciousness.

The consciousness and subconsciousness form a duality that are inseparable, so why am I only chanting to evolve my consciousness. That’s when it hit me: I need to be chanting to evolve my subconscious also. And what about the body which is also linked to this duality? So, I need to chant to evolve the physicality of my body where I can focus on health, strength and potential as I chant to consciously evolve my subconscious. And I need to be specific by chanting to consciously evolve my neural pathways to their maximum potential.

The bottom line is that all this conscious evolution stuff is an ongoing process that never ends. And what we consciously evolve appears to also be an ongoing process that never ends.

The point here is that there are ways to change your behavior for the better as part of your conscious evolution of your consciousness. We don’t have to rely on our negative history. But first you have to recognize the negative is there before you can take the necessary steps to consciously evolve your feelings.

As pointed out in the book *Elastic*, “We can program ourselves, we can create new concepts, and best of all, we can alter our approach until we solve whatever problem the changing conditions of our environment have put before us.” We can use the concept chanting to focus ourselves on what we desire, and to focus on other desires we have never considered.

Finally, it also popped into my mind while walking that I should chant to consciously pick the winning lotto numbers so that I can fulfill one of my goals of building campgrounds for the homeless. A far stretch of the imagination but an example of elastic thinking, so important to me now as I walk and chant, not just for my benefit, but for the benefit of mankind.

**Have a Happy Life!**

Don McCrea-Hendrick

aka Tony T. Trueblé

**Suggested Reading**

Joe Dispenza

 Evolve Your Brain

Eckhart Tolle

 The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment

 A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life’s Purpose

Ken Wilber

 A Brief History of Everything

Eric Fromm

 The Art of Loving

Deepak Chopra

 Reinventing the Body, Resurrecting the Soul

 The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success

Anthony Robbins

 Unlimited Power

 Awaken the Giant Within

Fredrick Alan Wolf

 Taking the Quantum Leap: Quantum Physics for Non-Scientists

 The Spiritual Universe: One Physicists Vision of Spirit, Soul, Matter, and Self

 Parallel Universes: The Search for Other Worlds\

 The Dreaming Universe: A Mind-Expanding Journey Where Psyche and Physics Meet

 Mind into Matter: A New Alchemy of Science and Spirit

 The Eagles Nest

Chance Massaro and Steve Wallis

 Easy Genus

Steve Hagan

 Buddhism Plain & Simple: The Practice of Being Aware, Right Now, Every Day

Ernest Holmes

 The Science of Mind: A Philosophy, A Faith, A Way of Life

Lisa Randel

Warped Passages, Unraveling the Mysteries of the Universe’s Hidden Dimensions

Stephen Hawkings

A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bank to Black Holes

The Grand Design [written with Leonard Mlodinow]

Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren

 How to Read a Book

Thaddeus Golas

 The Lazy Man’s Guide to Enlightenment

**Some Authors Whose Articles I Have Read, Summarized, and Categorized.**

Barbara Marx Hubbard

Ervin Laszio

Andrew Cohen

Tom Atlee

Ken Wilber

Ray Kurzwell

Tom Leonardo

Johnathon Richter

John Stewart

Gregory Ellison

Dennis Kingsley

Malcolm Hollick

Sri Aurobindo

Teilhard de Chardin

Charles Leiden

Stuart Hameroff

Marianne Williamson

Ed Mahood, Jr.

Jean Gebser

Greg Braden

Ken Gordon

Craig Hamilton

Bill Pheasant

Dick Rauscher

John Stewart

Anthony Chiaravallo

Gina Grey

David Hunter Tow

Nick Arrizza

Gary Evans

Jeff Nickles

John Kehoe

Kevin Zanetti

Joseph Naft

Andrew Cohen

Tom Huston

Peter Ward

Author’s Biography

Don was born in Sherman, Texas, while his father worked on the Red River Dam. Don’s dad was from Omak, Washington. At age 17, his dad told Don, that as the best pool player in Omak, he played Minnesota Fats in a pool game. When asked how he did, his dad said, “Fats had the first shot and I never got a turn as he ran the table”.

The family moved from Texas to Southern California when Don was one, and then to Seattle, Washington. Between first and second grade, they moved to Sanger, California where his dad worked on Pine Flat Dam and then between fourth and fifth grade to Fair Oaks, California where his dad worked on Folsom Dam.

His dad was transferred to freeway building during Don’s seventh grade where they lived in Pacifica, which was great for Don as the high school he would attend for his freshman year was going double sessions as they built a new high school, Westmoor. Don got out of freshman high school at noon every day. He and his buddy’s played golf seven days a week at Sharp Park Golf Course in Pacifica for a year, all of them becoming excellent golfers. It was a San Francisco owned course and fees were $6.00 per month and if you played on weekends it cost an additional twenty-five cents. The monthly fee included Harding Park and Lincoln courses in San Francisco.

Then his dad again got transferred to Ukiah between Don’s Freshman and Sophomore year in high school, then Fortuna for three weeks, then Bakersfield for one year. In Ukiah, Don hung out with the “hoods” and didn’t play golf at all, but he had a good time.

When his dad again got transferred, to Southern California, his dad, having left home at 17, told Don, now 17, to move back to Pacifica and share an apartment with his sister so that he could attend high school at Westmoor in his senior year where he went to high school in his freshman year. All that freedom, but Don never cut school and was selected as one of the top 15% of his graduating class.

After joining the Army in 1961, he was stationed ten miles from Pacifica at the Presidio of San Francisco (join the Army and see the world!), where he was a Secret Files Operation’s Specialist, which led to his being assigned two years later to the Military Advisory Group to Laos (located in Bangkok) as a Top-Secret Operations Specialist. Fortunately, his weapon was a typewriter—he typed the orders, never saw action himself, but because he had a top secret-clearance he was knowledgeable about all the intimate details of this secret war, which both Presidents Johnson and Kennedy denied existed.

After the service he marked keno tickets in Las Vegas, then moved to Washington DC to attend college at George Washington University. When the GI bill came through, he moved back to California to attend college at Cal-State Long Beach where he earned a BS degree in accounting in 1969. After graduation he worked for the CPA firm PriceWaterhouse, but found the work boring and lacking excitement. While in college he learned to meditate in 1967 and chant in 1972.

Like many of the disillusioned, he dropped out in early 1971, traveled the world and experimented with LSD. He traveled to Europe where compliments of his American Express card he rented a Mercedes traveling throughout France and Spain eventually landing on the Island of Ibiza where he spent a great deal of time doing the sex, drugs and rock and roll thing. His world travels led him to taking the chicken buses through Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and finally Costa Rica where he took a plane to the Island of San Andres, which is part of Columbia. Here he spent thirty days in the Centro de Rehabilitation (the local prison) for smoking pot on the beach.

In the mid-seventies, he sat in front of the Mormon Tabernacle in West LA, stoned on LSD, where he experienced that he was in fact a businessman. He became a Medicare auditor at Blue Cross, worked for several different national hospital chains, went to work for a hospital financial consulting firm and finally started his own business, where he could recover a minimum of one million dollars for a hospital, eventually having 200 hospital clients throughout the United States. His company was endorsed by the Hospital Councils of Southern California, Central California, Northern California, Washington and Washington, D.C.

His business grew to the point that after ten years he was able to sell the firm to a group of venture capitalists for one million dollars payable over three years. But it only took them two years to put the company in a position of bankruptcy. They sold the company back to him and his partner for ten dollars, assigning $800,000 in notes owed them by the company to him and his partner.

However, the venture capitalists failed to disclose that the company borrowed $1,000,000 from a bank in Silicon Valley, using the funds to take another company public, leaving the debt in the company acquired for ten dollars. He had learned early on that when signing a legal agreement that one always puts in language to one’s benefit that protects one assuming that all legal agreements eventually fall apart.

Although it took four years to collect, he and his partner eventually received 150,000 shares of stock plus $500,000. He and his partner were able to sell all the stock for $27.00 per share two years later for approximately $4,000,000, plus the $800,000 in notes.

It is because of his experience with venture capitalists that he was able to write this story as it applies to how some venture capitalists, but not all, operate in what he considered to be questionable behavior.

After the lawsuit settlement, he went back to college at Santa Rosa JC to play on the golf team. He studied music, linguistics, and English. He joined the debate team. He attended Cal-State Chico from 2002 to 2008 obtaining a Masters in Literature and Writing. Over a five-year period, he wrote numerous short stories, finally completing a mystery novel where he metaphorically murdered the venture capitalists that he had to sue to get his money.

He now lives in Sherman, Texas, having recently moved from California back to where he was born, where he writes, plays golf, and spends a great amount of time doing independent studying. He has toned down his wild side and given up alcohol and other harmful ingestibles although he does still smoke the evil weed. He is a spiritually seeking agnostic and explores the possibilities that might exist through CSL Dallas, a Centers for Spiritual Living affiliate, a new thought church.

He continues to study ways to consciously evolve one’s own consciousness and to determine what he should chant for.

One important consideration is that he has learned over the years that there is a fine line between fiction and nonfiction. So, keep in mind that the above and below might be nothing other than tarradiddle.

Love and Forgiveness,

Don McCrea-Hendrick

310 W. Wilson #59

Sherman, Texas 75090

(530) 559-3818

trueble@aol.com

Descended from 74 Kings: From England (Edward III-Edward IV; Henry I thru Henry VII and many others for a total of 14 kings) Scotland (six kings), France (15 kings including Louis VI-Louis IX; Charles V-Charles VIII), Sweden (2 kings) and Hungary (1 king) plus many of the small Kingdoms located in Spain. Related, not descended, to the following Presidents: George Washington, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, Warren Harding, Franklin Roosevelt, Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, both President Bushes, and Donald Trump through the Scotland McLeod family. Other relations: Mary Queen of Scots, Sir Winston Churchill, Charles Darwin, Amelia Earhart, Queen Elizabeth, Princess Diana, Helen Keller, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Chevy Chase, Britany Spears, Hugh Grant, Marilyn Monroe—and who knows how many more.

His favorite word, learned while studying for the SAT test, one which is used often by politicians**: ignoratio elenchi**: Using an emotional element in an argument that has nothing to do with the argument. A sample would be the inclusion of the “Descended from 74 Kings”, that has nothing to do with the above biography. His other favorite word **is tarradiddle**: pretentious nonsense which also applies to the Kings.

ROMANCING THE ABSURD

A Mystery Novel Based on Reinvented Reality

By Tony T. Trueblé

With Don McCrea-Hendrick

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author’s imagination or are used factiously.

AN OWNER’S MANUAL FOR THE CONSCIOUS EVOLUTION OF YOUR CONSCIOUSNESS

ROMANCING THE ABSURD

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 Thanks to Tom Foster who made my stay in the Reno jail worthwhile. Thanks to Jack Armstrong and Jim Sparks for all the memories and fun we had during our hippie era.

 And in memory, I express the life-time love I’ve felt for Dorothy Boreni, that cute eighth grade girl I was too shy to speak to. My apologies for running away at that last dance. I was too scared to hold her for more than the ten seconds it took for me to start shaking.

A happy life and afterlife to all those who allowed this novel to take root.

Don McCrea-Hendrick

aka Tony T. Trueblé

**CHAPTER** **TITLE**

 - - Definitional Writing

1. Tony the Writer
2. Punched in the Mouth
3. Flying Tidbits
4. Love is on the Horizon
5. Tony the Writer

 6 Windows of Opportunity

 7 Evil Seeks Its Own Level

 8 The History and Motivation of Three Guys in Need of Redemption

 9 Venture Capital Scheming

10 Reactions to the Deaths of Lon, Pei-Pei, and Garcy

11 Stud Service at the Silver Peso

12 The Sergeant

13 The Lawyer Feeding Frenzy Begins

14 Shaved

15 Playing Games with Walter

16 Vincent and the Fire Hydrant

17 Love Me, Love Me Not

18 More Questions than Answers

19 Missing in Action

20 The Truth about Rehabilitation

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22 A Group of Drunks

23 The Lawyer Feeding Frenzy Turns into an Eating Frenzy

24 One Man’s Redemption

25 Chasing Jimmy Bucks

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28 The Homicide Investigation

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32 Walter Loved His Gold

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35 Folders of My Mind

36 Friends with Troubled Lives

37 Reinventing Reality

38 The Penis Registry, Tramp Stamp, and Hetero-Normative Blather

39 Just Because You’re Paranoid Doesn’t Mean They’re Not After You

40 Zits, Broken Neck, Injured Knee

Epilogue Happily Ever After

**Definitional Writing**

 In many instances throughout the novel, I have used the definitions of words instead of the words themselves as an experiment to determine the effectiveness of using definitions instead of words as a more effective way to communicate to the reader.

 Words often have no meaning to a reader unless the time is taken to look up the meaning in a dictionary. But what reader wants to spend time looking up words? The reader wants to experience the story, not be taken out of the experience by looking up definitions.

 Is it not the meaning of words that counts, not the word themselves which are only abstractions requiring selected detail? The two examples below contrast the difference between utilizing words in the abstraction versus using their definitions. (Note: the undefined words in the first example were taken from John Gardner’s book, *On Moral Fiction*.)

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

 His laments were often vociferous, full of dirge, but he was immutable. He was turbid and dross. Because of this he was often vacuous.

 He was also inchoate. When he spoke, he was discursive and divagate. He was filled with entropy. He was nihilistic. Then again, maybe this was all tarradiddle.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

 He called out in grief, wailed to the sky. His grief was slow, sullen and mournful like you might find in a piece of music. It was as if the purpose of his loudness was to draw attention; but he could not accept, nor was he capable of change. He was deficient in clarity or purity—foul and muddy. He wasn’t just scum; he was scum from molten metal: impure waste—base, trivial and inferior.
Because of this, his actions could sometimes be highly injurious, even deadly.

 His mind was imperfectly formed and the why of his actions always seemed incoherent or formless. When he spoke, he continually moved from topic to topic, sometimes without even completing a sentence. You might say he rambled, wandered, sometimes completely strayed from the subject. His life also consisted of chaos, disorganization and randomness. Like the universe, his body was just slowly decaying matter and energy. He was running down, trending toward more and more towards disorder.

 It occurred to him that all traditional values and beliefs were unfounded since they were all just inventions of mankind. In essence, our existence is senseless and useless. The way we are socially organized is so bad that we might as well destroy society for its own sake, independent of any constructive program or possibility.

 Then again, maybe this was just so much pretentious nonsense.

Notation: Previously published in California University at Chico’s literary magazine, Watershed, as the closing submission to reflect the last comment, “just so much pretentious nonsense” as a satirical aspect as it applied to all submissions in that issue.

CHAPTER ONE

The Here and Now

MURDER IN SAN FRANCISCO

Tony T. Trueblé

1

Out of My Way, Asshole

Tony stood in line, growing impatient as the clerk fumbled with the cash register replacing the tape as if it were his first time. Tony already had waited for the customer ahead of him as the clerk rang up over twenty items instead of the ten-item limit for the quick checkout line.

 As the clerk readied himself for Tony, a loud noise distracted Tony. As he glanced over his shoulder to the left, a small, older woman crowded in front of him from the right.

 Tony went ballistic, as he often did when he drank—which was close to always. He grabbed the lady and pulled her back behind him, almost shoving her to the floor. Several people in line behind him made nasty remarks, but Tony ignored them as he placed his two items in front of the clerk.

During Tony’ drive to an afternoon meeting, a girl on her cell phone, eyes straight ahead, sauntered across the street against the red light without checking for cars. Tony slammed on his brakes, stopping at the edge of the crosswalk inches away from hitting the girl. The girl continued walking as if Tony and the limo he drove were elsewhere.

 Tony rolled down the window and yelled, “Jaywalkers die young!”

 The girl, now alert, wheeled around and shouted back, “Fuck you, asshole!”

 Pissed at the girl’s arrogance and stupidity, Tony did the only thing he could. He stepped on the gas and moved on through the intersection, ignoring his now red light. As usual under these types of circumstances, Tony reached into his glove compartment for a small vodka bottle.

2

Tony

We seem to exist in an irrational and meaningless universe where human life has no ultimate purpose. We humans are doing our best (worst) to destroy the world and ourselves. Nuclear annihilation hasn’t worked. Now we’re trying to do it by creating environmental disasters that work too well— but at least at a slow enough pace that won’t destroy those of us alive today; but at a fast enough pace that threatens everyone’s grandchildren.

 This doomsday thinking, and death itself, makes me wonder what the purpose is of anything I do today—why do I care? Why should I care? To release any concerns I have related to life and death, I swill vodka and smoke pot to free my body of the physical and mental pain caused by the stresses of being human.

I do have to admit though, pot and my financial detective work are in opposition to each other, and alcohol can be worse if I’ve drunk too much to remember the results of what I’ve investigated. That’s why I carry a voice-activated tape recorder in the inside pocket of my sport coat—which I use when I remember to turn it on.

Today, I’m jammed in by traffic and stuck on one of those San Francisco Bay Area freeways—similar to my life where I’m stuck with different forces of antagonism constantly attacking me. Listening to a little jazz on the radio after a rare summer thunderstorm helps make the traffic bearable.

The windows are down, and I can smell the freshness of this rain-drenched summer day, which contrasts with the distant piercing sound of sirens heading somewhere in the vast Bay Area—going to places where people are suffering, or perhaps finished with suffering.

The air smells fresh because the rain wiped out much of the smog. Music floats through the air as the radios of adjacent cars send out sounds that combine with the humid, summer air to provide a strange musical result—one as pleasing to the nose as to the ears.

As the traffic starts up again, it seems as if everyone decides to move in slow motion, which is good because many of the drivers are tailgating, including the asshole behind me. The blood in my body flows a little faster. I put on my emergency blinkers. To my surprise, the guy backs off a little instead of honking his horn. I give him a little wave, and he waves back. Yeah, some people can be nice when they drive in freeway traffic—but not many.

 “Fucking jerk!” someone yells out of a car window close by.

 I’m reminded that I’ve got to get off this frigging freeway, out of the traffic, and away from this everyday madness that accompanies the insane workforce to work in the morning and home in the evening as they return from their boring jobs to their boring lives. When they get home, I suspect they will yell at their spouses, children, and pets—after downing more beers or cocktails as they did right after work or like some do while driving home.

That’s one reason that I don’t have a girlfriend, wife or kids, and don’t have any pets—except for the goldfish that I can hear swishing around in the back of the Cadillac limo I drive and live in. I would rather yell at myself in the mirror when I’m drunk, not at some poor unsuspecting person or animal. That’s why I have a goldfish: it never gives me any trouble, and doesn’t pay any attention to my yelling.

 Because I don’t handle stress well, my blood flow now moves faster than the traffic; my brain synapses are operating a few cylinders short; and my body starts to shake. The traffic gives me a reason to reach into the glove compartment of the limo, take out another one of those airplane-sized bottles of vodka, and swill it down.

I immediately feel the vodka hit my stomach and dive into my blood stream causing waves of relief to penetrate every tense area of my body, which I express in one big sigh. As usual, I follow the swig with a toke from a roach left over from some very good shit that I smoked last night, the pot more a mental release than the physical release from the vodka. I follow the toke by spraying the car with air freshener. I carry a small bottle in one of my sport coat pocket as I often have to use it before a meeting.

The traffic again grinds to a stop. I kill time by rolling a joint.

As the traffic moves forward, I see the sign for my exit ahead and begin to ease from the fast lane to the far right lane. I’m almost at the exit, but no one will let me pull over. I angle the limo towards the next lane and aggressively maneuver into the lane.

Brakes squeal, horns honk, and people shout, but they let me in. The drivers in the next two lanes over saw what I did and seem to sense what I’m about to do. They make room for me to move over. I wave thanks, and they tap their horns. Once again, I reaffirm that sometimes one needs to be a maniac to drive the California freeways.

 I take the exit and pull off the freeway. On the rolling hills above the turnoff, the trees are so close together the hills seem like they are covered by green carpets. I take a right and head down the tree-lined street, the trees glistening at the top as sunshine tries but fails to break through the clouds.

I’m now late for a meeting with Pei-Pei Bearinsane and Garcy Slongavitch. Before my client Lon Rozzo recently died, he had set up a meeting for me with these two, who he referred to as insignificant defendants in the $100,000,000 lawsuit he filed against them and a group of venture capitalists. Although vampire capitalists would be a better term to use to reflect their blood sucking nature, for short I simply call then VCs as if I’m referring to the Viet Cong back in war torn Southeast Asia.

Pei-Pei and Garcy have agreed to provide me with inside information if they are dropped as defendants in the lawsuit. Pei-Pei is an overweight Chinese man, and his gay lover Garcy is a short, scrawny, half-Cuban, half-Russian. Garcy wears a safety pin in his right ear as if he needs protection. When I first met him, he spewed a subtle mixture of garlic and hot sauce from his pores, sending out a nauseating message to my brain.

They live in one of the nicer areas in this part of San Francisco. Drive-by shootings don’t happen more than once a year. Small, well-maintained yards surround the houses. Many of the houses are painted white, which contrasts nicely with the full-grown trees and provides a sanitary aura to the neighborhood. Some of the houses also have white roofs that make it appear as if it recently snowed, something that rarely happens in the Bay Area, but does happen every decade or so—but not as often as earthquakes.

 Now that I’m off the freeway, the traffic still sucks. It takes me more than thirty minutes to go nine blocks. I’d be laughing hysterically had I not taken another swig of vodka and a toke, both of which, for the moment, keep me on the mellow side of life. Instead of screaming, I’m able to smile at the insanity of it all.

I decide to park the car and walk the rest of the way despite the now drizzling rain and only this morning’s paper for an umbrella. I had difficulty getting Pei-Pei and Garcy to agree to talk, now that Lon’s dead, and I’m determined to make the meeting. I jog the four blocks left. As I get closer, I see red, blue and yellow lights flickering through the rain-drenched mist—the color combination depending on whether it’s a cop car, a fire engine, or an ambulance.

Dic Mécia, a San Francisco homicide detective and one of my golf buddies, stands on the porch smoking a cigar. I see wisps of smoke rising and gently mingling with the misty air like two secret lovers. Dic’s face reminds me of a rusting pipe—worn with red splotches creeping along the surface. A large, protruding stomach hangs over his belt. But I’d love to have some of his traits—his perseverance, his status, his family situation. I envy him and resent the advantages he enjoys.

Even though Dic lives and works in San Francisco, like me he belongs to Marin Country Club located in Novato, thirty miles north of the Golden Gate Bridge. We’ve been playing golf together off and on for over ten years. I’ve often wondered how he hits the ball so far having to swing around that gut.

Dic is a swell guy as long as you don’t mention pot. We’ve had several unfriendly arguments over the effects of pot versus alcohol—an argument that’s hard for me to win since I also like my little bottles of vodka. Dic thinks that pot is the horror of horrors and people who smoke pot should be locked up—including me. Unfortunately, many people are still locked up in America for violating these archaic drug laws even though no one has ever died from a marijuana overdose.

As far as I can see, it is the illegality of drugs that causes most of the problems, not the drugs themselves. Take methedrine, for example. Desperate people make their own meth using battery acid as one of the components. If pharmaceutical methedrine were available to these users, their bodies would not be prematurely worn out by these street drugs. Same for heroin. Users wouldn’t be shooting up using dirty needles which cause all sorts of problems.

As I walk to the house, I somewhat stumble up the steps where Dic stands with one hand on the cigar, his other hand on his hip.

 “What the fuck you doing here, Tony?” Dic asks with a sneer on his face.

 “I’m supposed to meet with the two guys who live here,” I say wondering why he’s here.

 “You mean lived here,” Dic says. “They’re in the living room, on the floor, dead. What do you know about them?”

 “Only that they used to work for a company called QuadFirm and they’re gay. They were both defendants in a lawsuit filed by my client, Lon Rozzo, who recently died. His wife Leticia is now running the show. What happened?”

 “They were murdered,” Dic says as he backs away from me, turning his face to the side as if he’s afraid his cigar will ignite the alcohol I’m breathing out.

“The cleaning lady found them on the living room floor, dead and naked—Pei-Pei on top of Garcy, both face down, a burst waterbed underneath them. They crashed through the ceiling from their bedroom directly above. Pei-Pei apparently crushed the life out of Garcy and broke his own neck when they hit the floor. The bedroom floor and ceiling were purposely weakened.

“Come on inside, Tony. The cleaning lady wouldn’t look at their faces, and I need someone to confirm their identity.”

“Christ, Dic, can’t you cover the bodies with a sheet,” I say as we walk into the living room. I’ve traveled around the world, even spent time in a South American prison, but I’ve never seen a dead body, let alone the naked bodies of two dead people I actually knew.

“No, it can contaminate the crime scene with fibers and whatever else might be on the sheet,” Dic says. “We leave them uncovered until we’re ready to haul them out in a body bag.”

I stare at the naked pile of fat resting on top of the skinny guy and bend down to look at the faces. Because of the nauseating stink, I could have identified Garcy with my eyes closed.

“Yeah, it’s them,” I say, then excuse myself and head for the bathroom where my body shakes start again as I kneel down and stick my head in the toilet to release the churning substance in my stomach. When I stand up, I notice several small statues of naked men, all with erections, strategically placed throughout the bathroom.

When I come back, Dic asks, “Who else is connected to this QuadFirm?”

I slip my notebook out of my back pocket with one hand while I wipe my mouth with the other. I flip the notebook open as Dic pulls his own notebook out from his shirt pocket.

“The other players besides Lon and his wife, Leticia, are a group of venture capitalists: Walter Funcker, James der Bacon, Ned Bondman, Vincent Fellure, and Kenneth Beck. A lesbian named Bobbi Sue Wet currently runs the company. Fellure is the son of some famous management guru, Peter Fellure. That’s all I know.”

“She good looking?” Dic asks as he quickly refers to Leticia.

“Better than,” I answer as a sexual image of Leticia enters my mind, temporarily shifting my consciousness down to my dick.

 Dic’s final words to me are, “Get a haircut, Tony, and get that suit pressed. What’d you do, sleep in it? And for God’s sake, brush your teeth or use some mouthwash before you get a DUI.”

 I want to be in my limo, have several tastes of vodka to wash the puke out of my mouth, have another puff, and take a long drive. I get out of there as quickly as I can, but the rain has stopped and thick fog has rolled in. It takes a while to remember where I left the car. After doubling back, I find it, get in and drive.

I think about who the killer might be. Walter Funcker, or one of his goons, seems a likely candidate. Of course, there are other possibilities. Maybe a jealous gay lover did it. Maybe Pei-Pei somehow crossed the Chinese Tong.

 But I’m a financial investigator, and I’ve never investigated a violent crime. I’ll leave it up to Dic to determine who did the killing because I’ve got that $100,000,000 lawsuit to deal with.

CHAPTER TWO

Not Long Before the Deaths of Pei-Pei and Garcy

PUNCHED IN THE MOUTH

Tony

I don’t have much money. When I do, I spend it faster than I should which leaves me few options to live a normal life. But I do desire money, lots of it, and someday I hope to get it. In the meantime, my life is centered in my Cadillac limo, which I’ve converted into a living and office space—the place I call home.

I’ve lived in the limo for the last five years. It’s black with blue interior and tinted windows. I converted it into a bedroom/office by using the trunk to hold a bed which folds out into the interior of the car and by putting in a fold-down, tinted Plexiglas Pooh Desk™ that, when upright, acts as a buffer between the front seats and the back. I put in a two-drawer file cabinet to hold the notes from my investigations and a bookcase to hold the books I read and study. I made both of teak I scavenged and built them as if they were made for an ocean-going vessel.

Like at a Japanese restaurant, I sit at my desk cross-legged when using my lap top computer, writing, eating, or using my cell phone to connect to the outside world. Cushions are set across from the bookcase where, with the desk folded up and the bed put away, I can comfortably entertain several people. I installed a closed-top, recirculating aquarium for the gold fish I keep in back, the recirculation a product of the limo when it moves.

I have a lot of freedom in my present life. Even though I don’t have a traditional home, I belong to a country club where I hang out and play golf with lawyers, cops, and other fine citizens who make lots of money or are into retirement. In addition to golf, the club gives me a place to store my things, a place to shower, and a place to work out at the club’s health center.

The guys I play golf with are bright; unfortunately, except for Dic, they don’t utilize their brains as well as they could. They spend a great deal of time reading the sports page or watching sports on TV—and that’s all they discuss, which doesn’t interest me. But they are good guys, and the golfing and betting give me a release, without drinking, from the daily work I do to pay for my continued, albeit often pathetic, existence.

I also belong to a health club with several locations throughout the Bay Area. If I’ve drunk too much to safely drive back to the country club, I crash in the limo wherever I am. In the morning, I shower at the closest health club after sitting in the steam room to take the wrinkles out of my sport coat and slacks.

Outside of the country club environment, I meet some real sleazy people who inflate my desire to understand life and its lack of purpose and to understand why we as humans act the way we do. When you come down to it, though, the behavioral difference between these people and the country-club people as human beings appears nil—we all seem to be equally fucked up.

I recognize that the major force of antagonism that I deal with is my inability to stop abusing alcohol. This morning, like many mornings, I woke up and said to myself, *don’t have anything to drink today, stay straight, be only productive*—but like every morning it seems impossible. I eventually lose this battle, partially because I wait for something to happen that will justify that first drink. However, I do succeed sometimes with a never-drunk, never-sober philosophy, staying only mildly toasted by limiting myself to two airplane-sized bottles of vodka every two hours, starting at eight a.m., and waiting for my first toke of pot until after five—with the exception I do not drink or smoke pot while playing golf.

Constant drinking causes me to move through life leaving a path of wreckage as I encounter people, places, and things. My life involves being anxious and resentful, having black outs, doing anything to find a drink when I’m feeling desperate, getting into people’s faces as I challenge them for no reason—and that only touches on my defective behaviors. When I drink too much, I’m basically a get-out-of-my-way kind of guy.

\* \* \*

Several weeks ago, I had decided to attend my twenty-year high school reunion being held by Redwood High at the Blue Rock Inn in Larkspur, a small town nestled under Mt. Tamalpais, twenty miles north of the Golden Gate Bridge.

I walked into a room full of old people. I hadn’t attended any of the reunions held in the past, so the age deterioration shocked me, made me wonder how far I myself might have physically fallen. Although we were in our forties, many of the people in the room dressed like they were in their sixties. Some even wore polyester dresses and suits. There were many fat, sloppy bodies. Some of the women’s hair was cut so short they looked like butch dikes who might have driven motorcycles to the reunion.

 One person stood out as younger than the rest: Leticia Trechetoria, my high school girlfriend. I spotted her immediately—she wore a short, slinky dress that clung to her slim body. She still carried her youth and beauty and was almost too gorgeous to be in the room. Her long, black hair flowed down past her shoulders making her look more like a young woman than one in her mid-forties. She danced with a giant at least six foot six and two hundred and fifty pounds of solid flesh. I could see they attracted the attention of many of my, supposedly, old high school chums who gawked at them, either envious or resentful of their good looks.

I sauntered over to the no-host bar, ordered a double shot of vodka, drank it down and moved to a dark corner to stand by myself and watch the crowd.

 I saw the “Joker” walking around playing tricks on everyone. I saw “Toohee,” the class nerd, also standing alone. I remembered a girl named Elvira, at least her cute face—but not the fat body massed below.

I saw one other attractive woman in the room—Stephanie who was Leticia’s best friend in eighth grade but was dumped in high school for not being cool enough. I ran into her fifteen years ago at the Silver Peso, located a block down the street from the Blue Rock. We had sex in the parking lot several times over the following years—sometimes in her car, sometimes in mine. Several months ago, she filed a lawsuit suing me for back and current child support.

Stephanie claims that I’m the father of her four children. She told me one night at the Silver Peso that she had been treated for cancer and was broke, and she needed money for “our” kids. This is pure bullshit. I have fantasized about ways to get rid of her—yet I have to say this night she competed with Leticia, except she reflected cute and desirable instead of sexy and lustful. Unlike Leticia, she did not stand out in a crowd. It was only when you looked at her up close that you noticed her subtle beauty: Eyes that seemed to beg for love; facial expressions that reflected a history of soft smiles; lips that seemed too pure to kiss, yet so full that not kissing them seemed out of the question. While Leticia’s appearance said, “Fuck me,” Stephanie’s appearance said “Love me.” *Maybe I should go for kid number five. I mean what the hey—five kids couldn’t cost me much more than four.*

As I turned away, wanting to avoid eye contact, I noticed Leticia walking towards me with her hunk in tow.

 “Hello, Tony,” Leticia said as she reached out and hugged me, making my loins quiver with a hint of subconscious lust. “This is my husband, Lon Rozzo.”

We said hello and shook hands. As each of us critically eyed the other, Leticia walked away leaving us alone.

 “Leticia told me of you, Tony,” Lon said.

 “Huh?” detonated in my brain. We’d screwed a lot in high school—she the hot chick and I the football star. She was an important part of my memories—but I never thought the feeling mutual. I may have a few dead brain cells, but during our last semester, I recall we didn’t talk—didn’t even acknowledge each other’s existence when we passed in the halls as we changed classes.

 “Tony, I got big legal troubles. Leticia suggest and I check you out. You done good in Ivan Boesky case. Impress me. I don’t care about your own troubles you have. Your instinct good; your subtle way of confronting people better—perfect for guys I fight.”

 “What are you saying?” I said as I slipped further into my drug-induced, alcohol-enhanced state of mind. Hell, he could have said, “Hi Tony, you’re a male person,” and I still wouldn’t have been clued in about what he was saying, nor would I have cared.

 Lon rattled on—shit, he could out talk any woman I’d ever met. Fortunately, I had turned on my automatic voice-activated tape recorder as I walked into the reunion, hoping to get some interesting tidbits from my former classmates that I could use in writing a short story, writing being something I liked to dabble in.

 Lon continued to talk on-and-on. I moved him over to the bar for drinks, then outside where I could have a puff of the evil weed.

I listened to the tape in the morning as I lay crashed in my limo—still in the Blue Rock’s parking lot. I realized Lon joined me in a puff. My lack-of-esteem for him decreased. Although Lon’s English was pathetic, his story had multiple possible outcomes, and he would apparently pay me big bucks.

According to the tape, I told Lon that I would break the mothers who had screwed him into bits and pieces. I had no idea what I meant. When it comes to a physical encounter with anyone, and the fight or flight syndrome kicks in, I favor the flight approach. No familiar reason existed why in my stupor I said other things to Lon—nothing worth repeating, but strange nevertheless. Just more proof to me that I needed to lighten up on my drinking in order to function in this world.

The tape indicated that I accepted the job, but I think probably because of Leticia more than the job itself—as seeing Leticia again had rekindled my sexual desire for her.

 The tape also revealed that after Lon left to go inside, Leticia reappeared. The tape triggered the memory of her walking up to me and kissing me softly on the lips, which contrasted with the hard kisses she used to give me in high school.

 Leticia left, Lon came back, and we arranged the deal. We would meet for lunch in the next couple of days to discuss the details.

 The tape also clarified why my face hurt in the morning. While we talked, some idiot came out, saw me, walked over, and punched me out.

 “That not necessary,” Lon’s voice said on the tape.

 “Yes it was,” the other voice said. “Tony has had that coming for a long, long time. Now we can get on with our business.”

 In error, I let the punch go never connecting the punch and the words “…we can get on with our business” as having any significance.

CHAPTER THREE

Not Long Before the Deaths of Pei-Pei and Garcy,

Lon Has Hired Tony as His Attorney

FLYING TIDBITS

Tony

Lon and I meet at his favorite Chinese restaurant for lunch to discuss his case and the venture capital deal he was involved in. It’s located in San Rafael, Marin’s largest city, and what you might call Main Street, USA. George Lucas filmed his first movie, *American Graffiti*, on San Rafael’s Fourth Avenue, a seven-block stretch of businesses still able to compete with the malls.

 Lon, as I said earlier, is a big guy, and he orders a big lunch: Hunan beef, stir-fried chicken, won-tons, spring rolls, soup, and a double order of white rice served with Chinese tea. I eat more simply: a bowl of hot and sour soup and two large sakes. I like sake because it’s hot and you drink it out of little cups that facilitate swilling, my favorite way to drink anything—and, of course, it continues my never drunk, never sober philosophy, although I seem a bit ahead of myself today.

Although Lon carries himself well, he sounds dumb. Lon was raised in a white-European ghetto in southwestern Chicago, which accounts for why, even to me, he doesn’t seem bright. While he sounds like a high school dropout, he tells me that he has an IQ of 180 and that he entered college at fifteen. Like me, he studied accounting and finance.

 Over lunch, Lon says that he knew what would happen when he did the venture capital deal. He apparently prepared himself for a subsequent legal battle, knowing that it would come. All deals fall apart, he tells me, so he always included subtle language in his favor that he could use against his opponents if he had to go to court—language the venture capitalists missed because they relied on lawyers unfamiliar with the details of business to read the documents instead of reading them themselves.

 The venture capital group—headed by a Walter Funcker—dumped Lon shortly after the deal closed. He left with a million-dollar buyout, which satisfied him at the time, but it was only partially paid.

Subsequently, unknown to Lon, the venture capitalists founded QuadFirm and held a public stock offering which made the original participants millions of dollars—except for Lon, who received next to nothing.

 Prior to the creation of QuadFirm, the original company, BathroomDesks, when under the control of the VCs, had apparent financial difficulties. Funcker’s group approached Lon and sold the company back to him for $10 and mutual releases, except for fraud, a stipulation added by Lon. The VCs’ intent was to trick Lon into wrapping up the mess they made of BathroomDesks by making him think the only way he could make any money out of the deal was to take back control.

Lon expected to benefit from the existing revenue stream as he closed down the company, but unknown to Lon, the VCs fraudulently stuck BathroomDesks with $5,000,000 in debt, most of it owed to a Silicon Valley bank. Lon discovered the VCs illegally shifted the money out of BathroomDesks to start QuadFirm—the company Funcker’s group took public.

 “I could not planned better myself,” Lon says. “Me and you going to take these farts down. They borrow bank money; strip funds from company; start new company; go public; make big dollars. Try leave me with debt. These guys stupid. When I say truth of what they do, they sue for defamation.”

The defamation charges meant that all Lon’s and BathroomDesk’s legal fees in the lawsuit against QuadFirm would be paid by BathroomDesk’s liability insurance policy. Ironically, the VCs had purchased and paid for the policy when they owned the company. *How sweet was that?*

I respected Lon for his aggressive style. He sued Walter’s VC firm and QuadFirm as corporations and sued everyone else he could as individuals, including the VCs themselves and QuadFirm’s executive management as well as innocent lower level employees.

“In addition to corporate lawyers, each person I sue must have own lawyer because of conflict of interest laws,” Lon says. “Multiple lawyers, I think maybe thirteen, make for lawyer feeding frenzy. Lawyers get paid talking to each other on phone, at lunch, over drinks after work, at barbeques, and playing golf on weekend. Lawyers expensive for them. My lawyer fees paid by someone else—cost me nothing to fight. They so stupid, I burst out laughing at them.

“Some I sue,” Lon adds, “will eventually want out. Testify for me if drop from lawsuit. I arrange for you to meet two guys already switching sides.”

Lon sued for $100,000,000, an amount structured to give the bastards a large downside if they lost, or, in the alternative, an amount to force them into a pretrial settlement for a lesser but still substantial amount.

Unfortunately, lunch has an unexpected result.

Lon rants and raves while he explains to me what happened. Simultaneously, he stuffs himself with food, taking little time to chew. As his face turns red, I’m slow to react until I guess correctly that a piece of Hunan beef is stuck in Lon’s throat. I move behind him, put my arms around his diaphragm, and pull hard, up into his gut, forcing the piece of meat out with one giant burp. After I let go, he falls onto the table. The impact of his fall sends bits of meat, chicken, rice, soup, and everything else on the table into the air, seeming to spread like gas molecules throughout the dining room, leaving no customers untouched by tidbits of Chinese food.

The strain is too much for Lon—instead of choking to death, he dies, right there, of a heart attack. I attempt CPR, pressing my lips against his as if I’m trying to kiss Leticia by proxy, but without success. The paramedics pronounce him dead shortly after they arrive.

3

Some Lawyers Are Assholes

After Lon’s death, Tony hopes that Leticia will keep him on the case. He will do it for her if asked, but only as an arrow shot at her heart by the cupid in him or by his inner Pan, that horny Satyr who views her as a tasty morsel—something to be eaten, tasted, and swallowed.

Several days before Lon died, he told Tony that he hired the most offensive lawyer he could find, a lawyer named Bruce Verbose. This would add firepower to get the VCs to settle. Lon knew Verbose would torture the VCs and their attorneys with his obscene, aggressive behavior and incessant talking. During depositions, Verbose would control the questions asked and the satisfaction of the answers given—and he would never be satisfied.

When Bruce called Tony to say that Lon directed him to hire him, he told Tony, “I want to make it clear that I’m the one in charge; that you are to do what I instruct you to do.”

*What an asshole*! Floated through Tony’s mind.

However, in sixty days, Bruce Verbose would be literally tongue-tied.

CHAPTER FOUR

Too Soon after Lon’s Death/Before the

Deaths of Pei-Pei and Garcy; Leticia

Hires Tony to Continue with His Investigation

LOVE IS ON THE HORIZON

 Tony’s Ode to Leticia

At Lon’s funeral, Leticia asked me to meet with her in several days. She suggested that I come by College of Marin, where she taught a course in linguistics, and sit in on one of her classes. After class, we would drive to Muir Woods and take a walk through the redwoods. It surprised me that she had become a teacher, especially since she sat in the dumb seat in eighth-grade. *What happened in her life to transcend her from dumb, hot chick to smart, beautiful woman?*

The darkened classroom made it easier for the students to see the outline of Leticia’s lecture on the computer projector screen. But she did let enough light filter through the partially closed shades to clearly see her move in front of the class as she lectured.

Leticia’s physique made a case for the existence of a God who designed one of its most perfect creations—the right-sized breasts, perfect feet, legs, and face. Today, God enhanced the design as a dark shadow crossed her chest forming a sash, which ran from her left shoulder down across her left breast, ending at her right hip.

 Dressed in a long-sleeved, red sweater, no bra, Leticia’s sleeves were long enough that she could pull them over her hands in a comforting move. But that did not stop her hands from moving as if she conducted a symphony, adding meaning and excitement to what she said.

 In addition to the red sweater, Leticia wore a jean skirt slit up the side to her thighs. As she paced in front of the class, the length of the skirt lifted up and back exposing her sexually erotic legs in full.

 Her round, firm rear mitigated the attractiveness of her legs as it brought my eyes into focus. Her rear shifted left when she made a point, right when she stared ahead waiting for questions. When she moved from the center of the class, the shadow on her chest shifted as it turned from sash to a horizontal bra that covered both breasts. Light and dark, then dark and light played on the beauty of her face as she brushed back her dark hair when she spoke. She now reminded me of a femme fatale in an old film noir.

 Bright white teeth coupled with a wide smile further enhanced the contrast of light and dark as she moved between the lighted screen and the darkened room. The red lips that surrounded her teeth were such that they demanded to be gently kissed, caressed, and moistened by the lips of another—mine.

 Sandals, no socks, adorned her feet, desirable like her lips. She would lift upon toes to write on the whiteboard, an event which raised her skirt higher and showed the back of her perfect thighs.

 Towards the end of class, Leticia turned the classroom lights on, radically changing the environment.

Did the light change her physical movements? Did the light show defects in her physical appearance? Did the light affect her speech, her intonation? Were her facial expressions more varied as she became subconsciously aware that the class could clearly see her face? Did the class appear less impacted by her presence as the dark shifted to light?

No! The light highlighted her beauty as it moved the shadows to the side and brought the focus directly to her face and body as if she stood in a spotlight. I became transfixed as if I watched a great actress performing on the stage.

She sent out messages of sexy and cozy at the same time. Yet, I found the most overriding element of her beauty to be her surprisingly sharp intelligence and knowledge of linguistics and the way she transmitted that knowledge to the gaping students.

 Periodically, she would stand in silence as she challenged the students to say something, to get them to ask questions, scaring some students into silence, getting from others gibberish because they couldn’t stand the silence—even their own stupid verbiage seemed more comfortable to them than her silent, focused eyes.

Her face and body responded to the emphasis of her voiced words. Sometimes she would extend her fingers upright in order to emphasize paragraphical elements of her lecture. When she asked a question, she would bring her hands to her face and open them out to the class. The intonation of her voice drove the class-interest higher—so unlike the normal monotone speech of many professors.

 Leticia formed sentences that caused the class to smile, often resulting in collective laughter as if she were a stand-up comic instead of a professor. Her facial and body expressions complemented her basic nature and extended the laugh track response of the class. “Who are you?” she might say with her hands flat, face up towards the ceiling as if she talked to God.

By the time the class ended, Leticia’s beauty had mesmerized me into desire. She was all I could want. We belonged together swimming in love. There would be nothing beyond my own desire that could stop me from treating her in the future like a woman whose great charm and beauty demanded adoration.

2

Tony

We drive to Muir Woods, located in a protected valley on the southwest side of Mr. Tamalpais—a fog-free valley, sunny, cool, and beautiful.

 We take one of the trails that meander through the tall redwood trees that border a small creek. The surrounding beauty keeps the cool darkness formed by the shadows of the trees from portending danger.

 I can hear birds chirping and squirrels running through the trees. There’s a parallel path on the other side of the creek. Two women walking on it are squawking at each other like a couple of macaws. Wind brushes the treetops back letting sunlight through the redwood trees as the needles shift against each other. As we get farther up the trail, further away from civilization, I hear the effects of silence mute the sounds of the day as if silence has taken over.

Leticia breaks the quiet. “Tell me about Lon’s death?”

 “There’s nothing to tell. He choked. He died. I assume the stress of the choking triggered the heart attack.”

 “Did he mention me during lunch,” she wants to know.

 “We talked business,” I tell her.

 “Oh,” she says like she’s disappointed.

As we walk farther up the trail into the dark, damp woods, she grabs my hand and holds it tight as she grasps for security. We walk hand-in-hand for ten minutes—no words seem necessary.

Leticia finally says, “This lawyer what’s his name, Bruce or something like that. He keeps calling, wanting me to continue the lawsuit with him as my lawyer, but I wouldn’t trust his dick. He sounds slimy over the phone. But I want to continue with the lawsuit. Will you help me? Will you meet with him?”

“Sure,” I reply as I softly squeeze her hand.

We walk several more minutes without speaking. Still holding hands she stops, turns toward me, pulls close, and gently kisses me on the lips, stands back, smiles at me, comes close again—this time muzzling my entire mouth with a kiss that reminds me of what it had been like with her in high school.

As she kisses me, I can feel the cool air of the woods heat up. I can feel more sunshine pierce through the treetops. I can see her dark hair illuminate as if it were the night sky filled with bright stars.

We continue walking, saying little, stopping for more kissing, walking more as we hold hands more firmly, sometimes with our arms around each other’s waist, sometimes arm-in-arm.

The kissing gradually leads to making out, to wandering hands as both of us explore the other’s body, re-familiarizing ourselves with the physicality that existed between us so long ago.

 Back in the parking lot, we get into the limo. I get four little bottles of vodka out of the glove compartment. We swill two bottles and sip on the others while I roll a joint.

 After we finish the vodka and take a couple of puffs off the joint, I pull the bed out from the back. Leticia wastes no time taking down my pants, lifting her skirt (she wears no underwear), and climbing on top of me. Her top falls down around her waist. I leer at her breasts—still round and firm, still exciting.

 As cars on the road next to the parking lot swoosh by, I touch her. I smell her. The scent of a sweet flower penetrates my senses. I rise like a flame from a fire, flaring up, smoldering down, over and over until the flame burns out, my fuel used up.

I drive Leticia to Muir Beach where she lives in a house on a bluff that overlooks the sheltered beach and ocean. The house stands directly above one of Marin County’s nude beaches, a place I have visited on those rare days when the fog has rolled out to sea, as it has today.

 As I enter the house, I can smell the stale air inside as if she hasn’t opened the windows or been there for days.

In the living room I say, “I like your hair that way; it frames the beauty of your face.”

She smiles and goes into the kitchen to make Bloody Marys.

Leticia’s desire towards me seemed unusually intense. She was unbridled in expressing that desire during lovemaking. I realize that I have also developed an intense longing for her, a craving to have her over-and-over again. I am enthusiastic and eager to feel the pleasure of her skin.

 I peer around the living room. Everything in Leticia’s home seems to have been placed and arranged with purpose as if it would matter somehow to her life where things were located.

I’m surprised to see the bookshelves actually contain books. I walk over to see what they are. Most of them are academic books. She has books on linguistics, English grammar, and literature. There are a few cheap novels, but most of the literature consists of the classics. She has a couple of my favorites: *The Magus* and *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* both by John Fowles. Hemingway. Steinbeck. Short stories by Alyce Munroe and Lorrie Moore. She also has a few videos.

 Leticia comes out with the drinks.

 “Tony, would you get that video marked with the Roman Numeral IV, take it out of the case please, and set it on the desk? I want to show you something later.”

 “What’s with all the books?” I ask. “I never thought of you as much of a reader.”

 “Tony, a lot has changed. After high school, the doctors diagnosed me as dyslexic. I took reading therapy for years. Eventually, I went to Boston University where I earned a PhD in Linguistics. That’s how I met Lon. He took my basic English grammar glass at College of Marin.”

 *Well, shut my mouth!*

 I scrutinize the house more as I sip my drink. Recessed pictures penetrate the walls. Wilted flowers are on all the tables confirming that she hasn’t been here for a while. Upscale furniture distinguishes her tastes. This is definitely not the Leticia I had known. She becomes more attractive to me.

Leticia goes to the bathroom. I stare out the back window into a magnificent garden where plants climb into the sky, swaying in the wind. The grass trembles in the yard as insects reflect the brutality of life by devouring each other. A cat walks amongst the bushes, climbs the fence bordering the yard, and jumps down to the other side.

 When Leticia comes back, she beckons me to come with her out to the screened-in porch where we tumult on a large lounge chair until exhausted by our lust.

 Light filters in from the outside. As the sun sets, we drift off to sleep. Before my mind shuts down, I hear the waves crashing below as they run towards the bottom of the cliffs, continuing with the slow erosion that eventually will result in one of the houses above crashing down to the beach destroying all within.

My last thought before I fall asleep concerns the video Leticia forgot to show me—I assume it was not all-that important.

The next morning, I drive south across the Golden Gate Bridge as I replay yesterday’s lustful encounter. The changes in Leticia have opened the door to a possible, permanent relationship now that I find her not only attractive, but intelligent.

 To wind down from the encounter, I’m headed for Artichoke Joe’s, a poker parlor located south of San Francisco in San Bruno where I will most likely spend a few hours losing a large amount or winning a small amount in a game of Omaha, a variation of the increasingly popular game of Texas Hold‘em.

 No one pisses me off until a car cuts in front of me. I honk, and the female driver flips me off with both hands—she must be steering with her knees, something that I often do myself to roll a joint. I ignore her and don’t even bother to question why she flipped me off. But like a Pavlov dog, I reach for the vodka in the glove compartment and swig down a bottle as I imagine how my life would change if my relationship with Leticia became permanent.

I decide to skip the trip to Artichoke Joes. Instead, I head for San Francisco’s Ocean Beach.

I could taste the remnants of a Red Bull and vodka combination, which had chased the taste of breakfast out of my mouth. I can no longer tell if my mouth can experience bitter or salty, sweet or sour sensations—just the foul taste of the Red Bull/vodka combination. I scrap my thumbnail against my tongue to see if I can rid it of the foul taste, but all it does is spread the foulness deeper into my mouth where it drifts down to my stomach causing a burp which sends the taste into the air in the car shifting the odor from my mouth to my nose. I pull the air freshener out of my pocket.

At the beach, I get out of the car and the cool breeze settles on me like a feather floating to ground. Clouds above race across the sky as if they are late for an appointment with God. A black, ominous fog bank moves towards shore. The wind blows bits of fog into the air obscuring where the fog ends and the sky begins as the horizon becomes completely obliviated. I sense no answers, nothing concrete. Fog horns sound warnings, but it doesn’t matter as I will soon be engulfed in the fog.

The sex with Leticia gave me a perceived feeling of enjoyment, but I can’t help thinking that having sex with her exhibits bad taste—way too close to Lon’s death. But I remember the sweetness of her lips on my mouth and the soft touch of them on my penis.Yet, there are bound to be negative ramifications from having sex with her.

Then again, if Leticia falls in love with me, maybe I should marry her—use her money to cover the back child support being claimed by Stephanie should the DNA test prove positive—I’ve screwed enough women while drunk, who knows how many children I might have?

3

Leticia

*Tony appears older, more mature. His dusty, blue eyes still look like a blue sky with clouds passing through. He looks good with a beard, and he still has dark hair unlike Bro Beck’s. He doesn’t have that potbelly those others have. And the sex seemed more intense than I remember it.*

*Sex and feelings for Tony are going to make it hard to deal with some of the choices I’ve made. With Lon’s unexpected death and Tony back, I need to reevaluate my life, examine it to discover what makes the best sense—money versus love, vengeance versus letting go.*

*Maybe I could get Tony to take a trip with me to some romantic spot to reaffirm my love for him, to see if it’s mutual. To see if he’s a way to sort out my life.*

4

Tony

I decided to meet with Bruce Verbose to let him know that while he would continue to run the lawsuit, Leticia appointed me her agent and he now reports to me.

When I entered Bruce’s office, fat and ugly stared me in the face. Rolls of flesh meandered down his neck, each separated by a thin line of sweaty indentations like furrows on a forehead. If his manner won’t make them settle the lawsuit, his ugliness might.

 “I don’t like this, Tony,” Verbose said leaning forward as if he wanted to get his face close to mine.

 “Too bad,” I said as I stood up, leaned over, and stuck my nose in his face. “Leticia signed an agency agreement with me. You’ll do what I tell you.”

 Startled, he pulled his head away from me—or maybe my alcohol-breath forced him back. Anyway, he didn’t respond, or couldn’t.

 Tomorrow I expected to make progress in the investigation. In the meantime, if the DNA test proves I fathered the children, I needed to decide what to do next with that cunt Stephanie before I found myself in jail for failing to pay child support.

CHAPTER FIVE

Tony and Leticia in Eighth Grade

TONY THE WRITER

Tony

Sometimes when I’m drinking and smoking pot, before I get too loaded, I write stories. I haven’t taken any formal writing classes, but I’ve read quite a few books on writing, and I’ve written several short stories. I like writing fiction because I can make statements that I don’t have to prove, as long as my words stay true to the story. My favorite way to write fiction is to reinvent reality—distort or embellish true events. It also interests me that fiction, and the best non-fiction, is always about conflicts people face in obtaining their own wants when they clash with the wants of others. And I like the idea of eventually getting paid to lie, an acceptable alternative to the way I presently earn a living—although I’ve yet to get paid for anything that I’ve written.

As I drive away from Bruce’s office building the fog thickens, which reminds me of the fictionalized short story I wrote about my traumatic experience with Leticia in grammar school when we first began our on-again, off-again relationship.

If It’s Foggy Anywhere, It’s Foggy in Pacifica

On the coast, south of San Francisco on Highway 1, Pacifica stands high above the sea on a plateau that rises gradually, then steeply up to Skyline Boulevard, which lies sometimes above the fog, most often not. The plateau’s crumbling cliffs, located on Pacifica’s west edge, rise three hundred feet above the beach below. On a clear day, one can see the Farallon Islands, which are more than forty miles out to sea—but clear days are rare in Pacifica.

I first became aware of Leticia Tretchatoria when we were both seventh grade students at Sharp Park grammar school in Pacifica—or saw her would be more like it. We never really talked until we were sophomores in high school.

Stephanie, one of Leticia’s girlfriends told me, during the summer before eighth grade, that Leticia liked me, so I knew why Leticia began sitting behind me in Sunday church. But Leticia and I were like two magnets with opposite poles—neither of us ever got too close to the other, not to offer a smile, not to say a hello or a good-bye, not even to make eye contact.

I secretly liked her and wanted to talk to her. But I didn’t know what to say, or how to say it if I had a thought—so I said nothing. Leticia too never once in all the Sundays that she sat behind me, or after the services, ever seemed able to say a word to me.

Things stayed that way until the last week of eighth grade.

Our eighth grade teacher became one of the forces that kept us away from each other. He had a mean way of seating the kids. He tested the students the first day of school and arranged them in order of the results with the highest score getting the first seat in the first row and the lowest score getting the last seat in the last row. He would rearrange seats after each quarter’s grades were out. While I didn’t sit in the smart seat, I sat in the first row near the back. Leticia sat in the last row, about three seats more toward the front than I. Neither one of us ever scored differently so we never changed seats, never got to sit closer to each other—always kept at the maximum distance by that unknown magnetic force working in opposition to our even being near each other. But I did have a clear view of Leticia, most always keeping my eyes focused on her.

I felt sad when Leticia stumbled through oral reading time, everyone embarrassed for her. I felt embarrassed too because in my fantasy life she was my *girlfriend*.

Leticia wore shoulder length hair, dark like black shoe polish, had a rounded face with soft lips and a matching nose as soft as a spoon full of creamy peanut butter. She dressed nicely, and I imagined she smelled nice.

I turned fourteen in January of our last year in eighth grade. I had been getting erections for a while, but I had no idea what they were, why they occurred, let alone what they were for. As I approached the end of eighth grade, I spent time touching my penis, sometimes fondling my testicles, sometimes even wearing my older sister’s undergarments while I did this.

One day, something squirted out from my penis. My body shook as fear penetrated my brain trigging waves of guilt which generated more fear. What happened? I must have done something wrong or I wouldn’t feel this way. I must be a sinner. I pleaded for God to forgive me as I promised that I’d never do that again. But to the outside world, I continued on as if nothing happened.

Stephanie sat next to me in class. She surprised me one day when she asked me who I liked. I took the opportunity to shyly say, “Leticia.” Things worked fast. Soon I found out that Leticia and I were going to meet at the eighth-grade dance being held the Friday night of the final day of class.

However, I did not keep my promise to never to do that again. Not only did I do it again, I did it on a Sunday, six days before the dance. I worried more about God’s reaction. I had heard bible tales involving punishment for wrong doings, and I wanted none of that. Yet, I never did that again on Thursday, the night before the dance.

During my periods of self-indulgence, my thoughts began to turn to Leticia, the dance, and the possibilities after the dance. After I finished, my fear of Leticia slipped in—but maybe I wasn’t afraid, maybe I was just shy, or maybe I was just at the age where boys are clueless about girls.

I told none of my friends that Leticia and I were going to the dance—embarrassed to be going to a dance with a girl. Besides, I wanted to stay home that week as much as possible. I felt too guilty to be out under the open sky where God could peer down at me while he planned the punishment I would receive for my bad behavior.

I almost didn’t make it to the dance.

The last day of school let out at noon that Friday. Cold, drizzly, and more damp than normal, the wet fog turned into a misty waterfall causing droplets of moisture to fall and merge with my hair.

I raced home from school with my wet hair flailing in the breeze. I could only think of one thing: a cup of steamy hot chocolate with creamy peanut butter and raspberry jam on quartered slices of white bread for dipping—like doughnuts into coffee.

As I ran, I remembered we were out of chocolate syrup. I had enough money to buy some, so I headed for the local supermarket. Once there, on the way down the aisle to get a can of Hershey’s chocolate syrup, I saw a delightful coconut with the face of an angel. The coconut reminded me of Leticia. If an image of the Virgin Mary could appear in strange places, it made sense that one of Leticia could appear on a coconut. I became obsessed with getting that coconut, felt that I must have that coconut.

 My wet, breezed hair contributed to my frenzied state caused by the dance coming ever closer, my newfound hobby of never doing that again, and my continued fear of what God’s punishment would be. I was also faced with the dilemma of not having enough money with me to get both the can of chocolate syrup and the lovely coconut. My internalized demeanor demanded that I resort to some drastic measure—I could not leave the store without both.

Leticia happened to be in the store when I struggled with my coconut, hot chocolate problem. She saw me the exact moment I stuck the coconut down the front of my pants in an effort to have both coconut and hot chocolate—an effort that resulted in the police taking me into custody the very day of the big dance, a day after I did to myself, for a third time, the thing that I’d said I’d never do again.

I knew as I watched Leticia watching the police arrest me that God had carried out my punishment—and, my, Leticia sure looked hot, her body having matured towards the end of eighth grade. As I watched her, I felt that thing again, rising, thickening, reaching out.

Released from the police station, I went home, went right to my room, took off my clothes, and climbed naked into bed where I never did that again as I thought of Leticia in the most sexual terms. Afterwards, I cowered under the covers with the fear that God would punish me doubly for thinking of her that way while I touched myself. I prayed to God for forgiveness, but I knew I would be punished again—and it would not be pleasant.

That night, I arrived at the dance apprehensive and embarrassed that Leticia had watched me get arrested. As I entered the gym, I saw that the students had decorated it like a foggy twilight evening. Cool steam escaped from small, dry-ice machines surrounding the gym floor. Misters sprayed light droplets of water, which added a soft wetness to the air. A spotlight in one corner shined through the faux fog giving the gym the feel of a bright sun setting on a foggy day.

Leticia stood in the center of the gym waiting for me. Leticia, with her beautiful dark hair, wearing a black, tight dress that hugged her body, emphasized her breasts—no longer a girl, but a woman. I moved towards her, sweat dripping from my fear of girls and from my embarrassment that she earlier saw me take the coconut.

I reached Leticia. As we danced, she pulled me closer as if she had let go of any negative thinking she might have about my arrest.

But I didn’t get it at the time, too wrapped up in my fear.

In the arms of Leticia, I sweated more, my forehead flushed. I started shaking. I wanted to blend in with the faux fog in the room. I needed to disappear, to get away from this newly formed, elegant woman that I no longer deserved.

Leticia spoke her first words to me as she asked, “What’s wrong?” I told her I didn’t feel well, turned and ran out of the gym, away from the dance, away from Leticia, as I disappeared into the wet fog and trudged home to my new fate as sinner, unworthy opposer of God’s will, knowing that I lost my chance with Leticia, who I imagined laughed—relieved that this boy, this child, this coconut thief ran away.

\* \* \*

Leticia and I connected in high school during a party held towards the end of our sophomore year. Leticia was now more beautiful and sexy than ever. I had gained confidence when my own body filled out. I now started as a defensive back on the varsity football team as a sophomore.

 I saw Leticia dancing with one of her new girlfriends. She had moved on from Stephanie, who had turned into a thin, nerdy type, someone we now completely ignored—she wasn’t cool enough for us.

When the music turned to a slow song, I walked out to Leticia, turned her around towards me, pulled her close, and we danced. Soon we were making out in the middle of the dance floor.

 We would talk and laugh about what had happened with us in eighth grade. We would become lovers, never far from each other’s side, until a collision in a football game injured me in the fall of my senior year.

 Depressed by my injury, I would turn to drugs and alcohol and push Leticia away as I escaped into that awful world of one’s inner self.

CHAPTER SIX

Tony, Leticia and Bro Seniors in High School

WINDOWS OF OPPORTUNITY

1

Football Agony

 Redwood High and Marin Catholic were tied 14-14 at the end of the third quarter despite the two hundred fifty yards gained on the ground by Kenneth Beck, Marin Catholic’s all-star fullback.

 The gains made by Beck were limited to two touchdowns because of the fierce hits by Redwood High’s defensive safety, Tony T. Trueblé, who forced a fumble by Marin Catholic’s tight-end after a short catch and by an interception that Trueblé ran back eighty yards for a touchdown.

 At the start of the third quarter, Beck and Trueblé were gunning for each other. To stop Beck’s rush sooner, Trueblé was moved up to cornerback. Noting this, Marin Catholic’s coach decided to run Beck straight at Trueblé, hard and fast, the idea being to wear Trueblé down, maybe even take him out of the game with a crushing charge by Beck.

 It didn’t take Trueblé long to realize that Beck had targeted him, that he intended to mangle him. That choice motivated Trueblé to be prepared to launch himself at Beck with enough power to force a fumble.

 On third down and four, Trueblé sensed a fake run by Beck, followed by a pass to him in the flat. Trueblé backed up a couple of yards, ignored the fake handoff and let Beck slide through the line. Beck quickly moved left and caught the pass short of a first down. As Beck turned right to head up field, Trueblé hit him with a diving shoulder tackle, missing the ball but hitting Beck in the knee. The sound of shoulder hitting knee could be heard by anyone close by.

 Shattered kneecap and broken collarbone left both players writhing in agony on the field, the last time either Beck or Trueblé would play football—all their hard-earned glory gone in the seconds the play had taken to drive them down and out.

2

Bro Beck

Because of my small size in grammar school, kids picked on me—sometimes beat on me—always white kids.

 We lived a few miles north of the Golden Gate Bridge in Marin City, which in the 60s housed Army officers but was converted in the 70s to ghetto apartments for poor folks like my parents. My opportunities for a descent future appeared bleak from birth.

 In seventh grade, I had a growth spurt in height and weight, making me the tallest, biggest kid in school. Yes, I did take revenge on some of those white boys who’d beat me up—the first time I tasted the feel of revenge, but that would not be the last time because I enjoyed the process of teaching those who tormented me a lesson they should not forget, an enjoyment that would last my entire life.

 As I began to grow, my father directed me towards football. I found a new method of revenge against those white boys through hard, physical contact, putting more than one kid out of the game forever. But I gained so many yards rushing that the parents, even of the kids I harmed, cheered me on, inciting me to run harder, faster, letting nothing stand in my way.

 My running statistics in high school brought the college scouts in massive numbers to the games I played during my senior year. Some of them already were recruiting me before the start of the season. I wanted to go to college with the intent of becoming a professional football player and nothing would stop me—or so I thought.

 But one more white boy had to beat on me one more time, ending my chance for college, ending my chance to play pro football, ending my chance to escape the ghetto unless I could find another way, perhaps other white boys that I could pound back on to get ahead.

 Since I was unfairly excluded from being a participant, I planned to somehow infiltrate white society, like a foreign spy working as a mole from within.

After Tony fucked me up on the football field, I decided to get even by stealing his girlfriend from him. This would be my first infiltration of white society. It turned out to be easy. Tony had begun drinking and doing drugs, and like the idiot he still is, he dumped Leticia. Vulnerable and seeking vengeance for the way Tony treated her, Leticia screwed me in the back of her car an hour after I approached her in a downtown parking lot. She and I were a perfect fit—then and now.

“Leticia, I want you to do something for me,” I said following sex one night during the last semester of our senior year in high school.

“Sure, Honey, what do you want?” she replied as she thumbed through the National Enquirer.

 “Before you turn eighteen, I’ve got an idea how we can get someone else’s money; but it’s criminal, and we could be in trouble if we get caught.”

 “Okay. What are we going to do?” She said as she turned her attention away from the magazine to the mirror.

 I laughed to myself at Leticia. She seemed more interested in gossip, her looks, and fucking than anything else. In a reversal of my ancestors’ plight, she accepted me as the master, she the slave.

“We’re going to take advantage of Peter Fellure, that teacher who likes to stare at your tits. We’ll set him up by taking pictures of him having sex with you.

“I’ve checked out his house. You can screw him in his home office while I take pictures through the uncurtained back-window. He’ll face statutory rape: seven to ten years. We’ll blackmail his ass for whatever we can get.”

 “Sounds like fun, and he is kind of cute. But why him?” Leticia asked as she brushed back her long, dark hair away from her face and again glanced at the mirror.

 “He taught a class at Marin Catholic last summer and the mother-fucker gave me a D,” I whispered as I gently kissed Leticia’s ear, letting my tongue slide in and out.

 3

Leticia’s Romp with Peter

“Mr. Fellure,” Leticia said, a slight smile on her lips. “I need some help to get my D grade raised to a C so I can graduate high school. Can you can help me?”

 “Sure, Leticia,” Peter Fellure said, his eyes fixed on hers, yet still able to glimpse the white, firm breasts she revealed through the low cut, flimsy blouse. “Let’s set a time for you to come to my office.”

 “Oh, Mr. Fellure, I thought I could come to your house where we could have some privacy,” Leticia said as she dipped her chin and eyed Peter with gently raised eyebrows. “I don’t want anyone to know that I need your help. It would, you know, just be too embarrassing.”

 Peter knew that Leticia was a senior in her last semester of high school, but he didn’t know her age. He asked her, and to his relief, she told him that she had turned eighteen a month earlier. He never thought to check her ID. “Okay,” Peter said. “Can you come on Thursday night?”

 “Will anybody else be there?”

 “My son, Vincent,” Peter said.

“Vincent makes me nervous,” Leticia said. “Could I come on another night? I’d rather we be alone. Could I come over on the weekend?”

 “I can’t do it this weekend because I’ve got army reserve duty. How about Friday night?” Peter said as his body slightly quivered. “Vincent will be at the basketball game all evening. Come then.”

On Friday night, Peter sat at his home desk in his favorite high-backed leather chair working on his new book.

The furniture in the office was stained a deep, dark-red mahogany. Floor to ceiling, red oak bookcases filled two of the office walls. Behind his chair, various certificates and awards covered a third wall. Three-quarters window covered the fourth wall.

Peter never let anyone into his office, including Vincent. The third wall thus represented a secret, sacred symbol of how successful he had become. While he never bragged of his success to anyone, he did require constant reinforcement of his own ego to offset certain failures he had experienced as a child—failures that he dispensed with as he slowly headed toward becoming a respected guru in the field of management theory and application—ready to break into the big time.

There were no pictures or paintings in Peter’s office, only an artful calendar open to the current month tacked on the bookcase directly across from the window.

Below the fourth wall window, stained wainscoting provided a back drop. A maroon leather couch sat in front with a table and lamp at each end. There were no curtains necessary since the outside of the house faced a gully. A three-foot ledge outside the window made it unlikely anyone would ever be there as foliage covered the approach from either side of the house.

Generally, Peter only turned on his desk lamp, which focused light on the paper on which he wrote as he sat in the dark, comfortable in his isolation from outside stimuli.

Mirrors surrounded by muted yellow lights along the edges covered the entire ceiling, except for one bright light above the desk. With the ceiling lights on, Peter could lean back and admire himself as he mentally developed what he planned to write. Sometimes while gazing up, he would let his mind wander, as he did now, fantasizing having sex with Leticia in various positions—too weak to ignore the window of opportunity that would soon present itself.

He turned on the other lights when sitting or lying on the couch reading or when he searched for a particular book in one of the bookcases. With all the lights on, the bright lights reflecting in the window prevented him from seeing outside—just as he could not see beyond his inner desires.

Smiling at himself in the ceiling mirror, Peter mentally worked on his new book and the style he chose. Unlike his earlier books, he would write this book on management theory in a nonacademic style. The style would appeal generally to business executives, yet have an educational application at the college level—a book he planned to be a best seller, a book for which his publisher already gave him a $100,000 advance against a $500,000 fee if a certain number of copies were sold. This would be his last year teaching high school as he had recently accepted a teaching position at UC Berkeley. Peter felt grateful for his organized, complete, and fulfilling life.

His thinking soon returned to Leticia, now thirty minutes late, not unusual for a woman. Peter’s impatience grew the more he visualized her. He had already chewed off the end of his eraser. He planned on giving her a C in the class without actually having to teach her anything. Make it easy for her to pass the course.

Peter wasn’t quite sure how to seduce Leticia. He could offer her something alcoholic, after all many states allowed drinking beer and wine at eighteen, even though here in California it was twenty-one. He wouldn’t really be breaking any of society’s overall moral codes—only a state law made by politicians who themselves regularly broke laws for their own convenience.

The doorbell rang. Peter hurried to greet Leticia. She wore a white, see-through tank top. Large, golden-brown dollars protruded through the thin material covering her chest, leering at him like winning symbols on a pornographic slot machine. Her feet were naked. Fashionable short-shorts several sizes too small stuck to her rear as if the shorts were made of saran wrap. The high school’s administration had banned this style—under protest by the students.

“Come in Leticia,” Peter mumbled through his trembling lips. “Follow me to the kitchen.”

He could kick himself for not letting Leticia go first. He quickly turned around as they reached the kitchen door, and, acting like the perfect gentleman he knew himself to be, let her go first as they entered, doing his best to keep his penis from prematurely reaching out as he admired those firmly wrapped butt cheeks.

“Would you like a drink, Leticia?” Peter asked. “A coke or maybe some lemonade?”

“Do you have anything stronger?” she asked.

“Would you like a beer?”

“I’d rather have a vodka martini,” she said.

*“All right!”* rushed to the front of Peter’s brain, but he restrained himself and said in almost a whisper, his breath caught in his throat, “Sure, Darling, whatever you want.”

Before Peter turned around to make the drinks, Leticia reached out and gave him a gentle hug in thanks, a hug so gentle it only involved her nipples touching his chest, but close enough that Peter could sense her nipples leach out in excitement.

Peter could hardly make the drink. He fumbled for a glass. He fumbled for the vodka. He fumbled for the vermouth.

“Oh, Christ,” Leticia said. “Just hand me the damn bottle.”

He handed her the bottle without thought and watched her unscrew the cap and take a big swig. She handed the vodka back to Peter who reflexively took his own swig, then returned it. Leticia took another swig, handed the bottle again to Peter, reached into her purse, pulled out a joint and matches, and lit up. Peter quickly took two huge gulps of the vodka, set the bottle down and took the joint from Leticia when she passed it—Peter’s first time, but he desperately wanted to make Leticia believe that he was more than the stiff, older man he knew himself to be.

 “Let’s go to your office,” Leticia said as she took his hand and led the way. Peter never thought to question her on how she knew the way to his office, and he ignored the fact that he never before let anyone enter his private domain. Peter lost his virginity with pot; his secret place would soon lose its virginity. In his universe, he now imagined Leticia losing her virginity.

In the office, lit only by the desk lamp, Leticia took one of Peter’s hands and placed it on a breast, leaned into him, pressed her breasts hard against his chest, and kissed his lips, thrusting her tongue inside as she brought one of her own hands to his groin—now filled with hard desire.

“Turn all the lights on. I like to do it in the light,” Leticia said as she pulled her top off.

During sex, it seemed to Peter that strobe lights were flashing. Afterwards, he realized the flashing came from outside the back window, flashing as if someone took pictures, flashing as if they threatened everything Peter worked for.

Only after the sex ended did Peter realize that he not only risked everything to have sex with Leticia, but the risk had grown. He wondered who took the pictures, but he knew money motivated the picture taker, money that he would pay to keep his life intact, to keep his reputation, to keep out of jail.

Peter stared at the naked, smiling Leticia as she reached out to smooth back his matted hair, then reached down to caress his limp penis. He realized this would not be the last time he had sex with her—whatever the cost.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Tony, Leticia and Bro Still Seniors in High School

EVIL SEEKS ITS OWN LEVEL

1

Bro Beck

My plan was simple. I would be outside Peter Fellure’s home office to take pictures of him screwing the seventeen-year-old Leticia. But plans don’t always happen exactly as expected; fortunately, I’m always prepared to adjust the plan to fit the circumstances of whatever occurs.

In this case, as I crawled through the wet foliage to get close to the back-office window, excited the entire time by my plan, I passed another window first. The blinds were raised an inch or so above the bottom. Inside, I could see Peter’s son Vincent, not at the basketball game, but home, naked, fiddling with a video camera. I watched him remove a picture from the wall and place his face directly against the wall. When he backed away, I could see that he had been peering through a hole in the wall between his bedroom and Peter’s office. It became obvious to me that Vincent planned on videotaping Leticia and Peter at play.

I almost forgot the picture taking idea thinking that I could steal the video that Vincent made, but I couldn’t be sure his video would provide the exact evidence I needed to blackmail Peter. With the camera, I would capture the office calendar in the background that clearly showed the month, a necessity to confirm Leticia was seventeen when the pictures were taken. Before I missed my opportunity, I moved on to Peter’s office window to take pictures. Afterwards, I could steal the video Vincent made and use both of them to support my blackmail scheme.

Later, Leticia and I broke into Peter’s house, found the tape Vincent made and had sex in Peter’s office in the same chair with her on top. I fantasized during the sex that we starred in a porno that Vincent watched through his peephole.

I’ve always prided myself in my ability to visualize possibilities and to gather information that might be useful in the future. Regardless of the eventual result, I enjoyed the process of scheming; and good scheming required good planning.

 I often developed in my mind potential outcomes in various circumstances. Once I liked an end-result, I would work backwards. Like some authors write a novel, I would develop the details required to effect the ending I wanted.

 Ultimate control, I believed, came from making the right decisions at the right time; but being ready to change them to account for the unknown made sense. After all, “predictions are hard to make, especially when dealing with the future.” How people eventually react to situations would become a dynamic in establishing the route I would eventually take.

 In this case, the major outcome I wanted—extreme personal wealth—would start with the pictures and video of Leticia and Peter screwing. Although the more I viewed the videotape, the more it seemed like Leticia had been screwing Peter, playing a role of her own without regard to the future outcome I had established.

I could somehow use this to my benefit, but it didn’t really matter. My future interest was in the results, not the here-and-now. I would leave that to Leticia, Peter, and Vincent.

2

Vincent Fellure

My insecurity existed because I was raised by a self-centered man who ignored any possibility in me for the possibility in others. No, I didn’t have a good childhood. Father behaved like an inconsiderate asshole. While he would become a famous man in the business world, he would never become a famous father—not even a contender.

I day dreamed that my father would develop me into a management guru and venture capitalist. But father laughed at me whenever I brought him ideas. He especially ridiculed my idea where the CEO reported to the employees instead of autocratically directing them.

Ironically, in high school I often sat in Father’s home office chair, pretending to be him—something I did in many circumstances. It gave me confidence to pretend to be Father—a success instead of the dumb kid that he thought me to be.

 The only thing my father did for me happened when he introduced me to the venture capitalist Walter Funcker; great at the time—but it didn’t turn out all that well in the end.

While in high school, I had watched my father as he sat in his chair—viewed through a peephole between my bedroom and his office. For several months, I videotaped Father as he worked. I wanted to learn how to emulate him in hopes that I could become more like him—and end the alienation between father and son. I generally did my taping on Friday nights, when Father thought I went to the weekly basketball game.

One night, I watched Father screwing Leticia, one of his students from Redwood High and the hottest girl in school. I videotaped the sex through the peephole.

 It excited me as I watched through the camcorder Leticia’s breasts move up and down as she sat on top of my father in his favorite leather chair, himself rhythmically responding to her drops and rises, she with a smile on her face as if she were being tickled instead of fucked.

 While I watched, lights suddenly flashed inside the office as if the sun had burst through the uncurtained back window; but in my self-passion and desire, I ignored the impossibility of any reason why the lights had flashed.

Many days after school, I would watch that tape while I masturbated. At least until the tape somehow disappeared.

When I wheeled my bike into the driveway one evening after several weeks had passed, I saw the streamlined, well-maintained, full-bodied Cadillac—Leticia’s car—parked in front. Sure that she came to visit Father again to screw him in his office, I decided this time to watch through the back-office window. This required me to creep along the side of the house through the low-slung foliage, swatting mosquitoes and other insects that tried to hitch a ride. The foliage dripped like raindrops before a storm from the recent running of the sprinklers, making the ground wet and sticky. By the time I reached the window in the back, my clothes were soaked from the mist on the outside and from the inside by the perspiration my body spit out because of the combined summer heat and my growing passion.

 When I peered through the window, I expected to see Father and Leticia going at it. It shocked me to see that the person underneath Leticia wasn’t Father. He wasn’t old, wasn’t even white. But I couldn’t see his face, only the young, hardened body—I hated him immediately, jealous that he was fucking Leticia instead of me, as I now constantly envisioned.

 As I continued to peer through the uncurtained window, my stomach churned, my face flushed. I could not believe that Leticia would have sex with some kid in father’s chair, yet it didn’t stop me from being sexually aroused and interested in what I saw. I continued to watch, even after I spurted.

After they left, I decided to go to my room and take out the video that I’d made last time. I opened my bottom dresser drawer and reached under my winter sweaters for the video. It wasn’t there; it wasn’t where I’d left it. Someone must have taken it. I hoped my father hadn’t found it. I suspected the maid might have.

3

Peter Fellure

Stunned, I could hardly breathe. I feared the possibility that as my career took off, my success imminent, I would instead find myself disgraced and in jail. I wanted to kill this Bro Beck—not let him leave the house alive—but that could be worse if I were caught.

 I contemplated my new book’s fifth chapter “How to Turn Losing into Winning.” *How can I apply this concept to this problem?*

 “Bro,” I said. “Give me a minute.”

 “Fine,” Bro said. “But don’t expect me to ever mention my proposal verbally again. I’m not going to put myself in a situation to be tape recorded.

“Here’s what I want. Leticia and I move in with you. You provide us with a room, food, and take care of all our living expenses. You cover all my expenses of going to college for four years. You cover the expense of Leticia getting some type of vocational education, like maybe a hairdresser, since she’s not bright enough to make it in college. After I graduate from college, Leticia and I will get our own place, but you will get me a good paying job in the business world.

“You send me a letter offering to hire me as your assistant and to put me through college for philanthropic reasons because of my football injury and family financial problems. Don’t come to me and verbally say you’ve accepted my proposal—I’ll just respond that I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“So Leticia and you will live here with me,” I said as the possibilities of Leticia living in my home became more clear, one opportunity standing out. “Will I be able to have sex with her under this arrangement?”

“That’s up to her,” Bro said. “I’ll try to convince her. I’m not the jealous type, you know. Besides, that would make it okay for me to chase down some of that college stuff.”

“Okay, I’ll write the letter,” I said. “Why don’t you and Leticia plan on coming to dinner a couple times a week, maybe stay over on some weekends; that way we can get used to each other before you move in?”

We shook hands, both of us thrilled as we anticipated our future: mine with Leticia, Bro’s with my money. Even Vincent seemed to like the idea when I told him that Leticia would be living with us, although he didn’t seem keen on the idea that Bro would be living here also.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Timeless

**THE WORLD OF VENTURE CAPITALISTS**

1

The History and Motivation of Three Guys in Need of Redemption

Scales covered Walter Funcker. Flakes fell naturally from his face, arms and any uncovered portion of his body. Children had tormented Walter since grammar school. When a child saw him, the child would call out, “Scaly face, fish face.” Walter would run as fast as he could until he reached the garbage bins alongside the back of the eighth-grade classroom, which were mostly filled with empty boxes. Because of his small size, Walter could hide in one of the boxes thrown into one of the bins. These boxes and bins became Walter’s safe place—the only secure place he could be.

 When Walter reached high school, his life changed after he realized he needed to control or be controlled. No one would believe the scrawny Walter could be powerful, both mentally and physically—his new found state of existence. But he became infamous for the revenge he took on those poor souls who dared do any harm to him, let alone refer to him as Fish-Face. Although some did call him Fish-Face behind his back, no one had the guts or stupidity to call him that to his face. People learned by observation or result not to antagonize Walter:

*As students arrived for morning classes, they noticed Jonny Popovich, the high school’s star basketball player tied front-faced and buck-naked to the back of a naked Joe Studle, the fullback on the football team—both blindfolded and standing in the middle of the school quad, Popovich with an erection. Walter sat nearby playing chess by himself, ignoring the naked jocks and the throngs coming to school. He simply sat picking his face, daring anyone to connect him to the event. After that, even the teachers were afraid to confront Walter.*

\* \* \*

By the time Walter entered Harvard, he would control many of his classmates, and some of the teachers, getting them to do his bidding. Walter dealt with people the way America often dealt with much of the world. He flouted his arrogance and any close relationship with others ended in a master-slave arrangement.

Walter’s belief system, in whatever area he actually held a belief, was dogmatic. He held his beliefs as absolute, beyond question, as if his belief system was sanctioned by some religious organization or God himself. Like the Pope and the Catholic Church, Walter carried out those beliefs in a dictatorial manner, which included punishment for failure—but unlike church, there was no confession, and no second chance existed if you failed in Walter’s world.

 Deficient in purity and clarity—foul and muddy—Walter’s mind lacked moral ambivalence. His actions could sometimes be injurious, even deadly, to others. His imperfectly formed mind, and the why of his actions, seemed incoherent, yet his business ideas were successful and made money.

Like a deciduous snake, Walter would shed every flake on his skin once a year. People avoided him during molting season as he would become foul smelling like a mephitic bog. Jim der Bacon, Walter’s second in command, noticed this for the first time when he became aware of a strange, tingling sensation in his nose, quickly followed by an offensive, foul smell; an event that happened as he and Walter walked into a coffee shop. Even though freshly ground coffee filled the air with miniature, wet drops of caffeine, Jimmy could still smell Walter. After that, he avoided him as much as possible during shedding season.

As Walter progressed in college, he took it on himself to screw over everyone he could—practice for his planned career path as a venture capitalist—a choice he made after first considering becoming a stockbroker, a CPA, or a lawyer. He also thought about politics which would meet his criteria for screwing people, but politics didn’t meld well with his personality or physical appearance. Who would elect a fish to anything?

 Walter had a selfish and excessive desire for gold. His gluttony, lust, and greed were for the gold itself. He wasn’t interested in what he could buy with it. Gold became the symbol of wealth to him; not money or other false icons of the rich. He treated gold as something to live for—something to die for.

During his college years, Walter studied alchemy. He wanted the knowledge to change metal into gold—with no interest in the immortality aspect of alchemy. But instead of learning how to turn metal in to gold, he found it easier to turn other people’s money in to gold. Using other people’s money to make money for himself became an addendum to Walter’s obsessions.

One of Walter’s other people turned out to be Ned Bondman—the prototype for the sucker waiting to give his money to Walter and the perfect lackey. With a simple mind and a nondescript personality, Ned served Walter in a submissive way with fawning attentiveness.

 Marked in life by a lack of ideas or intelligence, Ned lacked any real content—plain stupid described him accurately. Everyone perceived him as tedious as he actually provoked boredom. If he said more than two sentences, his speech put people to sleep as if they’d been drugged. His basic nature produced his own obscurity, except when beautiful, drunk women attached themselves to him in bars; however, although he was extremely good-looking and dressed well, none of the women could remember any quality about Ned—wouldn’t even recognize him on the street. Boys also interested Ned—he was arrested for molestation in high school, but daddy had bailed him out.

 Walter learned that Ned had inherited over two hundred million dollars when he was a senior in high school. Walter also noted that drunk girls went for Ned like Walter himself went for gold. Like Walter had done with der Bacon, he grabbed onto the scheming opportunities that would be available if Ned were under his control. Although the money lay in trust for Ned until he graduated college, Walter perceived it as money in the bank—waiting for him to tap for future deals. He didn’t have to wait to take advantage of the girls.

Girls who wouldn’t have given Ned the time of day, when drunk, latched onto Ned like hungry sheep latch onto grazing fields. Walter not only required investment money and massive loyalty from Ned, he required Ned to bring him unsuspecting drunk women, the only possible way Walter could get laid—even prostitutes were hesitant to have sex with Walter’s scaly body.

Ned loved the world of finance. It gave him self-respect—what he wanted, since he had the money, but not the ability, nor the brains, to get it on his own. It also let him feel important, to believe that he could actually be called a successful businessman who earned his money the hard way—by screwing others and getting away with it.

2

James der Bacon aka “Jimmy Bucks”

Walter Funcker gave me the name “Jimmy Bucks” in my freshman year at Harvard. I met Walter when we shared a three-bedroom dorm-suite with Ned Bondman, who is the third point in our triangle of deceit against the world.

Walter’s first words to me were, “Stay out of my way and keep your nose out of our business.”

Ned, a man of few words added, “You’re kind of cute. Take Walter’s advice if you want to stay that way.”

 After settling in, I checked out the naked girl situation—something I always did. It didn’t take me long to find out that a hole existed in a three-foot crawl space between the girl’s bathroom showers and the men’s. The access came through an overhead vent in the men’s shower. Empty candy wrappers, used kleenix and various other items of interest filled the crawl space—somebody had obviously peeped there before me—but I bet no videotaping occurred until I arrived.

 I thus started my college career by videotaping female bathroom scenes and selling them to male students, for a very good price, at colleges located in large cities at least fifty miles away from Boston—hoping to avoid fathers or other male relatives of the girls I videotaped.

 After a while, I decided to sell time at the peephole; however most of the male students refused to pay me once they knew how to reach the peephole. But another secret hole existed above the crawl space, so another idea came to me: I could videotape the guys whacking off while they stared through the peephole. I might make more money blackmailing them than selling time at the peep hole.

 I chose Walter as my first victim—I didn’t believe him strong enough to back up his earlier, threatening words.

 “Hi, Walter,” I said as I approached him. “I’d like to show you a videotape.”

 “Sure, let’s see it,” Walter said already sitting in front of the TV.

 At the end of the tape, I said to Walter in my most threatening tone, “I can sell this tape to you for one hundred dollars or to the girls you’re watching.”

That’s when I discovered Walter’s hidden strength. He stood, laughed, and reached down and grabbed me by the balls as hard as he could and said, “‘Jimmy Bucks’ is your new name and you work for me.”

No one had ever paid attention to me as a person. When Walter grabbed me by the balls and demanded that I work for him, it pleased and excited me. The opportunity to be the results of someone else’s actions would make me feel that I belonged—under the assumption that Walter’s actions would benefit me monetarily.

Over the years, Walter mentored me and taught me his scheming tricks. I made more money working for Walter than I ever could have made alone— money I would desperately need later to pay lawyers to keep me alive.

3

Ned Bondman

I like Walter. He’s a nice man. We have fun together, make money together. He thinks up ideas like one he had in college.

I would pick up drunken girls and bring them back to our dorm room where I would have sex with them. After they passed out, Walter would climb into bed with them and have his turn. Then we would take pictures of all the girls naked on top of the bed with their legs spread apart. Onetime, we shaved a girl’s pussy before we took pictures. Now and then, I like to look through the pictures, especially the one of the shaved girl.

The business deals Walter creates are like the sex. We find people drunk with a lust for money and take it away from them—and most of them never realize what happened. Those few souls dumb enough to try to get their money back usually wound up suffering in some way or the other. Walter might have even had someone killed once, which is okay with me—as long as I don’t know about it.

We have a third partner, Jim der Bacon. Walter refers to him as “Jimmy Bucks” because if you give Jimmy the chance to make money with money, he does it in a straightforward, ruthless manner. You know, “no-holds-barred.”

Walter likes gold and so do I, although he leaves his gold laying around his apartment or office, while I wear gold watches, rings, and necklaces.

I personally have a thing for men in addition to women. I guess you’d call me bisexual. But I have no interest in Walter or Jimmy. Walter’s scaly and unattractive and Jimmy’s a hetero who only likes to see women naked—avoiding any physical contact.

4

Walter Funcker

Jimmy Bucks, Ned, and I have a symbiotic relationship. I want gold. Jimmy Bucks wants money. Ned wants respect.

I knew early on that Ned bribed several professors to get passing grades in order to maintain a 2.0 grade point average, a requirement to graduate. But I didn’t want his brain—I wanted his money.

 Ned doesn’t really have a job in our business other than to furnish the money. To give him a sense of participation and to feed his desire for respect, I always invite him to the business meetings and treat him as an equal. I even allow him to vote—because he always, one hundred percent always, votes the way I want him to.

I make it a point to not make friends. I find business easier that way—I don’t have to worry about alienating friends when I take the necessary actions to succeed, which often results in taking excess advantage of business associates, or anyone else if necessary.

 For a long time, I thought of Jimmy Bucks as the only person I liked. But Jimmy Bucks did not fit my criteria for the type of person to be in ultimate control. Once in a while he showed sensitivity and remorse for some of the people we used to make money. Nevertheless, I could usually rely on Jimmy Bucks to be ruthless and successful in his dealings with others. His greed, his lust for money, his desire to play the game far exceeded any weaknesses he possessed, except for some innate or subconscious desire to be subservient to me—not an isolated trait that many people I dealt with seemed to have.

 As a young man, Jimmy Bucks could be called handsome in a perverted sort of way.

However, by the time we took on the QuadFirm deal, pudginess and rotting teeth had taken over. After he found people avoiding his bad breath, he constantly sucked on mints. Perhaps if he had used sugar fee mints his teeth might not have looked the way they did.

 Like Ned, Jimmy Bucks hid his pudgy body by dressing well, always wearing a three-piece suit with a vest. I’ve noticed over the years that people who wear three-piece suits are generally fatter than those who don’t. They use the vest to hold in their stomachs instead of using a girdle. Any observant person can see what I mean.

 Jimmy Bucks and Ned have always been loyal to me, not because they are loyal types, but because of our symbiotic relationship. We are loyal to our group effort, but not to each other as individuals, which is why sooner or later I know that I’m going to have to take both of them out of the picture when our relationship bifurcates—what they know about me and my dealings could send me to prison for a long time. I monitor the situation to ensure that they are not consciously or unconsciously taking steps that may lead to harming me. I keep a careful eye out for people that I can use or bribe to spot any deviations in the loyalty of all my subordinates.

 Soon I’ll be meeting with Jimmy Bucks and Ned to discuss a new investment deal and to get some laughs from them on my plan to use Bro Beck to run the deal—a sort of revenge I have planned for him.

CHAPTER NINE

Several Years before the Deaths of Pei-Pei and Garcy

VENTURE CAPITAL SCHEMING

1

Jimmy Bucks

Ned Bondman and I sat in Walter Funcker’s San Francisco office waiting. Walter would soon present a new venture capital deal which I would implement and Ned would finance. Both Ned and I will verbally okay the deal with great enthusiasm—although Ned isn’t aware of much, he too seems to be aware that it’s best to placate Walter.

 I smiled at Ned as I sucked on a mint. He smiled back, but his eyes were as dull as a mud puddle so I couldn’t tell if the smile was real or planted. Although he had gained weight and lost hair over the years, he stressed absolute perfection in the clothes he wore. He dressed himself in a highly elaborate and showy manner, “to the nines” as my grandfather would have said. But his body was flabby as if his inner self needed to be protected by soft fat cells.

As we continued to wait for Walter, I killed time glancing around his office. Like his San Francisco apartment, the gaudy office contained a lot of junk. Much like a rat pack, he seemed to hoard everything he could.

The office walls were painted in some type of faux—years ago it would have been called a bad paint job. Walter filled the office with trinkets he bought at garage sales and with paintings he found in antique junk stores—one of Walter’s few hobbies. The number of items made of gold reflected his wealth. His gold ranged from the large—a gold-plated stature of Genghis Khan—to the small—a solid gold golf ball, though he never actually hit a golf ball, let alone played golf.

 Walter at fifty-three still resembled a fish out of water. Toothpick skinny as if he didn’t eat, his small-boned body remained strong and lethal. Because of his scales, he seldom wore the same clothes more than once as some of the scales would flake off and become attached to the inside of his clothes which would irritate his skin if he wore them twice, even after being washed or dry-cleaned. Consequently, Walter spent a lot of money on clothes that looked cheap—because they were cheap.

Walter entered the office wearing a yellow shirt with gold and green polyester pants, which crept up to his calves as he sat. I could see the top of his white socks and scabby, hairy legs creeping down from his pants.

 Walter sat slumped in his high-backed, gold leather chair and scratched his face while he said, “Jimmy Bucks, Ned. I’ve got the perfect deal. Small investment, great return. An easy take-over following completion of the deal.

“There’s one main partner, Lon Rozzo, who’s kind of stupid. The guy’s English is pathetic. He uses double negatives and says things like me and him went to the store. There are a couple of minority partners, who aren’t as dumb, but they’re clueless since none of them have participated in a venture capital deal before. They are ripe for ego boosting. We’ll promise to put one of them in charge once we dump Rozzo.”

 “What type business are we talking here, Walter?” Ned asked as his lips tried to curl into a smile, but didn’t quite make it.

 “Lon is a man after our own heart, his only redeeming value. He stole several ideas invented by others and patented them,” Walter said as he picked more scratchings off his face. “This may seem a bit strange. He holds a patent for the Pooh Desk™.”

 “What the hell is a Pooh Desk™?” I asked.

 “It’s a desk for bathrooms,” Walter said, his lips forming a tight smile as if he suppressed an outright laugh. “Some guy named Winifred Pooh designed it in 1875, but it never got patented or marketed. He apparently thought the idea up while reading a Sears Catalogue in his outhouse. He wanted to mark the items of interest with a quill pen, but wasn’t able to arrange the Catalogue, quill-pin-inkwell, and his arm to comfortably do so.

 “He designed this horseshoe shaped desk that he could pull down around him once he sat down. The horseshoe shape lets the desk work for both right-handers and left-handers—the writing elbow rests on the appropriate side of the horseshoe shaped desk to support the arm of the writing hand, the other hand free to turn Catalogue pages.

“He placed an ink holder and quill penholder in a pull-down box on one of the inside walls of the outhouse, and he installed a shelf on the opposite wall for storing the Catalogue. He added a lift-up board, with a one-inch border near the bottom, to provide a means for reading the Catalogue in an upright position and to reduce the back pain and bad posture he got when he bent over to read the Catalogue.”

 “That doesn’t sound like something usable today,” I said, choosing my words carefully, not wanting to appear to be challenging Walter.

“Well, Lon modernized the concept for today’s environment and oversaw the marketing plans that brought it to market,” Walter continued.

 “Lon’s marketing staff set a goal for the Pooh Desk™ to become a bathroom standard. The company developed Pooh Desks specifically for men, called the Big Pooh Desk™, and for women, called the Little Pooh Desk™. The women’s version includes a mirror for working on makeup while sitting on the toilet. Men, who apparently spend more time in the bathroom than women, are able to use the Big Pooh Desk™ to store copies of old sport pages, books, writing materials, and other items of interest.”

“Walter, this sounds too absurd to be viable,” I said, again in a non-challenging way.

“It’s not,” Walter said. “Initial sales and acceptance are already occurring in the market.”

“Yeah, I used one of those in a bathroom stall at O’Hare Airport in Chicago,” Ned said surprising me that he could connect what Walter said to something he actually saw. “I got so comfortable using the Pooh Desk™ that I lost track of time and missed my flight,” sounding more like Ned.

“Listen to this write-up,” Walter said ignoring as usual any comments Ned made.

“The Ultimate Pooh Desk™ under development will have a built-in computer. Pooers will be able to access the Internet or write memos, work on spreadsheets, or sales presentations—all while taking their morning poo. Touting increased productivity in the home work environment is one of the company’s marketing strategies. A one-page advertisement suggests the Pooh Desk™ will increase the nation’s GNP as formerly wasted time becomes a vehicle for success. In addition, it will increase the nation’s GNH (Gross National Happiness) as people spend more time in the Pooh.”

“That’s gross,” Ned joked, smiling as if he himself had increased his own gross happiness.

“They actually have statistical surveys to back this up,” Walter said, then continued reading.

“Another advertisement suggests that women will become more beautiful as they use the Pooh Desk™ to poo and primp at the same time. The company signed a co-marketing plan with the Association of Reconstructive Surgeons aimed at making women realize the need for plastic surgery based on what they see daily in their Pooh Mirror™. ‘You can fool God, but you can’t fool a women looking at herself while she poos!’ is one of the company’s marketing gems.”

 “What’s next?” I asked as I added my own joke. “The Pooh Desk Fart Disintegrator?”

“Good idea Jimmy, we’ll investigate that idea,” Walter said sounding serious.

 Walter continued reading. “The physical evolution of the Pooh Desk™ is unlimited. It can evolve over the years into a masterful complexity of variable options much like what has been accomplished for the personal computer. Technological advancements are being made towards the development of the Pooh Seat, which will supplement the Pooh Desk™. Tiny electrical implants, similar to an electric blanket, will provide a vehicle for controlled warmth keeping each buttock warm and cozy during Winter Pooh Time. The same unit will cool the seat during Summer Pooh Time.

“Another proposed advancement will be a toilet seat lid that will provide a warm or cool back massage before or after wiping. The combined toilet apparatus will be designed to help the user sit up straight resulting in a side benefit of correct posture. The Pooh Desk™ will no longer be horseshoe shaped, but will have pull down armrests from the back. A massage function will be added to the Pooh Seat enabling everyone poohing to experience the relaxing benefits provided by the Pooh Lid and the Pooh Seat while working at the Pooh Desk™.

“A built in coffee maker and micro-refrigerator for cream, to be installed below the Pooh Desk™, are also being developed under the motto, ‘You never have to leave the Pooh.’”

“I’ve heard enough,” I said no longer treading carefully. “Calling the idea ridiculous would be an understatement. I’ll stick with absurd. Why are we investing in something so off-the-wall?”

“Rozzo’s at that age where he wants cash now. He wants to spend it while he’s alive. He’s willing to give us a good deal with no downside risk. We’re going to invest five million tops with a fifty million dollar return once we do the IPO and dump the company on the public—after we transfer the major money making patents to some of our shell corporations. We’ll have the fifty million and still have the royalties—and Rozzo and the stockholders, of course, will get the usual nothing.”

 “Walter, you fucker! How’d you find this deal, anyway?” I asked now convinced. My thin lips were close to cracking a smile, my unexercised arms were crossed in comfort across the vest of my three-piece suit. I popped another mint into my mouth as a reward for my patience.

 “Remember Vincent Fellure, the son of Peter Fellure, that famous management theory guru?”

 “Yeah,” Ned and I said simultaneously as we eyed at each other with brows raised.

 “Isn’t Vincent kind of retarded and hung-up about his father?” Ned asked, retarded being an ironic question coming from Ned.

 “Yeah, he is,” Walter said. “He’s tried to get me to do a deal with him for years, but he never brought me anything worthwhile, yet alone one with such good potential. The players are all losers like Rozzo, and they won’t get anything out of the deal either. We’re going to have a lot of fun with this deal.”

 Ned’s lips made that extra effort, and his mouth turned into a smile. I cracked my own smile and raised my eyes in anticipation as I uncrossed my arms and leaned forward.

 “Who’s going to run the deal?” I asked.

“Bro Beck. We’ll set him up as a buffer so that he takes the brunt of any problems—and this time he won’t get shit either. I’ve wanted to stiff him for a longtime.” Walter smiled, and Ned and I laughed, both us in favor of Bro’s long-deserved comeuppance.

“I’m in,” Ned and I both said as we high-fived each other without getting out of our chairs.

I learned over the years that Walter never regrets anything that he says or does. But if he knew what would happen to him, he might regret his love for gold—especially gold bars.

2

Walter

I got rid of Lon Rozzo rather quickly. I called Jimmy Bucks, Ned Bondman, Vincent Fellure, and Bro Beck together for a meeting so we could have some fun firing him over the speaker phone so everyone could hear Rozzo’s response.

 “Lon,” I said over the phone. “Things are not working out with you from our side. We’re going to cut you out of the deal. My lawyers say that this action is legally supportable. I suggest you accept this action and move on.”

 “Lawyers?” Lon replied in a loud, aggressive tone. “You want lawyers? I’ll give you lawyers!”

Lon hung up before I could say anything else. We laughed at Lon’s abruptness and false threat, except for Vincent, apparently clueless why we were doing this.

 “But who’s going to run the company?” Vincent asked causing everyone to snicker.

 Vincent shouldn’t have been concerned. We had promised him a ten percent stock share, he served on the board of directors, and so far he had acted submissive in following my directions. And I knew that he felt his dad would be proud that he brought an acceptable deal to me—even though he didn’t fully understand how this deal, or any deal, worked.

 “We’re going to put Bobbi Sue Wet in charge for now,” I said as I smiled at Ned. “The employees know Bobbi Sue. Even though she’s a goddamn lesbian, she’ll be safer than bringing someone in from the outside. After Lon’s termination settles down, we’ll dump her and bring in Bro, probably in a couple of months.”

 “Great,” Bro said, who I knew clearly understood the deal except for my plan to stiff him. “The other partners and the staff? Can we trust them? Are they any good?”

 “Not really,” I replied. “And they’re too damn expensive. They go as soon as we can cut them. We get Bro in there before we take the company public. His job will be to get rid of the high-paid staff and replace them with people who have lower salaries. This will increase profits dramatically. With the increased profit, we’ll restate past earnings based on reduced salaries, give the market some ‘good’ bullshit pro forma financial statements, go public, sell our stock, and cash out. After that, as usual, fuck the future results of the company’s finances.”

“Vincent,” I said before everyone left, “Wait out front, I want to talk to you.”

Bro left and Vincent waited outside while I called Bobbi Sue, as Jimmy Bucks and Ned waited in anticipation.

 “Bobbi Sue,” I said on the speakerphone, again so the others could hear. After explaining Lon’s termination I said, “We’d like you to run the show now that Lon’s gone.”

 “Yes, Walter, you’ve made the right choice. I look forward to implementing that upside-down organization chart I showed the board at the last meeting,” Bobbi Sue said.

 I quickly switched off the speakerphone. Jimmy Bucks and Ned were suppressing giggles, which turned immediately to laughter the moment I switched off the speaker.

 “Shut up, you guys,” I whispered with my hand over the phone as I tried to suppress my own laughter.

 “Of course, that’s why we thought you should get the chance to run the company,” I said as I played with the phone cord as if it were my penis. “Where did you get that idea anyway? The CEO at the bottom of the organization chart instead of the top—it’s brilliant having the CEO report to the employees.”

 “Well, I admit that I first got the idea from Vincent Fellure, but I’m the one who developed the organization chart, and, of course, I’m the one who’s going to make it work,” Bobbi Sue replied.

 Stealing the idea from Vincent almost made me think that she was more capable than I had previously thought, but remembering that she had a perspiration problem soon changed my mind. Instead, I imagined her sitting in her chair, placing both hands behind her head and leaning back like she always did. I felt sorry for any of her staff that might be in the room—having to avoid staring at those sweat-laced, yellowed armpits of one of the white shirts she always wore.

 “Bobbi Sue, in addition to a deferred salary increase, we’re going to give you another $1,000,000 in stock so you will know how much we value you.” Jimmy Bucks and Ned burst out laughing again, but I knew they would. My hand already covered the phone.

 “Thank you, you won’t regret it,” Bobbi Sue said and hung up.

 Of course Bobbi Sue would wonder what happened when the board approved an additional $100,000 investment by us in the company for enough stock to dilute Bobbi Sue’s stock to some worthless amount, like we already planned to do to Bro, well aware that we had to be more careful with Bro than with Vincent. Nobody would make money out of this deal except for me, Jimmy Bucks, and Ned, except for the small amount Vincent would get—only because his dad Peter still held some dangerous cards he could use against me. Of course, that is the way it is when you deal in the universe of venture capital.

“Thank God for the idiots in the business world,” I said to Jimmy Bucks and Ned who nodded agreement, smiles on their faces, Ned the epitome of the idiot splashed across his face.

“But I don’t understand,” Vincent said after the others left the room, and he came back in. “Isn’t the idea to make a fair return on our investment over a reasonable time period, say three to five years?”

 “Jesus Christ,” I said, my eyes rolling upward into my head in exasperation. “Did your father teach you that shit?”

 “Well, yeah, but . . .”

 “But? The only butt you need to worry about is your own by keeping everyone else off it.

“You think that we’re applying sound financial and economic principles here? Fuck, Vincent. You’re either stupid, naïve, or both. The idea is to take other people’s money and stick it in our pockets. ‘Our pockets’ might not include yours if you don’t get a hold of yourself and play the game the way it’s supposed to be played.”

 Vincent tried to speak again, “My father . . .” but I interrupted.

 “Fuck your father and his faux intellectual business bull-shit. We’re here to make money, not run a business. In early—out quick. That’s how we make money—with little time or energy expended. No ulcers. We don’t worry because we pay lawyers to clean up the mess. What we do isn’t much different from what those guys at Enron did. The difference being they got caught, we won’t.”

 “Frankly, you sound like you want to rape everyone,” Vincent said with his head bent down as if he were in supplication to his king.

 “I do,” I replied. “People beg us for money, and we give it to them under restrictive circumstances that ultimately give us control. We subvert them while stripping money from the company, which we use to make more money elsewhere. Christ, where do you think investment money comes from—heaven? No, it comes from hell, and I’m sure you’ve heard ‘the road to hell is paved with gold.

“You have artificial credibility because of your dad, but his game is not our game. We operate in the real world; he operates in the academic world. There’s nothing theoretical in what we do. Get on board or get the fuck out.”

 “Help me out here, Walter,” Vincent said as he began to test my patience. “What do you really want? I mean the desire for the gold thing has its historical ramifications, but how could it be your main motivator for being in business?”

 “Vincent, see this gold bar I use as a paperweight?”

 “Yeah, it even seems real.”

 “Vincent, goddamn it, it is real. Touch it, feel it. Notice how smooth it is, how fine it feels. You can even hear gold—the sound of gold coins jingling in your pocket, a sweet sound compared to loose, clinky sounding change or quiet greenbacks. Lift it up with one hand. Do you feel the balance in the weight of the bar? It’s as if it carries the weight of the world. Nothing looks nicer, feels nicer, smells nicer, or sounds nicer than gold. Once you recognize that, you’ll see one of the true purposes of having money—getting more gold in your own hands.”

“Isn’t possessing physical gold, versus what it could buy, meaningless?” Vincent said not giving up. “The purpose in life is to create souls, not acquire gold or wealth. I think of wealth as having an increased ability to consume—and gold isn’t consumed, it’s stored. I could understand a little if you adorned yourself in gold, giving gold a useful presence. That’s why I like the gold statues you have. Stacks of gold bars have nothing to do with consumption—it’s more like hoarding than anything.”

 “Many people, Vincent, probably yourself included, fixate on TV. They watch meaningless dribble. I’d rather relax by watching gold bars as I plan potential deals and reminisce about past deals. The bigger the gold bars, the better my imagination. That’s how I get my entertainment—the interaction and sophistication of siphoning off the rewards of other people’s ideas.

 “Having objects of wealth, like a mansion, a Rolls-Royce, or designer clothes, hold no interest for me. They are what I call visual wealth—wealth that’s defined by what others see. You can’t see or touch money in the bank. Of course, if you held the actual greenbacks you could, however storage becomes a problem. Do you realize how much more space a million dollars in $100 bills takes compared to a million dollars in gold?”

 “I find it nice to have money in the bank,” Vincent said as he continued to irritate me by not listening.

 “Christ, Vincent, there’s no thrill in a bank statement, no matter how much money that statement shows.”

“Do you ever think that maybe there’s something wrong with you?” Vincent said daring to challenge me, now putting himself at great risk. “You don’t seem to have any moral purpose or reason for what you do. The point is not to win against the human race, but to join it. Why not stop with the gold you’ve already accumulated, instead of investing money and time to get more at the expense of others?”

 “Vincent, you’re a poor listener, and you’re repeating yourself. It’s fucking with others that I enjoy most—gold represents my success. I learned early on to fuck with people who dared call me names behind my back. I’m like a fish out of water—a man-eating shark on the attack.”

 “Outside your lust for gold and your desire to attack everyone,” Vincent said, “don’t you want your life to have meaning or is your life to be pornographic with no redeeming value?”

 “That’s why I’m Walter and you’re not—I don’t give a shit about morals or what other people think. It’s all about entertaining my own mind where there can be no wrong.

“Vincent, you are one hopeless mother,” I said as I stood and left the room, leaving Vincent to his own mental meanderings. *I’ve got to somehow get Vincent out of the deal earlier than planned. Maybe I should just smack him down by having him pushed off a tall building.*

CHAPTER TEN

Soon after the Deaths of Pei-Pei, Garcy and Lon

THE REACTIONS TO THE DEATHS OF LON, PEI-PEI, AND GARCY

1

The Death of Lon

Walter Funcker

*Good riddance. Now maybe we can get rid of that damn lawsuit.*

“Hi, Jimmy Bucks,” I said into the phone, a big smile on my face. “That takes care of the lawsuit. These little guys never win, do they, Jimmy?”

“They sure don’t,” Jimmy replied. “A heart attack certainly saves us a lot of trouble.

James der Bacon

*Well that will sure make things easier, if it was a heart attack—you never know with Walter. Maybe Walter can also get rid of that Tony fuck—and I don’t really care how he does it.*

Ned Bondman

*Gee, he was such a hunk. His death really makes me sad.*

Bro Beck

*Totally unexpected! I can’t decide whether that’s good or bad. I hope Leticia is okay.*

Vincent Fellure

*Is Walter behind this? After that last conversation with him, I suspect he’s capable of anything.*

Leticia Trechetoria

*I’ll miss Lon. Not the best lover, but he was good to me. I need to talk to Tony. Reaffirm that we, I mean I, still need his help with the lawsuit.*

Bruce Verbose

*Shit my legal fees! This could cost me millions of dollars.*

“Goddamn it,” I yelled at the top of my lungs as I threw my desk stapler and my paperweight against the wall, then yelled for my secretary.

“Sue, get your ass in here, we need to talk some strategy.”

When Sue came in she said, “Relax, Bruce. Call Lon’s wife and convince her to continue with the suit.”

I immediately reached for the phone.

Tony

*Does Leticia want me to continue with the investigation?*

2

The Deaths of Pei-Pei and Garcy

Walter

*Who gives a fuck?*

Jimmy

*That sucks.*

Ned

*Damn, I really liked those two. They were both cute in their own way.*

Bro

*Two more fags scraped from the earth. God’s punishment is never nice.*

Vincent

*Lon, Pei-Pei, and Garcy? Did they piss off Walter? Do I need to be extra careful?*

Leticia

*It’s hard to feel sorry for people who weren’t kind to me.*

Tony

What would the far right Christians think—the deaths justified and part of God’s will and vengeance? Maybe that’s why Christians claim to be God-fearing—afraid of what God might do to them in the way of harm. I thought that was the devil’s job.

This really sets me back. Who else can I get to testify? Every time I try to reach Jim der Bacon, he manages to avoid me. I need to know who’s in the loop and who’s not.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A Few Months Ago, Before the Deaths of Pei-Pei,

and Garcy, Along with a Flash to the Past

STUD SERVICE AT THE SILVER PESO

Tony

At south end of Larkspur’s two-block downtown sits the Blue Rock Inn, where I had attended my high school reunion several weeks ago. The Blue Rock is a French restaurant with a separated bar. At the north end of downtown lies the Silver Peso, which is my favorite drinking hole in Marin County. Larkspur sits at the foot of Mt. Tamalpais, a 2200 foot mountain north of the Golden Gate Bridge. From the top of the mountain, you get a circular vista of the San Francisco Bay and the Pacific Ocean south towards Pacifica and North towards Bolinas.

Although I have tipped a few down the street at the Blue Rock, I’ve spent and still spend most of my drinking time at the Silver Peso. Many folks think the Peso is a dive—it isn’t. Yeah, it looks like a place for drunks or derelicts, but we locals refer to it as the “social club.” The Peso is the only place that many of us really fit in.

 When you walk through the front door of the Peso, the first thing you notice is the bar which was built in a square and looks like an antique from the 1940s. To the right side of the entrance there is a shuffle-board of the same vintage. To the left side of the entrance is an old jukebox, one that often blurts out such old songs as “Blue Skies, Nothing But Blue Skies” and “Stardust Memories,” both sung by Willie Nelson, which adds to the 1940s atmosphere.

 Behind the bar in the back are two pool tables so crammed together that when people sit at the bar, they need to move aside so pool players can shoot from the bar side of one of the pool tables. The other ends of the pool tables are so close to the wall that the players have to lift the pool cue up to a forty-five degree angle to shoot. No one bitches because everyone is there for the fun and the interaction, not the results of the games played—except for those games of life played after hours.

 Behind the pool tables, there is a storage room and next to it are the bathrooms and a rear door. The storage room and bathrooms are favorite places the customers retreat to snort cocaine. Outside the rear door is where they retreat to share a joint.

 Inside the bar area, the shelves are lined with booze, pickled eggs, and jars filled with cheap, dried sausage and dried beef sticks. There is also a rotating hot dog unit, mustard and mayonnaise jars, and bottles of catsup. The bar itself is surrounded by no less than forty black vinyl, rotating bar stools, many of them ripped open from years of use.

The Peso is usually filled with a mix of blue-collar workers, the unemployed and unemployable, doctors, lawyers, nurses, and representatives of all the professions for people who live in Marin and work in San Francisco.

 In the evening, the customers vary from beaten-down drunks, who’ve been there since the bar opened at six a.m., to men dressed in suits and women dressed in office work clothes, both who came to the bar right from work. More casually dressed customers, some in decent clothes, some in worn Levis, represent those who’ve gone home after work and changed clothes.

 The customers all have several things in common: they like to drink, snort coke, smoke pot and party till they drop—a party that often continues at someone’s house after the bar closes. Many of these parties are held at houses with hot tubs, so another thing the customers have in common is getting naked in hot tubs—a famous Marin social activity, even for those Marinites who do not party quite so hard as the Peso crowd.

By contrast, the Blue Rock Inn is a place you take a date to where you can wine and dine them, then take her home for a night cap and sex. At the Peso, you picked somebody up, snorted cocaine in the back room or in your car in the parking lot. Either way, you eventually would wind up having sex in her car or yours, then smoke a joint before going back into the Peso to drink more.

I always found the Blue Rock Inn an attractive place to visit, but it never grabbed me in the way that said, “This is my favorite place to be.” On the other hand, the Silver Peso, on my first visit, immediately pulled me through the door captivating me in a sordid atmosphere of people—an eclectic mix of disparate souls all pulled together by atmosphere, booze, and recreational drugs with willing members of the opposite sex.

Years ago, I noticed Leticia’s eighth-grade girlfriend Stephanie in the bar. She had filled out nicely since high school, no longer the nerdy girl I used to know. Like all the times I’ve seen her at the Peso since then, she wore a wig and dressed as if she were planning to attend a Halloween party; or as if she didn’t want me to know who she was—but over the years it was always obvious to me that it was Stephanie.

We’ve screwed every couple of years over the past decade or so. Like before, after some small talk, we would wind up in the parking lot, having sex in my car or hers—then she would immediately split without a word. After sex with her, I always felt used, but I wasn’t sure why. Much later, I found she had literally used me for stud service.

A few months ago, I sat at the bar as Stephanie entered. Undisguised, this time she wasted no time in sitting down beside me. She ordered a coke—without alcohol—and said, “Tony. My name is Stephanie.” I could see tears forming in her already red eyes. “We went to grammar school and high school together.”

 She seemed surprised as I said, “Of course I know you Stephanie. Christ, we’ve got it on three or four times in the parking lot—how could I forget you?”

 “I….I didn’t think you knew it was me out in the parking lot,” she said.

 “Well, I did and I do, even though you always seemed to think it was Halloween.”

 “I’ve been sick,” she said. “I’m having trouble financially. I need your help.”

She bent her head down so low as she spoke that her lips almost touched the bar. I could barely hear her. It took a few moments for me to realize what she said, and it took a couple of minutes before I replied as I wondered why she would hit me of all people up for money.

 “Shit,” I said, “I don’t have any money. I spend it as fast as I make it. I’m sorry. I don’t have any way to help you.” *Or reason to.*

 Then she laid it on me, her tears now streaming like a cascading waterfall down her soft, white cheeks. Sick or not, she remained attractive to me in a surprisingly sympathetic way—until she shocked me with her words.

 “I have four children,” she said. “You’re the father of all of them. You’ve got to help us!”

 I wanted to smash my head against the bar. I managed to not fall off the seat while I shouted to the bartender, “Chris, give me a triple shot!

 “That can’t be, Stephanie. Why would you even think I’m the father?” I said thinking the disguise thing must be part of some mental problems she’s always had that are now erupting like a dormant volcano come to life—with me standing in the way of the lava flow.

 “You’re the only one I’ve ever had sex with. I was a virgin the first time.”

 *Oh that’s a good one—trying to lay the* *virgin guilt trip on me!*

“That’s bullshit, and you know it,” I said. “Even if it were true, I don’t have the money. That’s hardly anything that I’d take for the truth, anyway.”

 I forgot about the drink I’d ordered and turned away, got off the bar stool, and headed out the front door before she could respond.

 *What’s wrong with this world anyway? Too many delusional people playing out their fantasies, too many people out to get a buck from the other guy. Shit, why can’t people take care of themselves and leave other people alone? Or at least leave me the alone!*

*Fucking Stephanie! I should have known she’d be trouble.*

2

Stephanie

Several years after high school, my body transformed itself into a woman with a good figure.

In high school after Tony’s injury, he became an all-around screw up. But even then I knew that he had good genes. He was handsome and smart, the perfect person to father the perfect children—but not the perfect husband, nor the perfect father.

Years later, I decided that Tony would become the father of my children—he just wouldn’t know it. I had sex with him and got pregnant. I did this four times over a lengthily period. After the fourth child, I moved us from Marin County north to the city of Santa Rosa, getting as far away from Tony as I could so he wouldn’t find out about the children I was unwilling to share.

We lived a happy life until I got sick with cancer. I didn’t have the money to cover my health expenses and provide the kids a good home. I decided to confront Tony and ask him for financial help, but he didn’t believe the kids were his. Of course, I couldn’t really blame him for his reaction.

But for the children’s sake, the only thing I could think to do was sue Tony for back and current child support. I’m sure he will be surprised when his DNA matches that of our children—but that’s what happens to people who are oblivious about their actions.

As far as the children are concerned, their father died a long time ago. I’m going to try and keep it that way, but I’m going to have to take the chance that they don’t find out because I’ve sued Tony. I just don’t know what else I can do to provide for them.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Five Years After High School: Bro in College, then the Army

THE SERGEANT

Peter Fellure

Bro Beck began blackmailing me over four years ago. I saw Bro as nothing but a thief. No matter what you called it, blackmail was theft by non-physical means.

I did pretty well in keeping my inner feelings quiet. The continued sex with Leticia made it all bearable, yet inside my fury continued to grow. I wanted Leticia to myself. And I wanted Bro out of the picture—preferably dead!

Bro promised to end the blackmail after he graduated from college; but now he expected, no demanded that I put him through graduate-school.

*Fat chance, mother-fucker!*

As a Colonel in the army reserves, I knew that the United States planned to continue the war in Vietnam, eventually resulting in my reserve battalion joining the conflict. We were going to continue to fight the communists no matter what the politicians told us. If I could get Bro to join the reserves by telling him he would be able to avoid going to Vietnam, when my company was transferred to Vietnam, there would be a good chance he would wind up somewhere in a jungle where the communists—or one of his own men—might kill him.

Bro took my advice, and was accepted for officer’s training. After I was activated and placed in charge of a battalion, I used my rank to get him transferred to my battalion where I assigned the new Second Lieutenant Beck to Company A’s 2nd Platoon. The only drawback to this assignment was that the platoon suffered no deaths in spite of its extensive combat success—although severe wounds sent several soldiers back to the states.

The platoon’s success could be attributed to the Platoon Sergeant’s leadership, combat expertise, and bravado. By the time Beck arrived, the Platoon Sergeant had earned a Silver Star and two Purple Hearts.

The sergeant, however, liked to scheme. He made money by loaning it to everyone in the company who needed it—at an exorbitant rate, but one fair to those who risked their lives daily. He also bought booze and cigarettes from GIs who didn’t drink or smoke and resold them on the black market. To a limited extent, officers, including me, participated in the sergeant’s schemes. He even helped me buy a solid gold bar which would be worth twice what I paid for it back home. Like all wars, they seemed to create a bent morality for everyone.

But now the stakes were higher—no longer about money, but life and death. The sergeant’s scheming became more about staying alive and keeping others alive, the only real commodity worth anything in the jungle.

Beck arrived and was assigned to the 2nd Platoon the same day the battalion assaulted a knoll heavily infected by the enemy.

After the 1st Platoon suffered major casualties, which included the death of the 1st Platoon Lieutenant, I ordered the company commander to have the 2nd Platoon take out a machine-gun bunker because the sergeant would increase the chance of the platoon’s success—and perhaps the enemy would kill the inexperienced Beck, or at least maim him.

However, the idiot Beck ordered the platoon to take out the machine-gun in a frontal assault, instead of sneaking up quietly in a flanking maneuver.

*“Sir,” the sergeant yelled to Second Lieutenant Beck over the noise of the machine-gun fire. “Frontal assaults are for the enemy. It’s more strategic to feint a frontal attack while flanking the enemy on both sides.”*

*“No, Sergeant,” Beck said. “That’s wrong. History shows that an aggressive up the middle attack puts fear into the enemy, puts them in to a sloppy retreat, exposes them as they leave their cover, letting us pick them off one at a time.*

*“Sergeant,” Beck added, “If I want advice, I’ll ask for it. In the meantime, don’t undermine my authority in front of the men.”*

During the frontal assault, the first two men out, a young Hispanic kid and an older black man, made it fifty yards before falling down wounded.

The sergeant stood thirty yards to Beck’s left. I had a straight-line view from the sergeant’s position to where Beck cowered behind several trees, protected from the enemy, but with his body exposed to the sergeant.

I watched in glee as the sergeant turned his rifle towards Beck and fired one shot which struck Beck in the same knee he injured playing high school football.

The sergeant then flung himself into the fray reaching the two wounded men in what seemed like seconds, but could have been an eternity. He dragged the older soldier towards safety as the machine-gun raked the spot they had just vacated. He scurried back, grabbed the young kid and pulled him down the hill to safety, again taking fire.

*The sergeant told Corporal Jones, “I’m going in from the left flank. You take two men to the right. In exactly ten minutes, fire ten yards in front of the machine-gun and lob grenades as close to that spot as possible. Then keep them distracted by continuing to fire while I hit them from the left.”*

The sergeant slowly crawled back into the thick brush. Minutes later, rifle fire came from the right, followed by grenades. The machine-gun fire moved towards the area where the grenades hit. Suddenly, the sergeant stood and made one giant leap forward as he tossed a grenade and dove as bullets penetrated the space he’d just left. The sergeant lived, but the enemy did not.

I collapsed down into my folding chair, excited that the sergeant successfully took out the machine-gun and elated that he’d shot Beck. When I asked the sergeant about his heroics, he shrugged out, “the two wounded guys and the pinned-down men all owed me money.” At the time, I didn’t address the fact that he’d shot Beck.

It disappointed me that the sergeant hadn’t fired a fatal shot at Beck. Even though the sergeant killed professionally, I guessed, incorrectly, that he was not capable of murder, that he lived by some moral code beyond his scheming heart.

 In spite of the sergeant’s cavalier attitude, I knew that I had seen an act of heroism. Instead of court-martialing the sergeant for shooting Second Lieutenant Beck, I recommended the sergeant for the Medal of Honor, which he received. Ironically, Beck concurred with my decision, but only after I recommended him for the Purple Heart and all members of the 2nd Platoon citations for bravery, including Beck, who did nothing to deserve either award.

The Army brass quickly approved the medals and citations and immediately removed the sergeant from combat—the brass preferred live heroes to dead ones.

 Our part in the war ended with all three of us returning to civilian life in the states—however, our combat would continue. The sergeant went back to his life, I went back to writing books on management, and Beck went to graduate school with me paying his way—the mother-fucker alive and finding new ways to blackmail me. If I wanted Beck dead, I needed to kill him myself—or shut him up some other way.

 *I could cut out his tongue. Maybe cut off his balls and stuff them down his throat choking him to death. I could bash his head in with that gold bar Walter got me. I could push him off a tall building or maybe take a walk with him on the Golden Gate Bridge and push him off the bridge, faking a suicide.*

 *It’s probably impossible to do, but it might be fun to drop a safe on his head, smash him to pieces like he’s tried to do to my life. Or perhaps I could somehow torture him to death, watching with joy as he suffered the consequences of his blackmail scheme. But one thing for sure, I didn’t want to eliminate Beck too soon. I’d bide my time. No matter how long it took, I would have my revenge against Beck.*

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Soon After the Deaths of Pei-Pei,

Garcy, and Lon

THE LAWYER FEEDING FRENZY BEGINS

1

Tony

On my way to the lawsuit conference to mediate the lawsuit, I find myself again stuck in traffic. I put my emergency flashers on to get the driver behind me to back off. She flips me off and keeps on tailgating—actually moving closer.

I slam on my brakes hard with my left foot and accelerate forward with my right foot. My windows are down—I hear the tires and smell the burning rubber as she reacts.

She flips me off again, but now keeps a proper distance between her car and mine. I politely wave and she leans on her horn. Many of the other drivers join in the honking, as if we’re in a tunnel, not on a freeway.

Hell, I even lean on my horn and join the others in the psychological release the honking brings. The woman behind me laughs, gets into the spirit. She waves at me, and I give her the finger back. We blow on our horns—both of us laughing at the insanity.

After a puff and a swig of vodka, my mind wanders to the structural differences that represent the word God and the word devil. The word God starts with a capital, but not the word devil. No article proceeds God, while devil requires the article “the” before it. I wonder if we are being subtly programmed by these structural differences, and if so by which entity and for what purpose? Which is the bad entity: God or the devil? Perhaps God is the devil in disguise while God is metamorphically trapped in the devil’s aura.

\* \* \*

I arrive at the building in Redwood City for the lawsuit conference taking place in Bruce Verbose’s office. The building is monstrous and over-architected, and the parking lot is full of Mercedes, Jaguars and BMWs—another building full of overpaid lawyers.

Although I’m thirty minutes late, I assume I’m the first to arrive because lawyers are never on time—they like to keep people waiting, and they had to drive in the traffic also. I have time, so I reach into the glove compartment for my second little bottle of the day, drink it quickly, and have another puff. *Ah, that’s better—let me at those mothers! Of course, I’m only here to listen.*

2

The First Lawyer Feeding Frenzy

Everyone arrived on time for the first lawsuit conference except Tony. Walter, Jimmy, and Ned sat at one end of the conference table. Bobbi Sue Wet, Vincent, and Bro huddled to their right.

At the other end of the table sat Leticia, a chair beside her left empty for Tony. In the center of the table, on one-side, Bruce sat alone. Corporate lawyers representing QuadFirm filled the other side. The individual defendants’ personal attorneys filled the chairs located behind the corporate lawyers. None of the personal attorneys appeared too happy with the seating arrangements.

There were more attorneys in the room than clients. The way Lon planned, the lawyer feeding frenzy would begin as each attorney worked to maximize legal fees, except for Leticia’s liability insurance company’s lawyer—only there because of the defamation complaint filed against Lon—sitting passively behind her, intent on keeping Verbose’s legal fees to a minimum.

Tony could smell the greed and arrogance as he slipped into the room. Verbose was already speaking. Some people in the room listened, but most ignored Verbose as they whispered to one another, thumbed through papers in front of them, or drew doodles on their notepads.

The personal attorneys in be back all sat motionless and upright like tin soldiers, knees crossed lady style.

“My client may be dead, but the case isn’t,” Bruce said as the loudness of his voice reverberated throughout the room causing more than one lawyer to put index fingers into ears. “You guys can put up ten million now to settle the suit, thirty million to settle later, or wait for the trial and risk the hundred million my client has sued for. The grieving widow says that she needs the money now, not later, and she will accept less than I’ve recommended to her. Of course, I’m legally required to present this offer, even though I disagree with her decision since she will eventually win the lawsuit because of her strong case and all the defendants being such dicks.”

All the defendants except Bobbi Sue Wet ignored being called a dick. She busied herself taking off her jacket, raising her arms, and placing her hands behind her head—yellowed armpits facing down the opposition, pointed directly at Bruce.

Bruce used his loudness as if he acted out a script written for the sole purpose of drawing attention to himself as he impressed the others with his purposely distorted viewpoints. His act had other unattractive aspects: He proclaimed his opinions arrogantly. He seldom expressed anything worthwhile, but he used an overtone as he spoke, one designed to sound strong and positive as if his opinions were actually facts. Given his oppressive and overbearing style, no one paid attention to anything that he said, even when they listened—except for the requested settlement amount, when ears perked, mouths gasped, and Walter farted.

Bruce talked with his hands, constantly knocking his glasses off his face. Everyone thought him clumsy. Weeks later, they would learn differently when the police would find a half-drunken pint of 100 proof Rumplemitz schnapps inside his inner suit jacket pocket. In his briefcase, they would find two unopened bottles and a nudie magazine containing images of naked, prepubescent girls.

A couple of the personal lawyers attempted to speak, but Bruce cut them off; then continued on and on. Like a new born chicken, Bruce peeped constantly without regard for the others. The corporate and personal attorneys attempted kept asking questions, but no one heard the questions. The massive sound waves generated by Verbose’s voice kept most questions from reaching his ears or the ears of others. When the few waves that got through did reach his ears, Bruce ignored the questions.

Walter Funcker whispered to Ned Bondman, “What an asshole. I wonder if he’s for hire. Maybe we could buy him off.”

“Or shoot the mother,” Ned whispered back. Walter agreed with that as a possible alternative.

Jimmy couldn’t keep his eyes off Leticia, offering her a lustful stare.

Ned couldn’t keep his eyes off Tony, offering him a smile.

Leticia glared with pent up emotion at Walter and Ned, her eyes reflecting some deep, violent desire to have them both castrated.

Ned no longer seemed like the man Leticia remembered. He looked like a tragedy had taken place with him being the result of that tragedy. His bloated, pink face matched the pink shirt he wore under the vest that held in his paunchy stomach. The small amount of hair left on his balding head had turned from blonde to gray. It seemed like he had not taken care of himself as he grew older, abusing himself with too much food and drink, too little exercise, and probably too many evil thoughts, followed by too many evil actions.

 Leticia had not taken revenge yet, but Ned looked as if someone else had. It almost satisfied her, but not quite, to see him like this. If Walter had not been sitting next to Ned reminding her of what they had done, she could have let go of her need for revenge, could have just forgotten it. But Walter’s ugliness reminded her of what she wanted: Walter and Ned in the hereafter, down below with all the other creeps that represented the devil’s evil ways. Her need for revenge would become all consuming—she was like a car without brakes just starting down a hill, about to constantly accelerate until it crashed into something at the bottom, destroying not only what the car hit, but destroying the car itself and everything within.

Tony turned away from Ned’s smile to meet another gaze. A well-dressed black man with white, curly hair that looked like curdled cottage cheese paid close attention to him. Like Leticia, he didn’t just look—he glared.

“Who’s the black guy?” Tony asked Leticia as his legs moved up and down as if he had lost control of them.

“Kenneth Beck. He works for Walter,” she responded. “You know, Bro.”

Bro did seem a little familiar, but Tony couldn’t quite place him. Then his brain caught fire. *Bro Beck! That kid I collided with in the football game in high school.* Now Tony’s entire body seemed to be out of control as his head began to move up and down, and his body began to sway back and forth.

There wasn’t much talk after Verbose completed his diatribe.

“We’ll think about it and get back to you,” one of the corporate lawyers said.

“Fine,” said Bruce. “But let’s schedule a meeting for next month to keep our calendars clear.”

3

Reactions to the Lawsuit Conference

Walter and Ned

On the drive back to San Francisco, Walter said, “Why did that Leticia cunt glare at us as if it’s about more than the money? Her face has a lot of hatred in it, but she is one hot babe. I’d like to get her home and share her. Take some pictures. What do you think?”

“I think we already did,” Ned said. “I’m pretty sure she’s in one of the pictures we took in college. What about that Verbose guy? Are we going buy him or kill him?” Ned said trying to sound tough as if he had participated at that level with Walter before.

Jimmy Bucks

*I loved those breasts, reflecting out of that low-cut, black top, like sunshine bursting through the clouds after a rainstorm. Someone’s got to have her address. I need to add her to my night patrol.*

Bro

*Tony T. Trueblé, what a joke. He’s first on my list.*

Vincent

*Who the hell let all those farts?*

Bobbi Sue Wet

*I don’t understand why I’ve been sued. Walter said he’d protect me.*

Bruce

*God, I’m impressive! I can’t wait to settle the case. Let’s see, 40% of ten million is four million fucking dollars. I’m going to be rich.*

Tony

Kenneth Beck. Bro Beck! That puts a new spin on the case. I’m exasperated, yet excited by his unexpected presence.

*What did they decide at the end? I felt so restless and completely disconnected sitting at the table with those guys, with Leticia, and then with Bro, that I couldn’t stop moving.*

 *These idiots all seem frozen in evolutionary time. What environment must exist for cheating to be so prominent? If there is an environment where cheating doesn’t exist, this isn’t it.*

*I need to set up interviews with each of these VC guys if I’m going to get anywhere in this investigation. I better meet with Walter first, see if he will go along with me talking to all of his people.*

Leticia

*Someday, I am so going to get those two fucks.*

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Many Winters Past

SHAVED

Leticia

Everyone believed me to be stupid because I liked to dress as sexy as I could, had a good little body, and, frankly, was very attractive. After working hard to control my dyslexia, I rebelled and went to Boston University, received a BS in English and a Master’s and PhD in Linguistics.

I realized after successfully completing my orals for my PhD that the sexual innuendos would continue. As I walked out of the building, I passed three college kids who obviously had been drinking. One of the guys yelled “hey cunt!”

 But no one could ruin my day. I replied, “That’s Doctor Cunt to you, asshole!” My action pleased me. I felt strong, unintimidated and happy when the three of them laughed and walked away.

The night after I obtained my PhD I went out to celebrate. I met this cool, dapper guy at one of the local bars. Ned said he recently graduated from Harvard and was in Boston on business related to his activities as a venture capitalist, which impressed me.

 We talked a lot, but I don’t remember much about what we might have said. It was one of those nights where the beer we drank included shots of tequila. I do remember accepting his offer to go back to his hotel room and make out, looking for a good fuck to celebrate passing my orals.

 “Don’t worry,” Ned said. “My suitemate, Walter, is away for the night.”

 What the heck, drunk and horny—totally without inhibition—I went with him.

 I awoke at dawn. The windows had no shades and the rising sun struck me in the face as if I’d been slapped awake.

 Before I opened my eyes, I reached out and felt to make sure Ned was there. He was. I quickly moved my hand to his groin area, hopping to bring his flaccid dick to life to make up for not remembering the sex. When fully erected, it surprised me that the entire thing fit in the palm of my hand—and that it felt scaly.

 *Small and scaly?*

 I opened my eyes. Seconds later, I screamed as I backed out of the bed, ready to karate chop whatever it was that had been beside me.

 I stared in disbelief at the fish face with mouth opening and closing as if it were sucking in water to get at the oxygen contained within. Maybe I’m being targeted by the mob, having a nightmare, or both flashed through my brain.

 *Who the hell is this creep, and where the fuck is Ned?*

 As I stood beside the bed, fish face suddenly broke into a half smile, half sneer as he rubbed himself under the sheets watching me without comment*.*

 *Shit, I’m naked! They shaved me!*

 I found my clothes, ran into the bathroom and puked. They shaved my pussy while I slept, passed out. I douched as best I could, dressed, and opened the door.

 Fish face, now on top of the sheets, whacked away, holding his tiny-little-erect penis between his thumb and index finger.

 Disgusted by what I saw and by the thought the little bastard probably screwed me last night, I ran out the door, crying. As I began to slam the door, I heard the creep yell, “I fucked you, you dumb bitch. And we’ve got pictures to prove it.”

 I pulled the door back open before slamming it shut and said with as much calm as possible, “That’s Doctor Dumb Bitch to you, creep.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

After Lon’s Death, Tony Continues

His Investigation by Interviewing Walter

PLAYING GAMES WITH WALTER

Tony

Instead of meeting Walter in his office, he asked me to come to his apartment. I was amazed by the shambles of golden objects that filled the apartment as if gold was a requirement for living—like food or air, it appeared that he would die without it.

 “Thanks for meeting with me,” I said.

 Walter’s reply surprised me. “It’s I who wanted to meet with you. I’ve checked out your background, Tony. You’re not much different from us. You represent Lon who was just another untrustworthy person. Leticia now wants to benefit from his illicit behavior, which doesn’t make her any better.”

 Walter spoke with an indignant smirk on his face. His very presence offended me. I resented his implications that Lon and Leticia were crooked.

 “You already know,” Walter continued. “that honesty isn’t a major player in life, in business, in America’s capitalistic system. Dishonesty exists everywhere. In politics religion, law—you name it.

 “You can be part of and benefit from this system; or by staying outside the system you can suffer the results of what others choose to do. Frankly, I want you in the system—working with me.”

 A pervading characteristic resided in Walter that itched my nose. I could smell the rat in the cupboard. The more he talked, the more I noticed some questionable quality in him that I couldn’t put my finger on. It seemed some unknown force marked his sentiments and opinions. Maybe I sensed he went beyond dishonest to plain old evil.

My rising anger provoked me to take action. To end Walter’s irritations, I went on the attack knowing that my pocket tape recorder might record an admission of guilt.

 “So you’re guilty, then, of screwing Lon. You’ve done everything he claims in the lawsuit. Do you want to discuss the settlement?”

 “How much do you think that bar of gold on the corner of my desk could be sold for?” Walter asked. “Ten of those gold bars can be yours if you work for me. The gold bars will get you out of your current financial difficulties, take care of that back-child support, give you a way to move out of that limo into a real place, maybe buy a home. Give you a chance for a real life.”

 “I don’t like you, Walter. You’re the product of some evil force. Did you screw Lon or not?”

 “Tony, take this gold bar with you. Keep it in your limo while you think over my offer. Maybe you’ll come to your own conclusions about Lon and Leticia. Maybe you’ll change your mind, recognize I’m right. Or maybe life will get worse for you before it gets better.”

 As Walter stood up and stretched his arms out like superman ready to fly away, he said, “Tell you what. Let’s have a drink and relax a little bit before we talk more. Do you play chess?”

 I not only played chess, I excelled at it in college. “Sure, let’s play.” I mulled over the back child support I owed and wondered how Walter got that information. *What other information does this asshole have that I should worry about?*

 “You make the drinks while I grab the chess set from my bedroom. The bar’s over there,” Walter said as he slithered away.

 I made the drinks as I pondered Walter’s offer and how that would free me from Stephanie. On the other hand, I couldn’t help thinking, what a jerk, trying to buy me. And what a jerk I’d be to take the money. Why does he think I’d even accept an offer like that? It might be worth it if he offered me five million dollars, but I wasn’t going to sell out, lose my license, maybe even face some jail-time by taking the gold bars—which would probably only help me short-term, but fuck me long-term.

 When Walter came back and opened the chess box, it didn’t surprise me to see that the white pieces were most likely made of gold and the black pieces from sapphires.

 “Let’s play for a hundred dollars,” Walter said.

“Okay,” I said ready to get information out of him while we played

I drew white—in this case gold. I moved one of the center pawns two paces forward. After waiting five minutes, Walter responded with the same move. I moved the other center pawn one space forward. After thinking for five more minutes, he again matched my move.

I moved a bishop. Walter took another five minutes, then moved his same bishop. I attacked one of Walter’s pawns with a knight. He matched the move by protecting the pawn with one of his knights. This time he took ten minutes to do the same thing. The board was completely symmetrical like a mirrored reflection.

 “What the fuck are you, a mimic?” I asked as I leaned back in my chair. “If you’re going to copy my move, could you play a little faster? I’m not the most patient person in the world.”

 “I like your impatience, Tony,” Walter said with his creepy smile emphasizing his bullshit tone. “That’s why you get things done. You remind me of Ricky Nelson at fourteen on the Ozzie Nelson show when he’d say, ‘I don’t mess around, man’. I’ll be right back. Make us a couple of doubles this time.”

*More bullshit! I’ll make triples instead so I have enough to drink while I wait for him to make his moves.*

When Walter came back, he brought a pipe filled with hash. After sitting down, he lit the pipe, drew in the smoke, and blew it out. This time he gave me a friendly smile. I smiled back laughing inside that Walter smoked hash. I took a puff. We finished the bowl before returning to the game. At this point I almost actually liked Walter, but stoned on hash I’d like just about anyone.

Then Walter offered me a proposition.

 “Let’s increase the stakes. Make the game worth something significant to both of us. If I lose the game, I’ll agree to settle the lawsuit with Leticia for ten million. What do you say?”

 I didn’t respond right away. Ten million sounded right, but what did he want if I lost?

 “If you win, then what?” I asked.

 “You seriously consider coming to work for me as we discussed, which will be our little secret.”

 “Before you settle the lawsuit?”

 “Yes.”

 “I can’t do that. I’d lose my license if anyone found out,” I said shaking my head.

“Tony. There’s no risk for you. I’m only asking you to think about working for me. If you decide it’s not in your best interest, no problem, we’ll keep the status quo. Don’t be a chicken shit, Tony. I know you’re a tough guy—prove it.”

I couldn’t help being suspicious of Walter’s intentions. But what the hey, the booze was good, the hash was good, and I liked where I was—at the moment, anyway. So I agreed—my fingers crossed.

 I wanted to beat Walter as badly as I could so I took my time for my next move, carefully studying the board and planning ahead. Suddenly, Walter decided he would talk while I decided.

 “You believe in God?” Walter asked.

 “No,” I said keeping my eyes on the board.

 “You know what I think,” Walter said. “God doesn’t exist in any shape or form. No deity created man. If God did create man in his image, then God must be one fucked-up mother.”

It took Walter thirty seconds to make each of his next three moves. It took me longer and longer to make mine. Walter would not shut up. He continued to work me, and it succeeded—God thoughts kept creeping up from my subconscious.

After my next move, I said with taut lips and an irritated mind, “I have a theory that assumes we’re like cows—nothing but animals. Something at a higher level than man is raising us for food and other uses. We’re aware of them to the same extent cows are aware of us. And here’s the rub: The more we spiritually progress in this life, the better food we are; that’s why all the religious bullshit exists in the first place—to make us prime cuts.”

I simply decided to take whatever Walter said and give him an oddball response or disagree with whatever he came up with to get him either distracted or angry. It became clear to me after he made the next three moves, again taking only thirty seconds for each move, that he had set me up. Walter played faster and better than I did, which meant he had probably memorized or planned many games—he knew where he wanted to go. Of course, the quicker he moved, the slower I moved, and the more he talked.

 “Yeah, I like that. I can see it now,” Walter said as he moved. “The Cow Theory, the latest advancement in man’s spiritual development.

 “Think of the number of small events that must have occurred in the life of each one of our ancestors for us to be born. If grandma hadn’t baked bread one day during her child bearing years, different sperm at a different time might have hit the egg and your parents and you would never have been born. If any one event were different for grandma, or another ancestor, you would not exist. There are too many events that had to happen exactly as they did, an infinity of them, for you, or anyone else, to have been born. Consequently, the probability of being born must be zero—which means that, like surviving a war as a soldier, it’s all about luck.”

“Or, because the probability of being born is zero,” I said, “there must be a God.

“What would make sense to me,” I continued during his move. “would be each person working within themselves to reach the definition of God; however, that ultimate definition could only be understood when a person reached that definition. You can only know God when you are God.”

Walter stretched his thoughts about God by suggesting there is a Sun God. “What if the Sun is the entity that created life on earth, the one who gave man sentient powers? If a small, weak, entity like man is sentient, then an entity with the energy of the Sun certainly must be sentient. Without the Sun, there would be no life on Earth. The Sun, unlike the other God’s chosen by man, is not an abstraction that lies outside the physical laws of the universe. The Sun is real; it exists; we can see it; we can feel its warmth, energy, and light. Through its light and energy, the Sun remains connected to everything in the universe, remains connected to man without fail. Even stormy, cloudy days can’t keep the Sun’s light and rays from penetrating to the Earth’s surface.”

It amazed me that Walter thought about anything besides money and gold. In response to his Sun God theory, I ignored what he said and tried to jam him by attacking the essence of his life. “I thought you believed in the Gold God. I’ve heard that you’re into alchemy: gold and immortality. Perhaps life on earth is the real hell—we’ve been sent here because of evil deeds done elsewhere. If you did gain immortality, would that mean you chose hell since being immortal would mean there will be no way out of your life, including the suffering moments? Perhaps it’s necessary to die to advance to a greater existence. What if this is your last chance for redemption? Frankly, your chances of redeeming yourself in this life seem rather slim.”

 Walter didn’t bite; he smiled and laughed. “I don’t give a shit about immortality. It’s only the gold that interests me and how much of it I acquire during this lifetime. It’s not a coincidence that gold is the same color as the sun, or as I like to think the Sun God.”

The drink, hash, and conversation worked on Walter also. Like me with my own lips pulled into a smile, he obviously enjoyed the game we played. Suddenly alert, I too made my next moves taking only seconds. Walter took a little more time with each of his next four moves allowing me to make several more drinks.

 “Walter, don’t you think you should have writing paper and pen with you when you play chess? That way, you could shut up and write all this shit you’re talking down on paper.”

 Walter again laughed, but he didn’t shut up. Instead, he said, “Which part of a person’s life makes it to heaven, anyway? I mean we’re different people at different times. Is it that last moment when our brains are no longer functioning, or some prior moment in our life? If it’s based on a good moment, you go to heaven; a bad moment you go to hell.”

 Walter made his next move, and I responded with my move. I then started talking as fast as I could, waving my arms around while I talked, standing up, sitting down, blowing my nose, and whistling the song “Sunshine and Lollipops.” Walter didn’t seem to be distracted—no matter what I did.

It took an hour to make our next ten moves as we drank more, smoked more, and talked more. Finally, Walter said, “Checkmate!” and the chess game ended—but our real game had just begun.

I moved first in the new game by deciding to take the gold bar; not to dwell on Walter’s offer, but to have something he owns in my possession, something valuable that I would keep to screw him. Let him prove he owned the gold bar. I picked up the bar and walked out without speaking.

I wanted to get on with the other interviews to see what I could find out. I decided on Vincent Fellure next since he seemed to be the wimpiest of the lot and the one most likely to reveal information I could use to help Leticia with the lawsuit.

It never occurred to me till later that the only reason I could interview any of Walter’s cohorts was because he ordered them to meet with me; I really wasn’t in a separate game with him— just a pawn in the larger game he played with others.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Tony Next Interviews Vincent

VINCENT AND THE FIRE HYDRANT

1

Walter

I gave Vincent a small monthly retainer and paid the rent for his office because I was indebted to his father, Peter. Vincent wasn’t stupid like Ned, but he was so hung-up with his father, who treated him like a dolt, that his behavior could only be called pathetic.

 Vincent had no balls. No sense. No clue. He wasn’t pudgy like Jimmy Bucks. Plain fat described him best. He didn’t bother to wear a three-piece suit as no vest could contain the mass that protruded from his gut. He had no neck—just a large glob between his chin and collarbone.

 I initially tried to develop Vincent into a capable venture capitalist after he brought me the Pooh Desk™ deal. After listening to his moral rantings, I gave up on him knowing there was only one thing to do—get rid of him.

2

Tony

Vincent’s sparsely furnished, one-room office contrasted with his over indulged body. I sat in a ripped-vinyl, straight-backed chair in front of his gray, metal desk, a desk similar to the one I used in the Army twenty-five years earlier when I was a clerk typist.

Through the open window, which apparently acted as his air conditioner, I could hear the noise of cars honking and tires screeching. I could see ominous dark clouds forming in the west, out beyond San Francisco’s Golden Gate.

“It’s not easy being the son of Peter Fellure,” Vincent told me before I could ask him any questions and as if I cared what he had to say about his father.

“But I’ve come a long way. The deal I’ve done with Walter Funcker will prove to my father that I can be successful like him.”

He continued talking, again as if I gave a shit. Much like Garcy Slongavitch, he liked his garlic. He seemed to emit a stream of garlic-filled droplets as spit exited his mouth each time he spoke. It was like being in the presence of a walrus with bad breath.

 “Your dad, that’s interesting,” I said turning my head away from Vincent, much like Dic Mécia always did when he talked to me. “Do you know that he taught one of my high school classes before he became famous? I remember him as smart and tough, but a good teacher.”

 “You went to Redwood High in Larkspur?” Vincent gasped as more bits of spittle spurted out of his mouth, most of it landing on his desk, a few drops reaching my legs, even though I’d quickly shoved the chair back.

Vincent’s eyes began to water, the lines on his face contorted, and his mouth flapped like a fish out of water—as though he were trying to imitate Walter. I tried to lighten him up a bit with a high school story he might remember.

 “Yeah, I even played on the football team until I got injured. I even dated the hottest girl in school until she dumped me after an injury caused me to be dropped from. . .” I said as my story trailed off as the expression on Vincent’s face bloomed red.

 Vincent seemed incensed by what I said. I could see that this interview wasn’t going far and wasn’t going to last long.

 Vincent abruptly stood up, placed his hands on his desk, and leaned forward spewing more garlic breath on me as he said, “I recognize you now, you arrogant bastard. I remember who you were and your out-of-control, drug-induced behavior in high school; and the way you treated freshman as if your being a senior made you some type of deity or more likely the devil in disguise. Get out of my office. I’ve got nothing to say to you, and I’m certainly not going to provide you with any information that could hurt Walter or our company, in spite of Walter asking me to meet with you.”

 I left Vincent’s office wondering why the angry reaction. I could understand his need to protect Walter, but why be furious with me? I didn’t realize he was in high school at the same time as I was. But what did high school have to do with Lon’s deal—or with the deaths? Too many of us seem connected to high school as if we’re really kids playing grown-up games.

3

Vincent

As Tony left my office, the phone rang. I picked it up on the first ring, anxious to move on to something else as the back of my mind screamed “fucking Tony, fucking Beck, fucking Leticia, fucking father, fucking fuck!”

What the man told me from the other end of the line surprised me and lifted my funk like a hot air balloon.

“My name is Ron, and I’m the convention manager for the National Convention of Management Consultants, which will be held at the San Francisco Marriott. We’d like you to be the keynote speaker at this year’s convention.

“We also want to honor you with an award for the work that you’ve done with your company and for the papers you’ve written on your theory of the reverse organization chart. And, of course, there will be a $10,000 stipend for your appearance.”

Shocked, I immediately said, “Yes. Thank you.

“What are the logistics?” I asked as I gazed out the window as the setting sun began to break through the clouds on the horizon—sending rays of hope to sunset watchers throughout the Bay Area.

“You take a cab to the Marriott. Go to the front desk and have them page Ron Junior. When we get to the auditorium, I’ll take your arm and lead you to the main stage. We’ll come in from the left side of the stage. There will be a podium on the other side of the stage. This will give the audience extra time to view you as you cross the stage to the podium, something we do to subtly connect the speaker with the convention attendees by extending the applause.”

 “Will I be able to stay at the Marriott?”

“No. But we have an associate who wants to meet you and discuss your theories. He’ll meet you outside the front entrance, after your speech. You’ll recognize him by the zebra-striped French poodle wearing a red bandanna, standing by his side. I’ll fax you complete instructions with the necessary information.”

*Yeah! Mother-fuck! Sons-of-bitches!*

*Me, Vincent Fellure. Keynote speaker! The National Management Consultants’ annual convention. Ooh, ooh, I sang as I danced around the room, over the piles of paper, ran to the window, threw it all the way up and shouted to the world:* “I am Vincent Fellure!!!”

*My Upside-Down Organization Chart: Putting Control in the Hands of the Workers—The Board of Directors, the CEO, the executive management there for one purpose—to report to and to support the workers of the organization, not the other way around! The majority in control, not subject to the whim of a few masters.*

*Recognition. Esteem. Honor. Women! Oh yes, women!*

*Fuck you, daddy, daddy, daddy! Your Fatherless is no more. I’m right; you’re wrong. Hah! Hah!*

*Father will get it now: I am the new go-to-man!*

\*

“Hi, Mr. Fellure,” he said. “I’m Ron Junior. Please come this way.”

We walked to the auditorium. He grabbed my arm and led me up the stairs to the main stage as the audience applauded the announcement of my arrival, the name Fellure faintly reaching my ears, but ringing loudly in my mind as I entered hearing range.

 As I walked on the stage towards the podium, which seemed far away, the crowd continued to applaud as Ron had said they would. I was already elated by the applause when Father surprised me as he walked towards the podium from the other side of the stage. *What a special honor—Father being here, at last, for me*.

After Father passed the podium and approached me, his eyes reflecting anger, my confidence fell from my brain to my stomach. I could feel my face flush red as he whisper-mouthed to me, “What the fuck are you doing here?” His words were so faint that I leaned toward him to catch what he’d said, but instead I fell forward, landing on my knees at his feet as if he were a King, I his knelt subject.

 The audience laughed as they assumed everything happening onstage was part of the show, part of the pre-speech entertainment—usually jokes, but this time an interesting little skit.

 “Sha-Bang!!!” I heard the crowed roar as I turned and ran off the stage—with no help or compassion coming from my father.

 Ron waited for me as he promised. He took my arm in a comforting manner and led me to the elevator where we rode it to the roof for, he said, a breath of fresh air, a chance to calm myself after what had happened. Too upset to do anything by myself, I let him guide me.

When the elevator reached the roof, Ron took me by my arm and said, “Relax, Vincent. Relax. Let’s walk over towards the edge of the roof where the city view, the stars, and the moon will calm you.”

The faint stars were beautiful as the black darkness enveloped the last of the blue sky with faint remnants of the sun squinting up beyond the horizon, then quickly disappearing as if it were gone forever.

Ron spoke, as he comforted me by rubbing my back, “See that strange dog with the red bandana down there by the fire hydrant. He looks like a tiny zebra.”

I bent over further to see the dog as Ron continued to rub my back.

*It’s Okay. Life is still good. I’ll handle this humiliation just as I’ve handled all my father-induced traumas*.

A few seconds later, Ron switched from rubbing to pushing, and I tumbled off the roof, hit a couple ledges, went straight down until I hit the fire hydrant—chasing away the dog.

4

Tony

Someone left a message on my answering machine about Vincent being a speaker at some convention; that he would be available to meet with me outside the San Francisco Marriott following his speech. This seemed like a good chance to make up for the failed meeting we had earlier.

 As I waited outside for Vincent, I heard a scream and glanced up to see a body cascading towards me as it bounced from ledge to ledge. I jumped out of the way as the body hit a fire hydrant ten feet away from where I stood. A blood-splashed dog ran away from the hydrant towards me, stopped, and shook blood from his body, a significant amount landing on me.

 Fear drove me into an anxious state. I wanted to define it, to reduce it from an abstraction by detailing what caused that fear—but all I could detail were my physical reactions to the fear: stomach pain, itching, hives.

 As usual, I was a little drunk and stoned. I remembered something my friend, Jack Armstrong, told me in college. “Just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean nobody’s after you. And it’s okay to be paranoid if someone really is after you.” Paranoid as hell, I didn’t stick around—given I’d already been at the scene of several earlier deaths. I read about it in the morning paper. The headline said, “SON OF MANAGEMENT GURU COMMITS SUICIDE – Jumps from Top of Convention Center after Encounter with Famous Father.”

I felt Vincent’s death was pathetic, much like Vincent himself. Ironically, the fire hydrant quickly put out what little fire existed in his life. But, given the other deaths, I couldn’t help wonder if Vincent’s death might *not* have been his own decision—that someone murdered him.

5

Reactions to the Death of Vincent

Walter

*They keep dropping like flies. That takes care of Vincent and the crap he learned from his father.*

Jimmy

*What the fuck!*

“What’s going on Walter? You doing this?”

“No, Jimmy, I’m not.”

*I didn’t believe him, but I knew better than to confront him with how I really felt.*

Ned

*He wasn’t even cute, and he didn’t even know how to dress—the guy didn’t even own a three-piece suit; but I bet he’s buried with one because his father does know how to dress. Oh well, just one less retard to deal with!*

Bro

*People dying left and right. Who’s next?*

Leticia

*I need to call Peter.*

Tony

*Where the fuck’s the vodka? Where’d I put that gold bar? Leticia’s right, we need to take a trip together, get away from this madness.*

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Soon after Vincent’s Death

LOVE ME, LOVE ME NOT

1

Tony

Shortly after Vincent’s death, Leticia suggested that we take a trip to Cancun, Mexico. I liked the idea, so off we went—our lust in hand.

 I had an ulterior motive for going on the trip. I could marry Leticia for her money, but there would have to be more for me than money or sex to take such a drastic step in my life. If I stayed with her for a week, I would get a better sense of how I felt about her. I would see what living with her might be like, find out if there were any connections beyond sex—determine if marrying her was even on the spectrum of possibilities.

 However, sex, interspaced with eating, dancing, and drinking, filled the first three days. We made it to the beach restaurant, but not to the beach itself, not even for a midnight stroll or for any other romantic interlude.

 After another day and night of extensive debauchery, the thrill, for me, wore off—intense passion gone. The sex never reached the level it did in the limo or at Leticia’s house, or as I remembered it in high school—sex had become a chore, and I started resisting her advances. I wasn’t sure why, and it didn’t make sense now that I knew she was educated and smart in addition to being sexually attractive. I should have been more interested in her, not less.

Leticia further bored me by watching soap operas on TV as a replacement for sex. I mostly drank, napped, or read. I realized it might tell me more about the possibility of marriage if we talked.

\* \* \*

We were sitting up, having eaten breakfast in bed, but we were still working on our Bloody Marys. “I have a friend, Jack Armstrong,” I began. “It took me awhile to realize that, while Jack could seldom shut up, if you asked him a question he couldn’t respond. His brain became nonfunctional whenever an outside force stimulated it. He would become like a computer locked in a never-ending loop.

“I once suggested to Jack that the next time we fly, I come up to him on the airplane, making sure a flight attendant was close by, and say, ‘Hi, Jack’ hoping that we would get arrested for this innocent greeting and get our fifteen minutes of fame. It took Jack over two days to get out of the loop that idea started.”

“That sounds like a fun idea with no downside,” Leticia said. “How come you didn’t ask him anyway, regardless if he understood what you were doing?”

“I’m better at getting ideas than carrying them out.”

I grabbed my drink and asked Leticia to tell me something strange that happened to her.

“I walked into a book store and asked the clerk if there were any books on pyramids,” she said. “His eyes kind of popped open as he turned around the open book in front of him and pointed to the chapter title: ‘Pyramids and How They Increase Awareness.’ After reading the chapter, I bought a tiny pyramid in another store. It was supposed to keep razor blades sharp and fruit fresh.”

“Did it work?” I asked, as she picked up her own drink.

 “Shit no! Have you tried any offbeat stuff like pyramids?”

I told her, “I tried Scientology.”

“Aren’t Tom Cruise and John Travolta Scientologists?” she asked.

I told her they were. She seemed interested because of the Cruise and Travolta connection, so I explained to her that Scientologists believe our brains are filled with engrams, negative images recorded during periods the brain is unconsciousness, engrams that replay like a tape recorder when stimulated. The unconscious brain records everything going on around you, in addition to the actual event. If you’re fighting with your wife and angry, a song might be playing on the radio. Months or maybe years down the road whenever you hear that song you become angry with no clue why.

“I signed up for Scientology’s Sea Organization to be a sailor on one of the founder’s nine yachts. Four of the yachts stayed at sea at any given time so if a nuclear holocaust happened, some Scientologists would survive to carry their message forward, as if it would matter after the world was destroyed—it’s more like the founder was paranoid. I think he was always on one of the yachts kept at sea. Scientologists also believed in reincarnation. To join the Sea Organization, you had to sign up for a billion years, which I did.”

Leticia asked with a slight hint of slur, “How long were you a member?”

“Three weeks—I still owe them a few years. They turned out to be an authoritarian group of dogmatic people. I’ve never been into being controlled. Did you try anything like that?”

“EST,” she said. It’s main purpose seemed to be getting people to realize that everything you do, everything that happens to you, good or bad, is a choice you made, so you might as well recognize and accept that you freely choose everything that happens in your life—that way you are technically in control. I think the founder tried Scientology first, squirreling some of their ideas for his own purpose. He also used that autocratic approach with his followers—often acting like an asshole. Or Est-hole as we liked to say,” she said with a laugh.

“Why’d you choose linguistics for your PhD?”

“During my undergrad years, I’d focused on creative writing, thought I might write the great American novel. I wanted to learn where language came from and understand how it works in humans—in order to write better.”

“What did you write?”

“Short stories never good enough to be published. I didn’t want to tackle a novel and be a starving writer, so I went to grad school and focused on becoming a linguistic professor, thinking maybe I’d write in my spare time. But I met Lon, married him, worked only part-time, and lost touch with my original goals.

“Lon’s an interesting linguistic case. He learned English in Eastern Europe, and then he lived in a European ghetto in Chicago. When I first met him, he’d say things like ‘me and her went to the store’ or ‘I didn’t never know’ and so on. I helped him learn to speak and write English correctly, but he continued to use poor language as a means to trick people in business, make them think of him as stupid, which he wasn’t. He’s probably one of the smartest persons I’ve ever met.”

“I didn’t realize he played the game that way. No wonder he could take advantage of the VCs. It’s like them to think everyone else lacks brains even when they look and sound smart. Lon must have enjoyed fooling them. I’d like to tell Walter about this sometime just to get his goat.”

We were now holding hands as she spoke.

“Jim der Bacon’s speech interests me also,” she said. “Instead of using big words that no one understands, he uses the definition of the words, you know, the ordinary definition you would find in any dictionary. He’s developed a large data base of definitions; I’m not sure he even knows the actual words anymore.

“What’s interesting is that it makes der Bacon sound sophisticated, because the definitions sound sophisticated, not pretentious like using esoteric words people don’t understand do. After all, it’s not words, it’s definitions that are intriguing—the concepts that words express. Words themselves are abstract. Like a person, we need the details to understand them.”

Leticia’s breasts were now drawing my rising attention.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Because you’ve come up with a definition and a word to represent the definition, doesn’t mean the word or its definition reflect the real world. God, and the varying definitions of God, might be the supreme example that a word or its definition may have nothing to do with reality or what people believe or think.”

“What people believe or think is questionable, anyway,” Leticia said. “To what extent do humans invent their own reality? We certainly must invent the reality of others. We only know them on the most superficial level—the only level we can observe. And that observation is distorted by our own personal views and experience. Each person sees other people differently based on his or her own internal self, and our own external behavior impacts how another person reacts. We are different people with different individuals. We are different people in different situations, in different environments.”

“You’re right,” I said as I rolled over and placed my left hand on her right breast. “It’s like in physics where the physical objects observed are always impacted by the observer.”

“What if we lived in a society where people were grouped together by physical characteristics such as beautiful and ugly?” Leticia said. “This would give each of us the most compatible physical human environment to live in. But, in a group of ugly, would less ugly have an advantage? Or the opposite: would the most-ugly one be considered the prom queen, and the least ugly considered to be the least attractive?

I didn’t answer because from that moment on, we were embraced in our final sexual encounter, which we executed in a routine manner: Kiss, fondle, insert. Come, fall asleep.

Yet the conversations were good. I liked the smarter, more educated Leticia—a surprise to me and probably to others once they got beyond her sexual demeanor, which was hard to do. She was certainly a lot smarter and more educated than I was.

It suddenly came back to me why I must have broken it off with Leticia when we were in high school: Although the sex had been good, no physical chemical-connection existed between us. Any love for Leticia took place in an earlier time—now it was gone. I should have been beyond the age of playing with dolls, but Leticia drugged me with lust—I couldn’t resist her visual, external beauty.

“Tony, I like you. I could love you. Do you think there’s any chance we could make it together, maybe get married someday?”

That question jarred me into my senses. I wanted to get out of this fantasy world. I told Leticia what I thought—needing to force the end of the relationship, once I realized it wasn’t going to go anywhere.

“I’d like to stay friends,” I said.

Later, we both consumed too much alcohol at separate downstairs bars. After I returned to the room, Leticia displayed a side of her I didn’t like. She came back to the room in a drunken rage, told me her view of things, each sentence spoken requiring her to throw something at me—whatever she could grab. There was broken glass everywhere making the room look like it belonged in a ghetto of drunken souls. I needed to get away from her. She seemed to represent what I began to see as old thinking, old destructive behavior. I could not see me making any progress in my life with Leticia

The next day we took separate flights home, which gave me plenty of time to think. *I can’t let that gold bar sit in the limo forever.*

2

Leticia

The resort was gorgeous, classy, a wonderful place for romance. However, the humidity made it seem as if we had just walked into a steam room with our clothes on. The skies were clear of clouds even though hurricane season would soon begin.

Neither Tony nor I told anyone that we were going off together. We just disappeared for a week—a week of dinners with fine wine, breakfast with champagne or Bloody Marys, beach lunches with tequila sunrises—and sex between each meal, sometimes during a meal, once on top of a meal.

Tony doesn’t look like he has much of anything—and he doesn’t. Although he’s been successful in his work, he blows money faster than he earns it. But sex with him was like the sex in high school—heaven sprinkled with a little hell. I’ve never found it better with anyone else—not even with Bro and his enormous thing. As Tony joked, “it’s not how big it is, it’s how many times you get it in that counts”.

 Towards the end of the week, I stood at the window watching the ocean churn in turmoil. Winds out of the north sent large waves crisscrossing the beach, stirring up sand, keeping everyone cooped up inside, even the chickens that usually roamed outside the hotel.

I watched soaps on TV—something I often did as a linguistic exercise. I enjoyed analyzing the language used, tried to identify the accents attempted and the region in the United States where the dialect was spoken.

 I should have left things alone—I never did, I never do. I confronted Tony and asked him why he dropped me in high school.

 “Leticia,” Tony said. “Don’t get carried away. Sex made us a couple in high school and sex is the reason we’re together now. I like you, and I’m pleasantly surprised by your intelligence. But to me, love requires a chemical reaction between the physical bodies to go with the mental connection. I’ve never felt that way with you. It’s like I’m grabbing for food but not getting anything to eat.”

 “We can still be friends,” he slurred out, as if that would make everything okay with me.

 His choice of words inflamed me. Like a thrusting blow, he spoke with no restraint. I put my bikini on and headed out the door for the beach bar—middle fingering him on the way out. *Fuck you, Tony!*

 After the bar downstairs closed, I came back to the room and tried to reason with him, plead with him to love me back, let time make it work. He was drunk and nasty. I threw a pillow at him, then another. I gave up and went back downstairs and outside to another bar, where I stayed until dawn. I went back to the room, packed while Tony lay passed out on the floor, and caught the first plane out.

Tony would never fuck me over again. That’s what led me, once again, back to the arms of another lover, like in high school when Tony dumped me. Tony’s the reason I’m involved in this shit today. He’s the reason I’m no longer a compliant bystander in my own life.

In the future if anybody is going to do the fucking over, it will be me!

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Still after Vincent’s Death

MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS

1

Tony

I stood on a corner below Jimmy Buck’s office watching a group of drummers pound out their version of reggae at the farmers’ market. I saw my youth walk by as mobs of teenagers and pre-teens roamed the street. I’d checked out at least three cute ladies who passed by, and I gave a bum $20 because he reminded me of how desperate I felt sometimes.

During the last week, I had chased Jimmy through a mall and later staked out his home twice with no success. I tried his office, but he was never in or always out—much like that character in Joseph Heller’s *Catch -22*, Major Major, who was only in when he was out and always out when he was in.

 Jimmy finally showed up. He waited at a red light to cross the street as I approached him.

 “Hi Jimmy, remember me, Tony T. Trueblé?” I said as he waited for the light to change. “I work for Leticia Rozzo, and I need to talk to you.”

 “No, I don’t remember you,” Jimmy said as he hurried away, crossing the street before the light changed from red to green, almost getting hit by a yellow cab.

 Nothing seemed to work in getting Jimmy to talk. Not even the day I ran into him on the ferry from San Francisco to the Larkspur ferry terminal located next to San Quentin Prison—a place Jimmy and I would get to know too well.

 I saw Jimmy sitting alone on a wooden bench deep in his own thoughts.

 “Hello again, Jimmy,” I said as I sat down beside him.

 Jimmy didn’t hesitate to get up and walk away—didn’t say a word or even acknowledge my existence—but on a ferry in the middle of the San Francisco Bay, Jimmy would find nowhere to escape, and I would find out that it didn’t matter.

 “Get away from me,” Jimmy shouted as I followed him, causing the other passengers and the security guard to take notice.

 “No,” I replied as I checked out the crowd and noted how the security guard was responding.

 “Officer, Officer,” Jimmy yelled at the guard who stood in a corner drinking coffee and checking out the well-dressed, attractive women commuting back to Marin after a hard day at the office or, more likely, shopping.

 I quickly backed off. It wasn’t worth going to jail for the joint in my pocket.

The following night, I decided to stake out Jimmy’s home one more time. I waited several hours down the street from his Sonoma condo—hoping he’d go out so I could follow him. The wait paid off when he came out a little after nine.

 I followed Jimmy as he seemed to drive to no particular destination. We drove west toward Petaluma on Highway 16, crossed Highway 101 and headed further west towards the ocean where we took Highway 1 south, down the coast to Muir Beach—where Leticia lived.

 Jimmy pulled over and parked his car up the street from Leticia’s house. I parked a half block behind him, wondering if they might together be behind the murders.

As he got out of his car, I could see by the inside car light that he was dressed entirely in black—boots, jeans and t-shirt and wore dark glasses on a dark night, no moon in the sky. *What does dressing in black have to do with visiting Leticia?*

 Jimmy started walking towards the back of the house. I followed him along some bushes that separated Leticia’s house from the one next door.

 Suddenly, Jimmy stopped next to Leticia’s bathroom window. The lights were on inside, the shade down, but not all the way. I could see Leticia’s shadow moving around the bathroom.

 I watched Jimmy as he slowly hunched over to peer into the window.

 *Goddamn! Jimmy Bucks is a Peeping Tom!*

 I saw no point in continuing to trail Jimmy in this sordid part of his life. I got out of there as quickly as I could, not wanting to be arrested for prowling, nor wanting to have Leticia find me in her yard with Jimmy Bucks watching her walk around naked.

2

Jimmy Bucks

I had first seen a woman naked when I was fifteen. It was not a pleasant experience unlike my future times of erotic visual pleasure.

 Pure Christian joy and religious service had filled my entire life because my father was the minister at the First Baptist Church in Ukiah, California, a lumber town when we lived there, now the center of Mendocino County’s illicit pot farms—reflective of how stable things can radically change over time.

 I believed that God existed and Jesus was my savior. I read through the Bible many times and even taught youth religious education classes. Christianity represented everything in my world—until one day coming down with the flu, I came home early from school.

 Unable to find the aspirin, I decided to check my father’s bathroom medicine cabinet. As usual, the door was shut, but when I tried the handle, the door opened to the sight of a naked Mrs. Jones facing me, her large tits bouncing up and down. She, a married member of our church, sat on top of my father, flat on his back, the back of his head towards me.

 “Not now,” Mrs. Jones mouthed to me as she kept moving up and down on him, who seemed to have no awareness of me at the door. I quietly shut the door and went to the kitchen, boiled a cup of Lipton Chicken Noodle soup, and sat down at the table to slurp and reflect on what I just saw.

 Scared of my father finding out that I’d found him out, I closed my eyes and prayed, “Please, God, forgive my father and Mrs. Jones for what they’ve done. Please, God, help me forgive him, help me to understand, help me through the confession he will make to me when he comes out.”

 My father taught me well. I knew he would apologize to me and ask for forgiveness. We’d talk over his sin and use it as a learning experience to enhance our faith in God.

 When they came to the kitchen, now fully dressed, my father in slacks and shirt, Mrs. Jones in a low-cut dress, two-thirds of her breasts exposed, I almost felt relieved, until my father said, “Oh, Jimmy, I didn’t realize you were home.”

Glancing at Mrs. Jones, he continued with, “Henrietta and I were having a private moment where I could give her some advice on how to solve some problems she’s having in her marriage. I didn’t want the maid, who I guess left, to overhear our conversation.”

 Mrs. Jones then added, “Yes, that’s right, Jimmy. Your father helped a great deal, as you might expect, by teaching me certain techniques that will make my marriage more meaningful. Your father is a wonderful man. I’m grateful for his advice.”

 They were flat-out lying to me! They were fucking and I had caught them. I bet that my father didn’t even feel guilty, let alone obligated to discuss it with me. Bullshit crashed through my brain, breaking that portion of my mind that respected him into shattered remnants, shot like small missiles that targeted parts of my brain, not destroying any beliefs I held, but infringing on their continued existence.

 I didn’t like my dad much after I discovered his hypocrisy—he was no longer the religious man he claimed to be. I immediately knew why my mother had left us. That moment started my religious downfall. However, not long after, I understood my father’s desires—when I myself discovered the male sex curse we carried in our genes—but I didn’t forgive him then nor did I forgive him later.

That summer, I found a refuge at the La Triannon Resort along the shores of Blue Lakes, California, a place I hitch-hiked to every single day for three months.

During the first week at the lake, I made friends with several of the kids I would go to school with in the fall. These guys liked to party, an unfamiliar activity to me, but one I learned to enjoy after the friends introduced me to bennies, or white crosses as we called them, and beer—a combination that enhanced visual desire, but often resulted in erratic behavior on my part.

 The La Triannon Resort was a beat-up place, thirty years past its time—a place filled with tents because the cabins long ago had returned to dust. I loved the contrast between the run-down resort and the beautiful, crystal-clear lake, a lake surrounded by brown hills filled with evergreen pine trees. The contrast was like seeing a hobo in church on a Sunday.

 I also loved the rundown condition of the La Triannon with the poorly constructed walls underneath the main building—where the men’s and women’s bathrooms and changing areas were located.

 The first time I entered the men’s bathroom, the smell of shit and piss that lingered in the air appalled me. I might as well have been in an outhouse with the constant smells wafting upwards like heat, rising to penetrate nostrils—even when breathing through the mouth.

 Because the stalls had no doors on them, I chose the furthest stall back—I never did like taking a crap if people could see me, and the back stall provided the only privacy available.

As I sat there on the stool, I knew I had to go, but nothing came out. I peered around the small space. On the white, marked-up wall to my left someone wrote, “For a blow job, call Christy at 382-0659.”

 Scribbled on the wall in front of me was a trite saying that applied to me, “Here I sit broken hearted, came to shit but only farted.” Several large cock measurements were carved into the wall that made me worry that I might have the smallest dick around. Empty knotholes covered the wall on the right. Through them I saw tools, dirt, and spider webs.

Grunting with constipation, I bent forward hoping to help the release. As I turned my head back in my bent over position, I noticed a pipe entering the wall behind the toilet with an open space surrounding it, maybe a quarter inch in diameter. After I finished my business, wiped, and flushed, I knelt down to take a look at the other side through the hole.

 Earlier, outside the bathroom, I saw a beautiful, older woman, probably twenty-five, wearing a one-piece bathing suit. The wet, white bathing suit had clung to her body revealing hard nipples, a flat stomach and a firm butt.

 Through the hole that circled the pipe, I could see the same woman taking off her bathing suit, then sitting down on the toilet. Despite the new smell she generated, my dick became erect—as if it were preparing itself to reach through the hole and penetrate every part of this woman’s gorgeous body, shit or no shit.

This pipe hole became my summer haven. With no stall door in the girls bathroom, it provided a view of the girl’s changing area which stretched at least ten feet beyond the stall. I had to bend down uncomfortably to get any real view of girls changing in or out of their bathing suits—but bend I did! In the fall, my dad sent me to a chiropractor to work on the muscles I’d strained during that summer of lust after I told him I’d strained my back while diving into the blue lake.

Because of the constant smell of shit and piss in the filthy bathrooms, I still associate that smell with naked women and erections.

That summer I made a choice, one which my dad never seemed to make, which separated me from the conflict he must have faced since his own first erection. I quit God for sex—or at least voyeurism and self-fulfilled sex. I now accepted God as a farce created by man. But sex was not a creation—it was real, not imagery.

I loved my choice; a choice I would enhance by finding more and more ways to surreptitiously view female naked bodies. A choice that hasn’t been difficult, since women are natural exhibitionists, often leaving windows open while they dress or undress, while they shower, or while they walk around the house naked. *Thank you ladies!* And it wasn’t just seeing naked ladies that excited me, because I never found topless or bottomless bars thrilling or sexually stimulating. It was looking at naked women who didn’t know they were being watched that thrilled me.

 Give me some beer and speed, and I search out ways to peer at women cooperative enough to leave windows open, shades up. I live a vicious cycle of sneaking around town at night, up alleys, over rooftops, down fire escapes in the pursuit of naked women. I see them in the bath, on the pot. I see them through one-inch gaps in the window shades as they lay on their beds masturbating. I see them giving blowjobs, getting fucked.

 In the early morning, I lie in my own bed visualizing the naked women I saw that night—the tits, the hairy pussies, the shaved pussies, the butts. I affirm again-and-again that I am a person subject only to vision and smells—not physical contact, which I abhor.

 Until recently, I never felt any remorse, never reflected on the morality of my life style, never questioned why I did what I did. I felt no guilt, possibly because of the speed and beer I continued to do daily for years, which seems to have distorted many of my perceptions and actions—including my way of doing business.

 Except for Walter Funcker at Harvard, no one ever challenged my visual pursuits until I myself did when I suddenly found plenty of time to think rationally—ironically freed from speed and beer. Jail will do that to you.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Still after Vincent’s Death

MISSING IN ACTION

1

Ned

I met with Walter and Jimmy to discuss Vincent’s death and our options. Walter and Jimmy laughed it off, making jokes to each other. I liked the one Walter told: “How many people does it take to chase a dog away from a fire hydrant?”

“One, if the person’s name is Vincent?” replied Jimmy.

“No, no,” Walter said. “One if the person is dead-on.” We all laughed.

“I guess,” Walter continued, “we’ll have to bring Jimmy Bucks into QuadFirm earlier than we planned.”

Later, I called Jimmy as the number of deaths related to the deal concerned me.

 “Jimmy,” I said into the phone. “We have four dead people, two of them murdered—maybe Lon too—and now Vincent’s suicide, which could also be murder. Do you think Walter’s behind the deaths?”

 “I’m sure he has nothing to do with any of the deaths,” Jimmy said. “I think he had a couple of lawyers killed in the past, but I don’t think he’s ever killed a partner in a venture capital deal—that’s too close to home. He wouldn’t do anything to put himself in jeopardy.”

 “Yeah, sure,” I answered not reassured. “One more death, and I’m confronting Walter.” *Of course Walter knows what he’s doing. I just need to stay focused, remember that it’s always about the money.*

2

Tony

I’d set up a meeting with Ned to see what I could glean from him. Others told me that he’d inherited his way into the venture capital business, but I knew nothing else.

I’d noticed Ned at the first lawsuit conference because he kept staring at me and smiling. Even after I’d turned my head away from him, I continued to feel his gaze. Even Bro Beck’s glare did not distract me from Ned’s smile.

However, Ned is the most nondescript person that I’d ever seen, and I wasn’t sure if I would recognize him if I met him on the street.

 I went to his office for an evening meeting, but he didn’t show. Instead I went for a drink, or maybe I should say several drinks—mostly doubles. As usual when the bar closed, too drunk to drive, I crashed in the parked limo.

CHAPTER TWENTY

After Ned Goes Missing

THE TRUTH ABOUT REHABILITATION

Tony

A belligerent, don’t-give-me-a-break cop hauled me out of my parked car and tossed me to the ground, rolled me over, and cuffed my arms behind my back. He dragged me to his police car and shoved me into the back seat. He cursed me the entire time as if I’d killed someone he loved while driving drunk.

Although he performed no field sobriety tests, he took me to the San Francisco City Jail where they charged me with a DUI—and threw me into the drunk-tank, again without testing.

The drunk-tank was shaped in a circle. Around the edges, rising six inches above the floor and separated by four feet, were eight concrete slabs for beds, which surrounded a large open area in the center. One, exposed, stainless steel toilet separated two of the beds. I couldn’t see any toilet paper. Three drunks were passed out or sleeping on their own concrete slabs.

 A large black man, dressed in gang clothes with a red bandana tied around his head used the toilet paper for a pillow, an idea I would remember once I got to my cell.

A pickled Hispanic lay on his back with his shirt off, his belly rising like an over-stuffed turkey.

The third guy, Germanic like me, wore a wrinkled suit he must have worn for several days—probably while he panhandled and drank cheap wine. Flakes of dried vomit covered the suit, and drops of still-wet barf hung on his lips like dribble from a baby. Although his slab was the farthest from mine, the distance did nothing to stop the waft of foul odor from reaching deep into my nostrils, deep inside my body, penetrating until I retched.

 Thank God I didn’t need to take a crap because I would have been afraid to take the toilet paper out from under the gang-banger’s head. He jerked constantly in his drunken sleep, each time making me afraid that he would wake up, beat me anyway. As if I could protect myself from danger, I slid as close to the wall as I could, keeping my back stiff to the cold concrete.

 Sometime after midnight, we got a new compadre. He took a crap before he checked for toilet paper. Afterwards, he shouted in an unfamiliar language as he threw his dripping wet shit across the room. The gang-banger woke up, got up, went over and punched him out. I hoped this banger would be someone else’s cellmate—not mine!

 The guards outside the drunk-tank ignored or did not hear the rampage within. Inside, the shit stink merged with the rotten-vomit stench like smoke and fog, but instead of creating smog, the combination formed its own unnamed, misty aroma. I turned my nose toward the wall as if somehow the effusive reek would stop before it got there—but it didn’t. The others in the drunk-tank slept as if the guards had decorated the tank with fresh-cut roses.

 Several hours afterwards, we were pulled out of the drunk-tank and processed. The procedure of getting to my cell started with visiting four separate stations located in the processing section. A health and social service lady, whose smoky coffee-breath spewed through buckteeth when she spoke, interviewed me. I signed forms I could not read because they had confiscated my reading glasses, although she did read me the questions, none of which I could comprehend in my still drunken state.

 A bulging nurse with three hag-like chins grabbed me out of the chair and shoved me against the wall, seeming more belligerent than the cop who arrested me, as if she too had been harmed by a drunk driver. She demanded me to, “Drop your pants, turn your head and cough.” She then probed me with stubby, banana-sized fingers.

Another officer asked me questions at the booking station, while a camera hanging from the ceiling took my picture. The picture reflected how fucked up I was: red-faced with scraggly hair, the remnants of my own vomit on my chin—the real reason I hadn’t been able to escape the horrid air in the drunk-tank.

 A new officer lined us up for fingerprinting, using a graphic scanner and computer instead of ink and paper—sophisticated stuff, no mess.

 The guards moved us down the hall to chairs, each stacked with a gray bin. Each bin contained one brown blanket, two white sheets, one pillow case (no pillow), toothpaste and a finger-sized toothbrush, a cup, a plastic spoon with teeth an eighth-of-an inch-long, and a pencil, like one used to keep score on a golf card—but no paper to write on.

 We showered and changed into fairly decent prison uniforms—brown pull over, open-collared shirts, gray comfortable pants that surprisingly fit, white underwear, socks and tennis shoes—the aroma of puke replaced by the fragrance of disinfectant.

 “Move down the hall,” shouted one of the officers. “Keep to the right of the hall so your shoulder almost touches the wall. If anyone comes down the hall towards you, stop and face the wall until they have passed. Stop at all doors until a deputy gives you permission to enter. Stop at all red lines. Wait for permission to pass. You are to call all deputies Sir or Ma’am.”

 There were a lot of red lines to control the traffic flow and artificially keep prisoners a safe distance from the fixed locations where deputies sat in front of monitors—never getting close enough to actually touch any of us scum-infested criminals.

I entered my cell, #21B around five a.m. The B meant I would sleep in the upper bunk, right under the light that they never shut off. But even with the constant light, just being in the cell felt as gloomy as a dark dungeon. The bunks were made for a person five-foot-ten. I’m six-foot-two. The lower bunk acted as a reverse penthouse, the desired spot to be, as the upper bunk blocked the sharp glow of the forever light.

 The width of the cell was the same as the length of the bunks so I had to sleep curled up or with my legs stretched and feet raised, pushed flat against the wall. The walls were made of stacked, light green and dark green cinder blocks, which made me feel as if I were trapped in a Lego set made by some perverted kid.

A desk attached to the wall and a chair bolted to the floor, so it couldn’t be used as a weapon, were alongside another stainless steel toilet—but with toilet paper and a spare, which I confiscated and stuck in my pillowless pillowcase. There was no way for air to escape the cell; it reeked much like the drunk-tank, the vomit vapor replaced by the tang of B.O.

 The sight of a young white kid in the bottom bunk relieved my anxiety of sharing a cell with the gang-banger.

I climbed up to my bunk and slept solidly for fifteen minutes—when the call for breakfast jumped out of the wall. There was a speaker cemented into the cell wall to send and receive messages—we watched what we said to our cellmate. We learned to speak in whispers with our backs to the speaker-infested wall.

“If you want breakfast,” a voice from the speaker said. “Put your shoes on and step out in front of the door.”

We pushed a button on the inside, held it, and pushed open the door to a kind of freedom—outside the cell instead of inside.

“Move to the right, stay in line, and move around the circle to the food servers,” the speaker shouted from behind us. I don’t know why, but it was always move to the right, never to the left wherever they took us.

 We called out-of-the-cell-time “tier-time” because the area for reading or watching TV consisted of a round, raised platform, surrounded by a walkway and the cells. We didn’t eat there. We took the food back to our cells where the “tears” were of a different kind.

 For breakfast they served something that seemed to be Cream of Wheat—It tasted more like cream a la shit. We also got a cup of milk and half a green or rotten banana. At least I found breakfast edible, as long as I breathed through my mouth to suppress the taste—lunch and dinner were not, except for the rolls. I lost ten pounds during the week they had me locked up.

 Over meals I got to know my cellmate. Joe had violated his probation for car theft when they found one beer in his house, or so he said. He wanted to join the Marines, but he couldn’t until his probation ended—violations of probation meant two weeks jail time. They originally convicted him of felony car theft, but the felony would be reduced to a misdemeanor at the end of his probation, enabling him to become a Marine.

Jail is a wonderful place for further educating our criminals about their trade. It took only one meal to learn how to steal a car and which cars were the easiest to steal—Hondas and Acuras because the Japanese failed to install the sophisticated antitheft devices Americans and Germans put in their cars.

Since we were in the lock-down unit, where you go for the first week, they shortly transferred Joe to a permanent cellblock, which according to Joe was like a move to the suburbs: They let you out of the cells during the day to watch TV, talk, read, or play cards. I had a lot to look forward to.

 I wasted no time moving down to the darkened, lower bunk, however, the speaker awoke me, at three a.m., “Trueblé, move to the top bunk.”

 “Yes Sir,” I replied to the speaker, but I wasn’t happy. I was even less happy when my new cellmate arrived—the black guy from the drunk-tank, Mr. Gang-Banger himself. Sweat ran down my neck, as my fear imagined I would be beaten, or worse—butt-fucked.

 “I’m Tom Foster. Who are you?” he said calmly.

 “Tony. I’m Tony,” I said as I cautiously eyed this large beast of a man.

 “What you in for?” he asked.

 “Drunk driving, but I wasn’t driving,” I claimed. “You?”

 “Nothing I did. Just a spat with my bitch girlfriend. Said I hit her—but I didn’t. The bastard cops who arrested me didn’t even check her for bruises before they hauled me in—like a woman’s word is always true no matter what.”

 *A fucking woman-abuser! I’m probably next.*

Neither of said anything else. We climbed into our assigned bunks to tangle with our own thoughts. Because of the weekend, I wasn’t able to contact a lawyer or arrange bail, so most of my thoughts were directed towards *how and when am I getting the fuck out of here?*

 Alone in the top bunk, my body trembled as my thoughts shifted to Foster. My imagination hinged with fear of this large, black abuser of women butt-fucking me. No way would the cops arrest him unless he actually hit his girlfriend. *Woman abusers must all be butt-fuckers.*

 I continued to fear that Foster would attack me in our cell. Or like the cliché, wait until we were in the shower or some isolated spot elsewhere in the jail. How the hell could I protect myself from this gang-banging, woman hater?

 Granted, I didn’t know much about blacks, hadn’t really been around any minorities for that matter, other than those who played on opposing football teams. Except for Bro Beck, I didn’t personally know any people of color, and I didn’t really know Bro as a person. Raised by white parents, in a white neighborhood, and going to schools with only white kids had brainwashed and branded me as a racist. The only thing I knew about blacks I had learned from watching movies or from the many racist jokes I’d heard, told, and laughed at. Being in a cell with a black criminal, however, did not make me laugh.

Forced shower-time occurred in the morning, after breakfast. Showers were taken four cells at a time. While we headed right towards the showers, one of the guards yanked Foster aside. I felt relieved that I would be safe from him in the showers. The guards directed the other seven of us down a long, isolated hall, then disappeared. There were four blacks, two Hispanics and me, headed for the showers.

 None of the blacks seemed to be gang-bangers; however, as soon as we got to the showers, the guards still gone, two of the blacks started to hassle me.

 “Hey, white boy,” one of them said with mouth wide open, lips puffed out, gold teeth prevalent, “You lookin’ sweet as sugar—white sugar!”

 They all laughed, even the Hispanics who seemed relieved that I took the brunt of the verbal attack, apparently making them feel safe for the moment.

 “Come over here, boy,” the other black hassler said.

 I ignored the laughs, ignored the order to come over. I stripped down, got into one of the shower stalls and closed the curtain as if that would protect me. I just finished soaping-up when one of them flung the curtain aside.

 “You gots a teeny one there, honey,” a hassler said as he stood facing me, rubbing his huge dick. “You want some of this? You better, ‘cause you’re gonna get it.”

 Before I could respond, a large black hand fell upon the hassler’s shoulder and spun him around. A punch to his stomach quickly brought him to his knees. “You guys fucking with my cellmate?” Tom Foster asked. “That ain’t right, you know.”

 Tom then picked the black hassler up by his ears and twisted them until the hassler begged Tom to stop.

“Guess you won’t be bothering my boy no more, will you?” Tom said as he let the hassler fall to the floor and gently closed the curtain so I could rinse the soap, now mingled with fear-sweat, off my body.

Back in the cell, Tom said, “Tony, we cellmates. We together. You watch my back, I watch yours. That’s how it works in here. No one else going to be as close as we in here be, so best we stick to each other like a mom with her children.”

 It turned out that instead of Tom Foster being the guy who would butt-fuck me, he became my protector, and I his, as we watched each other’s back. Tom also became my mentor as he explained how to survive in jail. I reciprocated by working with him to write some poems after he showed me some of the work he’d done.

 “You got to tell some jail stories. Let it be known you been here before. You got to tell stories ‘bout the outside—stories that strike fear. You thin, not too muscular. Make up a story where you take down some big guy you stab. It’s all about bullshit in here, you know.”

Tom told me another thing prisoners do to establish themselves as part of the herd. You talk about your previous prison time, telling prison stories to show that you’re okay, that you’ve been there before, that you’re one of the guys; make them know that you’re not some white honky waiting to be hassled. I learned to embellish my past, to make sure everyone knew I was a badass dude, experienced with jail time.

Tom would do more than teach me how to survive inside. He would show me how to work the guards. He would show me how to act manly. Most of all, Tom would teach me by just being himself that my fears, ideas, and bias about blacks were unfounded, that it wasn’t a black guy and a white guy together in a cell, it was two people working together, surviving together without regard to whom or what they were. Like soldiers together in a war, race didn’t matter.

 Tom proved that, gang or no gang, you wouldn’t call him a bad person. He even patiently listened to my own spiel, my running tape of how I too became an innocent victim of police lies, arrested for a DUI when I wasn’t even driving. Tom and I had false, false-arrest in common—kidding everyone, kidding ourselves, believing our own bullshit as we struggled to survive in jail without damage.

Neither Tom nor I had glasses; nor money on us to buy them from the prison commissary. We couldn’t read in our cell, leaving us nothing to do except sleep or talk. We slept sixteen hours a day. To me, boredom and uncertainty became the worst part of the experience.

After they released me, I wanted to do something for the poor souls left behind. Using my credit card, I put $100 on Foster’s inmate account so he’d know someone cared. He would be able to buy glasses for himself and for some of the others in the same situation.

I kept the letter he sent me several weeks after I got out, pinned in the limo as a reminder that I’m a bigot and shouldn’t be:

Tony,

I felt a letter of Thanks was in line, for the money that you left on my books and for the book you sent me on writing poems. You are certainly a RARE person. As you asked I have shared the wealth, there have been three other people besides myself that have been in dire need of reading glasses. And have purchased commissary envelopes, writing paper, coffee and the like for others like myself that had nothing. Little things make this stay a lot easier. As you suggested I been writing some poems. Here’s one for you to read:

**The Truth About Rehabilitation**

Rehabilitating prisons

don’t delight in providing answers.

Instead, round and round they go

where prey dominates inside.

Stop the cycle, change the name,

lock them up another way.

Don’t break them inside—

prepare them for the outside.

Make them better at what they do:

Train them all to be lawyers.

I laughed. A poem written by the person I thought wanted to bang me in the butt if I shared a cell with him. You just can’t tell people from the outside. I guess the Boston Strangler, who always wore three-piece suits, had proved that long ago.

They notified me at ten a.m. on my seventh day in jail that I was being released. Like in-processing—it took forever. We turned in uniforms, got belongings, signed more papers, and waited. Seven hours passed before I walked outside into clear skies with a new perspective on life.

A lawyer I didn’t know met me outside.

“My name is Sean Tracy,” he said extending his hand. “Dic Mécia asked me to meet with you and let you know that he posted your bail. I can represent you in the DUI case, but you’re going to need a more experienced criminal lawyer to handle the grand theft charge.”

“The what charge?” I asked as I felt my brain wrinkle in pain like it did with a bad hangover.

“You know,” he said. “They found the gold bar in your limo. Its registration number matched the registration number on the gold bar owned by a Walter Funcker, who reported it stolen.”

There was no sense explaining to the attorney that Walter had his dick up my ass. I could only hope that he did this to get me to accept his offer of the ten gold bars, not to punish me. With Leticia likely out of the picture, I needed the money to fight the charges and pay the other lawyers. I’d have to add a DUI lawyer and a criminal lawyer to my growing repertoire of legal advisers.

I would take Walter’s offer—if it were still an offer.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Right after Tony Gets Out of Jail

EMBRACING THE FORCES OF ANTAGONISM

Tony

After getting out of jail, I called Walter to discuss the acceptance of his offer to be his spy. We reaffirmed the offer and explored the details and expectations of what he wanted me to do. I would provide information to Walter that he could use personally against Leticia or information related to the lawsuit her lawyers were planning on using. I would also keep an eye on his subordinates and report any behavior by them that might be suspicious or not in his best interest. To protect me from being accused of stealing the ten gold bars, we signed an agreement transferring the ownership of the ten-registered gold bars to me for unspecified services to be rendered.

 Walter and I were like two paranoids working together without trust.

The gold weighed a lot. Walter placed five gold bars in each of two backpacks. I had parked the limo four blocks away, so we decided to walk to my car—he wore one pack and I the other. We should have called a cab, but Walter said it would be good exercise to walk. For a scrawny guy, he could move, always being much tougher than anyone thought.

As we walked down the street towards an intersection, me grumpy from my decision to work for Walter, he whistling away, obviously happy with the decision, I noticed a green SUV speed into the intersection from the right. The light we walked towards had turned green and a blue sedan with the right of way had already entered the intersection. The two cars collided in the middle of the intersection making a noise that sounded like tin being smashed together because they were both American-made cars.

I stood frozen several yards short of the intersection. The accident seemed to have the opposite effect on Walter. He wasted no time yanking off his backpack full of my gold. As if the gold had lost its value, he dropped it to the ground and sprinted towards the sedan, which now emitted reddish-orange spurts of fire with a yellowish hue, signs that the car could blow apart anytime soon.

I watched as Walter got to the sedan that looked like it was about to burst into flame. He opened the door, unhooked the driver’s seatbelt, and tugged an older Hispanic woman from the car, dragging her over to the corner in front of me.

The woman’s clothes began to combust. Walter took off his suit jacket and started to beat out the fire before it could engulf her. As the SUV now burst into larger flames, the woman inside seemed frozen in time as if she were me standing aghast as Walter acted.

“Goddamn it, Tony!” Walter yelled in a shrill tone that might have burst my ear drums had I been closer. “Take your fucking jacket off and get over here and help this lady.”

As I ran forward, still wearing my backpack of gold, Walter ran to the now-burning SUV and wrenched a black teenage girl out, bringing her to the same corner where I, having dropped my own gold-filled backpack beside me, worked feverishly to finish putting out the flaming clothes of the Hispanic woman with my sports coat. Walter’s gold, my gold now, still lay back where we stood when he had dropped it.

The black teenage girl came alert as she screamed, “My baby, save my baby.”

Without hesitation, Walter ran back to the SUV, the flames now bursting as he yelled back to me to get both women further away from the cars.

As I pulled the Hispanic woman back, I could see Walter struggling to open the rear door of the SUV, first burning his hand, then running back to get his suit jacket and taking it to the SUV to open the simmering door handle.

By the time I’d taken the teenage girl further away from the burning cars, Walter had the door open. I watched as he plucked out a curly-headed child and the car seat he or she sat in.

As Walter headed towards me, the child held safely in front of him, the SUV semi-erupted, spewing large blue flames. Because Walter held the child in front of him, the flames bursting from the car caused the child no harm, although the fire bursts blew parts of Walter’s shirt right off his back, his scales seared by the heat.

A last I moved and ran to Walter, grabbed the car seat with the child in it with one hand, Walter the other and hauled them further away from the flames, reaching safety as both cars exploded into a fiery mass of steel, rubber, and vinyl, the force of the explosion fortunately directed away from where we stood gasping for air.

Worn from the trauma, we both slumped down to the curb and sat.

Walter turned towards me and said, “Goddamn, I hate kids.”

As we sat, a young man came up to us and said, “Here’re your backpack. How come it’s so heavy?”

The morning *Chronicle’s* headline surprised me as I expected it surprised anyone who knew Walter:

**WAR HERO SAVES THREE FROM BURNING CARS**

**Medal of Honor Winner, Walter Funcker, Shows He’s Still a Hero**

 The story went on to explain how Walter won the Medal of Honor during combat in some far off jungle, how he personally risked his life to bring others to safety, then returned to single-handedly take out a machine-gun nest.

 But, the real surprise occurred when the article mentioned Colonel Peter Fellure as his commanding officer and Second Lieutenant Kenneth Beck as his platoon leader, reporting that both had recommended Walter for the medal.

 *How else were these three connected and what did that connection have to do with the murders?* jumped into the forefront of my mind, almost, but not quite, as quickly as Walter’s reaction to saving the women’s and child’s lives.

My thinking towards Walter as a person changed after he saved the women and child, especially after I learned that he was a war hero.

I couldn’t help but now give him some benefit of doubt, but not too much, since most of the actions he took in civilian life were questionable if not outright evil—actions that completely contradicted his heroics.

I’d have to accept that even the worst people have some good characteristics, just as the best people have bad characteristics—but I didn’t know now which applied to Walter: a good man acting bad or a bad man acting good.

 Walter dropped the charges after I agreed to accept his offer of the ten gold bars to work for him. I would continue acting as if I worked for Leticia so I would have access to developments in her case. Walter and I would be the only ones aware of our arrangement. I knew spying for him collided with my view of right and wrong, but I had grown tired of fighting the forces of antagonism that constantly worked against me in ever-increasing intensity. Following the path of least resistance made the most sense at the time.

 I pleaded guilty to the DUI as part of a plea bargain. The judge sentenced me to ninety days in jail, but gave me credit for the seven days I’d already served. He put me on probation, with the remaining days suspended provided I attended Alcoholics Anonymous meetings for ninety days—break probation by missing a meeting, go directly to jail just like happened to Joe, my first cellmate when he broke probation.

But I abhorred the thought of going to AA meetings. I believed AA to be a Christian-oriented group of drunks who gave up alcohol to embarrass themselves in front of other drunks and to justify their own behavior as they confessed to them. *Why couldn’t they find a priest to confess to and leave the rest of us alone? –especially me!*

 But I knew that I had gotten out of control, and I wanted to do something before I killed myself or someone else. I often undermined my own life, my own health, my own ability to think straight. I put others at risk as I jeopardized their lives by driving drunk—by now I should have 4,000 DUIs, although I’d reduced the risk since I’d moved into the limo. But as my friend Jack Armstrong once said, “The difference between a good boy and a bad boy is the bad boy gets caught.” And I had been caught by both the police and Walter.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

After Tony Gets Out of Jail

A GROUP OF DRUNKS

Tony

The day after my sentencing, I decided to get a triple latte at my usual place to jack up for the day. Of course, I still drank little bottles of vodka, but not as often.

I’d noticed before a group of people sauntering in and out of the building next door to the coffee shop, laughing, carrying-on, enjoying life. I asked a cute-girl, actually an attractive woman in her forties, “What’s going on with you people in that building every morning? Why are you so happy?”

She introduced herself as Nadja. “I’m an alcoholic,” she revealed as she surprised me by breaking her own anonymity. “This is a regular morning meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous.”

*Perfect!*

Nadja sensed my need—or smelled my breath—and gently intertwined her arm with mine, leading me into the meeting before I could get my latte. I followed like a puppy being pulled by its benevolent owner; the one who fed it, the one who rubbed it, the one who unconditionally loved it.

At least thirty-five drunks were brave enough to make a seven a.m. meeting on a Saturday.

It didn’t take long for me to begin to freak out as men and women read from a bible-sized blue book; readings that reminded me of being in a church on Sunday. This appeared to be part of a regular program, which at least related to alcoholism, and thankfully did not mention any particular religious belief, although the word God did come up several times. The readings mostly described the steps to sobriety and the traditions under which AA operated.

The first AA step they read dived to the bottom of my brain and resurfaced as if it were one of my own thoughts. It suggested that I recognize I am powerless over alcohol and living an unmanageable life. Not too hard to grab onto, since even when I didn’t want a drink I got one anyway.

If someone pissed me off, I drank to kill the anger. If I didn’t feel well on any given day (which happened a lot because of hangovers), I drank to feel better. If I felt stressed, for any reason, I drank to de-stress. And if I felt good, no problems, life under control, I drank to celebrate my well-being.

At that first meeting, ten people sat around tables; another twenty-five or so sat in chairs behind them. An older man sounded and acted like he was in charge. But I would learn overtime, that the meeting secretary was there to serve, not to dictate or to be in control, although the secretaries often lapsed into control-like behavior—the need to control apparently one of the common defects of alcoholics, and one of the many manifestations of mankind’s innate need for conflict.

The walls were covered with sayings: *Take It Easy; Think, Think, Think; Let Go*. The serenity prayer hung on one wall, calling for acceptance of what can’t be changed, courage to change what can be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference.

Several pictures of two guys dressed in 1930s clothes hung on one wall. In one picture, they sat in chairs talking to a guy sitting on a bed in his underwear.

I didn’t know whether to laugh or get weirded out, but weirded out won.

The atmosphere got better when this hot chick said, “Hi, I’m Buffy. I’m an alcoholic.”

“Hi, Buffy,” the entire group responded in sync.

Typical of my sexual instincts run amok, I could only focus on her breasts so I didn’t initially hear a word she said. Yet, her breasts were nothing compared to her face and eyes. No, she didn’t have some type of green eyes, for God’s sake, nor did they look like emerald-covered sparkling diamonds. They simply showed an honesty that belonged at the entrance to the Supreme Court; an honesty that belonged on the face of the Statue of Liberty.

I still didn’t listen to what she said, but as I stared into her face, she smiled in my direction, warming my heart, making me want to cry—to cry out: Goddamn woman, take me I’m yours, I’ll never drink again.

 I decided to listen.

“I got tired of waking up in bed with strangers, hung over, fearing getting up and going to work, getting off work and going drinking with my girlfriends, and then waking up in bed with some new asshole,” she said.

“Thanks, Buffy,” the group said in unison.

Now they were getting my rising attention. Like when I was a freshman in my high school French class, I had to suppress an erection as I continued to scope out Buffy’s body.

An older woman, maybe sixty and wearing a hat, spoke up. “I’m Jane, alcoholic.

“Hi, Jane.”

“For me it wasn’t so much waking up in bed with strangers. When I woke up I wanted a drink, and I had one no matter how early in the morning I woke. I usually started drinking by five a.m. I eventually learned that if you don’t take that first drink, you can’t get drunk, can’t get a hangover. To do that, I simply worked the program, which led me to accept responsibility for my own actions. Now the strangers are a lot more attractive when I wake up,” she joked bringing laughter and smiles to the room as if we watched a famous comic on the stage instead of a drunk confessing their secret aberrations. *A bunch of happy drunks—how funny.*

“Thanks, Jane.”

A man said without identifying himself, “Turning my desire to stop drinking over to a higher power worked for me. I call that higher power God, but not the God my parents raised me with. Not that vengeful, punishing entity created by man—but a loving something out there at a higher level than I am. Frankly, I call him God for convenience. I don’t know what or who he or she is, and I don’t care. Sending prayers to my God, as I understand him, helps me stay sober. Oh, I’m Tom. I’m an alcoholic.”

“Hi, Tom.”

*Jesus Christ—this “I’m an alcoholic, hi, thanks” shit, is driving me crazy. But, I do like what the man said about his God.*

I closed my eyes and drifted a little, let things settle. When I opened my eyes, everybody had gotten up and formed a circle, which I quickly joined out of embarrassment. We held hands while that head control-freak guy said, “A moment of silence for those who still suffer in their alcoholism, followed by the Lord’s Prayer.”

Before I could puke, he said, “Whose father?” Most everyone followed with the Lord’s Prayer, while I silently wondered how I could listen to this more than once. *Maybe I could write my own version based on Walter’s Sun God and say it instead: Our Sun God in the sky, taketh away our defects and obsessions, develop our spirituality as you inspire us with your life-giving force. Give us twenty-four hour periods to accept our failures as we accept the failures of others. And give us serenity in our choices as you deliver us from anger and resentment, thy sunshine with all its glory directed toward progress, not perfection, during the foreverness of our limited lives.*

As I went to more and more AA meetings, I found attractive, intelligent people sharing at random their own experiences and problems with alcohol—and how AA virtually saved their lives and enhanced the way they lived it. I heard a lot of interesting stories. One’s you might reveal to your psychiatrist, but not to anyone you knew.

 Over time, I learned that AA sharing is limited to a discussion of alcoholism. No one shares or talks to others about any drug problems they might have. You speak your piece mostly without verbal judgment or criticism of AA or its members. No arguments because there are no discussions—only short monologues where everyone else listens in quiet—no interruptions or cross-talk allowed about what someone shared. Listening and taking responsibility for yourself were two important aspects of AA.

The AA traditions and the way the alcoholics seem to operate under the traditions, instead of being fixed rules, made their approach seem to be somewhat anarchistic, which I found extremely interesting. Part of their anarchistic approach was to not endorse or involve themselves in any outside positions. No one appears in the news or on television to promote AA. No money is taken for operations from any source other than AA members—AA being one hundred percent member supported.

The AA meeting format, the organizational format, the way everyone interacted, led me to feel that presence of anarchy. Yet it surprised me that there were no fanatics present or in the street touting the program and shouting salvation—and maybe that’s it: You can’t mix fanaticism and anarchy—they are at opposite ends of a spectrum.

 I liked the people and the AA program, so I decided to stick around, even after the ninety days mandated by the judge were up. But, I hadn’t had my last drink, nor had I seen my last bout of insanity.

Though I didn’t believe in God, I always liked to discuss and argue the possibilities, as I’d done with Walter during our chess games. I seemed to be a walking contradiction—in search of self, spirit, and the meaning of life, but drowning myself in such oblivion that answers were dreamed, not lived. The universe still seemed irrational and human life without purpose.

AA claimed that a higher power greater than myself could restore me to sanity, but the only higher power I knew was alcohol since I had no control over it—or maybe it was a lower power: the devil down below. The devil and God: each striving to win the battle for my soul. The devil and God: each doing everything in their power, higher or not, to continue to lure me away from or towards sobriety.

*Boy I must be important for both the devil and God to pay attention to me, given the size of the universe and number of things in it. Could God and the devil be micromanaging the entire thing? In collusion with each other?*

Apparently, I had the freedom to choose my own God, or more simply my own higher power, to be whatever I wanted it to be, which could be entirely recreated by me or modified later in any way I desired—however that seemed to set up any belief in God or a higher power as a wishy-washy concept.

More to the point, in the present I could choose the members of AA, in their collective existence, to be my higher power, which I initially did. I found the idea of God as an acronym for Group of Drunks to be an attractive alternative. Ironically though, I would eventually choose Walter’s concept of the Sun God to be my higher power as my skeptical view of God shifted more towards neutral.

The Sun God made as much sense as anything—perhaps more sense. I liked the basics in the idea of the Sun God because they lacked dogma and authoritarian control found in religious hierarchies. The Sun God required no structure, no belief system generated by others; no rituals, no one telling me or interpreting for me what the Sun is, what the Sun thinks, what the Sun wants for me or what the Sun demands me to do to recognize its existence. A belief in the Sun God, like AA, was an anarchistic concept. I added a short prayer to the Sun God that expressed my desires in the perfect acronym, WELL: Sun God, please give me warmth, energy, light, and love, which I said to myself when I buzzed around in the limo or wanted a drink.

I filed all my new found God thoughts in my mind to use in my next chess game with Walter, as we had played a second time in spite of his having set me up. Once again I lost. I knew that I would need more psychobabble to disrupt him when we played our third game—like he would continue to do with me.

In retrospect, Walter always said something or did something that gradually made me accept him as a quasi-friend, or at least someone capable of entertaining me. But the relationship with Walter required me to continually watch my back, knowing that he played life like he played chess—to win at all costs using devious or questionable methods.

The first thirty days of getting sober were difficult. I suffered mentally from my obsession to drink, and I suffered from a continued physical craving for alcohol. Fortunately, an older woman, Louise, told me I could reduce my craving for alcohol, a normal withdrawal symptom, by eating a tablespoonful of peanut butter whenever my body demanded a drink. After the meeting, I headed for the closest supermarket to buy a jar of Jiffy creamy peanut butter, my favorite as a child. However, I did experience an unexpected negative result: I gained twenty pounds in ninety days, although I’ve since taken those pounds off by learning to control my eating habits just as I learned to control my ability to no longer abuse myself with alcohol.

Restless, irritated and discontented, I roamed the Safeway aisles searching for the Jiffy. The crowds make it seem like a street fair. People kept getting in my way, even banging into me. I wanted to yell at everyone, but by now I knew how to restrain myself. Finally, I found the right aisle. The crowed vanished as if they were beamed away all at once by aliens.

As I walked down the aisle, an alien looking guy in his twenties, tall and slender with yellow-spiked hair, approached me from the other end. He wore earrings in both ears and a tiny, gold ring pierced his lower lip. I couldn’t help but laugh because he wasn’t walking as much as falling forward as if gravity produced his motion by pulling him forward. In addition, his head down, he never took his eyes off the floor.

 As I got closer, I could see his problem. He was pigeon-toed. His feet pointed inward causing an imbalance that shifted his weight to his toes so that he appeared to fall forward as he walked. I laughed again, this time loud enough to get his unwanted attention.

 When he raised his head in response to the loud laugh I uttered, his eyes glared at me with a deep penetration that seemed to express a rage that I even existed, let alone dared to be in his presence. He said while his head rose, mouth snarled, “What the fuck are you laughing at, fucker? You think it’s funny to laugh at me like that?”

 I didn’t recognize this dip shit, but he seemed to recognize me.

 “No wonder Leticia and Bro dislike you—actually hate your guts. You go around in your drunken state antagonizing everyone you interact with. Frankly, I don’t see why Leticia ever liked you; but I assure you she could care less now. She told me that you’ve been fucking her over since high school. Someday, Tony, someone will give you what you deserve.”

 “Who the fuck are you?” I asked, ready to punch this sucker out as I tried to connect him to Leticia and Bro, tried to grasp what he said about them hating me. I could understand Leticia’s feelings, but I hadn’t realized Bro carried this much resentment towards me. I wondered how the three of them were connected.

 “Shut up, old man, or I’ll smack you into the retirement home. For what it’s worth, I’m Leticia’s stepson, Cozen,” he said as he turned and gravitated away.

 The term “old man” pissed me off, I wanted to fly into my own rage and chase him down the aisle, as the idea to strike him from behind surfaced to my consciousness. Instead, I turned and walked away leaving the hard to find Jiffy on the shelf ahead, steps from where he walked.

I knew that Leticia had a stepson, but I’d never had an opportunity to meet him as he seemed to exist somewhere in the background, out-of-sight, perhaps out-of-mind to everyone else. That worked fine for me because I had enough trouble staying sober without adding one more asshole to the pile of jerks I seemed to always find myself interacting with.

 And speaking of jerks, the second lawsuit conference was scheduled for the next day. Staying sober before and after that would be a real challenge to my desire to stop drinking.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

After Tony Gets Out of Jail

THE LAWYER FEEDING FRENZY TURNS INTO AN EATING FRENZY

1

Tongue-Tied

Bruce Verbose’s days of yakking on and on ended happily for all concerned.

The housekeeper found Bruce at home on the kitchen floor next to a knife from his own kitchen drawer. Some unknown person had mutilated him by cutting out his tongue.

 All the defendant lawyers would learn that, although Bruce could no longer speak, he could still email—and that he did, constantly, which irritated even more than his talking ever had. His emails were diatribes that vented his anger as if other people existed only for some esoteric purpose contained deep inside Bruce’s brain.

 Yet, eventually all the lawyers considered Bruce’s emails works of perfection. The more complicated and mixed up they became, the more time it took the lawyers to read them and prepare responses. This in turn generated more responses by Bruce to the emails responding to his emails resulting in the lawyers being able to bill more and more fees to their clients as the response cycle seemed to infinitely repeat itself. Lon’s prediction of a lawyer feeding frenzy exceeded Lon’s expectations—with many thanks to Bruce, who also took advantage to drive up his own fee payments from Lon’s liability insurance carrier, which had acquiesced to Bruce also representing them.

 The emails also entertained the lawyers. Mixed into his emails were comments about his furniture: How he loved his couch, how his dining room table represented perfection, how his kitchen appliances carried a certain sexuality. This reminded Jimmy Bucks of a porno movie he saw where the male star fucks his kitchen. He squeezes his penis between the refrigerator handle, sticks it into the toaster, rubs flour on it, comes on the counter and uses his sperm as a cleaning solution to wipe the counter down.

 Jimmy Bucks mentioned Bruce’s emails to a psychologist and learned from him that a psychological response occurs for some traumatized people causing them to love their furniture. *God, that guy in the porno must have been intensely traumatized.*

 Although the emails originally seemed worse than any of the numerous phone calls previously made by Bruce, and the lawyers who loved to pad their bills could now maximize their fees by spending as much time as possible reading and responding to the large mass of emails, it seemed that the only way to shut Bruce up, even after cutting out his tongue, would be to kill him.

2

Tony

Jimmy and one of the attorneys waited at the elevator as I walked up.

“Pleasant day,” the attorney said to no one in particular, his eyes looking up, as several people waited for the elevator to take us to Bruce’s office.

 “Yeah, sure,” I mumbled, not thinking so, scuffing the floor with a foot.

 Jimmy grunted as we entered the elevator.

 “Walter’s not coming,” the attorney said.

 “No, he’s not,” replied Jimmy.

 “I thought that he was going to be here,” I said starting to test them to see if they knew of my arrangement with Walter. I wanted to know if they had any inkling that I sold out and worked with them now, not against them.

 “No,” said Jimmy. “He’s not going to be here.”

 “Jimmy, how are you involved in the deal?” I asked as the elevator rose.

“Tony, please wait until the conference starts and all the lawyers are here before asking anymore questions,” the attorney said.

3

From Feeding Frenzy to Eating Frenzy

Bruce Verbose had again demanded that the second lawsuit conference be held in his office conference room, perhaps a bad choice made by Bruce.

The death of Vincent and the missing Ned significantly reduced the number of conference attendees. There were four fewer people, if you included each of the personal attorneys.

Walter made the meeting—Jimmy and the attorney had jacked Tony around about Walter’s absence.

 Good and evil filled the room; the evil easier to identify than the good, if you counted the lawyers as part of the evil, or at least candidates for devil worship.

 Walter and Jimmy still sat at one end of the conference table with Bobbi Sue Wet and Bro Beck close by. Leticia decided to keep Tony on, and they sat at the other end—but Leticia did not talk to Tony nor respond to any of the questions he asked. Again, the lawyers sat in the middle acting as a restraining wall between the parties.

Bruce sat in his usual spot at the center. This time he had a laptop computer in front of him. Much like Stephen Hawking, Bruce used the computer to communicate, but what he said came out of the computer in a very, very slow manner because he could only type with his two index fingers.

 “Don’t . . . let . . . any . . . of . . . you . . . think . . . that . . . somehow . . . my . . . accident. . . will . . . have . . . any . . . impact . . . on . . . the . . . demands . . . of . . . my . . . client . . . to . . . compensate . . . her . . . for . . . the . . . actions. . . taken . . . by . . . Walter . . . and . . . his . . . gang.” Bruce’s computer spit out the sounds in a shrill, artificial voice causing individual bursts of suppressed giggles or outright laughter.

 Bobbi Sue Wet soon dozed off. Walter listened to one of his lawyers. Jimmy grinned as he recalled Leticia walking around naked in her bathroom. Hung-over, Bro pretended to be asleep, grunting out a snore now and then. Someone farted, but whatever lotion or oil Leticia adorned herself with that morning diminished the smell as she exuded a sweet, but evocative and suggestive fragrance.

Bruce continued to slowly spew words. Bobbi Sue now sat with her jacket off, hands behind her head, all eyes avoiding the exposed yellowed arm pits. Jimmy still smiled. Walter farted. Tony and Bro both sat with their eyes closed. Tony listened closely. Bro continued to nurse his hangover. Leticia also nursed a hangover, but her eyes were open and alert every time Bruce mentioned the money he demanded on her behalf.

 Bruce continued talking, once again referring to Walter and his gang.

 “Wait a minute,” replied one of Walter’s attorneys as he rose from his chair, giving him a looming presence, “There’s no need to take that tone. Walter and his business associates are honest businessmen, not a gang.”

 The meeting quickly turned into a free-for-all with everyone taking their shots at the others, except for Jimmy who thought about what Ned said to him earlier to watch his back.

 Walter’s viewpoint remained consistent: The little guys never win. He liked no one, least of all the lawyers in the room—except for maybe Tony. While he did make a few nasty comments for the fun of it, he busied himself letting more silent, deadly farts.

 The meeting started at ten a.m., but had made no progress by eleven-thirty, so Bruce suggested that “we . . . break . . . for . . . lunch.” He emailed his secretary from his laptop, ordering soup for himself and sandwiches for everyone else.

 Up to now, the fun part of the morning for most of the players at the table happened when Bruce forgot to use the computer and tried to speak directly to the participants, forgetting that he had no tongue as he tried to express himself.

 Walter’s people giggled each time Bruce tried to say something. Bruce’s face grew redder and redder when this happened, and he was glad for the lunch break. Bruce always ate his favorite soup, clam chowder, on Friday.

 A slightly hunched-over, lanky guy with a beard and long, brown hair brought in the lunch. He walked like a serpentine, his wavy legs winding in intricately complex, lithe movements. He set soup in front of Bruce and a variety of sandwiches in the middle of the table for the others who garbled down their food as if it were their last meal, swilling their coffee like shots of whiskey.

Bruce did his best to eat his soup, lightly dipping his spoon into the bowl and slurping at the milky broth. He smiled for the first time that day. He dug his spoon deeper into his plastic soup container searching for clam meat as his mouth began to water and open. His mouth grew closer to the spoon as his hand slowly and gently brought the clam-filled spoon to his lips. A sudden chill made him aware that things were not as they seemed. He turned behind himself, expecting perhaps to find a silver ghost cloaked in ice—but saw nothing there. He turned back towards the soup, his lips seeming to chill the closer they got to the clam-meat soup, still in the spoon, waiting to be tasted. As he slipped the meat into his mouth and took a bite, the view of the clam meat on the spoon penetrated his consciousness.

 *My fucking tongue!* He tried to speak the words, but could not. He grunted as he spit the partially chewed tongue out, which took a bounce on the conference table and slid across the table stopping in front of Walter, who started laughing.

 “Here, Jimmy Bucks,” Walter said as his index finger flipped the tongue towards Jimmy Bucks, who batted it with his hand at Bobbi Sue who batted it at no one in particular.

 Everyone laughed, including Tony and Leticia, but not Bruce—too busy grabbing his chest as he fell out of his chair onto the floor.

 The medics arrived within twenty minutes, too late to help Bruce, but not too late to help the others, except for Tony and Leticia who ate the morning Danishes instead of the sandwiches.

 Bobbi Sue Wet started it. She suddenly spewed green bile, a liquid that matched the color of Walter’s green and gold polyester pants, the same pants that he wore several years ago when he originally met with Jimmy and Ned to discuss Lon’s deal.

 Walter could not bat the bile as he did with Bruce’s tongue. Instead, he gagged as he jerked his eyes away, then contributed his own bile to the table, followed in sequence by the others, the order depending on who bit into their sandwiches first.

 Soon, a floating mass of green covered the conference table, which did not include the many portions of the bile that seeped off the table onto the suits of those too sick to move fast enough from their seats, except for Tony and Leticia who alert, jumped away from the table, relieved they only ate the Danishes.

 Tony put his arm around Leticia in an attempt to comfort her while they stared at the fiasco in front of them. Leticia slapped his arm off and stomped on his foot.

The police would determine that someone poisoned Bruce’s soup with a deadly chemical that induces heart attacks, and poisoned the sandwiches with a less toxic chemical, which only made the others hurl vomit onto the conference table.

 Of course, all the lawyers billed their clients for the time they spent in the hospital getting their stomachs pumped; and they billed their clients for any deductibles, coinsurance or other out-of-pocket expenses. A little stomachache would not stop the lawyer feeding frenzy.

4

Reactions to the Death of Bruce

Walter

 *God, that was funny slapping that tongue back and forth. Whoever is doing the killings sure has a good sense of humor. But, I guess the rest of us are safe or they would have killed everyone at the lawsuit conference instead of only making us sick.*

 *I’m starting to have fond affections towards Tony. He plays a good game and is fun to hang out with. He almost beat me in that last chess game. His babble actually distracted me. I think he’s scripting out what he’s going to say before he comes to play. I respect that.*

Jimmy

 *I wish Vincent and Ned could have been there. I know for sure that Ned would have enjoyed it—except the sick part. Where the fuck is he?*

Bro

 *Those were some good sandwiches. Even though I got sick last, I couldn’t help laughing as I watched those idiots play bat-the-tongue, my laughter becoming hysterical when they all started vomiting—that is until I too threw my own vomit onto the table.*

Leticia

 *Jericho! This makes me horny. I need to call Peter.*

Tony

 *That was the sickest thing I’ve ever seen. What’s wrong with these guys, anyway?*

*I don’t know how I’m supposed to help Leticia when she won’t even talk to me. But I shouldn’t care since I’m not really working for her any more. I can’t believe she stomped on my foot. She is one angry lady.*

*Jimmy escaped me for the last time. I’m following him until I force him to meet with me. I’m going to find out who did the killings regardless of my arrangement with Walter—he’s still a suspect no matter what he said to me. He and Jimmy have to be behind this, and maybe Bro. No one else benefits more than they do. Since I can’t get to Jimmy right away, I’ll try Bro Beck next.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Tony Moves on to Interview Bro Beck

ONE MAN’S REDEMPTION

Tony

Now that I had switched sides, I felt reluctant to meet with Bro Beck, but Walter wanted me to test Bro’s loyalty and intentions, and I thought that I should for my own protection.

I scheduled an appointment and went to see him. But in my mind, I no longer represented Walter or Leticia—only my own interests. I hoped that Beck’s answers might shed some light on how these idiots operated, but I didn’t want to be too direct, especially given the circumstances of our last meeting in high school and what Cozen recently said about Bro disliking me.

Beck’s office seemed smaller than its actual size. His extra-large desk, like the ego in his brain, filled the space like an elephant stuffed into a Volkswagen. The space between the desk and the walls on both sides held several folding chairs, which seemed necessary so that, when not in use, there was enough space to get from the front of the desk to Beck’s chair. There were no windows in the room. The office might as well have been in the basement of the building instead of on the top floor.

 Beck dedicated each wall to a different theme. The wall behind his chair held diplomas, certificates and other evidence of educational achievement. No evidence that Beck excelled academically appeared on the wall—apparently Beck never made the honor roll.

 He filled another wall with football memorabilia, beginning with a picture of him in his Pop Warner football uniform from his pre-high school era. But most of the pictures were of Beck playing high school football, catching passes, scoring touchdowns, or posing for pictures while taking various football stances. There were no pictures of the aftermath of our football clash.

 He chose pictures of himself in Army uniforms for a third wall: attending commission ceremonies; dressed for combat; sitting on top of a tank; marching the troops. In addition, he had attached to the wall a small case with medals: a purple heart and a company citation.

Mirrors extensively covered the fourth wall behind where I sat, including the office side of the door into the office. From Beck’s chair, he could observe the back of the person sitting across from him by peering over or around the person’s shoulders. I learned afterwards that the walls held hidden cameras that enabled Beck to secretly record any, and all, meetings. But I suspected Beck spent a good deal of time admiring himself in the mirrors while he sat at his desk. There were also mirrors in the center of the memorabilia on the walls to the left and right of Bro’s desk, but no mirror on the wall behind his desk.

 I smiled at myself in one of the side mirrors and scanned the office while I waited for Beck. You can always tell something about a person by the books the person has read or appeared to have read.

The books on Beck’s desk were all religious tomes. Beck placed the largest bible I’d ever seen prominently in the center of the desk, an obstruction that required me to peek around the bible in order to see his empty chair. The titles of the other books varied, but they all seemed to have the same theme: Christian fundamentalism.

After I waited over thirty minutes, Beck came into his office, his completely white cottage cheese hair wanting to, but not quite making me laugh. Up close he appeared to be as slender as I remembered him, but I knew that behind his slenderness existed the same muscles that made him such a great football player in high school. I’d never want to be in a fight with Beck—I would lose before I started. My only hope would be to go for that bad knee—as fast and as hard as I could, like I’d done in the football game where we were injured.

Beck dressed to reflect the hunk he deemed himself to be because of his six foot four, two hundred twenty pound build. He wore a tailored suit jacket, and when he took it off, I could see the ripples of muscles through the tight-fitting, white shirt. Of course, his shoes were shined to the point that I thought they might be made from patent leather.

 Before I could ask my first question, Beck said, “Tony, you’re a mess. When’s the last time you got a haircut? Your face has a reddish, brown hue to it, your eyes are bloodshot, your clothes are rumpled. What do you do, sleep in them? It’s obvious you need to get your life together. You’re not in high school, you know.” *A carefully crafted statement, I’m sure, to subtlely remind me of that high school football game that ended both our football careers.*

I scooted the chair over so he would have to see me while we talked. I crossed my arms, half closed my eyes, leaned back in the chair, and crossed my legs man-style. “Thanks,” I said. “I needed that as much as I don’t need to take a shit in the morning. What makes you think you’re so great?”

“Jesus Christ, my savior, and His inspiration in my life.”

“Gee,” I said. “I seem to remember you in high school as a major fuck-up—after your football “accident”. You were more on the side of the devil than God. What changed you?”

“Combat in the jungle opened my life to a lot of things. I almost got killed during an assault on a hill. It gave me more respect for life and the importance of choosing good over evil,” Beck said. “It all comes down to ‘there are no atheists in foxholes.’ I know that God saved my life for a purpose: to live my life according to His plan. Were you in the service?”

“The Military Advisory Group to Laos,” I said. “A sniper trained to kill. I could blow a commie’s head off from a thousand meters.”

“I thought we weren’t in Laos,” Beck said, seeming to give no indication that he bought the bullshit lie I told him about being a sniper. Or maybe he too continued to compete as if we were still on the football field, although I would rather be competing in a chess game with Walter than playing games with Beck.

“Well we were. We fought a secret war, a war that several presidents publicly denied existed—a statement that made us all laugh. My outfit supplied arms and supplies to the two anti-communist forces: the Laotian government and the Neutralists. Ironically, they also used the weapons against each other.

“What was your combat like, how long were you there?” I asked, already knowing some of the answers from the article in the morning *Chronicle* last week.

“Scary at first, but you learn quickly how to survive. My tour lasted long enough for me to be shot in the same knee you injured. I got a Purple Heart and a company citation for the success my platoon had in taking down a machine-gun pit of commies. One of my soldiers even earned the Medal of Honor.”

“Don’t blame me for your injured knee,” I said, ignoring everything else he said and avoiding saying fuck you, asshole. “I kind of remember it as one of those things that happens playing football. You could have been seriously injured by anyone. But if there’s any blame to throw around, I blame you for stealing my girlfriend.”

“Tony, I forgive you for what you did to me. It’s the Christian way. And I didn’t steal Leticia from you—you drove her away by your own outrageous behavior.”

 “The Christian way my ass,” I said. “Shit, you’re a fucking venture capitalist. You work for one of the biggest crooks in the business. You helped these guys screw over Leticia’s husband. Yet you claim you’re a Christian. Given the way Christians have acted during their history, I guess you fit right in.

“You’re like the rest of them. You pretend you’re not, but listen to what you say, what you do,” I said trying to mimic his earlier assault about how I looked.

 “All you’ve done differently is to choose sides, but it’s a different side of evil, not a choice between good and evil,” I continued as I glanced at myself in the small mirror on the wall to the left side of Bro’s desk. I saw my body shaking as if it were my body that was disgusted with Bro instead of my mind.

“Tony, it’s not necessary to use words that make you shake. You seem agitated all the time. You need to learn to ‘pause when agitated,’” Bro said as if he were trying to piss me off by throwing one of those irritating Alcoholic Anonymous sayings at me.

“We’re not all like that, Tony,” Beck continued. “Walter and his gang represent only one end of the spectrum. At the other end are people like me who always ask, ‘What would Jesus do?’ Actually, most of the venture capitalists are in between these two extremes: They cheat only when they have to and go to church every Sunday.

“Frankly, I’m ashamed to have been in business with Walter, which has probably already ruined my reputation anyway. People I respect are questioning my integrity. Heck, if I were Japanese I’d probably commit hara-kiri.”

I didn’t respond, couldn’t respond at first. Beck didn’t strike me as the religious or suicidal type. Maybe he really is a reformed Christian, and he’s taking it all too seriously with the suicide bit. Either that or I’m more gullible than I think.

“I’m searching for other opportunities,” Beck said. “I thought I might go back to school to study theology, maybe even become a minister—be in service for the Lord as a way of making amends. In the meantime, I’m working on a Christian-based venture capital fund that invests only in companies whose owners follow Christian ideals.”

“Is there a market for that type of approach?” I asked. “It’s my impression that business and Christian ideals don’t fit too well together. Personally, I’ve yet to meet anyone in the venture capital field that I’d trust with my money, especially Walter and his gang.

“Tell me, Bro, what’s going on? Lon sues—he dies of a heart attack. Pei-Pei and Garcy agree to talk—they’re murdered. Bruce Verbose is murdered. Vincent commits suicide. Ned disappears. Don’t you think maybe somebody murdered Lon, Vincent, and Ned also? That Walter had something to do with the deaths? Who else do you think might be behind the deaths? Who benefits? Come on, what do you think?”

“Walter, Ned, and their henchman, Jim der Bacon are not trustworthy,” Beck said. “We’ve had some serious tête-a-têtes. I don’t know if they’re what you call evil, but they do scheme and take liberties with other people and their money. It all comes down to making the right choices for oneself.”

“Yeah, there are a lot of choices to be made out there,” I said. “I’ve faced my own temptations. At one time, I thought that if I died owing five million dollars, I would be ahead of the game because I would have use of the five million dollars while alive. You know, screw the debt once you’re dead.

 “Another time I came up with the idea to get the personal information from people in mental institutions, find ones with clean credit histories, use that information to get false credit cards. Mental patients would be the last people to realize their identities were stolen or report any unauthorized credit use to the authorities.

 “How’d you get connected with Walter?” I quickly slipped in.

 “Tony, listen to you and your thinking. Get a grip,” Bro said before answering my question. “You’re like a tornado roaring through the lives of other people, setting down to disrupt them, and then moving onward, never really seeing the damage you leave behind.”

 “What about Walter,” I said, ignoring Bro on the outside, but steaming on the inside.

“I met Walter through a high school teacher, Peter Fellure, Vincent’s dad. I worked for Peter before he became a famous management guru. I helped him with research for his book and took care of personal business for him so he could free his time up to write. We became friends. Peter made big bucks, and he loaned me the money for college. Eventually, I graduated with a master’s degree in finance. He mentored me during college, and after I graduated he got me into the Army Reserves. After the Army commissioned me, they sent me to the jungle where Peter was the battalion commander. He oversaw my platoon’s assault that I mentioned. Several years after the war, he got me a job with Walter, who owed him some type of favor.”

“What about Walter?” I asked.

“What about him?” Beck said.

“He earned the Medal of Honor as a sergeant in your platoon.”

“He wasn’t in my platoon,” Beck said.

“Sure he was,” I said. “The *Chronicle* mentioned it in an article last week about Walter saving those lives.”

“I didn’t read the San Francisco paper last week; I was in New York the entire week,” Beck said as his eyes closed to slits as if his mind had gone somewhere else.

“Well the article mentioned Walter as the platoon sergeant and you as the platoon leader.

Beck’s face drew a blank as if he hadn’t realized that his own platoon sergeant was Walter Funcker. How do you serve with someone in combat and not remember them? Bro continued to not respond, staring off in space. I could see that it was news to him by the blankness in his eyes. As his eyes returned to normal, I decided to move in another direction.

 “Did you get killed in the stock market dot-com fiasco?”

 “No,” Beck said, now being responsive, but looking confused. “I diversified, so I’m in good shape. How about you?”

“No problem,” I lied to avoid letting him know the truth of my financial failures as I protected my own ego.

 Beck surprised me with an offer to help. “Tony, let’s meet next week. I’ll give you everything I have that will help Leticia with the lawsuit. I’ve got documents that will interest you.”

“Thanks, Bro,” I said thinking that maybe I could be wrong about him. He certainly seemed to have a better handle on his life than I had on mine. “Don’t do anything rash. I can understand how you feel, but the world is full of crooks, and you’re not personally responsible for other people’s behavior—especially Walter’s.”

*Now, if I can just chase Jimmy Bucks down and get some answers from him.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

After Tony’s Meeting with Bro Beck

CHASING JIMMY BUCKS

1

Tony

*Okay, so Jimmy Bucks is a Peeping Tom. What else does he do for fun? I need to follow him for a while to see where he goes, what he does.*

2

The Travels and Travails of Jimmy Bucks

Tony spent Monday night sleeping down the street from where Jimmy lived, assuming he didn’t know he drove a limo. In the morning, the day felt questionable as the change of seasons and the impending winter bore down, seeming to foreshadow an unpleasant future. But in the afternoon, a late, hot Indian summer would suddenly change the weather for the better portending hope, but that hope would not reach the unpleasant future that awaited Jimmy.

 Jimmy was on vacation and heading to Reno for a golf tournament. He decided to stop in Chico, where he had attended his first year of college, to visit one of his few friends, who had stayed in Chico—as many students do because Chico is a nice place to live.

Jimmy headed north through the San Joaquin Valley where the west and east mountain-range foothills slope down into the valley replacing the flat farm fields further south. While the skies were clear in the North Valley, Jimmy could see clouds to the south in his rear view mirror as if they were lurking behind him. One hundred miles to the north, he could see Mt. Shasta rise into the sky, its volcanic peak covered in snow, looking like a big white tit. Jimmy moved his hand to his groin, rubbing it as he thought about Leticia’s soft, white breasts.

Jimmy drove north to the small rural town of Orland where he cut over east to Chico which is nestled against the lava-covered buttes and foothills. These buttes surround canyons that penetrate into the hills where numerous hiking and horse-riding paths provide a place for physical activity for Chico residents. The snow-covered Mt. Lassen, located north east of Chico, is the source of the fertile valley land created by centuries of volcanic activity. Mt. Shasta and Mr. Lassen are both dormant volcanoes subject to future eruptions. But unlike the prolific California earthquakes, eruptions might not happen for centuries—yet could happen much sooner and be more destructive than any earthquake ever seen in modern times.

Jimmy and Tony spent the night in Chico. Jimmy stayed at his friend’s house. Tony slept, as usual, in the limo. Tony woke early and decided to grab a quick breakfast at the Chico State campus. On the way to the campus, he passed houses with lawns littered with empty red cups left over from kids boozing the night before, reinforcing the legend of Chico State being a party school. Many of the houses had beat-up couches on the porches, some placed on the lawn close to the sidewalk for people watching.

Multiple-brick buildings surrounded by large grassy areas, pine trees, and bushes make up the Chico State campus, making it look like an eastern college unlike some of the modern California campuses where cement block buildings distract from any beauty offered by the landscape.

 As Tony ate his French toast with crisp bacon and drank a latte in the student union, he looked around. The chairs were filled with students writing or reading—sometimes lifting their heads up for a thought. The tables next to him were covered with books, paper, and pens, half full cups of chosen drinks and blue paper, yellow paper, white paper, and green paper. One cup sat on a blue napkin as if it were King Cup overlooking the unthroned cups of peons sitting on the table top. Scratching pens, creaking chairs, and breathing made it all come alive as if every item on the table lived in a harmonious jazz band of sounds.

By eight a. m. the temperature outside reached ninety degrees. The inside temperature stood steady at seventy-two degrees. But it felt as warm as the outside when combined with the hot latte which caused sweat to drip down Tony’s back. It also poured out his armpits as if he were responding to the stresses of his life. The hair on his head and groin were also wet. The weather forecast for the day expected the temperature to reach a hundred. The skimpy clothing the coeds wore made the heat bearable to him and to anybody who liked the way they barely dressed to beat the heat. Tony imagined that Jimmy Bucks would be in peeper’s heaven if he visited the campus.

The entire atmosphere of the campus, the town, and the buttes made Tony wish that he were a student here instead of having to deal with all the bullshit of his present life. Maybe someday he would go back to college and study writing at Chico State.

Another attractive part of Chico is Big Chico Creek, almost a river, which begins in one of the canyons to the east and flows through Chico’s tree-filled Bidwell Park, downtown, and the campus to the Sacramento River, ten miles west. Bidwell Park is the longest city park in the United States. The original *Robin Hood* movie starring Errol Flynn, was filmed there in the 1930s because the abundant, close-knit trees make the park look like a forest. Varieties of trees line the streets and fill the yards of Chico, which is known nationally as the City of Trees. Who wouldn’t want to live in Chico, yet it is basically small town living compared to anywhere in the San Francisco Bay area.

 The campus abuts the downtown, which consists of a six-by-four-block area of brick buildings occupied by boutique shops that cater to the town and to the visiting parents of college students. No fewer than ten college bars, in addition to several non-college bars for the locals and parents, make up the remaining businesses. *Playboy* magazine once named Chico State the number-one party school in the nation, but in recent years it has become more famous for its green technology in constructing new buildings.

 The 5th Street Steak House, one of the best steak houses in the world, and the Sierra Nevada Brewery, a popular new age beer hall, are located in Chico not far from downtown.

At nine a.m., Tony waited outside for Jimmy. He came out around nine thirty and headed downtown to a restaurant called Jack’s. Tony parked around the corner by an air-conditioned coffee shop, Has Beans, where he drank another latte to kill time. By now, the streets were cooking outside and Tony was cooking inside.

 Jimmy decided to eat an early lunch at Jack’s diner where he ordered soup and supplemented the soup with a glass of cheap Chardonnay—one of those wines that comes in a box. While the wine was shit, the soup was good stuff and he liked its color: yellow-squash orange with lines of cream etched in as if it were a piece of modern art. It might have been early to start drinking, but that’s what Jimmy does on vacation—gets fucked up early and often—his way to reduce the stress of working for Walter and dealing with people dying.

 Jimmy sat at one of the window counter seats. The temperature had already hit one hundred, not unusual for Chico in the late summer or early fall, but not usual this late in the fall. The heat heightened his view as petite, young college girls walked by wearing as little as possible—just enough to draw attention to their breasts and butts. Stenciled, cute sayings on the shorts filled each butt cheek. A girl who walked by a few moments earlier had “JUICY” written from cheek to cheek, the “I” located in her butt-crack. Another said “EAT” on one cheek and “ME” on the other. He wondered what their fathers and English professors might think of the highly literate sayings they wore on their butts.

 Jimmy sipped his soup as he fantasized what it would be like when he sat in Reno’s SaltMill Casino at a poker table, drinking a beer, surrounded by artificially cooled sixty-nine degree air, the same temperature maintained three hundred and sixty five days a year. There were no up or downs in this environment beyond winning and losing—it was all black and white unlike life.

 In Jimmy’s fantasy, he played in a high-stakes game of Texas Hold ‘em. The dealer dealt him two Jacks in the hole and two Jacks and a Queen had been flopped. Luck stood on his side as he sat with four Jacks with two more cards to come, he raised the bet substantially after the Queen flopped. But when another Queen came up, followed by another queen, fear struck him with chicken shit. If someone had a Queen in the hole, they would have four Queens to his four Jacks. He dropped out not feeling lucky after all, even in his day dream; or it wasn’t about luck—he was just a dumb shit for dropping, too scared to go the extra mile to win, much like his present life working for Walter. He was no longer as ruthless as he used to be because murder was never part of the game that he played.

 When reality returned, he found himself making the drive to Reno on Highway 70, one of the most beautiful roads in California as it weaves through the Sierra Nevada Mountains. A narrow two-lane road, sometimes closed by falling rocks in the summer and mudslides in the winter, the highway winds its way through a Grand Canyon in the making. The road runs along the Feather River, taking all the room between the riverbank and the canyon walls.

 After Highway 70 reaches the town of Portola, the mountains fade to high plains that stretch for miles leaving the mountains as distant views. California gold country’s Highway 49 ends or starts in these plains depending on whether you’re driving north or south.

 As Jimmy drove, he sang “Luck Be a Lady Tonight.” But he didn’t want luck to be a lady. *I want luck it to be a man, my main man—me!*

 But luck not only evaded his dream, it evaded the entire drive. He almost made it to Quincy, almost halfway to Reno, when the first tire blew. Triple-A came, changed the tire, and the journey continued after a one-hour delay. Things didn’t look promising for Jimmy.

 He left the mountains and drove into Portola, only thirty miles past Quincy, when a second tire blew. Fortunately, the new blowout happened next to a gas station where he got both flats fixed. Once again, he had five tires, but this delay added another hour to the trip and several shots of vodka while he waited and waited.

 Fifty miles from Reno, still on Highway 70, a logging truck in front of Jimmy suddenly slammed on its brakes. Jimmy braked with his left foot as he turned the car right. He didn’t crash into the truck, but there was little shoulder and a ditch ran alongside the highway, which engulfed his right front wheel, stopping him from going further. He avoided rear-ending the truck, but the car ended up stuck. This trip had turned into an odyssey for Jimmy. Bad luck seemed the only luck that he was going to have.

 By the time he was towed out and on his way, three extra hours had now been added to his two and a half hour journey. However, alive and well, he would still make his late afternoon golf tee time and even have time to stop at a roadside casino along Nevada’s Highway 395 and have a few drinks to further reduce the stress of this hellish drive.

 Meanwhile, Tony was smoking puff after puff of pot as he too waited for Jimmy’s tires to be fixed and his car to be pulled out of the ditch. Because he wasn’t drinking alcohol, Tony thought about how insane is that they allow alcohol to be sold in the same place as gasoline, especially those little airplane bottles that are sold for immediate consumption. But that’s the trouble with humans—many human choices might only be explained by genetic insanity.

The first nine holes of golf were the worst Jimmy ever played, probably because of the stress associated with the drive, maybe influenced a little by the drinks, including one at the golf course before he teed off. On the back nine he began seriously to mitigate the mental pain leftover from the drive and from the poor golf by drinking more and more booze.

 Jimmy’s mental condition was not only relieved by the drinking, but by the fact that, like at most golf courses, a beverage cart girl drove around the golf course selling alcoholic and nonalcoholic drinks. You can buy booze, beer, sandwiches, chips, cokes, and water. They sell the booze in those little airplane bottles, which contain 1.7 ounces—almost a double shot.

 Like most cart girls, the one driving around today couldn’t be more than eighteen. She wore short-shorts and a white T-shirt with no bra underneath because of the one hundred plus temperature. The white T-shirt was as wet as a participant in a wet-T-shirt contest because each time she stopped golfers sprayed her with water from the iced spray bottles they carried to keep themselves cool. Jimmy added as much wetness as he could, paying close attention to her increasingly wetter breasts and hardened nipples. By the time he finished the round, he had consumed six little bottles of vodka and was drunk, but visually sexually stimulated.

 On the way back to the SaltMill, he did his usual thing after seeing a hot girl’s body: He rubbed his penis through his shorts as he drove and fantasized about what he’d seen. But he hadn’t seen enough. At the hotel, he headed to one of the bars and sat down next to the cocktail-waitress station to leer at tits. He drank two double shots of Grey Goose vodka while he watched.

 Totally plastered, he went up to his 5th floor room, situated above the second-floor swimming pool. He stripped naked and walked over to the window where he cracked it open the maximum eight inches. He peeked through the window gap to see if there were any bikini-clad cuties down below. He saw a couple of them and grabbed the binoculars he always carried for a better view, but he couldn’t get a clear view from the tiny open space; nor through the closed, tinted windows.

 He went back to the cracked opening, held the binoculars with his left hand and rubbed his flaccid penis with his right while he scanned the pool for action. Too damn drunk, he couldn’t get his penis erect, no matter how hard, how soft, or how long he rubbed it.

 He’d just given up and crashed on the bed ready to sleep, or pass out, when he heard a knock on the door. He pulled on his golf shorts and opened the door to find a five-foot-nine, two-hundred-twenty-five-pound dike, wearing a blue blazer. Ugly didn’t begin to describe her. She immediately walked into the room without his permission.

 “Sir,” she said. “Pack your things; you’re being evicted from the hotel.”

 “What?” Jimmy stammered.

 “There have been several complaints from the pool by women that you’ve been watching them through binoculars and masturbating.”

 “Bullshit,” he said. He was sure that no one could see him in a fifth-floor room from a second-floor pool.

 “Sir,” she said. “We have you on tape from one of our parking lot security cameras which clearly shows you masturbating and holding binoculars.”

 “That’s an invasion of privacy!” he said as if that would mean anything to her, but it did provide him with a self-serving reason for rejecting the claim. He became argumentative and in his drunken state asked—no demanded—to speak to the police.

 “Fine,” she said. “In that case I am arresting you for indecent exposure and taking you downstairs while we wait for the police.”

 The entire time he seemed to be missing the fact she arrested him for a sex crime. In his mind, Jimmy rationalized his innocence. *Can they get away with videotaping people in their hotel rooms? Does the SaltMill do this to all their guests—invade their privacy? How many times did they do this to other guests? Has anybody sued them? Can I sue them?*

 The police arrived in the form of Officer Reid. He rearrested Jimmy, and took him to the Washoe County Jail where they threw him into the drunk-tank to sober up. They charged him with indecent exposure, a misdemeanor. Drunk and tired, he didn’t care.

3

Tony

I decided to bail Jimmy out. Dic Mécia had bailed me out of my recent drunk-tank experience. So why not help Jimmy by passing the favor on?

 “Hi, Jimmy,” I said as he came out.

 “Tony?” Jimmy said, his eyes blinking from the sunshine, his surprise to see me reflected in his shiny, red face; this time acknowledging that he knew who I was.

 Jimmy’s body shook indicating he needed a drink badly. The usually white irises that surrounded his green eyes were red like his face; his eyes were like a pimento stuffed olive turned inside out with the red on the outside, the green in the center.

I took him downtown to Harrah’s and bought him a double something. I’d been sober for quite a while, but like every day, I wanted a drink, and on this day I seem to have unconsciously ordered my own double to go with Jimmy’s. I drank it, forgetting the consequences. I’d heard in AA meetings that this happened to many alcoholics. You’re sober one moment, drinking the next—out of habit or delusion.

 We talked as we measured time by the number of drinks.

 “I don’t know what happened to me,” Jimmy said. “I generally don’t drink; maybe binge once in a while, but I’ve never had a DUI or any trouble with the police.” His words reminded me of how Tom Foster and I were both in denial about the reasons for our own arrests.

 “You got caught, Jimmy, it’s no big deal. Welcome to the real world.”

As Jimmy ordered two more doubles, he asked, “Didn’t I hear you were in AA or something?”

“Oh shit,” I said. “Goddamn, I forgot—not drinking slipped completely out of my mind.” “What’s AA like?” Jimmy asked, then swilled the drink and ordered two more.

I didn’t answer. We’d have to head home soon or crash in the limo. I didn’t believe I’d particularly like sharing a bed with Jimmy, who was overweight and had bad teeth and bad breath. “Let’s go before I’m too drunk to drive,” I said.

We got into the limo and headed for home. As soon as we were on Interstate 80 heading west, I brought out a joint, which we both smoked down to a roach.

 Jimmy and I surprisingly liked each other: He was grateful that I bailed him out; I was grateful to actually be talking to him. I needed to get something on Walter to protect myself, and I hoped that I might be able to get Jimmy to talk about Walter, maybe give me some inside information now that his lips were loose and his mind fucked up, and we’d established some rapport.

 It didn’t work out that way.

4

Jimmy Bucks

Going down the road with Tony T. Trueblé. Flying! We’re flying! Swigging little bottles of vodka—puffing on a joint.

“Hey, fu..uck you Tony!” I shout in jest.

Yesterday I would have meant it. Yesterday the enemy. Today my best friend. “Tony T!” I yell out, and we laugh.

He’s been running after me for months. Tony had been there watching, seeing it all, seeing me arrested—coming down to the jail, bailing me out. *I love this guy.*

The fuck drives a limo. Look at this thing! Shit, he has a little living room back there. Couch, teak shelves. God, he even has a Pooh Desk™ in the limo, one of QuadFirm’s patented products. And a fucking gold fish, something you’d expect to find at Walter’s.

“Hey, Jimmy,” Tony blurts as he reaches out to me. “Wake up, pass me that joint before it goes out.”

“Oh, yeah,” I say. “The joint. The joint and the joint. Out of the joint smoking a joint.”

“Yee hah!” we both shout like Simon and Garfunkel together again.

“You worried, Jimmy, ‘bout drinking and smoking, just getting out of jail?”

“Nah. The past is fate, the future destiny. Reno’s fate, California destiny,” I respond as Tony lurches over towards the shoulder, turning back to the road in time.

“You, Tony?” I ask as I wonder if he’s too drunk to drive.

“Well, shit,” Tony says. “I got a DUI several months ago, but right now I’m too wasted to worry. Just a relapse, sometimes that happens when you’re trying to get sober. You been to AA?” Tony asks, forgetting my own question back in Reno.

“Fuck no,” I spit out, trying to get the foul taste of the word out of my mouth. “Even if I wanted to get sober, I wouldn’t do it through some fucking God cult

 “Shit, Jimmy, come on,” Tony says. “Each person in AA decides for themselves who or what God is. You know, we define him, her, or it in our own individual terms. If you wanted to, you could call your dick God, pray to it to help you stay sober.

“Actually, my dick is God,” I say, *“*Or maybe the devil.”We laugh some more.

“So you’re in AA,” I say as my brain flashes on the amount of vodka we’ve swilled in the past several hours.

“Yeah,” he responds. “Today is just a temporary lapse.”

Tony says there’s more vodka in the glove compartment. We drink two more each. We’re coming down the mountain now into Sacramento. We roll the windows down to let in the hot air and to let out the smell of booze and pot. Tony sprays the inside with bathroom deodorant, which he keeps in the limo.

“Jimmy,” Tony says in a tone that clues me into why he’s in Reno, why he most likely bailed me out. *I should have known that he would get to the damn reason he’s with me.*

 I begin to think that the fuck has set me up, wasn’t interested at all in helping old Jimmy out—what a mother-fucker he’s turning out to be.

We’re now on a straight-a-way. Tony has put on the cruise control, taken his feet off the floor and placed them on the front window ledge as if he’s sitting at a fucking desk—like the arrogant fuck he really is. No wonder he got a DUI, probably deserved it.

“Jimmy. Can you help me with this? You’re not like those guys—I see something different in you.”

“No thanks,” I say. “Walter would have me dead in seconds if I started helping you. You know he’s a crazy fuck. He only likes two things in life: gold and loyalty.”

“Yeah, well he’s going down, Jimmy. I’d hate to see you go down with him. Maybe we can work out some way Walter wouldn’t know.”

“Like what—become your Deep Throat,” I say sarcastically.

“Good idea, Jimmy. You be my Deep Throat. We’ll meet secretly. You’ll gradually feed me information. We’ll have a secret agreement. When it’s over, Leticia won’t collect on what you owe. No one will ever know.”

“Ok, Tony,” I playfully respond as a smile forms on my lips, my fingers crossed. *Like hell, I’ll cooperate! You fuck!*

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

After the Reno Trip

STILL IN CONFLICT

Tony

Back in the real world, *people, places, and things* did their best to drive me to drink.

 One morning, *frustration* took the first shot when I cut myself shaving. *Anger* took a second shot when I stubbed my toe against an object left on the floor by some asshole—in the way when I trudged from the showers at my golf club down the hall to my locker.

*Pause when agitated* tried to help me, but this early in the morning, *pause* didn’t help, nor did *letting go* when I sought an alternative. I sensed it would be one of those days. *Think, think, think*, I cried to myself. *Take it easy*, I exclaimed.

 I prayed to the Sun God: Give me *serenity, acceptance, courage* to change those few things that I can. But the day turned cloudy and rainy so I don’t think my prayers got through the dark sky above, now filled with streaks of lightening.

 *Anger* tried to bury my *resentment*, to take over as my umbrella jerked open from the wind, which sent it tumbling down the street.

 *Anger* and *resentment* collided as a guy on a bicycle ran a red light and almost hit me. I yelled and screamed at the asshole on the bike after he flipped me off as if I ran the red light, not he.

 I decided to go to breakfast with *gluttony*, hoping to stuff away my *anger*, but *gluttony* allowed *sloth* to slip in. The *forces of antagonism* seemed to be running amok that morning. What’s next? I wondered. Maybe *lust* will take her chance, give me a piece of perverted fulfillment of what might be if I let imagination run wild. But *fear* would not let *lust* act on my imagination. L*ust* changed tactics, combined with *gluttony*, *anger,* and *resentment* to walk me to the nearest liquor store where vodka patiently awaited my arrival.

 *Willingness* fought back and instead dragged me to that place where others like me struggle together. *I can’t do it, but we can* fight the *forces of antagonism*. *We* gripped their necks and threw them to the ground. *We* stomped on them until they no longer moved. *We* prayed—me to the Sun God, the others to a God of their own choice, but collectively *we* were united in prayer to each of our higher powers.

 *We* took turns sharing our *experience, strength, and hope*—fighting the *defects* thrown at us by the circumstances of our lives.

 *We are not a glum lot* took over—*we* laughed away our *defects* as if they were toys *we* played with. *We* focused on our *desire not to drink, no matter what*.

 *We* left secure in our *desire* and *willingness* to *go to any length*, do whatever it takes to walk hand-in-hand with sobriety as *we trudge the road of happy destiny.*

After relapsing with Jimmy Bucks in Reno, I knew the next morning I would need to attend an AA meeting and start my sobriety over. I found it easy going back as the time I spent with Jimmy reinforced my desire and need to better my not-very-well-rounded life—to be in control of my life, not controlled by people, places, and things as I so often let happen.

I should have figured that I’d eventually have a conflict with another AA member because sooner or later I’d have to deal with the dogmatic behavior of an AA control-freak—one who often expresses their control through erratic verbiage in conflict with AA traditions and principles.

At the meeting where I celebrated my second attempt at ninety-days sober, the subject of smoking pot came up. I acknowledged to the group that I smoked pot, as did several other members. I then made the mistake of trying to rationalize and justify that smoking pot was okay.

 “I’m still smoking pot, and I don’t believe that has anything to do with getting sober or staying sober. Pot is an outside issue that deals with drugs, not alcohol, and under the AA traditions, outside issues are not to be discussed or considered. The traditions are clear that we focus on alcohol, not other distractions. Besides, if you want to talk about drugs and the harm they cause, let’s talk about cigarettes. Many AA members step outside during meetings to smoke cigarettes, a drug that actually kills hundreds of thousands of people each year. I’ve yet to hear anyone in AA say that it’s not okay to smoke cigarettes. It’s hypocritical to say smoking pot means a new sobriety date, yet it’s okay to smoke cigarettes. Alcohol and cigarettes kill, pot doesn’t.”

 By now, I knew that I needed to learn to be more willing to accept other people’s responses and viewpoints without traumatizing myself or them. I can do nothing about how others think or behave. I can only change my own thinking and behavior.

But sometimes knowing and doing are difficult to meld together. When that thinking and behavior are directed at me in a verbal attack, I react in an uncontrollable rage, spewing out words without thinking as I redirect the verbal attack back at the attacker.

 After the meeting ended, my ninety-day sobriety chip safely in my pocket, Roy, eight years sober and a smoker, came up to me and said, “Tony, you disrespected the group by accepting your ninety day chip. You smoke pot and you’re not ninety days clean.”

 I responded to Roy by flying into a violent, internal mental rage that culminated in my saying to him, “AA doesn’t stand for arrogant asshole, Roy, except in your case you mother-fucking, arrogant asshole.” My friend, John, stepped in between us, or I’m sure Roy and I would have gone to blows, or at least I would have started swinging.

 In addition to being a control-freak or because of it, Roy liked to take inventories of other members’ behavior, but did a poor job of taking his own. His “my-way-or-the-highway” approach did nothing to help anyone stay sober. His viewpoint belonged in a garbage can so it could be hauled away.

Several days later, Roy, the secretary of the meeting that day, threatened to kick me out of a meeting because I’d quietly whispered something to the person next to me while someone shared—not unusual behavior by members. He said if I didn’t leave the meeting, he would have me arrested for trespassing. This he would do by citizen’s arrest. The problem with Roy saying this is that the AA secretaries are supposed to be “trusted servants,” not dictators. Having been in jail several times, this overt threat to me was at the same level as saying “I’m going to cut your nuts off.”

 And what was my verbal response to Roy this time?

“Roy, I want you to know that I trained as a sniper in Laos, and I could blow the head off a commie sitting on his tractor from a thousand meters.”

Roy happens to be a farmer who often can be found on top of his tractor as he drives through his orchards. Of course, I lied about being a sniper as I did with Bro Beck. I only wanted to sound tough to scare Ray into backing off, which he did.

 The problem with Roy’s comments was that I would run them over and over in my mind, making up different fantasy scenarios and words that I might have said to them. Fantasies concerning how I would react to make them wrong—me right—over and over, again and again. Never letting go, never getting it out of my mind. It was as if they rented space in my mind—but didn’t pay the rent.

 I made an attempt to develop my own methods to eliminate the impact of what this imbecile said and did. Each time a thought arose in my mind related to his actions, I would immediately replace the thought with “blank, blank, blank,” hoping to evict those thoughts from my brain by eliminating all thought. Although I eventually blanked these thoughts out, I still seemed to provide space to him rent free as the thoughts slowly crept back in.

 I previously learned not to make any claim that my own behavior was rational or proper. In fact, my reactions often seemed improper and not close to being rational as if my instincts were on a rampage. In the case of Roy, I always seemed to choose fight over flight when impacted by the fight or flight syndrome.

The AA tradition of “progress, not perfection” kept me going since every day I at least made progress, albeit often little. I thought by now I had learned to accept the fact that there will always be some force of antagonism working against me; the important thing being to learn how to deal with it from the inside out.

Yet here again, I found myself running a replay of Roy’s behavior towards me. My mind quivered like a shaking body; my body spewed something vile through its pores; and the language of negativity continually crept into my mind.

My friend John tried to help when he said, “Tony, you’ve got to learn to love the person, but when you do, you can still hate their defects. Until you forgive Roy and forgive yourself for your angry responses, you’re never going to get free from his behavior and your reactions.” But while I could forgive myself, I couldn’t bring myself to forgive them, so I tried forgiving myself for not being able to forgive him, which seemed to work as I gradually let go. The idea of forgiving myself for not being able to do something I should do or wanted to do became part of my healing process, helping me reduce the impacts of my continuing, inappropriate reactions and behavior.

Then I got the idea that I should use self-forgiveness as a way to eliminate all negative chatter. By first forgiving myself for letting any specific situation from the past enter my mind, I was able to reduce the impact of the chatter. However, because some chatter related to negative situations would pop up again, I found that by forgiving myself for letting the chatter come up again, instead of forgiving myself for a specific situation, I was able to move away from the actual past situation.

But while dealing with this internal drama, I still had to focus on the more serious external traumas I faced: trying to stay out of jail, working both sides of the fence, and hoping to identify the killer before I became one of the victims. Forgiveness of myself or others was not going to keep me out of jail or keep me from being killed.

 And speaking of forces of antagonism, I needed to continue my interviews with the QuadFirm staff by meeting with Bobbi Sue Wet, the person currently responsible for running the actual operations of the company.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Tony Now Interviews Bobbi Sue Wet

SPRING LOADED

1

Tony

I went to Bobbi Sue Wet’s office to interview her. As I impatiently waited for Bobbi Sue, I chatted up her secretary, a cute little thing, five-foot tall and no more than a hundred pounds, with long blonde hair and soft breasts pressed through a shear, white blouse.

 I pegged Bobbi Sue as another one of those big ego people who showed their importance by making people wait, like Bro Beck did when I met with him. I think people who show up late are showing weakness, not strength. I prepared myself to take advantage of Bobbi Sue’s rudeness. I never had the chance.

 Bobbi Sue arrived, and she, her secretary, and I went into her office. I could smell an unpleasant order as if I were in a boy’s gym where sweat had spread like raindrops from the many armpits that roamed about. Both the secretary and I sat facing Bobbi Sue, I ready to ask questions, the secretary there to take notes. I could tell that Bobbi Sue also thought herself too important to take her own notes.

 Bobbi Sue dressed well, but like a man, not a woman. She wore the normal dark, pinstriped suit, but removed the jacket as she sat down. Her breasts were so small that her chest seemed as flat as a man’s. She wore her white hair in a crew cut style, something right out of the fifties if she were a man, but out of the nineties if she were a lesbian, a more accurate distinction. Her dark, Greek face contrasted nicely with the white hair and white shirt she wore. I would actually call her handsome. Tall and large for a woman, maybe six foot two and one hundred and eighty pounds, she was broad shouldered and she appeared to be in good shape.

I remember from the first lawyer feeding frenzy that Bobbi Sue wore white shirts—shirts that, no matter how much they were bleached, showed yellow stains under the armpits when she habitually placed her hands behind her head and leaned back in the chair, sweaty armpits constantly exposed to anyone in the room. But my present view of this still appalled me as she sat back in her chair and put her hands behind her neck revealing the dried pools of sweat as if she were proud of the stains, and they were badges or medals she wanted everyone to see.

 “You’re here only because Walter asked me to meet with you,” Bobbi Sue said in what I took to be an unfriendly, superior tone. “What can I do for you, Mr. Trueblé?”

Bobbi Sue gently rocked back and forth in her chair as she waited for my answer—but she did not lean back.

 “Thanks for meeting with me, Bobbi Sue,” I said to be polite, although that’s not how I felt when I met with any of these characters who worked for Walter.

As I spoke, she continued her gentle rock.

“I’m trying to find out a little about the relationship you, Pei-Pei Bearinsane, and Garcy Slongavitch had with Lon Rozzo. You were all partners at the time Lon completed the venture capital deal. How come they dumped Lon and kept you guys? What do you think about the deaths?”

 “Lon was an asshole and a crook,” Bobbi Sue said without hesitation, leaning forward in her chair to make her point. “He got what he deserved. No one missed him after he died. Pei-Pei and Garcy were decent guys, they were my friends. I regret they died like that. I’ve no idea who might have killed them or why.”

 I took note that Bobbi Sue confirmed Walter’s comment that Lon used crooked methods. As she waited for me to respond, she pushed her chair back forcibly with her hands, which she quickly placed behind her head, and started rocking back and forth with ever increasing effort.

Later, I stood outside Bobbi Sue’s office in a semi-trance, when my cell phone rang.

 “Hi, Tony,” Dic Mécia said. He got right to the point. “There’s been another death.”

 I wondered how Dic found out so fast as I said, “I know. It happened with me in the office.”

 “You were in Ned Bondman’s office?” Dic asked, sounding incredulous.

 “What?” I replied. “No. Bobbi Sue Wet’s office.”

 “Bobbi Sue Wet? What’s she got to do with Ned being dead?”

 “Ned’s dead, Dic?”

 “Yeah, that’s why I called.”

 “Well, so is Bobbi Sue,” I replied, shaking my head in disbelief about Ned. “I started to interview him when he put his hands behind his head, leaned back, and started rocking. The chair flipped back as if it were spring-loaded. He hit the back of his head on the edge of the credenza behind him. The chair sprang forward, and he mashed his nose on the edge of his desk. I think the blow to the desk killed him immediately.”

“What do you mean he?” Dic asked.

 “I tried to give Bobbi Sue artificial respiration. I unbuttoned her shirt to give her some breathing room. She didn’t have any tits; a flat chest; no scars from breast removals. I loosened her pants, pulled them down. No underwear, just a dick and balls. Apparently, Bobbi Sue’s real name was Bob—a man, pretending to be a lesbian, acting like a man. More proof you can never tell what is real and what is not about people.”

“Jesus,” Dic murmured. “I’m on my way over. Don’t go anywhere.”

Dic and several police officers arrived at Bobbi Sue’s office, I mean Bob’s, within thirty minutes. They went right inside, leaving me with the secretary to continue flirting. But we were through with that game.

 Dic came out to the reception area after another thirty minutes.

 “Unbelievable,” he said. “We stripped Bob down before putting him in the body bag. He’s a man all right. We found a suicide note in his desk. He seemingly did this on purpose because of the struggle he had with his identity.”

 “I don’t believe it,” I said. “Who the fuck would think to commit suicide that way? Besides, that would make two suicides, out of how many deaths? What about Ned?”

“No, Ned was a man with a normal body,” Dic replied.

“Christ, Dic, I mean, how did Ned die?”

 “Well it wasn’t suicide. We found his body stuffed in an old laundry chute that was used when the offices were apartments.

 “Tony,” Dic added matter-of-factly. “When did you last see Ned?”

“I had an appointment to interview him two weeks ago, at his office, but he never turned up,” I said. *Why does everyone die close to when I see them, or was supposed to see them? I hope Dic’s not asking the same question.*

2

Tony

“Tony, what have you found out?” Walter asked.

 “That everyone associated with you is a dickhead,” I said.

 “Come on, Tony. Talk to me!”

 “There’s nothing to tell you, Walter. Your people are closemouthed, afraid to speak. They seem to be afraid of your reaction to anything they might say. I haven’t learned a goddamn thing from them.”

“What about Leticia? Surely you can tell me something I need to know about what her attorneys are planning to do at the trial,” Walter claimed.

“Leticia speaks with me only when she wants to, which is rare. She only asks questions, never gives answers. But she did tell me that Lon spoke perfect English and had an IQ of 180. He purposely used poor English to lull you into thinking he was dumb. That way he could—and he did—take advantage of you by using your superior ego against you.”

“The fuck you say! You’re not being helpful, Tony.” That was the first time I saw Walter lose his poker face—not pissed off at Lon, but at me for telling him that he might have been taken for his own ride.

 “God helps them who help themselves,” I said as if we were playing chess.

 “Yeah, I know. That’s why I help myself to whatever I want,” Walter said, his anger still evident, but now in his tone, not his face.

“Given the fact people keep dying,” he continued, “I want you to change your focus to finding out who’s behind the killings before one or both of us are victims.”

“Okay,” I said, wondering if this indicated that Walter was not responsible for the deaths—unless he had a diversionary plan as part of his game to keep me away from investigating everyone but him. *Would his games never stop?*

3

Reactions to the Death of Bobbi Sue

Walter

 *I guess I’ll have to bring Jimmy Bucks in even sooner than I thought.*

Jimmy

 *Shit! I bet Walter expects me to take over. I hate that operational stuff. Maybe Bro can step in.*

Bro

 *Bobbi Sue a man! Goddamn! Probably a fag too.*

Leticia

 *I’d better call Peter.*

Tony

 *The deaths are overwhelming me. It’s too bizarre that I’m always around when people die.* *I can just imagine the questions Dic’s going to ask me.*

Dic

 *What’s Tony got to do with these deaths? Why is he always around when someone dies?*

4

Reactions to the Death of Ned

Walter

 *Shit. I hope that doesn’t dry up my money source. I wonder who Ned’s beneficiary is? Where the hell are those key-man insurance policies Jimmy was to supposed to purchase?*

Jimmy

  *Lon. Pei-Pei and Garcy. Vincent, Bobbi Sue, and Ned. It looks like a game of Ten Little Indians. I’m confronting Walter and he’d better have some answers.*

Bro

 *Bobbi Sue and Ned in one day. How precious*.

Leticia

 *The walls came tumbling down. Now I really need to see Peter.*

Tony

 *I think I’d better watch my own back. It’s time I planned my own game, at least a practical potential move to keep me ahead of the other games being played. Maybe I should get out of town far away from this madness. My passport is valid, so I’m going to buy a one-way ticket to Paris with an open travel date. If things get more out-of-hand, I’ll be ready to split quickly. I’ll stay in Paris until things are sorted out by Dic. At least avoid being killed or suspected of any more murders. After all, Walter’s gold bars have given me enough money to be wherever I want to be for as long as I want to be. I’ll leave the limo in a long-term monthly parking lot away from the airport so it can’t be found. Let Dic think that I left town in the limo, not in an airplane. One more murder and I’m out of here.*

Dic

*Tony is somehow involved with the murders. I should go along with my staff and bring him into the homicide investigation as a suspect, maybe even arrest him if I can get the DA to okay it.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

After the Death of Bobbi Sue and Ned

THE HOMICIDE INVESTIGATION

Dic Mécia

I took Tony to lunch at the Larkspur Inn, located in an old Victorian-style, white building with an outdoor area surrounded by redwood trees. Except for the fancy food and elegant décor of the furniture, it was like being Robin Hood eating in a forest. Ironically, the Silver Peso is one block away.

 The Larkspur Inn is a popular place. Sean Penn, Huey Lewis, George Lucas, and many other celebrities who live in Marin eat at the restaurant. Today, Blythe Danner and her daughter Gwyneth Paltrow sat at one of the outdoor tables close to the table we’d chosen.

“Tony,” I said after we sat down. “You’re looking really good—the hair, the face—what’d you do, take a shower?”

Tony smiled as he said, “Very funny. No, it’s the sober thing. I learned at AA meetings that I not only needed to clean up my inside act, but also my outside appearance if I wanted to stay sober.”

Tony and I ordered lunch. We talked golf for a while, but my motive for meeting with him did not include a leisurely lunch.

 When the meal came, I said, “I’ve talked with Peter Fellure and the people responsible for the convention where Vincent died. Fellure couldn’t think of any reason for Vincent being on that stage. He and Vincent were estranged, and it angered him to see Vincent walking towards him. The convention organizers have no idea either how he got onto the stage. They had nothing to do with it. What do you think?”

 “That it wasn’t suicide—whoever’s behind the killings pushed or had him pushed off the rooftop,” Tony replied, consistent with my own thinking except for my thoughts about Tony somehow being involved. “Vincent told me he’d had problems with his dad all his life. But now with a successful deal completed, why commit suicide? Why would anyone want to kill him anyway? Who could possibly benefit from his death? Of course Walter Funcker and Jim der Bacon always come to mind since their actions aren’t always logical.”

 “Tony,” I said, now treading in deep waters. “The front door video camera at the Marriot showed you were in front of the hotel when Vincent died. What were you doing there?”

 Tony’s face gave nothing away as he said, “I got a phone call from someone who said Vincent reconsidered our last conversation and wanted to talk to me. Two months back, he threw me out of his office. I admit it. I stood close to where Vincent hit the fire hydrant. That damn dog shook blood all over me!”

 “Why did you leave the scene?” I asked.

 “Stoned, bloody, and nervous that I’d been around too many deaths, I reacted without thinking it through,” Tony said, beads of sweat starting to form on his forehead.

 “That’s another thing,” I said. “You were having lunch with Lon when he had his heart attack. You showed up at Pei-Pei’s and Garcy’s right after they were killed. You were at the Marriot when Vincent supposedly committed suicide. You were at the lawsuit conference when Bruce Verbose was murdered—you and Leticia were the only ones who didn’t get sick. You were at Ned’s office the day he disappeared, the day forensics say he died.”

“Either those are coincidences, or someone is setting me up,” Tony said as his eyes began to twitch.

“I suppose you call the trip that you and Leticia took to Cancun a coincidence?” I said. “I’ll be direct, Tony. I’ve talked to everybody else with a connection to the deaths except you two, and she’s next. Some members of my staff think you’re both behind the murders?” I noticed that as I spoke, Tony’s hair gradually turned from sweat-laced to dripping, and his head began to droop. He looked like a race-hound at the end of a losing race.

 “I’m not involved,” Tony said. “I don’t know if Leticia has a connection. Although she hasn’t fired me, the Cancun trip ended any personal relationship between us. Leticia and I were trying to rekindle an old relationship. She was my high school girlfriend until I got seriously injured in a football game and started doing drugs. Getting back together didn’t work out. It seemed to be all about the sex. You need to also know that Vincent, Leticia, and I all went to the same high school in Larkspur, and Peter taught there. That may have something to do with why Vincent tossed me out of his office and may be why he died.”

“That’s interesting,” I said as I grasped this new information. “What else?”

“Bro Beck attended Marin Catholic. We were both football players until our football careers ended with severe injuries to both of us when I tackled him in the last game we played. After I broke it off with Leticia, she and Bro got together. I met with Bro recently, and we seemed to get along fine despite the past. He’s found some type of redemption and seems to be on the right track to have straightened out his life.

“Also, Peter, Bro and Walter were in the same outfit in Vietnam. Peter was a Colonel and Battalion Commander, Bro was a 2nd Lieutenant in charge of 2nd Platoon and Walter was the Platoon Sergeant. Walter won the Medal of Honor. When I met with Bro, he seemed to have no recollection that Walter was in his platoon, let alone won the Medal of Honor.”

“You should have told me all this before. Here’s another interesting connection,” I continued. “We found a picture at Ned’s apartment of Leticia, when she was twenty-something, naked, lying on the bed face up with her legs spread apart, her pussy shaved. She seems to have a prior connection with Ned. What do you know about that?”

“Nothing,” Tony said—no longer able to control his facial expression.

The surprise in Tony’s face suggested to me that he knew nothing about the picture; made me think maybe he was not working with Leticia in the murders, even if she might be involved. I like Tony. Not my best friend, but a friend nevertheless. Yet, if he were involved, I couldn’t let him think I would by-pass him in the investigation.

“Tony, you seem to be in deep shit. You’re being sued for back and current child support. You’re getting a long rap sheet that includes drunk driving and theft. You’ve acted like a wild man out of control.

“Stay in Marin or San Francisco. Call me daily on my cell to check in. I don’t want you and your limo to disappear. If I don’t hear from you daily, I’m going to arrest you for suspicion of murder.”

“Dic, unlike fish stories, you never hear about the ones that got away,” Tony said as he got up and walked out, his body reflecting a lack of confidence as he stumbled out the door as if he still drank.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Timeless

 DRIFTING DREAMS

Leticia

*In bed. Drifting—in that never-land before sleep. Remembering.*

*High school. Walking down the hall, heads turning—not looking back. Liking being ogled—even by those pimple heads. Feeling sexy, sexy. Dressed to turn heads. Beautiful feeling—being desired. Tony’s hand in mine like we belong together, forever.*

*Balloon breasts, shapely legs, wet, dirt-colored hair.*

*Corny, trite Tony—my face sweet as apple pie.*

*Short skirts long enough. Bend over, let them stare. Tomorrow, maybe no underwear—go ahead, follow me up the staircase as I move slowly. Tony’d kill them if they dared say a word.*

*Pass the mirror. No bra! My nipples. Oh, I dropped my pen. Here boys, take another peek.*

*In Tony’s arms, Tony in me, holding tight, rubbing, waiting my turn, my relief. Other eyes wishing they could watch Tony and me, doing it, right there, on the newly cleaned floor.*

*Tony crushing Bro’s life plans with a bad tackle, Tony injured too. Out of football, doing drugs, drinking, being mean to me. Tony lost. Hating me.*

*Bro taking care of me. Bro with that Greek love body. Bro with a plan. Fuck you, Tony! Bro and me, we’re going places—you’ll never be.*

*Peter Fellure. Rich, not always making good decisions. Cute for an old dude—kinky, fun. Always there when I need someone to hold me.*

*Bro in college, gone forever. Me at Boston U.*

*I’ll make my own way without my folks, without Tony, without Bro or anyone—except for Peter.*

*The perfect wife for the first rich guy I meet—who’s not a bastard like those two fucks that one night! Gentle, loving Lon. Married. Happy. Lon, the only good man of my life.*

*Tony! I still have the hots for him.*

*Lon dies. Lean on Tony like before—in love with Tony, wanting Tony, fucking Tony. Friends my ass! Fuck you, Tony! It’s not your purpose in life to torment me—it’s to love me like I love you.*

The next day, like a lost soul, I struggled for the reason why I was here in the first place. I had to force myself to focus, to go beyond reacting to every situation in my life. But I needed to be careful not to over think things because that’s when I tended to justify or rationalize my behavior—behavior that seldom could be called the result of right thinking.

I wiled away the day writing in my notebook. I put on paper constructions of images that floated through my mind.

ARE THERE ANY QUESTIONS?

The girl beautiful in her twenty-four hour life no longer tried to find her way—happy to not repeat memories long forgotten—until he comes uninvited to her side wanting to kill her favorite day. Too many of them can be too many to hear voices, smell breaths, see differences in their make-up. Good-looking men—wasted souls. Wanting to take her heart away. Each with their own spiel, yet bodied the same. In dark bars, the differences nil—because of how they wear their clothes, pressed or not, shirts fallen out.

Locked in step with one man, surprised to see there were more. She runs away from them. What does she know about these things or the varying ways they speak? They could have been unified, but alcohol separated their souls. She is unable to make them one, walk with the one to someplace, watch the one grab for time, fall away into a safe haven, listening to what she says. She can’t be one for all of them, but can’t one be for her?

THE NOTHING

Potential nothingness haunts me as I try to visualize my nonexistence. How could I be aware, then nothing?

Asleep, I dream images that may or not have meaning. Even if I don’t remember all my dreams, I am still aware that I am something. But nothing?

No, that seems not possible. Nothing is an image that exists only if I am aware. Nothing can’t be unless I perceive it so.

I try not to, but The Nothing will haunt me till I die. Then I’ll understand—or not.

CHAPTER THIRTY

After the Deaths of Bobbi Sue and Ned

WHERE THE FUCK IS BRO?

1

Suicide?

Nobody has seen or heard from Bro.

The police found a body that apparently washed up on the beach at Marin Headlands, just north of the Golden Gate Bridge on the ocean side. The body was pretty much unidentifiable. The unclothed areas, the face and hands, were mutilated, probably by a shark or some other sea animal. They did a dental match after finding Bro’s wallet on the body—it’s Bro Beck all right. They suspect he committed suicide by jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge. But given the number of deaths related to Bro Beck’s business activities, murder is also under consideration.

It doesn’t make sense. Why would Bro kill himself?

The police found a diary in Bro’s apartment. He wrote about his despondence and described the shame and humiliation that he faced working in the venture capital field with Walter Funcker and the others. The dot.com stock crisis caused Bro to become financially bankrupt. The chronic pain in his knee from his football and war injuries—and the lost opportunity for his football career—greatly depressed him as he looked back on what could have been.

Bro Beck has finally bridged the gap between himself and others—something that could only happen in death where everyone is equalized

2

Reactions to the Death of Bro

Walter

The Golden Gate Bridge. How ironic. I knew long ago he was a coward. Most of them are, that’s why I like doing business with them—they’re easy to manage as long as you handle them right—just cap them when they misbehave, although I should have killed him when we were in that other jungle.

Jimmy

 *That’s it! Walter’s giving me answers whether he likes it or not. I don’t care how scared I am of him; this is getting too close to home.*

Leticia

 *He told me that he was going to do it—and he did!*

Peter

That will save me some money. I wonder if the police will suspect murder? But with Lon dead, Bro dead, and Tony probably a dead-man-walking, I’ll get Leticia to myself. I wonder how she’s handling all this?

Dic

*What was Tony doing on the days that fall into the time frame Bro would have died. Where was he—anywhere close to the Golden Gate on those days or nights?*

Tony

*Who’s next: Walter? Jimmy? Leticia? Another one of the lawyers? Me? I’ve got to talk with Jimmy again and make him tell me Walter’s secrets; help me see how he might be behind all this, give me some ammunition to use against Walter to protect myself. As far as I’m concerned, he’s the number one suspect behind the deaths.*

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

After Bro’s Suicide Several Years Later

STILL CHASING JIMMY BUCKS AND THEN SOME

Tony

I chased Jimmy to a football game and sat down beside him. I was sober—he was drunk and blabbery. We’d established some type of relationship during our drive back from Reno. He didn’t run away from me this time. Or maybe he was just too drunk to care.

 I asked him questions throughout the game, hoping that he wouldn’t connect the questions to the interview I was doing on him. He didn’t seem to—or maybe he no longer cared.

 “What do you think is behind Walter’s motivation?”

 “Gold. And domination,” Jimmy said.

 I waited five minutes, then asked another question, which I continued to do in between buying beers for Jimmy and watching the game. “Why’d he put Vincent and Bro in charge of Lon’s deal?”

 “Vincent brought the deal to Walter but was blind to Walter’s plan to have the company borrow money from a bank and strip it out for ourselves. Wanted to screw Bro; something to do with the past.”

 Later, I asked, “Hey, Jimmy, how does Walter avoid ever getting sued?”

“Doesn’t involve himself in the details. Never too close to the action. If trouble, sues first. Muddles things with paper work and discovery requests, drives up attorney fees to make it too expensive to sue him—distracts people or settles for minor amounts. Probably kills when necessary. Walter was a jungle fighter, you know. He’s a trained killer.”

 Jimmy’s slurring speech made it hard to understand him. He probably wouldn’t remember me even being there or asking questions. But he had to be really drunk and out of it to tell me that Walter could have killed people.

 “Is Walter behind the deaths?” I continued to probe.

 “Don’t know.”

 For a supposedly bright person, Jimmy sure didn’t have much to say that sounded intelligent. I wondered how many brain cells he’d killed over the years.

 “Why do you work for Walter, do the things he asks you to?”

 “Make lots of money. Work for Walter, do what he says. No free choice. Accept his world, no other way.”

 I pieced together that Walter expected Jimmy and Ned—when he was still alive—to follow his direction without question. They knew what happened to those who didn’t, and it wasn’t pleasant. They took directions, as if God himself issued them, or at least some church authority where refusal would result in being excommunicated and condemned to hell.

 Compromise with Walter was impossible—making eventual conflict with anyone who dealt with him inevitable, as I myself was learning. Now that I was in the loop with Walter, I apparently would have to obey him or suffer the consequences. I hadn’t liked Jimmy’s comment “kills when necessary” –which hit me like a double play as if we were at a baseball game instead of a football game. Perhaps that’s why Ned was dead—his failure to continue to be one of Walter’s lap dogs.

The call came so late that I would have slept through it except that I have a siren kick in after ten rings—that many rings and it’s usually important.

 “Be at Walter Funcker’s at six this morning. You’ll get the answers you’re searching for,” the voice said quickly before the hang up.

 Like with my pocket tape recorder, I automatically record all phone calls I receive to gather information I might miss if I’d had too much to drink. I listened to the voice on the phone recorder to see if I could identify who called. The only distinct thing I noticed was a slight accent, or maybe lisp. But I had no idea who spoke.

 I checked my watch; five past midnight. I had plenty of time to get there. I rolled a joint and headed out long before I needed to, driving around, thinking about everything that had transpired: the deal, the deaths, the people still alive, that trite saying: “follow the money”.

*It has to be the money. That’s what these characters have in common—not a lust for money, not a vocation—more like an avocation, a hobby, a game. Regardless, I need to solve the murders before I’m the one charged with them—or worse, I’m the next one killed. I’ve got to at least do something to stop this repetitive chatter that keeps replaying in my brain like words stuck on a merry-go-round.*

I realized that if I wanted results, I’d better start playing the same game they’re playing—maybe go for a little more of the gold for me and see what shakes out.

But I never had the opportunity to get more gold out of Walter.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

After Bro’s Suicide Still Several Years Later

WALTER LOVED HIS GOLD

1

Walter

I’m not sure where my desire for gold came from. While I enjoy playing the game of getting money from others through business deals in order to line my pockets with gold, I don’t think the game would have any point if it were only for the gold. Like a board game or athletics, without a way to keep score the game has no meaning. There must be both winners and losers, and the game must excite the players, must challenge the players, must put the players at risk for the highest stakes possible: being a winner instead of a loser.

 The current game that we play includes all the required elements: a high monetary return, the risk of losing a great deal, and strategies that excite—in the original planning and in the execution of the plan. The deaths have added an unusual aspect to the game by changing the risk to one of life and death—like it was fighting in the jungle. While the deaths have added an excitement to the deal in a way that I’ve never felt before, I’m glad that everyone isn’t dead—you’ve got to have opponents or the game would be prematurely over.

 Tony, Leticia, and Jimmy Bucks—I’m sure they are continuing to strategize in ways that give them a chance to win, but they won’t—that’s my job: winning.

 I wonder which one of them decided to use the death-strategy? I don’t think it’s Tony, unless he’s working with Leticia, because I’ve grown to know him through our chess games. I like Tony and don’t want it to be him. But I’m sure he’s really working for himself, not me as I planned. Ever since I got him to switch sides, he hasn’t really been useful as a pawn in the game. He appears to be playing another game with me—but like his chess, he’s not very good at it—but he is awful fun to play with!

 An outside chance exists that Peter Fellure has an interest in all this because of his problems with Bro Beck in Vietnam. Since he saved my ass after I shot Beck, I shouldn’t have to worry.

 Jimmy Bucks doesn’t have the guts or the inclination to kill. That leaves Leticia as a prime suspect. She seems too dumb and inexperienced, but I can’t think of anyone else who stands to gain financially. I would suspect Bro Beck if he weren’t already dead.

2

Jimmy Bucks

The thunderstorm, with its unrelenting lighting strikes, keeps me awake. I decide to call Walter and demand that he meet with me. This entire business has gotten out of hand.

“Walter, it’s Jimmy,” I say when he answers the phone. “We need to meet to discuss the deaths and who’s behind them. We’re the only two left on our side and, frankly, I’m nervous.”

 “Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy,” Walter replies. “You worry too much. Two of those deaths were suicide, and the deaths of Pei-Pei, Garcy, and Bobbi Sue couldn’t have anything to do with us. I doubt if any of the deaths are related.

“I am concerned with Ned dying, though. It may mean our source of funds has dried up. Why didn’t you get that key-man insurance on Ned and the other dead mothers? Damn, we’d have made a fortune off the deaths if you’d done your job right.”

 *Shit, he’s probably going to take out a policy on me first thing in the morning, or he already has. Now I can worry I’ll be killed—in some accidental way.*

 “But what’s done is done. Shit, Jimmy Bucks, someone’s doing our job for us—the more stockholders that die, the more money we make. Any idea who Ned’s beneficiaries are? Maybe we can tap them.”

 “Fine, Walter,” I say. To keep him away from any suspicion that I’ve talked to Tony I add, “But what are we going to do with that Tony T. Trueblé fuck? I’ve avoided talking to him, but he’s been stalking me constantly. Has he contacted you?”

 “Listen, Jimmy Bucks,” Walter says. “Come over late tonight, and we’ll talk. We’ll figure out some way we can turn this into more money for us. Don’t worry. I’ve checked Tony out. He’s a drunk and a stoner. His entire reputation exists because he habitually stumbles onto good luck; and good luck is always followed by bad luck so it’s his time to take a fall.

 “You’ll have to come over after midnight. I have some things to do first. Why don’t you get here around one in the morning? See you,” he finishes and hangs up before I can respond.

*I’m fucked—and I goddamn know it!*

3

Walter

I’ve been napping. It’s now around eleven p.m. I can’t tell east from west, night from day, as the full moon’s golden rays shine over the horizon like the rising sun instead of the setting moon. Tomorrow’s going to be another beautiful day—in contrast to my just completed dream.

I dreamed about my father—again. This time he wore a dress—a golden, floor-length gown, low cut. Not only did he have tits, but the tits were sprinkled with flakes of gold, and he wore white, gold-tinted gloves. I couldn’t tell if he was a she-man with both tits and a penis, or a woman. In the dream, Father reminded me of Bobbi Sue Wet.

I’m in a crib again, the one that dominates my dreams whether the dream includes my father or not. This time the dream includes him, but I only remember the images and the feel of his golden touch—like the slick, cold feel of gold itself.

Later in the dream, I’m no longer in the crib. I’m not quite a teenager, and I’ve experienced my first wet dream—a dream so real that I thought someone actually touched me.

My dad lies dead on the floor beside my bed. Gold sprinkles cover his naked body.

My uncle, my father’s brother, ten years his senior, comes by to share the grief. He climbs into bed with me to offer physical comfort. He stays there holding me until I wet the bed with golden streams of piss and ejaculate into the gold latex gloves he wears.

As I become slightly awake, my mind drifts.

*Everything good or meaningful in my life concerned gold as if that’s the ultimate purpose of the universe and human life.*

Even now, years after my father and uncle died, I surround myself with more and more gold. I use solid gold bars as paperweights—at the office and in my home. The rack that holds my toilet paper is solid gold as are all the fixtures. I use Dial soap because of its golden hue. I’ve even had my Medal of Honor gold plated.

Maybe Vincent had the right idea—there is something better than gold, like life experiences. The war and rescuing those people from that car wreck were certainly more interesting and exciting than any gold I’ve ever touched. Maybe Tony can come up with some crazy ideas we can act out. I think I’ll ask him to come over tomorrow and play chess. He stopped drinking, but I bet he still smokes hash.

I decide to nap while I wait for Jimmy Bucks. This time I dream that my father is a gold bar wearing a white-skinned colored dress. I dream that I melt my uncle into a gold liquid, which I reform into a mold of something not evil.

The first blow to my head wakes me into a dull stupor. The second blow, a glancing whack to the right side of my head, brings me to full awareness; my eyes open as I watch the tall, hooded person above me grin as he again slams the gold bar into my head, one last time.

4

Jimmy Bucks

Working for Walter can be a real pain. I don’t believe for a moment that he had to do anything that required us to meet at one in the morning. I’m anxious, but it could have waited. It irritates me to drive fifty miles on the freeway in the middle of a vicious storm. I seem to automatically respond to any demand made by Walter, and that’s going to make it difficult for me to properly confront him.

 It’s surreal, driving the freeways after midnight in the middle of the storm. I hum *Luck Be a Lady Tonight*. A lightning bolt strikes close by. Golden light flashes to the side of the road as if I’m at the end of a rainbow. But for once, there is no traffic, so the fifty-mile trip in my green Corvette takes me only sixty minutes instead of the ninety minutes I expected.

 Unfortunately, it’s the dead of night. Even the lights of the Golden Arches are off this early in the morning, or late at night—I can’t get a breakfast muffin, let alone a much-needed cup of java.

*Thank God for the speed in my pocket and the caffeine in the Coke I grabbed before I left.*

 I drive from Sonoma through Marin County to the Golden Gate Bridge and across to San Francisco. Eventually, I arrive at Walter’s building—one of the many buildings that he owns. His apartment, of course, is located on the penthouse floor.

I wait for the elevator, but it takes its time arriving from one of the top floors of this twenty-story building. The elevator reaches the lobby and opens. Before I can step in, a tall, lanky man, wearing a hood that covers most of his face, rushes out and knocks me down.

 “Goddamn,” I shout at him.

 “Sorry, sorry,” he lisps as he turns away without helping and hurries out the lobby’s front door, past the guard’s empty desk.

 “Fuck you, asshole,” I yell after him, but I utter the sounds too late for him to hear.

 I pick myself up and get in the elevator to take me to Walter’s penthouse floor, which consists of four separate apartments, each occupying one fourth of the floor. Each apartment has a wrap-around corner view of the city below.

 It surprises me to find the door to Walter’s apartment slightly ajar. I knock, push the door open and mumble, “Walter?” as I enter.

 I trip over something and fall to the floor. I look back from a sitting position and see a gold bar on the floor, the reason I tripped.

 I scoot over to the bar, pick it up and admire it. That damn Walter. He’s so into gold and has so much that he leaves it lying around, even with the door open. I get up, holding the gold bar in one hand, and this time shout, “Walter!” Again, no response.

 Walter’s apartment is 5,000 square feet. I have no idea if he can hear me. I assume he stepped out for a moment because he left the door ajar—probably so that I could get in and wait for him while he gets a drink somewhere. Typical Walter behavior.

 I walk into the living room, the gold bar in my hand, and sit down on the gold, leather couch.

 I’m steaming a little. I’ve driven over here, in the storm, at Walter’s request, and he is nowhere to be found—stepped out as if I were some dog at his beck and call. But as usual, I will not challenge him with this affront.

 A long time passes. Tired of sitting on the couch waiting, I get up, make myself a drink, and decide to call one of my underlings—to wake him up like Walter did to me. Demand that he do something, anything—I too can behave like Walter when I have to or when I want to.

 My Rolex says 2:15 a.m. Who should I call? The employees I’d usually torment are dead. I know! I’ll call, Tony; wake him up; tell him I’ve decided to tell all; that I have something important to reveal; ask him to meet me somewhere—send him on a wild-goose chase. Of course, I won’t be there when he arrives. I’ve learned to like Tony, but I still like to play fuck-fuck with him.

I pick up Walter’s phone and dial.

“Hey, Tony,” I say when he answers after the tenth ring. I have to cover the phone with my hand for a moment. “It’s Jimmy. I want to talk to you. I have some important information that can’t wait.” Silence is the only response I get. *He can be such an asshole!*

 “Where are you?” I ask. Tony could be down the block or fifty miles away.

 “I don’t know, Jimmy,” he replies. “Where do you want me to be?”

I surmise that I have to choose some place where Tony could not possibly be—one not even close.

I tell him that I’m in Pacifica. We agree to meet at five a.m. to give Tony time to orient himself. He says he’ll call on the way if he’s closer or further than he thinks. Even Tony doesn’t know his own whereabouts.

I imagine Tony rolling out of his bed in the back of his limo, climbing to the front seat, grabbing a roach out of the ashtray, and opening the glove compartment for vodka, forgetting that he quit drinking. I’m laughing, waiting for Tony to call me back on my cell, to tell me he’s on his way to nowhere, although he doesn’t know it yet and won’t till he gets there. And when he gets to Pacifica, he’ll probably become lost in the fog.

I’ve been sitting on the couch for over two hours, had four drinks, taken a nap and gotten more pissed. I haven’t heard from Tony. I wish that I could be more like Walter. He wouldn’t sit around waiting, or take a nap, or get pissed. He’d get up and do something.

I get off the couch and walk around. I admire the framed Medal of Honor made of gold. Walter never told me the story behind the medal, and I never asked. It’s hard for me to imagine Walter as a war hero, given his somewhat evil nature. He’d be more apt to shoot one of his own men. And his rescuing three people from burning cars surprises me even more. I’ve never known Walter to take unnecessary risks, especially to save a black girl and her child since he’s a bigot and hates kids.

I decide to pull open a couple of drawers to see what Walter keeps hidden. There’s a picture of a young girl lying on the bed naked with her legs spread and her pussy shaved. She resembles a young Leticia. I stick the picture in my pocket for later.

I scan the books dispatched around the room as if Walter tossed them aside*.* MaybeI should get Walter a bookcase, or at least a book, for his upcoming birthday. One particular book he might like is, Quicksilver by Neal Stephenson. I’ve read it. There’s quite a bit about alchemy in it—a lot about making gold and obtaining immortality. *God forbid if Walter gained immortality.*

I finally notice the sound of chimes—gold ones I suspect—coming from the master bedroom. I get up, grab the gold bar, and walk down the hall, thinking that maybe Walter has been in his bed asleep, all this time. I should have checked earlier, but I was hesitant to disturb him or walk about his apartment without permission.

“Walter? Walter?” I whisper as I walk down the hall towards the master bedroom, not daring to abruptly wake him out of a sound sleep. As I walk down the hall, I hear the sound of a dripping faucet. My emotions spring to fear as I sense something is wrong.

The bedroom door is also ajar, so I push it open and walk into the dark, yet surreal room. The bedroom is located in the corner of the apartment that overlooks the city. The light coming in from the floor-to-ceiling corner windows penetrates into the room letting me see Walter lying in his bed.

“Walter?” I say. No response.

I fumble for a light switch by the door first, but I can’t find one. I walk over to the bed to search for a bedside lamp. The carpet feels squishy as if there has been a water leak.

I find the lamp switch and turn it on.

“My fucking God!” I exclaim out loud as I jump back and move backwards towards the bedroom door, tripping on the gold bar I dropped, falling on my butt to the blood soaked carpet. Blood has leaked from Walter’s head like a running faucet, an indication that he didn’t die immediately.

I am panicking—fearing for my life—suspecting the culprit might still be here.

Okay, okay—I’m a coward when it comes to blood and violence. I’m brave when dealing with others face-to-face in business—not with this shit. I bolt, run down the hall, through the living room, and out the still-ajar front door, not bothering to close it.

In the car, my cell phone rings. I don’t even check the caller ID to see who’s calling. I suspect it’s Tony, but I’m through playing games with him.

I find myself at home, parked safely in my own garage. I get out, walk to the garage door and turn back toward the car. My footsteps are outlined by specks of dried blood. I walk back to the car and open the door. Walter’s blood in the form of my footprints covers the carpeting.

*Shit! Shit! Shit!*

5

Tony

While driving around, I get a call from Jimmy that he wants to meet me in Pacifica. I do as he says. I wait twenty minutes for him, but he doesn’t show. I head to Walter’s because of the tip I received earlier.

 I arrive at Walter’s a little after six a.m. I’m careful going into the building as I’m not feeling too trusting these days. I take the stairs. It’s a long hike and I’m breathless when I reach the top. I carefully open the stairway door. Seeing no one, I hug the hall’s wall as I move down to Walter’s penthouse apartment, remaining cautious.

There are bloody footprints on the carpet leading from Walter’s door to the elevator. I call Dic Mécia and wait at least ten feet away from the open apartment door, making sure I don’t disturb any evidence that might be in the hallway or worse, leave evidence implicating me.

 When Dic arrives, he says to me, “Here you are again, Tony, at the crime scene. Stay here while we look around. And get prepared to level with me, tell me what you’re doing here and why you continue to be around when someone dies. Which are you, Tony: a one man audience watching a deadly play, an actor in the play, the playwright, or the director?

 Dic comes out in sixty minutes. “Walter’s dead. His head crushed in with a gold bar found lying in the blood beside the bed. Somebody killed him around one a.m. There are prints all over the gold bar used to kill him,” he says as if there is more than one gold bar.

“You still working for Leticia?” Dic asks as he continues the interrogation from our recent lunch.

 “She hasn’t terminated me yet, but I suspect she might. I’ve been doing some interviews and checking around.”

“We found an interesting letter of agreement in Walter’s desk drawer,” he said. “It’s a copy signed by you which lists the registration numbers of ten gold bars similar to the one that killed him. Like the one you were arrested for stealing. Says he paid you for services rendered. You working both sides of the fence here, Tony?”

 “Does the gold bar used to kill Walter match one of the registration numbers on the list?” I ask hoping it doesn’t, but, giving what’s been happening, believing it will.

 “No, it doesn’t.”

 “I need to talk to a lawyer, Dic, before I say anything that might incriminate me.”

 “In the murder, Tony?”

 “No, with the gold bars,” I reply, then ask him for permission to leave the scene, which he grants.

 It’s now obvious to me that I’ve been set up all along as the fall guy. I doubt that the footprints belong to the murderer as that would be too sloppy and inconsistent with the other murders where the police found no clues. I realize the phone-tip was no tip. Those footprints could just as well have been mine. If I’d found Walter dead inside his apartment, I doubt if I’d stayed around.

*Jesus Christ! What do these people want, whoever they are, and what do they have in store for me next? And why did Jimmy want to meet me in Pacifica? —he must have had a good reason.*

6

Reactions to the Death of Walter

Jimmy

*I am so fucked*. *I need to head somewhere, fast.*

Leticia

*Poor, poor Walter. I can hardly keep from crying. Ned and Walter certainly got what they deserved.*

Peter

*How funny! It looks like Walter’s satisfaction for gold is complete: He lived for gold, he died by gold.*

Dic

*Tony once again! I need to think about the investigation. Put it all down on paper and objectively review what we’ve got.*

*Tony*

 *That’s it! I’m out of here on the next flight to Paris.*

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

After Walter’s Death

THE HOMICIDE INVESTIGATION CONTINUES

1

Dic

I’m in my office, sitting at my desk with my feet up, trying to figure out the damn murders, the damn suicides, and my buddy Tony’s role in the deaths. If anything, the arrows point in different directions—but more than one arrow points to Tony.

 I’ve filed a request to have Lon Rozzo’s body exhumed and an autopsy performed to see if he did in fact die of a heart attack, one of the many instances where Tony’s presence when someone died makes his actions questionable.

 My investigation of the Pei-Pei-Garcy murders led nowhere. Witnesses said they saw a telephone truck parked down the street, but the telephone company did not schedule work anywhere in the neighborhood for that day.

 Vincent Fellure and Kenneth Beck, Bro that is, could be suicides, but I have my doubts. Bobbi Sue Wet’s death was definitely murder, not suicide—who the hell would believe someone would commit suicide by spring loading his own chair? Then again, a man posing as a lesbian, dressing and acting like a man, might do anything.

 But the way Bobbi Sue died applies to murder also. Who would take the time to kill him that way? All I have is a mustached telephone repairman in the office the morning of the death. Again, I wasn’t able to find evidence the telephone company had sent someone out to do repairs.

 I talked to Peter Fellure about Vincent’s death, but I failed to ask him anything concerning the other deaths. Peter seems to be tied into this more than I suspected, especially after the paper reported he served in the War with Walter and Beck.

 All the deaths seem to have been done in some bizarre fashion, except for Beck jumping from the Golden Gate. Deaths done in a way designed to punish, not just kill—which seems to support Bro’s death as a suicide since I found no evidence of punishment, unless you can call it punishment to be pushed off a bridge. But even though his suicide appears legitimate, I’m going to get a search warrant to examine the possessions stored for his estate sale.

 The killer makes Bruce Verbose suffer by first cutting his tongue out. Then the killer at the lawsuit conference serves him poisoned clam chowder made from his tongue, and makes the others sick with tainted sandwiches—except for Tony and Leticia, who later go off to Cancun for a love romp, according to Leticia, a sex fest, according to Tony, making them both suspects.

The server at the second lawsuit conference had a similar build to the telephone repairman seen at Bobbi Sue’s before the murder, but no one could provide any other details. He didn’t work for the deli downstairs, and they say they didn’t provide the food served at the lawsuit conference—someone was prepared to kill Bruce, but not the others. Walter was eventually killed bringing up the question why he wasn’t also poisoned at the same time as Bruce?

 Ned Bondman’s body was found stuffed in a laundry chute, dying at approximately the same time that Tony arrived for an evening meeting. Again and again, Tony was around when someone died.

Earlier, I suspected that Walter Funcker might have orchestrated the murders, but it was not a well thought out suspicion. It might be because he gave me the creeps—always flaking, always scratching. Funcker hadn’t been cooperative, but neither has Tony. Why did Tony decide to work with Walter—for the gold bars or because he and Walter were already colluding? I don’t know if Tony is tied to the deaths, but I fear he is.

 The police investigation indicated that Walter’s phones were tapped, but not by the police or feds. With Walter Funcker murdered, that leaves Tony, Leticia, and Jim der Bacon as the only logical possibilities—unless Peter Fellure is somehow a participant; but what would have motivated him?

How far back are Tony and Jimmy connected? Tony and Leticia connected? Tony and Walter connected? I need to research their histories.

Then there’s the picture we found in Ned’s apartment apparently of a young Leticia naked, lying on the bed, face up, sleeping, with legs spread apart, private area shaved. She denies it’s a picture of her, but I don’t believe her. How was Leticia connected to Ned and Walter twenty-plus years ago: A nude model, a whore?

 I’d have arrested all three to put some pressure on them, but the D.A. nixed that idea. Yet, at the same time I have to believe that all three are at risk of being murdered.

 The phone rings. “Hello,” I say. It’s a recorded message.

 “Mr. James der Bacon killed Walter Funcker and is going to flee the country.” Bingo!

I put out an APB. It wasn’t hard to learn that der Bacon bought a one-way ticket to Paris on a flight leaving at midnight. I head to the airport to greet him before he boards the plane.

2

Somewhere in the universe Walter farted, Garcy spewed garlic, and Vincent sat on a fire hydrant wondering what the fuck happened.

 Meanwhile, Tony arrived at the gate for his flight to Paris apprehensive and paranoid. After checking in for his flight, he sat waiting for the plane to board.

 As Tony read a book, Jimmy Bucks found his own way to the same gate, checked in, and headed for the bar where he ordered a double bourbon which he slowly drank while sitting at the bar asking himself, “Why me?”

 Dic Mécia arrived at the gate with his gang of cops in tow ready to arrest Jimmy Bucks for the murder of Walter Funcker.

 Tony put the book down and closed his eyes. His mind drifted in a pre-dream state when he heard a voice that seemed far away, yet seemed close enough to touch. It felt like Dic Mécia had entered his dream without permission. His voice sent chills throughout Tony’s stoned body. Suddenly, the dream was no dream at all.

 “You here to see your buddy off Tony? Or are you planning to go with him to Paris?” Dic’s voice seemed to pound out as if the dream were real.

 Tony slowly opened his eyes to the face of Dic, his head bent over as he stood in front of Tony, his face now inches from Tony’s surprised eyes.

 “Don’t give me that ‘I’ve been set up bullshit’ this time,” Dic said as his eyes reflected Tony’s look of bewilderment. “Or are you going for the claim it’s a coincidence that you’re here?”

 Before Tony could respond, Dic grabbed the ticket folder out of his hand.

 “A one way ticket to Paris; couch class. Couldn’t you afford first class like your cohort? He’s checked in. Where’s der Bacon, Tony?”

 Tony still in a sleep stupor, almost believing that he was still dreaming, and in a state of disbelief said, “What are you doing here, Dic? What are you talking about?” *How the fuck did Dic find out I was leaving for Paris tonight?*

 Just then, Jimmy Bucks staggered into the gate area and took a seat a couple aisles over, oblivious that Tony and Dic were debating his whereabouts. Tony noticed Jimmy first. He scratched the back of his head as he wondered why Jimmy was there and what would he be doing on the same flight to Paris?

 Dic had not yet noticed Jimmy whose head was bent down. When Jimmy lifted his head to take a sip of coffee, their eyes met—Jimmy’s as if he were in hell, Dic’s as if he’d just won the lotto.

“You’re under arrest for the murder of Walter Funcker,” Dic said as pulled Jimmy out of the chair and spun him around to be cuffed.

 “I didn’t do it,” der Bacon pleaded. “He died before I got there.”

Dic quickly advised him of his right to an attorney, his right to remain silent. If he was going to talk, Dic wanted everything he said to be admissible. Dic asked him to repeat his prior statement which he voluntarily did. Dic was satisfied, for now, because der Bacon placed himself at the scene of the crime.

Dic returned to Tony, “You’re under arrest as a co-conspirator for the murder of Walter Funcker.”

After Dic read Tony his rights, Tony took the right to remain silent at heart and said no more.

At the police station, the same picture of the young naked Leticia was found in Jimmy’s pocket further confusing the issue. No incriminating evidence, other than the plane ticket and passport were found on Tony. Jimmy and Tony were placed in the same holding cell pending the fingerprint check on both of them.

Jimmy is pretty clear why he was arrested, but remains clueless as to why Tony was on his flight and why he was arrested. Tony is clueless period.

 “Did you do it, Jimmy?”

 “No. He was already dead when I got there.”

 “Why did you leave the apartment if you didn’t do it?”

 “I was in shock,” Jimmy said to the doubting look in Tony’s eyes.

 “Okay, I’m a coward. What were you doing at the airport?”

 “I guess I’m a coward too,” Tony said reminding himself that he had stood on the side lines when Walter rescued the women and girl. “I wasn’t about to wait around to be charged with Walter’s murder or to become the next victim myself. Why’d you ask me to meet you in Pacifica? Was that after you discovered the body? Were you looking for help?”

 “Ugh, no it was before I found him dead.”

 “Before?”

 “Before.”

 Jimmy had made more sense when he was drunk at the football game where Tony had grilled him about Walter.

\* \* \*

The fingerprints are matched against the arrest records for der Bacon in Reno. The fingerprints on the bloody gold bar used to kill Walter confirm that Jim der Bacon used the gold bar to kill Walter. Dic suspects that he probably killed the others or had them killed, although the methods were different and nothing connects him to the murders. But he does suspect that he was responsible for the “suicide” of Vincent Fellure. The fingerprint check on Tony turns up nothing.

The charges against Tony are dropped for lack of evidence. Booked on a flight together going to Paris is not enough to tie Tony to Walter’s murder. But Dic’s suspicion about Tony’s involvement in the murders has escalated.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

After Jimmy Is Arrested for Walter’s Murder

WHY ME?

Tony

From the beginning, I told Jimmy that I believed his story, that he was innocent, and that I would do everything I could to help him.

 Jimmy and I bonded on the drive back from Reno, at the ball game, and in the holding cell after we were arrested. I could see that he too was an alcoholic. One of the ways to stay sober is to get out of one’s own mind by reaching out to the alcoholic who still suffered—I reached out to Jimmy.

 I brought Jimmy some AA books and some novels to read that I liked. He was being held on a no-bail warrant and would have plenty of time. He might as well use his free time productively. One of the books I brought is, *How to Evolve Your Brain*, by Joe Dispenza. I haven’t read it yet, but it looks interesting and Jimmy’s going to have plenty time to evolve his brain.

 After Jimmy began alcohol withdrawal, he was at loose ends. What could he do, after all, locked in a jail cell? I suggested he have his attorney hire me as an investigator on his case. That way I’d have private access to Jimmy. I also suggested he act as his own co-counsel so we could meet as often as we wished to discuss anything we wanted.

As co-counsel, Jimmy would get to have a computer in his cell and have access to the prison library. He would be privy to all meetings held between his counsel, the prosecutor, and the judge. These steps would greatly reduce the boredom of being restricted to the cell and avoid receiving second hand information from his attorney on the progress—information that is often not reliable or incomplete, like the rumor syndrome.

“When your life is on the line, you better be there,” I said.

We discussed the murders. If Jimmy didn’t do them, who did? Unfortunately, it left only me or Leticia—unless some outside reason existed; something having nothing to do with the lawsuit as to why these skunks were killed.

“Maybe Dic Mécia is a secret serial killer,” Jimmy said, which was so out of the question we laughed and continued to make jokes about the idea.

I suggested, “Perhaps Leticia’s stepson Cozen is the killer.”

“You know he’s gay,” Jimmy said.

“No, I didn’t,” I said not really knowing much about him having only met him that one time at the supermarket. “In that case, perhaps he had sex with Pei-Pei and Garcy before he killed them.” We both laughed.

“What about Vincent’s dead mother?” Jimmy said. Maybe she’s come back from the grave.”

“Or Vincent’s father Peter had him killed because she died in child birth.” We didn’t laugh as the idea was too plausible.

Nevertheless, only one person would benefit from the deaths—Leticia. She was going to get all the money as the last crook standing, but she had alibis for the murders. We made no jokes about her being a murderous, and we both agreed that she is the most likely suspect.

Dic called me on my cell phone. He started with something that didn’t have anything to do with the case in an attempt, I believe, to throw me off.

“This corporation thing,” Dic said “never made sense to me. Don’t you ever wonder what philosophical and political process allowed corporations to come into existence in the first place? Why do corporations get the same freedoms endowed to citizens by the constitution, such as free speech? A corporation can be found guilty of a crime committed by employees on its behalf, but suffer no other punishment than some limited financial penalty. If an employee murdered on behalf of the corporation, he could receive the death penalty, but the corporation itself would continue on as if nothing happened.”

Dic wanted to go somewhere with this; something was wrong, but I didn’t have proof. There was barely a detectable amount of evidence to indicate his intentions until he asked me a question that brought things home.

 “What’s this relationship that you have with Jim der Bacon?” Dic asked. “You’re already a suspect because of your affair with Leticia, being at all the murder scenes, and booked on a flight to Paris. First you work for Walter for those gold bars. Then you’re running off to Paris with der Bacon. Now you’re working for him, visiting him at the jail constantly. How can you investigate his case by spending time at the jail with him? Then there are those gold bars you got from Walter. You’re part of this in some way that you’re not telling me. You need to come clean, Tony.”

 “Dic, I swear I only held back the double-dipping: working for both Walter and Leticia. And that was only because Walter had blackmailed me into working for him. I’ve already told you that he set me up with that arrest by falsely accusing me of stealing the gold bar he gave me. Christ, I lost my license. What else do you want?” I asked.

 “The truth Tony. I want the truth,” Dic said. “And all the facts I need to resolve who killed whom and which of the suicides were murder. One more piece of evidence that points to you and I’m going to have to re-arrest you. You need another lawyer, Tony. A good one.”

Dic called several days later. He asked me to come to the police station to talk. Reluctantly, I did as he requested.

 This time, he didn’t waste any time before asking me a question.

 “Tony, we’ve found a tape in Bro’s possessions. It shows Peter Fellure and Leticia having sex when she’s seventeen. Your fingerprints are all over the case and the tape. There aren’t any other prints. What’s the deal with the tape? Is that something you made in high school?”

 “Before I answer that question,” I said as I remembered Leticia asking me at her house in Muir Beach to get her that videotape, take it out of the case, and place it on the table, “what other questions do you have? I might as well get them all at once.”

 “Okay,” he said. “Let’s start with, how did you make the tape and why? Why did Bro have the tape? Were you in league with him somehow?

“We already know you were working both sides with Walter and Leticia. We know you went to Cancun with Leticia. You’re working der Bacon’s case, and you bailed him out of jail in Reno. You’re involved with everyone when they’re alive. You’re always around when someone dies. Then there’s the Paris trip.”

“Dic, I don’t know anything about Peter Fellure, but because of the tape, and since it’s obvious to me that I’ve been set-up by someone, he’s high on my list of suspects. Although it’s just as likely that Leticia could be taking revenge for the way I treated her in high school and for dumping her in Cancun. Peter could be involved with her or not.

 “Are you arresting me again?” I asked.

 “Not yet. But after I clarify things with Peter, you might be.”

 “In that case, I’m not going to have anything else to say until I talk to an attorney, and he’s present during the questioning.”

 I got up and walked out. Dic didn’t stop me.

*Is it Peter? Leticia? Could Jimmy be behind the murders after all? Is there someone I don’t know playing death games?*

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Several Months after Jimmy’s Arrest

FOLDERS OF MY MIND

Jimmy Bucks

Jail has given me too much time to think, to ponder the possibilities. I was never a deep thinker, however, when all one can do is think, thinking can become a by-product of one’s life.

As I lie in my bunk drifting off to sleep, my mind wanders in a futile attempt to go to sleep as I listen to the sounds of jail at night: A convict dragging his tin cup across the cell bars like a jailed cliché. Another convict yelling, “Be quiet!” A cell door being slammed shut by one of the guards.

 Because I’m reading the book Tony gave me by Joe Dispenza on how to evolve your brain, the thought that I can perhaps evolve my mental capabilities beyond the normal creeps into my mind. Mankind has a collective history of evolution and individually we are more mentally evolved than our ancestors. Why don’t’ I consciously work on evolving my mind instead of lying here wasting my time, feeling sorry for myself, getting nowhere? To make this work, I decide to periodically, in a constant way, say to myself: Evolve! Maybe by programming or brainwashing myself into believing I can evolve, I will evolve.

Perhaps I can organize my brain—and the information it contains and receives. I could use the computer model of organizing things in virtual folders and files. By creating various folders in my mind, naming them, and creating programs or sub-routines related to those folders, I might be able to organize my thinking, maybe even develop a photographic memory. I create a folder labeled “Photographic Memory” and an internal program to work on developing a photographic memory.

I could even create an internal mind program to reach out to my future self on a continual basis to receive things from my future, things in the future that I would consciously send back to my past to put into this folder—things in the future to help me in the present.

I create in my mind a folder called “Linking My Future and My Past.” I create a program to collect future information to send to this folder and a program to send information back to my past. I tell the programs to begin operating. I create a program to call the attention of my present self to the messages being sent by my future self, and I create a folder to store this information.

My goal is to move forward while receiving information from my future that will continually improve my present; to receive information from my future life that would create a positive geometric progression in my mental evolution and existence.

To make this work, I create a physical place for me to be where I can become conscious of information received from my future self. In the past, the shower was a place where ideas popped into my mind, and as a death row inmate, my showers are private. I choose showering as the place to consciously focus on the receipt of future communications. I also use the shower to send messages to myself in the past. In case it actually works, I tell my past self not to go to Walter’s apartment that night someone else ironically smashed his head with the gold bar.

Over slowly moving time, I create other folders and programs, such as a place to receive information from the universe and a mental program to receive and distribute that information to the appropriate parts of my brain, a place to develop and store ESP information.

There may be no end to the folders and mental programs that I can develop, and I certainly have the time, so I create all types of folders, files and internal programs, some reasonable, some so far out that even I view the creations as improbable wishes reminding me of the cliché “if horses were wishes, poor men would ride.”

I realize that I must be careful, though. I need to create a folder and program to work on my sanity to ensure that, as I pursue strange ways of thinking, the process does not lead to insanity—although I do recognize that perhaps what I am doing is, in itself, insane—but no more insane than being here, in jail, for a murder that I did not commit. I wonder if I’m a sane person in an insane world or an insane person in a sane world?

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

A Year after Jimmy’s Arrest

FRIENDS WITH TROUBLED LIVES

1

\_\_\_

San Francisco Chronicle

JAMES der BACON SENTENCED TO DEATH

Convicted of Murdering Walter Funcker

Transferred to San Quentin’s Death Row

\_\_\_\_\_

2

Jimmy Bucks

On the Path to Redemption

You’re born. You live. You make choices you hope are right. You make good money, have a decent life—no real cares in the world.

Then it happens. Suddenly, you find yourself in jail, charged with murder. Then you find yourself convicted and sentenced to death—which really means twenty years of appeal after appeal after appeal.

You have two problems: you know you didn’t do it, but you don’t know who did.

Everyone abandoned you except for one person. You like this person, but in the past, he’s been your adversary, not your friend.

You take his advice. He helps you. He proves he is your only friend. You find him standing behind you no matter what happens—even after all hope has been abandoned.

You sit rotting in your jail cell until he slaps you and tells you to get it together, to focus on your time, to spend it meaningfully.

There have been a lot of changes in your life: you no longer drink, you no longer go around peeping in windows at naked women—okay, you masturbate in your cell while you remember those times, but you don’t commit any more criminal actions. They’ve got you “locked-up, with the key thrown away.”

You read. You write. You think. You gain knowledge and understanding.

Your only friend comes by several times a week, plays chess with you, talks with you, keeps you company. He is the only thing that keeps you sane, gives you hope that someday you will be cleared of the murder you were convicted of, but did not commit.

When I first reached puberty, girls scared me: didn’t know how to talk to them; didn’t know what to say; didn’t know how to speak without my voice quivering—what I wanted to say lost somewhere in my mind the few times I tried to speak.

 I never thought of myself as a bad person—only a victim of being raised without a mother or sister or other female relatives. It was just my dad and me, and he wasn’t much help.

Girls physically attracted me, but as I grew older I began to dislike females of any age because of the traumas they caused me. They were always leaving shades partially up as they walked around naked making it easy for me to see their naked bodies. So I began to ignore girls and women as people and focused on them as visual sex objects.

 My view of myself as a victim included the impact of other outside forces: society, religion, and whatever suppressed anything sexual, which was extensive during my teenage years. Like my religious beliefs, I had been brainwashed to accept values that belonged to others whose main objective seemed always to be having others believe as they believed. Consequently, I found myself yearning to see naked girls, a subconscious rebellion I rationalized against the world and the enforced values defined by others.

 Of course, my somewhat deviant behavior went beyond a desire to see naked females, as it metaphorically manifested into screwing others to get their money into my pocket. Eventually, my lust for other people’s money replaced any lust for physical sex with women—similar to Walter’s lust for gold and Ned’s lust for respect, I lusted for money.

 I think that’s why the three of us got along so well—we all lusted, but our lust was for different things which enabled us to work together as if we could satisfy ourselves using the same process for different goals without the results being in conflict with each other. Whenever anyone outside our circle came along to interfere with our objectives, we went right into the fight mode, going for what we wanted without being restricted by someone else’s moral code.

 I might die in San Quentin someday, but in the meantime I get to choose what I do with my life under the constraint of being in jail. I can read or sleep. I can choose productivity or inaction. I can make friends or enemies. It’s a lot easier getting along with the guards than fighting them. I can be pissed off or I can accept the fate that got me here. I have many choices that I can make within these walls. Frankly, I’m tired of fighting life. I’ve surrendered to it instead, and that is making for a much calmer existence.

 It’s ironic. Here I am waiting for the state to kill me—yet this is the happiest and most secure that I have felt in a long time. It’s also ironic that even though I’m awaiting a death sentence, they have replaced my rotten teeth with false teeth. In addition, I’ve been able to work out. Between the often inedible food and exercise, I’m in the best physical shape I’ve been in since my early twenties—making me glad I’m in a death row cell and not in the general prison population where I would now be seen as the sexual object.

 I have only two things now: The ability to vividly remember in great detail each and every woman I’ve ever seen naked, and lots time to read, think, write, and work on the appeal of my death sentence.

 One of the things I’m faced with thinking about on death row is the existence or non-existence of the soul. Of course, there are more questions, than answers.

 Does the human possess the soul, or does the soul possess the human? Perhaps souls are microscopic; maybe even a more basic element than the atom, so small that they appear to not physically exist; or exist on another plane. Then again, maybe the soul is not small at all—it’s just spread so thin throughout the body, like God in the universe, that you can’t see it. How much space does a soul take up within the mind and outside the mind before and after the life of a human being? Does the soul become part of the entire body, or just the physical mind? Is a soul equal to life: created and developed at birth, then dying at the end? Or if souls can somehow survive after death, do the short, finite lives of individual humans make any difference while alive?

Something inside drove me to do things that I’d rather not have done. Has my soul been penetrated by the devil or its cohorts? Does my physical mind or soul drive me? Which one is in charge while we’re alive? How can we be in constant conflict with ourselves? Is the instinct behind our need for conflict internal or external? Does that mean we have at least two separate, competing things within our self, within our mind, within our soul—one driven by God, the other driven by the devil?

If there are souls, I wonder what existed before souls. Were souls created before, with, or after the big bang? Maybe it’s just the way God distributes himself throughout the universe—through soul bound entities? After all, without thinking entities—no one to be aware of God—how could God even exist?

My new purpose in life to make it meaningful is to reach my own maximum potential; and to make the maximum effort to get there. I have a lot of questions and a lot of time to search for answers since, as I’ve mentioned, the average jail time for death row inmates before being executed exceeds twenty years.

Interestingly, I’ve discovered that only questions are true in the absolute. A question asked is a question asked. A question may not be fair (“do you still beat your wife?”), but it is true to itself. Answers will always be open to a varying degree of truth and falsehood and open to everyone’s own interpretation.

I’ve started getting messages from my future self in my communication with my future and past self mind folder. They all seem to be about the conscious evolution of the consciousness—an end to my search, a definite life purpose I can hold close to my heart and mind. I’ve even received a message defining *Enlightenment* as the conscious choice, purposely and voluntarily, to consciously evolve one’s own consciousness. It is a process, not an end result, however, if you want an ultimate goal to work for, using the definition of God, as you might define Him, is as good as any way to determine the end result of evolving your own consciousness. You can, of course, set any end-goal you want as long as you recognize it is only an end-result. It is working on the conscious evolution of your own consciousness that is the truly meaningful part of *Enlightenment.*

 Looks like I’m going to be doing a lot of interesting reading and writing. I just love being in jail.

3

Tony

A sense of malice of forethought permeated the air. Finding out who caused that malice would be both difficult and dangerous. The murders were pure wanton slaughter. If I weren’t careful, something outrageous would happen to me, or I would be defeated in the process some other way.

I hoped that if I lost, I would not be badly defeated. I hoped that I would find a solution, an explanation, at least some answer—before a murder got pinned on me with false evidence, or before the murderer or murderers added me to their list of the dead. Again, I found myself continuing to fight the repetitive chatter that kept creeping into the conscious part of my brain, so I forgave myself for letting the chatter surface—unfortunately, this time the chatter was about to partially come true.

It was without a doubt the worst round of golf I had played in years. Even though it surprised me, it seemed metaphorically appropriate as if the universe were sending a message to me about its hidden meaning—it’s all shit!

 I totaled the score on my card standing by the eighteenth green. After writing the total down on the card, I stared at it, my mind blank as bird shit dropped from the sky landing on the total score I’d just written down as if the score card were a toilet bowl for birds.

It was then that Dic arrested me at the country club in front of people I knew. I don’t think he did it there to be malicious. You can’t blame him for thinking that was the only place he’d be able to find me.

 “Tony, you’re being arrested for the murder of Kenneth Beck,” he said when he approached me.

 *That’s a good one. The murder of Beck?*

 “On what basis?” I asked. “I thought you had determined that he killed himself.”

 “We got a tip. We did a DNA analysis on Beck’s clothes. We matched the DNA you gave in your child support case. We found your sperm on his clothes. You’re sick, Tony. With luck, maybe you can cop an insanity plea.”

I contacted the only real criminal lawyer I knew, Jimmy’s attorney. I didn’t know how I’d be able to pay for an attorney in a murder case. Fortunately for me, even though Jimmy had been convicted and on death row at San Quentin, he was still filthy rich. As soon as Jimmy found out, he had me bailed out and arranged to pay for all my attorney fees.

We seemed to be the only ones that cared for the other, which made me feel guilty having recently thought that Jimmy could be behind the murders—although he still could be.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Two Years after Jimmy’s Arrest

REINVENTING REALITY

1

Wall Street Journal

LETICIA TRECHATORIA AWARDED QUADFIRM STOCK

Ms. Tretchatoria has been awarded by default 100 percent of the QuadFirm stock owned by a group of venture capitalists she sued for fraud. The stock is valued in excess of $100,000,000.

2

Tony

With all the defendants in the lawsuit dead and Jimmy convicted and sentenced to death for Walter’s murder, Leticia received a settlement from the estates of the deceased and Jimmy, who no longer thought defending the lawsuit important. She was one rich lady. Damn, I would like a chunk of that. If only I had that chemical attraction for her, but I’d proved to myself when we were in Cancun that it wasn’t there. Besides, I was okay financially thanks to Walter’s gold and Jimmy’s help with the bail and legal fees.

The only thing I had to worry about was the murder charge against me for the death of Bro Beck, but that seemed to have been significantly postponed by my attorneys. They still didn’t expect to go to trial for another year, and I was getting tired of just playing golf. I needed something to stimulate me and get my mind off of the threat that I too might wind up on death row at San Quentin. I needed to take the advice I’d given Jimmy—make my life be meaningful.

I’d been reading a lot more literature along with writing in a journal that I started long ago to keep my writing notes. One day on the golf course, I got the idea to go back to college and formally study writing. I decided on Chico State because I discovered when I chased Jimmy through Chico that I loved the college and the town.

The first time, college bored me because I’d studied business. Now I wanted to get as far away from left-brained thinking as possible—develop the right-brained artistic elements in my life, then go forward once I’d decided what interested me. That first semester I signed up for an acting class, music theory and piano, beginning philosophy, beginning fiction writing, and linguistics.

I first thought of becoming a professional writer after I wrote a short story about spending thirty days in a South American prison for smoking pot on the beach, but so far I had treated writing only as a hobby, including the story I wrote about Leticia and me in eighth grade. Writing more draft stories in my journal rekindled my interest. Writing would be a way to clarify the jumbled thoughts that constantly ran through my head—get those thoughts sorted and on paper. I could benefit from studying writing by organizing and documenting my life in order to understand who I am, where I’ve been, and where I wanted to go. It was obvious to me that my wants had radically changed, but what those wants were, still seemed elusive.

I would examine my life—to make it worth living; to give it structure in this meaningless universe. Maybe I would actually find out that the universe had a purpose and life itself was meaningful. Being sober has helped, but being without a specific purpose in life hasn’t seemed too fulfilling.

Jimmy had told me about his Conscious Evolution of the Consciousness idea, which sounded like a great idea, although I had to laugh to myself about the idea coming from his future self. If it is possible to evolve one’s own consciousness, I think that continued learning would have to be one of the ways. I’m glad I’m in college now so that I can treat it as part of my own conscious evolution.

I might later even write a non-fiction book addressing the ways to evolve one’s own consciousness and to determine what type of attributes an evolved consciousness would have. I could also identify how the idea could be implemented world-wide as this seems like a necessity if humans are to avoid destroying the planet and themselves, given present human behavior patterns as expressed daily in newspaper headlines.

\* \* \*

As soon as I entered the fiction-writing classroom, I saw a beautiful blonde sitting towards the back. I like to sit in the back of classes myself, and I like to sit next to beautiful blondes—even ones twenty-five years younger than I. Not that I expected anything would happen sexually. I just like to be in the presence of beauty.

Rob Davidson, our teacher, called the roll.

 “Tony T. Trueblé,” he said towards the end of the roll call.

“Here,” I responded noticing the blonde’s slight smile.

“Victoria Trueblé,” Rob said, glancing at me.

“Here,” she said. “Please call me Ria.”

“I assume you two are related, sitting next to each other with the same last name,” Rob said.

 “I don’t think so,” I said.

“No,” the girl replied.

After class, I suggested to Ria that we get a coffee and talk family to see if there might be some connection. After all, Trueblé is not the most common name on the planet.

I asked, “Where are you from, Ria?”

“Santa Rosa. How about you?”

“Larkspur,” I answered.

“Oh, my mother, Stephanie, used to live there. I was born at Marin General Hospital.”

 “Do you have three brothers, Ria?”

“Yes, how did you know?”

 “What are their names?”

“Prescott, Teague, and Brodie.”

Ria confirmed what I immediately knew to be true. She was my daughter; one of the four children I had unknowingly fathered. Stephanie lived in Santa Rosa and obviously changed her last name to Trueblé, which surprised me. The lawsuit did not reveal this as she sued under her given name, McLeod.

I saw no sense holding back. “Ria, I’m sure this shocks you as much as me. I’m your father.”

“My father’s dead.”

“Not true. Your mother and I were in high school together. By our mid-twenties, I drank excessively and hung out at the Silver Peso in Larkspur. Your mother came in once in a while, and we made love, several times, over several years. I didn’t know she wanted a child, let alone children. Stephanie never told me she had kids by me, kept it her own secret. I only found out two years ago when she sued me for back child support. A DNA test confirmed that I’m your father and your brothers.”

“My mother has cancer. She needed money,” Ria said. “I remember her coming into some money. Was that from you?”

“Yes,” I said as a few tears began to trickle down Ria’s soft, white cheeks, then quickly burst into a stream, as tears formed in my own eyes. We did the only reasonable thing we could do under the circumstances. We instinctively stood up, hugged each other, and let the tears flow.

When I started my first writing class, I felt the possibilities as I held the pen, touched the paper, and began to write. My pen scratched words onto the page like cutting love initials into a tree.

 But I was a student out of practice. At first, I could only study while I ate or pooped (thank God for the Pooh Desk™), but I got a lot done that way. I started reading in bed at night, which I found easy now that I was sober. I forced myself to go to the library where it was a comfortable place to study—you weren’t suffering alone. Most of all, I wrote because that is what a writer does.

 I found writing had its own high stakes. A writer spends a significant amount of his or her time without knowing if the result will be successful. The writer has to make a choice, as do all artists: be a starving artist or work for money. This time, I did not go for the money—although it was still one of my long-term wants.

 As I went to class and studied, I learned that story without conflict was boring to the reader. If a story needs conflict to represent the human condition, does this mean that war is inevitable because humans need conflict to make life interesting? When a society can’t get enough conflict in the individual lives of its citizens, is that when they go to war? Is life collectively about humans against humans and individually, internally, against oneself?

 Perhaps that’s the purpose of affirmations, or, if you will, self-brainwashing—to put one’s self on one side of the conflict and in the dominant position. Maybe people make decisions that work against their own interests to make life interesting. Perhaps we unconsciously think that this is more important and enjoyable—less boring than having no internal conflict.

 Maybe that’s why I drank so much, why other alcoholics are drunks: we need the conflict. Frankly, though, the conflicts in getting sober were more interesting and more meaningful than the conflicts when I was drunk since I actually remember the events related to conflicts now.

 It became clear to me that I could no longer drown my internal and external conflicts by numbing them with alcohol. As chaotically jumbled thoughts sprang forth from my now-consciously-evolving-mind, I faced and confronted doubt, shame, guilt, lust, anger, resentment, and all the other defects that surfaced. Writing helped me to face these defects by getting them out of my mind and putting them down on paper, then creating fictionalized versions of the truth—which would be lying if I were not a writer. I looked forward to someday getting paid to lie. I also spent time practicing self-forgiveness, but I’ll be damned if I can remember where I heard that idea; but it sure is helping to continually clear the repetitive chatter from my conscious self.

In our writing class, we first learned how to write a sentence. Rob Davidson passed out an essay written by the writer, Donald Barthelme. Barthelme said a sentence “should surprise, in some sense be true, be beautiful, and be possessed of a metaphysical dimension.” My first assignment was to write three sentences:

“Sex outside of marriage was a sin and within marriage a necessary evil, yet sex was God’s vehicle for procreation; Jim Der Bacon was so conflicted by this that he had to choose—he rejected God in favor of sex.” Rob noted, “this is an interesting and enjoyable sentence.” That comment made me happy.

“She pleaded with her daughter to not change the relationship for the better, but to destroy it from within with time taken carefully.” Rob’s note said, “I like this one—subtle and menacing.” That comment got my adrenaline and hope going.

“We reside in an unknown, never knowable physical and mental existence neither sure what or if something grand, bad, or final will happen to us.” “Well it is true,” Rob noted. He didn’t seem impressed.

 Overall, I was pleased with Rob’s notes. He gave me some positive feedback on fiction I wrote, the first I’d ever received from anyone, the first to read anything that I had written. Maybe I can get Ria to read some of my stores about my past. Let her see how I reinvented the realities of my life by fictionalizing situations I encountered while living my life.

 An exercise that Rob later gave us to do, which came from John Gardner’s book, *The Art of Fiction*, consisted of two characters viewing the same barn from different viewpoints to show the impact of how setting changes when viewed from two very different emotional perspectives.

The first character’s son had just died. The second character was in love. For the character whose son died, I wrote:

 The sunlight reflecting off the barn was blood red. From the loft hung a large rope that could be used either to haul something up to the loft, hand something down, or hang someone by the neck. The peak of the barn’s roof looked like a small mountain crushing the lower part of the barn into a squat, unattractive rectangle. A small hill overlooked the back of the barn. The hill was lined with old gravestones, each marking the spot where the fallen had been buried, some over one hundred years ago, others more recently. The barn’s surroundings were bleak—not a blade of grass, a bush, or a tree could be seen within fifty yards of the barn’s warped sides. The fences of the corrals holding the horses behind the barn could not be seen, but the horses whinnies’ could be heard, sounding like ghouls screaming for life.

For the second character who was in love, I wrote:

 Sunset red was the only way to describe the beauty of the light that reflected off the barn. Against the back-drop of the barn was a small, brown hill littered with what appeared to be some type of monuments. The peak of the barn’s roof made the barn look tall, thin, and bold as the peak rose up to touch the blue sky. A rope hung down from the loft, swinging freely in the soft, hot wind of summer, looking like it was waiting for boys to swing back and forth on. The summer wind had cleaned the yard of all debris making it look like a recently swept floor. The existence of a corral behind the barn was revealed by the horses’ singing what sounded like a high-pitched song to the Gods above.

 “Bravo,” Rob wrote. “You nailed it, Tony. Great work—vividly imagined details infused with deep emotion.”

 This exercise really gave me insight into how we choose our own reality by how we see people, places, or things—something Leticia and I discussed when we were in Cancun.

 I felt I was on my way. As the semester continued, I worked on my writing, even tried some prose poems to practice imagery, although I did these for myself, not class. By the end of the first semester, I was hooked. I wrote only small bits and pieces, but I’d gotten satisfying feedback from Rob and the class. I knew I was on my way to becoming a successful writer. And to top it off, I was a father whose daughter was going to college with him. It doesn’t get much better than that.

In my second semester of writing, I decided to write a fictionalized short story reinventing and embellishing the real events of my life after Lon hired me. I wanted to make this an outline of a novel I would write later.

The short story described some of the events that I’ve mentioned in earlier chapters: venture capital scheming, murders, suicides and bad behavior by all, including myself. I wrote the entire short story in third person, past tense because only later could I fill in the blanks for each of the people I wrote about. In the actual novel, I showed each person’s part in the story by using first person to capture the sense of the internal and external conflicts they faced in their own lives.

But at the time, I didn’t know how the story really ended since the ending had not yet happened, so I completed the short story with a completely fictional ending, one that didn’t actually occur anywhere except in my imagination:

During one of his drunken, stoned states, Tony had a realization. Leticia had everyone killed.

It made sense. Bro had told him about Leticia and Cozen’s love affair, but Tony didn’t think that anyone else knew.

So Tony tracked them down. It wasn’t difficult because there was no reason to hide.

Peter Fellure had been convicted of Walter’s murder and was suspected of all the other murders, so no one was looking for them.

Tony found Leticia at one of the most exclusive beach resorts in the Caribbean.

As he walked down the beach to confront Leticia, he saw her ahead sitting under a shade

umbrella, a drink in hand.

Tony approached Leticia, who said, “Hi, Tony.”

Tony could only say, “Why, Leticia. Why?

“Why not, Tony? What are you going to do?”

Tony thought for a moment, looking at the still beautiful, sexy Leticia. Finally, he sat down next to her, put his arm around her, and said, “Help you spend it Leticia. Help you spend it.”

I thought that I’d done quite well with the short story version. I looked forward to the workshop where Rob and the class would comment on the story. The student comments did not please me:

 “I knew who the murderer was right away. It was obvious. Like the butler, the femme fatale is always guilty.”

 “Tony is slothful the entire time. There is no change in his character.”

 “There is too much telling, not enough showing.”

 “There are too many characters in the story. It was difficult to follow. I don’t know what a venture capitalist does so the story line was meaningless to me.”

 “There’s no feeling in the story. The characters don’t ring true. The characters need to be fleshed out.”

 “The cop didn’t seem too smart, didn’t figure anything out himself.”

 “Tony is just there. He doesn’t even investigate. He doesn’t respond to the existence or behavior of the other characters.”

 “There’s little interaction between the other characters. You could combine them all into one character without changing the story.”

 “I don’t see Tony making any choices. As the protagonist, Tony has no stakes in the story. He never seems to be at risk himself.”

 Worst of all from Rob: “Your language is like stagnant water, not moving but just sitting there on the page in putrefied stillness. This is not literary fiction. It is straight genre writing. That’s not what this class is about.”

 It was depressing. After two semesters of writing classes, I didn’t know a goddamn thing about writing. My shit was awful. It had no meaning. I would have to choose to drop out of my fantasy to become a writer or dig in. Dropping out seemed the easiest.

Images of little airplane bottles of vodka entered my mind. I didn’t know if I would make it through the rest of the day without one. I lapsed once with Jimmy, and I did not want to lapse again. It had been over a year since I had a drink, and I was satisfied with my life, just not some of the events that kept popping into it. I stayed sober—but damn, did I want a drink.

As usual, under that innate need for conflict, I would soon find myself embroiled in one more battle, this time with the Chico Women’s Center.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Still Two Years after Jimmy’s Arrest

THE PENIS REGISTRY, TRAMP STAMP,

AND HETERO-NORMATIVE BLATHER

Tony

It seemed like my life always guided me into some major conflict. Even so, it surprised me that I would find myself in a major conflict in Chico, a conflict with the local women’s center and its director.

It started out as one of those beautiful, sunshiny days with a mild morning temperature. As time went on, the temperature gradually rose like a small fire that ultimately will burst into a flaming torrent that consumes everything in its path.

On Wednesdays, the Chico State commons, a large grassy area in front of the student union, also called the free speech area, hosts a collection of tables, many of them hawking liberal or conservative ideas that compete with and are in conflict with each other.

During the lunch break, I peacefully wandered through the maze of tables, sometimes talking to students, other times observing the process of young minds attempting to find their place in the world by working for this idea or that. Peaceful that is until I stopped at a table being run by the Chico Women’s Center—where a large sign advertised something called the Penis Registry.

Immediately, my mind went into a tailspin as it failed to embrace the concept of a Penis Registry, something that seemed to be a sexist turn of events— this time the feminists being the offender at the expense of males.

 “This Penis Registry thing seems to be offensively sexist,” I said to the overweight, short-haired woman manning the table, a woman who I would find out was the director of this women’s center.

“Oh no,” she said. “We’re just being playful in our attempt to get men to acknowledge the suffering women have been subject to from the behavior of men. This will give men the opportunity to come clean with their chauvinistic and sexist behavior by registering their penis with us to show their support.”

“Well, it’s sexist to me. In fact, I’m appalled that a feminist group would do something like this since I’ve always been a supporter of women’s liberation. Isn’t “playful” the word governor Schwarzenegger used to describe his behavior on the movie set where he was accused of groping females?”

“That’s different,” she said—her smile capped by condescending lips.

 My mind no longer behaved rationally. Fired up, I began attacking her with the hypocrisy of her position. My mental rationality became so warped by my anger that my words made no sense to me, let alone her.

 Pissed, I walked away, went home to my computer, and wrote a letter to the editor of the *Chico Enterprise Record*, the local newspaper, to edit and revise my ramblings into a more pointed argument. I also filed a complaint with the school claiming that this type of behavior should not be allowed on campus. I pointed out in both instances that if men were to have a Vagina Registry, all hell would break loose with accusations of sexism and offensive behavior, most likely led by the Women’s Center. I sent copies of everything to the director.

My letter made an immediate impact, but not the one I expected, which would have been an acknowledgement that the Women’s Center was wrong in using the Penis Registry concept. The director issued a news release, which you can find on the Internet by typing in Tony T. Trueblé. I do have to say that my being a search result on the net actually gave me an acknowledgement that I am a real live person with an actual history, so in many ways the news release elated me—until I read it.

To paraphrase and summarize the news release, it stated:

The Women’s Center has had an overwhelmingly positive response to the Penis Registry. This event is intended to be a positive way for men in the Chico community to show their support for women and to stop sexual assault. 51-60% of college men report that they would rape a woman if they were certain that they would get away with it. The VAST MAJORITY of sexual assaults are committed by men. We feel that the Penis Registry is positive and lighthearted. We are not sure exactly what is found sexually inappropriate. The use of the word penis? In addition, Mr. Trueblé poses the question of what we would do if we saw a similar flyer asking women to register their vagina. We feel that the proper response is to question why he did not seek out more information on the event before he jumped to conclusions. The Women’s Center will not be sending out any apologies. We do not feel that we have done anything wrong.

Everyone can judge for themselves the appropriateness of the Penis Registry and the Women’s Center response, however, let me point out that their letter attacks men as want-to-be rapists if they can get away with it; the women’s center didn’t see what was sexually inappropriate about a Penis Registry; and when they address the question of their reaction to a Vagina Registry, they answer it by attacking “Mr. Trueblé” instead of answering the question, as if they are afraid to address or even consider why a male might be offended by their actions. The Women’s Center seems to be better at taking other people’s inventory than taking their own, never being able to comprehend that their behavior and use of words is the same as what they fight.

Unfortunately, my dispute with the Women’s Center and its director did not end with the Penis Registry. At the end of the Spring semester, the director of the Women’s Center mailed a letter to the editorial page of the *Orion*, the school newspaper, which said in part:

An opinion columnist wrote an article about tattoos. I take issue with the use of the slang “tramp stamp” as a synonym for a lower back tattoo. Is it her opinion that all women with lower back tattoos are tramps?

When you allow your editors to play with social stereotypes without offering original thought, then you have become a publication that merely regurgitates hetero-normative blather.

Does she think that it’s funny for women to scrutinize and judge other women based on superficial appearances? Did she think that we don’t have enough to deal with (i.e., the male gaze, rape culture, sexist advertising, etc.)? Does she realize that she has so internalized the opinions of the patriarchy that she feels it is completely appropriate to casually call women she doesn’t even know “tramps”?

For your information, “tramp stamp” is not an alternative definition for a lower back tattoo but merely base slang that serves to demean and subjugate women. Be aware that this was the straw that broke this camel’s back.

Once again, I was on the attack; this time only by emails. I knew that any verbal confrontation would immediately throw me into an unjustifiable rage at the attitudes expressed in the letter. After all, what is more stereotypical than the words “hetero-normative blather?” Was she expressing a women’s view or a lesbian’s view? Was she suggesting that women who are heterosexual also use hetero-normative blather when they disagree with her? And what about the term “male gaze?” Isn’t that also a stereotype, especially when “male gaze” is couched with the terms “rape culture” and “sexist advertising?” And isn’t it a bit excessive to say this minor incident is ‘the straw that broke the camel’s back,” making it more important than it is by adding an unjustified, emotional pull?

The patriarchy she referred to was white males, who I agreed ran the country and caused problems, but to apply these actions to all males was just another form of stereotyping. And what exactly was her opinion of the United States Constitution and Declaration of Independence, which were both written by white, hetero-sexual males? Are these documents just “hetero-normative blather?”

I doubt seriously if any white male, or male of color, would even have an opinion about that tattoo being called a “tramp stamp” or would even be aware the term existed. This term seems solely to have been coined by women, not men, so why bring men into her letter?—except for her own sexual bias against men. And maybe this is what really got my goat: not only her sexual offense, but her hypocrisy.

Doesn’t it all really come down to a question of power and the abuse thereof? Look at other countries’ power hierarchies made of non-whites. Those in power behave the same way. And if women, lesbians, gays, or people of color were in power, I suggest they would probably act the same way as white men have in power—putting their own interests ahead of everyone else. It’s almost as if the abuse of political power is an instinctive human behavior.

It all seemed to come down to the fact that the director, like with the Penis Registry, used the type of language and arguments that she opposed in order to support her argument. But it slapped the face of all hetero-sexual males and females and that of any male who might have admired the beauty of any woman with the “male gaze.” God forbid if this woman were ever in power.

Without going into any great detail, we engaged in a battle of emails. I even sent her the following words to a blues song that I wrote as a response to her suppressive, attacking tone:

I’ve got the white-man blues. I’m not a woman, not gay; not black, nor yellow. I get blamed for everything. They think it’s all my fault. In their minds I made the laws and I’ve got the money; I’m one of the guys who takes advantage of them, doesn’t listen, steals their toys. But I’ve got no money, got no home, and I’m pissed too. In truth, it’s some other white boys who did them wrong; and those white boys did me wrong too. I’ve got the white-man blues.

The director’s responses to the song’s words were morally despicable and intellectually dishonest just like everything she said or did so far. I found myself once again where I didn’t really want to be. Angry responses were a normal situation for me during my days of drinking. But since I’d been sober and working on bettering myself, learning to be better in spite of man’s apparent need for conflict, I tried to stay away from confrontation, especially after my run-in at AA with Roy. But with the Women’s Center on my butt, and I on theirs, I decided to let it go and not respond or involve myself anymore in the war we carried out.

It shocked me later when I read in the *Chico Enterprise Record* that the director of the Women’s Center died after being shot in the head, from a distance, while driving her father’s tractor on the weekend as she helped him in his almond orchard. The police found a sharpshooter’s empty shell, one that could only be fired through a sniper-rifle.

I opened the door to two police officers, one a sergeant who said, “Sir, are you Tony T. Trueblé?”

After I replied yes, he indicated that my presence was required downtown.

At the police station, they asked me numerous questions for over an hour, when suddenly an officer who stood in the back asked me if I had been in the Army. After I replied yes, he said, “Yeah, we already knew that. We also know that you were a sniper. The San Francisco police have a complaint on file that you threatened a Roy Rummy by bragging about blowing someone’s head off from a thousand meters while you were in the war. You used that skill to kill the director, didn’t you, shot her with a sniper’s rifle, didn’t you?”

God, I’m stupid! I remembered when I lied to Bro Beck by bragging that I had been a sniper. And I tried to intimidate Roy when I told him that I’d been a sniper after he threatened to have me arrested for trespassing. If you don’t control your behavior and what you say, this is what happens. I felt like a real jerk, a fucking idiot, a loser.

“I wasn’t a sniper,” I replied. “Only a fucking clerk typist; I sat in an office on the seventh floor of a hotel in Bangkok—my only weapon was a typewriter.”

“Didn’t you in fact receive the “expert marksman” medal when you were in basic training?” He asked.

 “Kind of,” I said as I wondered who they got that information from.

 “Kind of?” he frowned, his eyes flickering in disbelief.

 “Yeah, kind of,” I said. “I was one of the last guys taking the marksman test on a Friday afternoon. The drill instructors run you through the hills and you shoot at pop-up targets that are dressed like World War II enemy soldiers. Halfway through my run, my rifle jammed. The two sergeants didn’t want to stay late and run me through the test again, so they gave me all hits on the remaining targets. I think I came in third out of a company of two hundred men. Even got a three-day pass, the first passes given out in over four weeks. But I was no marksman.”

“So you accepted a medal you didn’t earn. Not a very responsible thing to do. What other irresponsible things have you done, Tony? I see you were arrested and convicted of a DUI. You were charged with stealing a gold bar. You’re currently out on bail for murder. I believe you are an expert marksman. I believe you were a sniper in the war. I think maybe you’re the killer here also. Come on, confess now, make it easy on us and yourself.”

That’s all I needed to hear from the police. I immediately asked for a lawyer and declined to speak further, but because they had no real evidence against me, such as a fingerprint on the spent shell, they didn’t arrest me. But I knew by the anger in their eyes and faces—anger that squinted the eyes, inflamed the whites, fixed the facial muscles like stone—that it wouldn’t take much more for them to justify arresting me and charging me with murder.

I desperately needed to find some answers, maybe get out of town. I needed someone to talk to, someone I could trust, someone I could call a friend. I couldn’t call Jimmy because I still had some lingering doubts about him as I did with everyone. Ria was the closest person to me, although I wouldn’t say we were connected like a father and daughter. But I felt that I could trust her, and I was grateful to have a daughter to turn to.

CHAPTER THRITY-NINE

Still Two Years after Jimmy’s Arrest,

but a Little Bit Later

JUST BECAUSE YOU’RE PARANOID

DOESN’T MEAN NO ONE’S AFTER YOU

1

Tony

In addition to the stresses of writing and staying sober, living in Chico had not freed me from the stresses of my past life, which continued to haunt me.

The first two “accidents” fooled me. The third did not.

The first “accident” occurred at the corner of Second and Main. I was about to cross the street to Peet’s Coffee House when the light turned yellow, and I backed up to the curb to wait for the light to turn green. A car careened around the corner and sped through the spot where I had stood. I could have assumed at the time that the car turned the corner after noticing that I had stepped back, but my shaking body didn’t seem to agree.

Instinctively, I reached into my pocket for one of those airplane bottles of vodka to throw at the car, but I found the pocket empty of temptation. Instead, I yelled, “You asshole.” I followed the yell with a raised right hand, middle finger extended, kind of in an anti-salute to the bastard. But I might have kept on walking and be dead instead of fuming, so I let it go.

Several weeks passed. I hadn’t been arrested for the murder of the Women’s Center’s director. Because I had no alibi, I still worried, but I had talked with Ria which had calmed me down—until the second “accident” on the stairs in my apartment building.

I’d moved out of my Cadillac limo into a decent upstairs apartment in downtown at the corner of Third and Broadway. It was a one-bedroom with a cozy living room space decorated in typical Chico college style—only awaiting the messy student touch.

An old wooden oak desk and an executive, faux leather chair with a high back had been placed in front of the window that overlooked the corner. I put the goldfish in front of a second window. The atmosphere made it a great place to write, a great place to watch the world go by.

In contrast to the inside of the apartment, the halls outside and stairways were dark and foreboding—like something you would find in a film-noir murder mystery starring Humphrey Bogart.

 One day, I walked out into the hall on my way to school. The light in the hall had been broken for a long time, making it dark like a bat cave. On my way down to the second floor, I carefully stepped on the top stair, then the second, then the third.

As I reached the fourth stair, my feet slipped out from underneath me. Fortunately, I’m a railing freak, something I became after I read that Laura Ashley, a famous clothes designer, died from falling down the stairs—apparently, she did not hang onto the railing. My paranoia probably saved my life. As I slipped backward, I pulled myself back up while I held tighter to the rail with my right hand.

*Whew!*

I reached down and touched the stair that might have killed me, or worse, left me paralyzed. It felt like a slimy, slippery fish.

Happy to have avoided the fall, I only told the manager he needed to clean up the slime never considering why the slime was on the stairs in the first place. This time I simple-mindedly assumed it was an accident, even though my paranoia level had increased because of all the shit that had happened and continued to happen to me.

The third “accident” was the old drop-the-safe-on-the-head-trick. I found it impossible to call this cliché an accident.

Ria and I were walking down the street to have breakfast at Moxie’s, where they serve eggs with *Those Potatoes:* hash browns made with onions, peppers, and bits of sausage.

I believe in luck, so when I saw a nickel on the sidewalk in front of me, we stopped. I stooped over to pick the nickel up, which turned out to be a 1908 buffalo-head nickel worth fifty bucks. Ria walked back to look in a store window behind us.

I saw something black flash in front of me, heard a crash, and felt a stinging sensation in my legs as chunks of concrete penetrated my skin through the soft, light pants I wore.

Later, I would find out that three feet in front of me, a small safe had hit the sidewalk, churning up the small bits of sidewalk that pierced my legs. I must have instinctively fallen backwards to get away from the disaster in front. I ended up cracking my head against the concrete sidewalk, which knocked me out.

The police told me at the hospital that their investigation showed no one occupied the office from which the safe was dropped.

This time my rage could be justified. Someone not only tried to kill me, but almost included Ria in the attempt. My mouth salivated with the taste of vodka as I thought how it would chase the stress out of my blood stream and calm me down. I called my AA friend John as my temptation to drink escalated.

2

Ria

One of the things about my relationship with Tony, one I’m sure that doesn’t occur between normal fathers and daughters, is that at first we never fought, never argued. I guess we were both too sensitive about the separation in our lives with neither of us wanting to rock the boat.

Even though I couldn’t bring myself to call Tony “Dad,” I liked having a father; maybe not in the having-been-raised sense, but in the sense a male person was responsible for my being born; a person that I could trust and could trust me just because we were father and child. I wasn’t ready to call him Dad, but I mostly liked him so I was happy with finding out the truth.

Just as difficult to grasp Tony as my father, I thought it strange that Mom had used him to father her children. But I loved Mom and didn’t like the idea of breaking into our relationship by attacking her, so I never mentioned Tony. We talked about telling my mom and brothers, but neither of us felt we should disrupt Mom’s or the boys’ lives until we knew each other better. Tony seemed to be still dealing with the resentment and anger that Mom had four children by him without his knowledge.

 Another strange thing about having Tony as my father was going to school together. Christ, who goes to school with their dad? But it was interesting that both Tony and I were studying writing, as if our desire to write proved we were genetically connected.

Unlike me, Tony seemed to always involve himself in weird shit—often causing trouble. He had this ongoing battle with the Chico Women’s Center, and I’ve taken some flak from some of the female students for being Tony’s daughter. I’ve learned that Tony is not anti-women, and I think he’s right in his argument that the Women’s Center was being sexist and acting offensively from a man’s perspective. But that didn’t justify him going off half-cocked, rampaging across the campus, and causing unnecessary problems. He needed to learn how to chill out.

On top of all this, it really freaked me out when I learned Tony was currently out-on-bail for murder. I couldn’t help but wonder if he might be guilty in the Women’s Center director’s death.

I don’t know if you could say that Tony and I had grown close during the last year, but we were at least friendly, saw each other in classes that we took together, and sometimes had breakfast or lunch together. Since I have no knowledge about how to have a father, it was just as well that we didn’t get too close—but I wanted to.

Not long after we were almost hit by a safe and Tony was feeling better, he took me to breakfast at Moxie’s. Ken cooked while Jan, the owner, worked the counter. A new gallery of paintings covered the walls. The paintings contained images of death and destruction. Some of the paintings were blended with images of hope and beauty. I liked the paintings that contrasted good and evil, but not the ones that focused only on evil. None of the paintings seemed to focus only on the good.

 It quickly became evident that Tony wanted to talk to me, open up about himself.

“Ria,” Tony said between bites. “I’ve accepted that I’m an alcoholic, that I can’t manage my life when I drink so I need to stay sober. I’ve made a moral inventory of myself, or perhaps in my case, an immoral inventory would be truer.”

 “Great,” I said, glad to hear more about who my father really was. “I’m proud of you. I’ve seen some positive changes in you over the past year. What’s next?”

 “The next step,” he said, “involves making amends to those people I’ve harmed during my life. Some amends will be easy, others more difficult, especially to those I can’t locate.”

“Who do you have to make amends to?” I asked as I studied the painting behind him. It was drawn with a black background like one of those Mexican day-glow paintings on black velvet. The different shades of white that took up most of the drawing made the picture have a ghost-like aura. The white objects were all drawn as distorted humans who seemed to be struggling to get free of some unseen entity. The faces reflected terror: the eyes bulged, and the lips were drawn tight as if the mouths tried to hold something in. The heads appeared to quiver.

I worried about Tony and began to feel the need to protect him, the first time that I had any feelings towards him that went beyond accepting him as my biological father. Before, I never really had an interest in his life. Maybe the casual acquaintance between us could move towards that illusive daughter and father thing if I somehow helped him.

 “I have big amends to make to Leticia, the lady I worked for. She was my high school girlfriend, and I treated her as a sex object then and after I started to work for her. When I represented her in the lawsuit, Walter Funcker, the guy she sued, blackmailed me into taking a bribe to work both sides of the lawsuit.”

 “What do you think you should do?” I asked as I cringed with the news. Tony’s honesty and the murder charge made his character suspect. Mom seemed to be right—Tony was not good husband or father material.

“My friends in AA have told me because of the guilt and shame I feel towards Leticia that I can’t clear my mind of all the shit in it, let go of the trauma inside, until I meet face-to-face with her and make direct amends. If I want to get on with my life, I have to track her down. Also, she hasn’t paid me for the work I did, and I’m running out of money. She ended up with over one hundred million dollars, so I’d like to get paid the money she owes me, even though I don’t deserve it.”

 “Let’s track her down,” I said. “I’ll help you.”

 “It’s more complicated than that,” Tony said. “I think Leticia might be behind the murders and whoever is now trying to kill me. She might also be the person who set me up as a suspect in the murder of Bro Beck, the murder I’ve been charged with. The police found my DNA all over the clothes Beck wore when they discovered the body. After sex, Leticia always insisted on disposing of the used condom.

“And the police have a videotape that shows Leticia at seventeen having sex with this guy Peter Fellure. The police think the tape was made by Peter’s son Vincent, who was one of the lawsuit defendants. The police want to know why my fingerprints are on the tape. Several years ago at her house, Leticia asked me to get a videotape from her bookcase and set it down on a table. I’m a suspect in Vincent’s death because my fingerprints are all over the tape. But if you ask me, it’s Peter they should be looking at not me. He’s probably in cahoots with Leticia.

“Making amends to Leticia will be difficult, and dangerous, if she was behind the murders and set me up to be the fall guy.”

 “That’s really scary,” I said, “and a definite reason to track her down. Maybe if you make amends to her, she’ll stop trying to kill you, you know, forgive you for the past.”

A couple of days later, Tony told me that he had tracked Leticia to a resort in Cancun, Mexico.

“Tracking her down was not particularly hard,” Tony said, “as she had no reason to believe that anyone would be searching for her. She left a large spending trail that leads to the same resort she and I stayed in not long after her husband Lon died. I’m going to Mexico to confront her. I’ll let you know what happens.”

“I’m going with you,” I said, not too pleased to hear that Tony had sex with Leticia right after her husband died, but wanting more than ever to protect him since I was probably the only one who cared. Guilty or not, I decided to stand with him—maybe even learn to call him Dad instead of Tony depending on the actions he would take with this Leticia person when he sees her.

“You’re certainly not,” Tony said. “It’s my business, not yours. Besides, it might be dangerous.”

“I’m going with you Tony. There are some things you can’t do alone. If you want to move beyond being just Tony to me, to be more than my biological father, then you need to bring me into your life, show me what you’re made of, give me a reason to call you Dad instead of Tony.”

After arguing for some time, Tony acquiesced. Summer vacation started in a couple of weeks, and I suggested that we make dual use of the time by doing some research on the Mexican pyramids located on the Yucatan Peninsula, information we could incorporate into a novel that we could write together, if he wanted to do that.

 While we did find Leticia, Tony never got the opportunity to make amends to her other than to mumble the words, “I’m sorry.”

CHAPTER FORTY

Three Plus Years after Jimmy’s Arrest

ZITS, BROKEN NECK, INJURED KNEE

Tony

The resort hadn’t changed since Leticia and I snuck away to it several years ago. Leticia and I stayed in the main hotel, now she had booked herself into a beach cabana. Ria and I checked into one of the airport hotels.

 The night was so humid, we might as well have been in a steam bath. Once we got to Leticia’s hotel, we walked down a path surrounded by overhanging palm trees and tropical bushes as if we were in a tunnel. I could see a light at the end, which turned out to be Leticia’s cabana. The path to the cabana sparkled with movement as moonlight penetrated through the shadows of the trees blowing in the wind, a wind that, despite the warm weather, sent chills down our spines.

On the way to the cabana, the wind stopped, and I heard no sounds. Ria grabbed my hand and held on tight—sometimes the sounds of silence are scarier than any sound itself.

As we got closer, I could hear noise in the Cabana—shouts, screams, and the sound of furniture and glass being thrown against the walls. I could hear the refrigerator running, ice being made. I heard small creaking sounds, then a popping noise like a bottle of champagne being opened as if they were anticipating our arrival and wanted to celebrate.

I turned on my pocket tape recorder. We waited several minutes, breathing slowly to calm ourselves. Then I knocked on the door despite the *Do-Not-Disturb* sign.

“Shit,” Cozen slurred after he opened the door and saw me standing there.

I had only met him that one time in the supermarket several years ago, yet I remembered his gravity induced walk and the irritating way he talked to me back then. It pleased me to see how fucked up he appeared. I stared at him, then over his shoulder to find Leticia, but I saw only disarray.

“What the fuck you doing here, Tony,” he blurted out. “How’d you find us?”

I stared in disbelief at Cozen who wore an expensive shirt and shorts, both wrinkled and unwashed. Turned over furniture, broken bottles and glasses, clothes, and other things were scattered throughout the room. A white substance I assumed to be cocaine covered a mirror on the coffee table. In spite of Leticia receiving millions of dollars from the sale of her QuadFirm stock, it didn’t seem like she had put the money to good use.

I shoved my way into the room past Cozen before he could stop me. Ria followed. I glanced around the room of substance abuse. I might as well have been in a ghetto drug dealer’s apartment—except the broken furniture here probably cost a bundle.

“Cozen, where’s Leticia?” I asked, not expecting a coherent answer.

“Fuck you, Tony,” he replied as gravity seemed to pull him down to the ripped sofa laced with junk.

I grabbed Cozen by the neck and jerked him up, squeezing his throat as I asked again where Leticia had gone.

“Damn, Tony. She and Bro are out somewhere—probably down the beach.”

 I shoved Cozen back onto the couch as what he said reverberated through my mind, bounced off damaged neurons, and settled deep inside. I moved over to an armchair, shoved the stuff off it and sat. Ria stayed standing by the door.

*Bro?*

“What are you saying, Cozen? Bro’s dead and I’ve been charged with his murder,” I managed to squeak out. Cozen laughed, too spaced out from the drugs to respond coherently.

“Come on, Cozen. What’s going on?”

Before he could reply, the sliding doors to the patio opened and Leticia and Bro walked in.

“Tony?” Bro said through chapped lips, his cheeks sunken and his eye sockets withdrawn, his eyes as quiet as his voice.

Leticia gawked with dazed eyes that couldn’t believe what they were seeing—me.

“Who’s the bitch, Tony?” Leticia said. “Kind of young for you, isn’t she? Fuck, you pervert, she’s young enough to be your goddamn daughter.”

Leticia had put on at least thirty pounds since I last saw her. Her clothes looked two sizes too small and were more wrinkled and much dirtier than Cozen’s. Her matted-down hair went well with her eyes which screamed out inner demonic thoughts. She no longer had perfect posture—slumping forward as if she were practicing to be a hunchback. She only needed a shopping cart to complete the bag lady image. Worse, two bright-pink, purple zits on her nose detracted from what little beauty she had left. I could see that Leticia had experienced for herself what it was like to be ugly.

*Jesus Christ! Jesus Christ!*

I felt an intense dread face-to-face with Bro, no longer dead, but alive, standing in front of me, staring with nothing written across his face. I was shocked by the sudden change in my circumstances and alarmed for Ria and myself. I decided right then and there to kick Bro in his bad leg, the one I injured in high school, and flee out the door. But I hesitated.

“Why Bro? Why?” I asked. He seemed to be the only one of them aware that I stood there for a purpose.

“Why not, Tony?” he said with a wide smile as he poked fun about Tony spelled backwards being “y-not.”

“Why not, my ass,” I replied. “You killed all those people, tried to set me up as the fall guy. Who’s the guy you killed that the police thought was you? Did you kill the Women’s Center’s director in Chico?”

“They all deserved to die,” Bro said. “Do you know that Walter shot me in during the war? That Pei-Pei and Garcy constantly insulted Leticia and were going to testify against her? And that black guy who stood in for me was a drunk, a wasted soul. His life wasn’t worth living so I did him a favor by ending it.”

“What about the others?” I asked, amazed at how he justified these murders and wondering how he would justify his other actions. “Did you murder Lon also?”

“Lon wasn’t murdered. He planned the whole thing, but it was our idea to bring you in as the fall guy, although Leticia did waver for a bit when you were fucking her. But we never seemed to be able to work the fall-guy thing out.”

“So, you’re the idiot who punched me out that night I met with Lon at the Redwood High’s School Reunion,” I said as I began to realize more and more the meaning of all the things that had happened to me over the past few years. “You killed the director of the women’s center, didn’t you?”

“You gave me the idea to set you up for her murder when you told me that you were a sniper during the war. You should be glad I killed her—she was just one of those typical feminist bitches. The world’s a better place without her. But when you didn’t get arrested, we decided to kill you in order to be finished with you—that obviously didn’t work out either.”

“And Jimmy? How come you set him up for Walter’s murder?” I said, wanting to get as much confession on my tape recorder as possible—the only way I could think of proving that Jimmy did not kill Walter.

“I’m sorry about Jimmy Bucks being arrested instead of you. You were supposed to stumble onto Walter after Cozen killed him, but Jimmy got in the way. You’re such a fuck, Tony. Both Leticia and I wanted to see you punished as much as we wanted the money—that’s why all the others died the way they did—not just to die, but to receive the punishment they deserved.”

“I assume that Peter Fellure is working with you since you haven’t killed him. Or is he the next one you plan to punish?

 “Peter’s alive only because Leticia wouldn’t let me kill him. I punished him by having his pathetic-son Vincent killed, although I might have done both of them a favor. Peter knew that Walter had shot me in Vietnam. Instead of having him court-martialed, he recommended the bastard for the Medal of Honor, even getting me to sign for it while I was in the hospital and mentally out of it. What a joke!”

“What about all that religious shit you laid on me when I met with you?” I asked. “How do you justify murder?”

“We’re not responsible. It’s all part of God’s plan. We’re just the disciples he selected to carry out His plan, and we’re the ones who will continue to make His plan work by punishing those who deserve it—and God has a very large list.”

“Sounds more like the God of Hell’s plan,” I said reflecting on an earlier thought that maybe the devil was posing as God, which would explain the evil aspects of all the actions taken by mankind on behalf of religion.

“What you going to do, Tony?” Bro said as he wiped his forehead. “No one needs to know. I’ll let you in for five million cash to stay quiet.”

There was the rub. What should I do? Certainly, not use God as an excuse. I spent two years getting sober, a year studying writing in college. But my money would soon run out, and my legal fees to defend myself for Bro’s supposed murder were mounting. The police suspected me of killing the women’s center director. I knew that I couldn’t depend on Jimmy Bucks to cover my legal fees forever. These people split with a hundred million dollars. Wouldn’t it be nice to have some of that? Should I follow the original ending I wrote for the story in class by taking the money? Or, like Leticia, had the money turned ugly?

“Have a drink, Tony; have some coke,” Bro said. “Let’s sit down and talk.”

“No thanks. I don’t drink or use drugs anymore,” I said reminding myself that I’d worked hard to stay sober. But I wanted to take the money, something I desired since this story began.

“I heard you’d stopped boozing,” Bro said. “But I never believed it. But that doesn’t stop you from taking the money.”

Then Ria said, “Tony, don’t do it. You’ve come too far. Look what the money did to them. You don’t want to live the decadent existence these freaks are living.”

Bro moved rapidly towards Ria shouting, “Shut the fuck up,” as he bitch-slapped her—unknowingly giving me an extra incentive to have nothing to do with them or their money. Ria had become more important to me than the money—now I simply wanted Ria to call me Dad. They could keep their money if they didn’t get caught after I turned them in.

Bro reached out before I could react, grabbed my arm, twisted it around my back and pulled me towards him. Leticia moved behind me and started beating me on the back of my head trying to help Bro. Ria rushed up, grabbed Leticia’s hair and yanked her away from me, then hit her in the face with her fist, right on those pink, purple zits, knocking her down. Leticia was too wasted to get back up. She sat there with a blank face, tears dribbling down her cheek like a baby’s spittle.

Bro laughed out a piercing, ghost-like noise, which sounded much like the horses I’d written about in the barn writing exercise for Rob Davidson. Something was in the process of happening. Something was obviously under consideration. Things were becoming instant, immediate.

Laughing again, as I remained silent, Bro said, “You didn’t really think that I’d give you money did you? Killing you and your bitch is the only thing that you’re going to get out of me.”

Bro stopped holding me, spun me around, tossed me across the room, and threw me over the couch, past Cozen. As my head crashed against the wall three feet behind the couch, my foot flew out as if my leg were a rope with a heavy weight attached to it. I felt my foot hit Cozen’s head, heard his neck snap, which sounded much like a firecracker going off.

 I must have been unconscious for a few moments. As I came to, Bro shoved coke up my nose, then wrenched my head back and poured vodka down my throat.

 In the background I heard Ria screaming “Stop it, stop it!” and Leticia screaming, “Kill him, kill him.”

 My eyes fully opened, I could see Cozen lying behind the couch, his neck hanging like a broken promise.

 Bro drew me to my feet, picking me up with one large hand. With the other hand, he punched me in the gut, bending me over, causing me to gasp for air.

I knew that I was at the mercy of whatever choice Bro would make. He was fifty pounds of muscle larger than I, and Ria didn’t have the physical strength to help—although I wanted to yell, “grab something and hit him in the head.”

Still bent over from the punch, Bro lifted my head and bitch slapped me like he did to Ria. “Cozen’s dead and so are you,” he said.

Leticia yelled from the floor, “Tony, you bastard, you’re always ruining my life!”

Bro came at me again. Death was on the horizon. However, Bro had made a mistake. Angry that Bro struck Ria and threatened to kill her, and invigorated from the coke and alcohol, I felt the same energy a person must feel who lifts a car to free someone he or she loves.

I kicked out with my uninjured foot in adrenalized desperation, purposely connecting with Bro’s bad knee. I’d ruined his football career in high school, now I would ruin his new career—if you can call being a murderer and thief a career. I heard a crack, one much louder than the sound Cozen’s neck had made—more like a cherry bomb than a firecracker. Bro went down screaming in agony.

Before, Bro’s religion seemed fixed as if God did arrange everything. Bro’s house of religion seemed to be built upon a rock. Now it seemed like he built his house on sand, which now crumbled apart as it settled deeper into the earth, away from the sky and God’s location, almost in defiance of any concrete reason for God’s continued existence.

I kicked him again—in the same knee. I would make sure that he tasted the frustration of defeat. I then kicked his head as hard as I could. I don’t think he felt the kick in the head because the pain in his knee kept him yelling the entire time.

Leticia tried to speak, but words tumbled out of her mouth as if they were marbles without meaning.

I stood, shaking, surrounded by what the hundred million dollars did to them. I quietly mumbled to Leticia, “I’m sorry,” a weak attempt to still make amends. But I had no connection between my mind and body. A physical trance embraced me, and I couldn’t move, but I was ready to go.

“Wait a minute,” Ria said as she reached into her purse and took out her cell phone.

Ria had something I did not have at the moment—the presence of mind to use her cell phone camera to get pictures of Bro, Leticia, and the mess, but not Cozen whose body remained out of sight behind the couch.

The camera shot and my tape recorder together would provide the evidence I needed to prove that Bro had not died and, along with Leticia, provide evidence that they were responsible for the murders. It would get Jim der Bacon’s conviction for the murder of Walter Funcker reversed, and resolve the murder charges against me for the supposed murder of Bro.

Even though drunk and coked up, I realized that it would be stupid to tell murderers that I would turn them in to the authorities, so I didn’t.

Ria grabbed me and guided me out of the room. We hustled for our lives, through the dark, soundless tunnel of trees towards safety. Bro still down, continued to scream, and Leticia could not get off the floor, so our escape was as easy as our arrival, but not as suspenseful.

Ria took me back to the hotel, packed our things, and drove us over to the airport terminal. We were taking the first flight out to the states—going to Miami, not San Francisco.

We stood on the observation deck waiting for our plane. I felt like a fly that had just escaped from a spider web. I hoped that Bro felt like a fly swatted.

My ears kept ringing—now I asked of no one: is there no silence possible?

White streaks of lightning penetrated the black clouds, which turned gray as the sun rose. I couldn’t tell where the sky began and the ground ended, but my range of perception had changed enough that I perceived that something could be attained as a result of the confrontation with Bro—which lingered in my mind. An unpleasant, strong emotion then combusted inside my brain—an emotion that consisted of light, flame, and heat. My fear and anger slid away. My daughter and I were together—we were safe.

 “Nice friends you have back there, Dad,” Ria said with a slight smile on her lips as she fulfilled my new desire.

The plane left Cancun before Bro had time to recover or send the police after us for Cozen’s death, for which I’m sure he would say I was responsible. He would have had to first clean up the drugs in the room, get that knee taken care, and cover his ass before he came after me.

I wanted to get back to the mainland, talk to Dic Mécia, get Jimmy out of jail, assuming he had not colluded with Bro and Leticia—with Bro alive, anything was possible.

When I got home and talked to Dic, I knew that I would have to continue to struggle with the conflicts in my life and my often defective behavior, and I would have to start over with my sobriety because of the alcohol Bro had forced down my throat. But I also knew that I would live a sober life, and they would not. Whatever happened next, I would have the advantage.

2

Ria and I walked into Dic’s office to tell him how we had traced Leticia and Cozen to Mexico and found out that Bro Beck had not been murdered, nor committed suicide, as we all thought; how all three of them were responsible for the murders involving QuadFirm, including Walter’s—for which Jim der Bacon awaited execution.

Dic was not receptive.

 “Tony,” Dic said. “Jim der Bacon’s prints were found on the murder weapon, and the bloody footprints in Walter Funcker’s apartment were identified as his. The case is closed. You’re still facing trial for Bro’s murder, and you’re a suspect in the murder of that woman in Chico.”

 We showed Dic the cell phone camera shots and played the tape recording.

 “Okay, that will probably let you off the hook for the murder charges. The fact Bro’s alive, however, doesn’t mean that der Bacon didn’t murder Funcker. That will be up to the lawyers to decide. In the meantime, I’ll investigate further; but be careful and watch your back. If something does turn up, you’ll be the key witness. I don’t want to find you dead, hear me?” Dic said—ending the story for now.

EPILOGUE

Timeless

HAPPILY EVER AFTER

Bro and Leticia were on the run immediately. Now they had a reason to hide and the money to buy their safety. Dic had no luck in tracking them down, nor did the Mexican police, who are involved because the two of them, along with me, are murder suspects in Cozen’s death. Their whereabouts remain a mystery.

Jimmy is working on his appeal, and I continue to help him. I’ve petitioned to have the murder charge against me for Bro’s supposed death dropped. The attorneys are optimistic for both of us. I have stayed sober despite the drugging by Bro. I connected with all of my children, especially Ria; and Stephanie and I had started dating. I continued to study writing and wrote this fictionalized version of the events.

Several things might happen next:

Maybe the real venture capitalists I based my novel on sue me for libel, and my insurance company pays all my attorney’s fees. Maybe I write a second novel based on that lawsuit and Jimmy’s fight to avoid execution, which includes Bro and Leticia showing up, still seeking vengeance.

Maybe Ria writes her own novel, a young adult book that describes a mystery she and her brothers solved while living in Santa Rosa. Maybe Ria and I spend summers researching material for a novel we plan to write together. Maybe we are faced with another father-daughter mystery as sleuths attacked by other forces of antagonism, and we write a novel about it. Maybe we write several novels based on future summer adventures.

Maybe Ria and I together write the non-fiction book on how to consciously evolve one’s own consciousness, and we call it *An Owner’s Manual for the Conscious Evolution of Your Consciousness* with the book acting as a catalyst to solve the problems humanity faces.

And maybe everybody lives happily ever after.

 Tony T. Trueblé