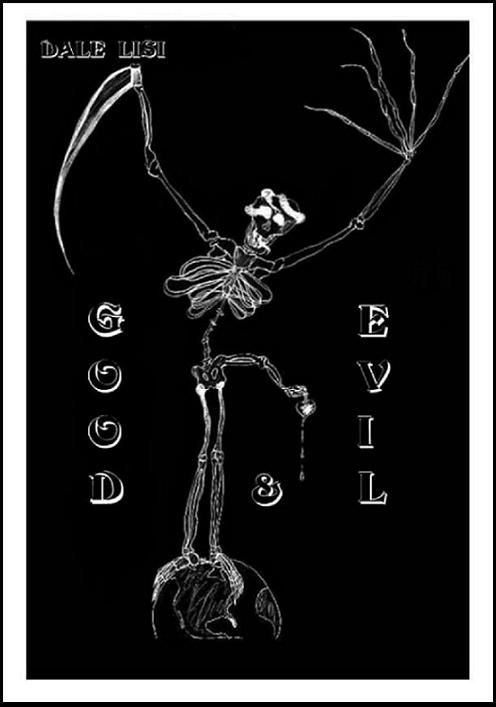
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**Good**

**and**

**Evil**

**by Dale Lisi**

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**Everyone who enters this world has a**

**chance. If you do not take advantage of the**

**opportunity you are given, it is no one’s fault**

**but your own. Ignorance of the law is no excuse.**

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One gentle, tender glimpse

A softly woven stare that bears the secrets only Heaven shares

Serenity beyond compare

Celestial invocation

Whispering passions incantation

With divine salutation

On angels’ wings descends the sting of kings

As a spark designs the flame it brings

The birth of time, crime, and reason

From a delicate breeze brews a violent season

A season which will come but once an eternity

And in it dwells all the dreams of hell

Exchanged for a coin down a wishing well

**Part I**

**Chapter 1**

**Loss**

There are many ways in which people view this world, many things they believe in, and many things they hope to get out of it, and their actions dictate their pursuit of these passions. Nothing man does is done without motive, and I, like everyone else on this earth, have motives and desires. But my desires have become outside the realm of sane men, and my beliefs, though widely spoken, remain very rarely trusted, so my endeavor had to be kept hidden, until the deeds had been done.

Tragedy brings change—to some for the better, for others the worst, depending on how it is looked upon and dealt with. Sometimes there is no other way for a change that must take place to come about except through tragedy, and when this storm hits, if you can’t withstand its wrath, you will be consumed and destroyed by it. I met with such an act of violence as to barely escape with my life, an act carried out at the hand of one of my greatest passions, a tragedy that would change my life, my beliefs, my desires, and my actions, forever.

On July 4, 1992, the prescribed measure was imposed upon me, against my will, against my knowledge, without testimony on my behalf—the fate of my future existence. The omnipotent force that seemed to have haunted me since my beginning once again made its presence and power known, hurling me into torment and toil as it chewed the left arm from my body, its latest assault on my temple. A day of rejoicing and remembrance was violently seized with bloodshed and broken bones—its implement of malice, my beloved boat, the backbone of my joy.

As I headed across the bay that afternoon, I was met by an unseen tragedy, one of many that plague this world, waiting for us all in the shadows, like a serpent, hiding, possessing unyielding patience and undoubting confidence that the opportunity to strike will present itself, calculating the precise time when the window of vulnerability will be left open, and then laying claim to its victim with pinpoint accuracy as it sinks its fangs. A malfunction in the hydraulic steering system of my boat—manifested by a quick-fix alteration I had made impatiently—enabled one of the fittings connecting the hydraulic lines to blow apart, allowing both of the outboard motors to instantly turn full starboard. The severity of this sudden turn combined with our present speed sent me hurling end over end from the vessel. Efficiently, without hesitation, the boat circled back around to move in for the kill as I floated stunned and helpless in the water, awaiting the verdict.

Seconds upon entry into the sea, I regained my vision after having been blinded as a result of my head striking an aluminum pipe—one of several fabricated together as a small observation tower over the helm—during my ejection from the vessel. But this gift of sight now only revealed the raging, screaming jury, headed off by a stampeding colossus, thundering toward its victim with all the fury of hell’s heart at the helm, harboring no remorse, recompense, or hesitation. I could not fathom its anger, nor elude its wrath. In a last moment’s futile attempt, I raised my arms to ward off my attacker as it slammed into me, relinquishing all my senses. My body offered no resistance toward the unyielding aggressor as it feasted on the flesh that hung on my frame, splintered the bones that had erected my house, and dined on the dreams I held in my heart. Mere seconds of unconsciousness gave way, and I found myself still bobbing in the water, only this time to find that my left arm had been shredded and blood was streaming from my body. The angry jury sat dormant now, not far from its verdict—its justice served.

The horror of my situation overtook my being for a split second, just long enough to experience true hopelessness, a state more horrific than the one I was already in. The only way to describe it is like being cast into hell, an intense consciousness of inescapable doom. After brief seconds of true terror, I was graced with the ability to gather my faculties together mentally and limp my way through the water with my good arm, back to the safety of my sleeping assailant. One of the members of our party had managed to remain on board through the ordeal and was able to subdue the vessel after its work was done. (Had I paid attention to the kill switches on the boat and their utmost importance, this tragedy could have been avoided, but instead I would fall victim to what I could have never believed.) The other member of our group, who had also been thrown from the boat, had found his way back aboard with only a few minor cuts and bruises. I arrived at the side of the vessel shortly after him, not so fortunate, where I was pulled aboard, greeted by a horrified crew. The mood was that of utter desperation, the other two passengers frantically trying to gain the attention of a nearby boat as I lay in a pool of my blood, reluctantly surveying the damage to my body in short intervals, turning my eyes away when I could accept no more, and then returning to the task that had to be done—curiosity’s demands are seldom left unfulfilled.

The trail of destruction led down the left side of my body like a path carved by a steel tornado, a tribute to brutality, my arm crushed and broken, lifeless, the exposed flesh protruding from the openings in my skin where the propellers had slashed and ripped their way through my wrapper like a lion dining on a beast, pulling the flesh from beneath my skin. My fingers were now on display, pointing in all directions, directions they normally couldn’t point in—sloppy, patternless, without prejudice. My chest bore the image of a huge *X* that had been scratched into the surface of my skin, easily identifiable by the tiny droplets of blood that trickled out of it but just barely touched me. Farther down, my left leg saw the end of the terror and destruction, with numerous lacerations on my thigh from where the blades of the prop each took their turn carving and pulling out the meat in my leg all the way to my kneecap, where it made its grand exit, leaving a large piece of flapping skin folded back and exposing my knee. I lay on deck, helpless, powerless, at the mercy of others, unable to move the arm that lay tattered by my side—a beloved member of my body, a slain soldier in a blind crusade.

I listened to the sounds of the others as they strived to deliver me to safety, all the while my body attacking me, overindulgent pains gorging themselves on what was left of my existence. During these moments, solace was not to be found, as relentless torment reigned supreme. My friend on board had been making an attempt at stopping the bleeding with a stray piece of rope he had wrapped around my body, a sort of giant tourniquet, though despite his efforts, the blood still flowed from my wounds, for there was just too much exposed meat. He tried to comfort me with words, but I could see for myself that things didn’t look good, and the expression on his face that he could not hide. Perhaps he felt worse than I did. I tried to ease the situation with the only thing I could think to say to him at the time: “You know I love this shit”—not very profound, but it got the corner of his mouth to pull up on one side for a fraction of a second before he returned to task. As the blood left my body, I grew weaker until even the simple involuntary action of breathing had become a strenuous, painful ordeal. I struggled for a deep breath of air to fill my empty lungs, though I received only excruciating pain through attempt after attempt. “I can’t f\*\*king breathe. I can’t breathe.” The words sprang forth with each agonizing syllable as it dawned on me that I was suffocating and perhaps death was not far behind. A quick series of cardio experiments provided me with a system of breathing that incorporated miniscule breaths accompanied by remaining in a completely inert state. This tactic proved to be effective at keeping the pain to a minimum, and though the breaths weren’t satisfying, they were sufficient.

The longer I lay there, the better I began to feel, with all the pain and suffering slowly drifting away, leaving me.

The sun shone bright in the afternoon sky as I stared into its warm glow without hesitation, my eyes no longer tormented by its once-harmful rays. It seemed to rain down a foreign but welcome comforting presence. “I’m comin’ home, God. Jesus, I’m comin’ home.” Over and over, my thoughts kept repeating this, without an ounce of doubt or uncertainty, though I neither saw nor heard anything, no pearly gates, no light in any tunnel, no angels or voices, only the feeling of safety and happiness. I closed my eyes, as I had not the strength to keep them open any longer, and just listened to the sounds of those scurrying around me as they slipped and slid in my blood on the deck.

The members of my party had managed to catch the attention of a nearby boat, which reluctantly towed us to a dock (after my friend had cursed them into service) where some paramedics were already awaiting our arrival. Shortly after the paramedics had begun working on me, I could feel my body returning back into the world of torment I had so recently escaped from, the wanton, soft luxury of death now just a memory. Preparations, helicopter flights, gurneys, stretchers, tables, doctors, and nurses all followed the next few days of restoration as life returned to my house, though as I had reluctantly foreseen, what was left of my left arm had to be removed.

That tragedy I endured on that day changed my life and would change my beliefs. And after several years of existing with this new unacceptable condition, I realized the challenge that had been placed upon me: I had to get my arm back. I must try to fix what had been broken. The events to take place over the coming years would be nothing short of epic.

**Chapter 2**

**Sea**

For several years after the accident, I lay in misery, lamenting the loss of my arm, growing angry and frustrated with life, as so many before me have done, watching time as it slowly consumed me, as it did all things—a sort of premature midlife crisis. I spent my days reminiscing the past, a time when all the joys of this world seemed to be at my disposal, though none of these thoughts held any value now. When it’s over, it’s over, and memories only make it hurt worse at times, though it just seemed easier to gaze upon them rather than to stare at the cold, hopeless road that appeared to lie ahead, the road paved with anger, jealousy, depression, and hatred—all the sights that fill the eyes and thoughts of a condemned man. Amidst my daily activities, I pondered the existence of a God, a God such as the one I had been raised to believe in, one I had no use for—until now.

In my spare time, when I was alone, I began to browse the pages of a Bible I had gotten as a gift from my grandmother, saying a prayer now and again as the seed of faith was being planted. When my faith could grow no further with the resources I possessed, I halfheartedly returned to the Catholic Church, the church I had been raised to believe in. Uncertain, uncomfortable, out of place, week after week I went, learning about God and of Jesus from this institution. I was not always pleased with what I heard, but I had no choice at this point, because I could not fix myself, and the things I loved, the things I knew of, the things I worshipped, always attempted to destroy me. I needed to change. My past and track record had been horrific since the beginning of my existence here, and I had always chosen the wrong path ever since I could remember. The world we are all a part of, whether we desire to be or not, possesses many sides, layers, truths, lies, illusions, consequences, and what have you. I was born in the late sixties, was a child in the seventies and a teen in the eighties, and pretty much like all people here, made choices during my time as a teenager that put me on a path. That path has been almost inescapable to this day, burdening me with payments that can’t be paid, labels that can’t be removed, and debts and a past that will not be forgiven as they compound daily, increasing rapidly as the seconds, minutes, hours, and days tick on.

Our culture is one of extremes and hypocrisy. Emotions now kept roaming off their leashes, undisciplined, and I was always right there in the middle of it. Our thoughts are consumed with what our hearts desire, and what our hearts desire are so often the most deadly and destructive forces in our lives. We are told not to have sex, do drugs, fight and kill, etcetera, but ironically, the television programs, topics of discussion, activities, and actions we engage in so passionately are exactly the things we are told not to partake in. Could it be because that is what we naturally love? The closest we can get to the flame without getting burned is where we want to be. From our beginning on this earth until our end, we are warned about these things that we all desperately pursue and glorify (some in secret, some boasting) as we constantly attempt to partake in them while at the same time trying to elude their wrath, constantly feeding this addiction to entertainment, from Hollywood, to drugs, to the act of sinning. I have always made horrible decisions, never believing anything until it was too late, and to make matters worse, I was overrun with desire for the “extreme.” Ever since I can remember, I was completely captivated by just about everything I was told not to do and did things many times out of dares I posed to myself, from skateboarding to riding bikes and motorcycles, from smoking cigarettes to drinking alcohol, from using marijuana, LSD, and cocaine all the way to doing PCP, where I would find satisfaction at a price and a label that will never go away, like a Scarlet Letter. “It is easier to ask for forgiveness than to beg for permission.” On the path I chose, you can ask for forgiveness all you want, but the only one who can forgive the debt is the one to whom you have now become indebted, and it will never be forgiven; as for permission, that never would have been granted.

In this day and age, we would rather put our hopes and beliefs into lies, desperately attempting to make them real, glorifying emotions, feelings, and erotic experiences, placing our power into coins and paper, hungering for them with all our being. And we worship those who have boldly advocated these specters, those who appear to have successfully achieved the treasure these lies have boldly claimed. Like modern-day prophets, these appointed ones lord over our hopes and dreams as we all follow the teachings of these actors, musicians, and politicians (every interest has a king), molding our lives to pattern theirs, captivated by the wisdom, illusions, and pleasures these icons have demonstrated, never looking at the fact that everything they promoted led to the “eternal dirt nap,” commonly by means of a strict diet of pills, alcohol, and drugs—or they simply sucked on a shotgun lollipop because their wisdom was so great and their life choices were chosen so well they just couldn’t bear to be any happier. Furthermore, we still hold their memories and their works in our highest esteem, inserting their names into sentences containing phrases like “He was brilliant” or “She was so beautiful, what a shame” or “What a genius.” It is tragic what happens to these individuals, because we all struggle to try to achieve the status these men and women have been recognized for. And you are lying to yourself if you say you haven’t wanted it. We all have; it’s human nature. From the classroom to our jobs, clubs, and gathering places, from birth to death, we desire. And unfortunately, I greatly desired as well, but all I had to show for it was a mutilated body, a stacks of bills, and a permanent label from the government that would make paying these bills much more difficult. We have all heard that you can make a deal with the devil to get certain things you want, and you can; however, the formalities involved with these deals are not as conventional as we may have been led to believe. Nonetheless, there is a real deal that has been struck when you pursue things the devil has dominion over, and there will be payment; ignorance of the law is no excuse.

Probably one of the first things we do wrong as kids is lie, usually about something we did that we knew we were not supposed to do. I can’t remember when I told my first lie, but I know I have told plenty of them. And when you tell one, you are attempting to mislead someone in a direction that you want to steer them, a direction that benefits your desires or interests for whatever reason, perhaps so you do not get in trouble for something you did or didn’t do. Lying is an important ingredient in any involvement in wrongdoing and deception.

As a little kid, I was infatuated with girls as far back as I can remember. Sometime when I was about six or seven, my mom threw out all my dad’s *Easyriders*, *Penthouse*, and *Playboy* mags, which I desperately wanted for obvious reasons: naked women. It was my job to take the trash to the curb on Monday for trash pickup, and I couldn’t stand that job, except this week because I saw that pile of treasures being evicted from the house Sunday afternoon, and I knew exactly where they were supposed to be heading and who was supposed to be taking them to their final destination. I remember being so excited about the idea of getting my hands on all those beautiful images I was not supposed to look at but wanted more than anything in the world, so much that I could hardly sleep. In the middle of the night, when I was sure the house was asleep, I made my way out of my bedroom slowly and quietly, opening my door and heading down the hall toward the kitchen. I can still remember trying to walk softly so as not to creak the worn wooden oak floor in our house and wake everyone up. I listened all the while during my approach in case someone other than me was stirring. If I met another member of the household, I would be ready with a quick lie, something as simple as “I’m going to the bathroom” or “I need a drink of water.” It was getting back to my room that was going to be the challenge. How could I explain toting a pile of smut back to my room?

I made it to the kitchen undetected, slid open the sliding door, the last obstacle before I got the “booty.” We had a few trash cans that I would have to search to acquire my quarry, but fortunately it didn’t take long to locate what I was after. I grabbed every single magazine there was, and it was all I could do to carry them. I snuck back in, piled the mags on the kitchen table, carefully slid the door shut and locked it, retrieved my desires from the table, and made my “do or die” getaway back to my bedroom. This was the part of the mission where I had to have luck because there was no way to lie my way out of this if I got caught. My heart raced with excitement and fear as I executed the task that would fulfill all my wildest desires if I was successful—feelings that are only born through committing forbidden acts, feelings that we all pursue, oftentimes in secret, and attempt to conceal in lies, feelings that never taste as sweet as they did the very first time and never will again. Nonetheless, we chase them with every resource we have until we have exhausted them all.

I made it down the creaky hall, deposited the magazines on my bed, and then slowly shut my door. I had an old desk in my room, the kind with a sloped top to do paperwork on or place reading material on while studying it. It also had an open compartment beneath the seat to store reading and working material. It was a desk I really never used and couldn’t care less about until now. I crammed every single magazine into the book storage area, where I would store them until I could find a better hiding spot later. The light from the night shone in through the window. It was clear, and the moon was full. Too excited to sleep, I opened up one of the magazines at the foot of my bed, where the light from the moon hit it just right, to the effect that I had no problem gazing upon the most beautiful women in the world as they bared it all, probably in exchange for what they hoped would fulfill their wildest dreams. I wasn’t old enough to know anything about sex, but I definitely knew what I loved, and there was nothing in this world that could even come close to the feelings a beautiful woman could evoke. After all, I was just a little kid, and I was willing to risk everything—lie, cheat, steal, whatever—just to look at them. After a few brief moments of celebration, I returned the magazine I had been hypnotized by back with the rest of the magical collection and went to sleep until it would be time for me to get up and complete the final stage of the mission: the cleanup, when I would take the trash to the curb for pickup, the trash that would not be containing the beautiful women I had just rescued from the trash truck.

I woke up early, before everyone else, so as just to be sure to get the trash to the curb without anyone knowing anything was missing. I scrambled out the kitchen door in my pajamas, barefoot, and dragged all the cans to the curb in a few trips. When I was done with the chore of the trash, I returned through the kitchen door. My mom was now up and getting the day started for everyone. I still remember her praising me for taking down the trash that morning without being told—a very rare event. I also remember feeling very guilty for receiving praise for a crime that no one even knew had been committed. I went to my room and got dressed, all the while thinking, “I got the magazines. I got away with it.” I then went to the kitchen, fixed some cereal, and started eating breakfast. No sooner had I started eating when my mom, who had made her way back to my bedroom for some unknown reason, started to summon my dad and then me. I was petrified. I knew the jig was up and all the entertainment and excitement was over—payment was due.

My dad continued about his morning preparations before work as I faced a very upset, disturbed, and disappointed mom. She had found the stronghold of stolen porn. She was not exactly mad but more upset about the massive heist. She opened with, “Well, I guess I know why you were so eager to take the trash down.” I can’t remember much more than that other than, “Your father is going to deal with you about this,” which usually meant it was gonna get ugly. I was raised in a house where the mom and dad roles were extremely traditional. My mom was the sweetest person in the world, and my dad was someone you never wanted to be around because he seemed to have no tolerance for anything a kid would do or would like to do and never got tired of administering discipline.

I milled around the house that morning as my dad said nothing to me while he went about his routine before going to work. The seconds seemed like hours as I was tormented by fears of the unknown, fears that would not let my mind function. When it was time for him to leave, he called me to come outside to talk to him. I remember looking at him as we stood next to his truck, and I could see that he did not appear mad at all. It almost seemed like he was trying to keep from chuckling, completely different from the attitude my mom had. He looked at me and said, “You can’t keep those magazines. When you get older, you can, but not for a while. Don’t do this again.” That was the only pass I think I ever got from him. My mom, on the other hand, did not have much to say to me for a while as she made sure the mags were properly disposed of this time.

This was the first time I can remember plotting to do something that I knew I was not supposed to in an attempt to satisfy my lust for a vice. This was the beginning of how I would spend my life on the hunt for a few brief moments of ecstasy, exchanged for hours, days, and a lifetime of consequences, for myself and everyone around me. In this day and age, a lawyer could argue that my dad was the one who was responsible for this one particular incident, for bringing these forbidden magazines into my reaches, or maybe that these women who graced these succulent pages were the ones to blame, for displaying themselves in exchange for some sort of payment. Or perhaps the ones behind putting the women on the pages were to blame. The list of suspects and motives was long, and each one played a key part, but the bottom line was, I was the only one who was truly guilty of this particular crime. Fortunately, I got off easy on this first episode, and through the eyes of our society, it was pretty hilarious when you think about it: a little kid, six or seven years old, lugging a stack of porn as big as he was back to his bedroom and then trying to hide it in plain sight, as if no one would notice a huge pile of magazines crammed into a desk that had served no purpose up until this point. It was about the equivalent of a cartoon character trying to hide under a carpet in the middle of a living room, putting a huge lump or a hill where there should not be one.

As life went on through the seventies, I dabbled in mischief, as all kids do. I tried cigarettes, took sips of beer, looked at nudie books with the other kids in the neighborhood—everything adults enjoyed and told kids not to do. Maybe that made these things even more exciting, I’m not sure. One thing I am sure of, however, is that the hypocrisy woven into our society is unbelievable. As a kid, I knew what I was allowed to do and what I wasn’t supposed to do, as probably all kids do. I was on a pretty tight leash as a kid and didn’t get much time away from the house and chores, so when I did, I took full advantage of any opportunities for adventure as they presented themselves if I thought I could get away with them. Unfortunately, this path had taken me very far from God and the church, and there were things that would have to be done to come back.

Preparing myself for this journey into the unknown, I received the sacraments of confession (forgiveness of my sins) and communion (the Body and Blood of Jesus) in the Catholic Church, the things I had read in the Bible that were essentials for salvation. I had already received baptism at birth in this church (forgiveness of original sin). These things seemed bizarre as conditions of salvation, and my pride struggled with their authority, but I had no choice. It was all too clear. I could not save myself from death alone, and I planned to go all the way to death’s door. There was no room for error. There could be no mistakes or second guesses.

The first order on the bill had been filled—the sacraments were received. The time had come for the second: “What good is faith without works?”—the entire reason for my return to religion. Such claims made in the Bible, of healings through faith, tempted me to search for my solution there. I prayed day after day, relentlessly, always asking God and Jesus for an arm; I received neither reply nor result. Enraged with the outcome, I directed my accusations at the Lord: “If You exist, why do You not do what You claim You can? Are You a liar? Are You a fairy tale?” “How can I believe in You if You do not do as You have said?” This is the standard, generic reply to God all men have when their wishes aren’t granted.

After my anger had subsided, I gathered myself together and reconvened on the matter. Perhaps I was going about this in the wrong way. The only one who had ever supposedly performed such a miracle as the one I was requesting was Jesus. What did He do to receive such power? What ingredient was I lacking? John 15:13 says that there is nothing greater one can do than to lay down one’s life for another. I came across this disturbing yet gratifying answer to my invocation and promptly prescribed the next phase of my mission: to lay down my life for this miracle of my request. I plotted and schemed the offering of my life to God. It must be something horrible, but not a suicide and not something that could be interpreted as an easy way out. It must be a confrontation with my worst fear as well as perhaps a sacrifice of my greatest joy.

I still remember it like it was yesterday, my first and oldest memory. I was a child, maybe two or three years old, walking happily along the side of the neighborhood swimming pool, not a care in the world, when I stepped off the edge of the pool deck and into fear and helplessness. I remember going under and sinking instantly, my mind overcome with fear. Then a hand reached in and jerked me out by my hair. It was the old man, my dad, saving me from the depths of the local abyss. Perhaps that is where this fear was born, though its origin is of no consequence at this point, only its reign. Several years later, once again at the pool with the old man, I found myself at the end of the diving board, staring down into the deep, dark, blue depths of the deep end of the swimming pool, with an angry dad yelling at me to dive. I stood frozen while a line of people waiting to use the board formed behind me, impatience on their brows, tempers escalating. Overpowered by fear, I made my way shamefully back down the board, down the steps, and was greeted by failure and a disappointed dad. I can’t remember a feeling worse than that of cowardice, a taste fouler than the fear I had savored so many times at the water’s edge. As I grew older, the water became my favorite place to be, though in the back of my mind, I could not completely abandon the fear of the open sea and the power she possessed over life and death. On a calm day, there was no more beautiful a place to be, but on a bad day, she would define hell.

Matthew 5:30 says that if your arm causes you to sin, cut it off, for it is better to have your arm thrown into hell than your whole body. This passage hit home a little too hard. Though I did not choose to have my arm cut off, and never would, I could see that perhaps God may not have been pleased with how I had led my life and that there may have been no other solution. But if hell was where my arm was, then to hell I must go into to get it back. So it was decided, my greatest love and my worst fear would become a challenge of my faith, a trial at sea. I would drive my boat due east, out into the Atlantic Ocean, until it was out of gas, and there I would place my petition before the Lord.

It was the summer of 1994. The time I had appointed approached rapidly, and the following day, Saturday, was the day I had set aside for this mission, for the plunge into the ancient mystery. That night, fear engulfed me, my spirit back on the diving board, cowardice my close companion, only this time much worse than before. No sanctuary or solace could I find, only horror, hopelessness, and cowardice, a prayer I dared not speak, too petrified to even ask for the strength to face this specter. All the modern devices of our world offered neither escape nor comfort. I could not hide in television or find companionship in song. I lay in bed on the brink of insanity as time proved me faithless and unworthy of an arm, unworthy of anything but misery. That Saturday passed slowly, and in silence, a broken man I stood, remembering how I had accused God so many times of not doing what I had asked of Him. And now here I sat falling short of my task, coming to the realization: Who am I to accuse another when I myself do nothing?

Upon the arrival of Sunday, a little more knowledgeable of myself, and a little humbler, I went off to Mass with the hope of executing my task over the following weekend. In the blink of an eye, it was Friday. What I had put off for a week had arrived, and once again, I was skeptical of my willingness, though I had not accepted defeat yet.

I made my journey to Ocean City that Friday night halfheartedly, calling my bluff as I went. The three-hour trek passed in what seemed like seconds, ending in an unwelcoming greeting from a howling wind, running rampant through the region, fueling my fears and trampling my spirits. “Certainly the Lord does not want me to go out into this tomorrow,” I told myself, and I knew now, in the back of my mind, that I wouldn’t go. The next morning, the sky was dark and the wind persisted—not a chance in a million was it going to happen today. How I longed for the weather of the week before and remembered what I had heard so many times: “The longer you wait, the worse it is going to get.”

I drove down to the beach that morning to witness my adversary firsthand. Standing there on the sand, I watched in horror as hell tossed the monolithic sea buoys about effortlessly, knocking them all the way over and then letting them bounce back up, just to knock them over again, like a child’s inflatable punching toy that rises back up every time it gets hit. With every lick of its lips, it stripped the sand from the shore, foaming at the mouth, showing its teeth, laughing at me and my failed attempts.

The remainder of that weekend was spent as the one before, with periods of sorrow, Sunday Mass, and plans of yet another attempt.

Several weeks passed filled with prayer, conflict, and talk of commitment until the challenge was once again at hand. It was now late August, and summer was almost gone. I knew this was going to have to be the time or it may not happen this year. The days were growing shorter, the air was getting colder, and my spirit grew weaker in this environment, like so many things that can’t survive in the cold and in the dark.

I packed my bags and headed off in my usual routine to the shore, trying to remain focused, abstaining from all forms of entertainment. When the morning arrived the following day, it proved to be my third failed attempt. I lay in bed trapped, sick to my stomach with fear, writhing in agony, tossing and turning in the bed, beneath the blankets, finding no comfort or excuse, branding myself a coward.

As the morning passed, the phone rang, relinquishing me from my convictions. It was a friend of mine asking if I wanted to make some money by giving him a hand with putting some shingles on a porch roof. I jumped at the opportunity, thinking it would help me to escape my present situation and to obtain some sense of worth. Work always seemed to be the best way for me to take my mind off my troubles. The work turned out to be just what I needed, not too overwhelming a chore but just enough to keep me occupied and consoled. (I first started roofing when I was twelve, so this was standard stuff.) After we had removed the old tiles from the roof deck, we discovered some rotten wood that had to be replaced, and upon plucking the damaged lumber from the roof, we uncovered a huge hornet’s nest hanging from one of the roof joists. Hornets buzzed around everywhere, hindering any further progress on the project.

I stood there gazing at the nest while my buddy went to locate a can of bug spray. The diligent little creatures swarmed around their home with total dedication while the Spirit propositioned me. “Lord, grant me immunity from these hornets so that I may know that you are with me.” I said this in my thoughts with a clean, honest, humble tone about it; certainly this action could be interpreted as a noble one. I was putting something up on the table in exchange for this sign—my body, offering to willingly subject it to a harmful, painful experience. A strange feeling came over me, and I decided to go for it. I said a quick “Our Father” prayer and asked Jesus to give me the strength to trust Him in this matter. Then a combination of anxiety, curiosity, mystery, and hope overtook me, leading me to crouch down to the nest, where I grabbed a handful of it and tossed it to the ground. The hornets swarmed about but never stung me. Fulfillment engulfed me as I reached down for the remaining pieces, humbly, not declaring this my own victory, not boasting of my bravery, but simply being grateful for this sign that had been given to me. As I tossed the last piece to the ground, my friend stood there watching with a bewildered grin on his face, clutching the can of now-unneeded bug spray, totally oblivious to what had truly happened or its significance. I don’t know if he even knew that I believed in God.

My spirits soared after this intervention, and I was confident tomorrow would hold the victory I was striving for. I went to Mass that Saturday evening and then hooked my boat trailer up to my truck, ate dinner, and went to bed, hoping for the execution of this mission. The night passed rapidly and restlessly, and by morning, the dedication to this endeavor had escaped me. I was again a complete and utter failure. Having now become accustomed to this condition, I rose from bed, accepting this title as failure, and milled about the house, looking for some form of escape and consolation. I stared out the window at my boat as it waited like a dog with its leash in its mouth, begging to go out for a walk, though my decision had already been made. This day that was provided for me, to execute this task, was perfect, no excuse to be found, and all the evidence pointed to cowardice, fear, and faithlessness. I shamefully reclined on the sofa, reviewing my situation. “Perhaps if I just went out fishing alone, that would be something”—not much, but better than nothing, and sitting around idle always made things worse. My spirits became slightly lifted after accepting this act of fishing as some form of progress.

Fishing was without a doubt my passion, the mystery of the creatures that lurked beneath the surface of the sea, another dimension, another world, into a place without law, without reasons, a place where neither the inhabitants nor their environment could be tamed, kill or be killed, no threats, no bluffs, no charades, no acting. All its creatures were constantly on the hunt in a world so beautiful, yet so violent, man could not contain or control this force, accuse it, haul it into a courtroom, or play games with it. The sea did as it pleased, without interference, without opposition, without question.

Though I loved to fish, I did not care to fish offshore alone. So much could go wrong. The possibilities were limitless, not to mention the inconveniences that came with having only one arm. As most everything I did now, fishing also had to be reinvented to accommodate my handicap. Unable to hold a rod and crank the reel at the same time, I needed the assistance of some additional equipment to perform this task: a reel harness and a rod belt.

The harness was a sort of belt, comprised of a nylon strap that wrapped around the body’s midsection just above the waist. A pad was affixed to the strap that contacted the back to prevent the harness from cutting into the body while fighting a fish. Also attached to the main strap were two short straps that hung off the front, having clips about the ends, much like the clips found on the end of a dog lead. These clips were what attached the reel to the harness when clipped into the lugs found on large trolling reels. The purpose of the harness was to provide the angler with a means of relief while fighting a big fish over a long period of time, enabling the angler to let go of the rod without having to put it down, but for me, not having an arm, it was the only way I could fish with rod and reel.

The rod belt consisted of a simple Velcro strap that wrapped around the waist like a belt, suspending a sort of rectangular-shaped, molded plastic slab. The slab was approximately fourteen inches long by ten inches wide and maybe an inch thick, and it spanned across the upper thighs when in place. The slab’s job was to provide a base to rest the butt of the fishing rod on, preventing the rod end from digging into the leg or groin during a fight. In the center of the slab was a round hole with a steel pin stretched across the interior diameter. The opening was about an inch and a half in diameter and held the butt of the fishing rod when it was in place. The pin accepted a groove in the base of the rod. The groove was a common feature found on offshore trolling rods, and it prevented the rod from rotating side to side when large amounts of pressure were applied, such as the activity involved in reeling in a big fish. This belt was worn around the waist, below the reel harness, and together they proved to be extremely effective for me.

The sea was relatively calm that day, a two-to-three-foot chop, not bad for a late-August sea. The sun illuminated the sky with its warm glow, making the journey a little more comfortable for me. The light always helped to give me strength, its unexplainable power invisible yet visible. You can’t actually see light, but you know where it is when it’s there, and you can see its work—probably the single most important ingredient in life. I headed out to a fishing area known as the “Jackspot,” a small underwater hill on the sea floor where fish were known to congregate. Located some twenty miles from shore, it was one of the closest areas in which you might get a chance at a tuna or some sort of prized game fish.

An hour passed, and I had arrived at my destination, a little more comfortable with my excursion. Several commercial fishing boats were dragging their nets through the green rolling sea nearby as I put my lines out to begin trolling. Back and forth over the lump, I worked my boat in search of my quarry as I reflected on the events in my life over the last few months and the toll they had taken on me, how they had mentally incapacitated me at times, crippling me, my religious beliefs colliding with my incessant demands. Why did I really even want my arm back? For what reason should God return it? After an honest interrogation of the soul, I realized I only wanted my arm so I could continue on in my life right where I left off. There was no sense in lying to myself. I know myself too well. There was no sense in pretending I was going to change. The only love I knew and truly wanted existed right before my eyes. I had no knowledge of or use for the kingdom of heaven. Things had been great for me right here. Though I can’t say that this revelation regarding my desires pleased me, I knew it was true.

“ZZZZZZ”—my thought was broken by the telltale sound of line being pulled off the reel. I had a fish on. Scrambling for the rod, I attempted to clip my reel harness into the lugs on the reel. I fumbled with the clips on the harness for a moment or two and then just started cranking the rod right there in the rod holder where it sat, not wanting to lose the fish. The longer he was on the line in the water, the better chance he had of getting off. It wasn’t long before I had the fish at boat’s side. It was a false albacore tuna, maybe fifteen pounds. I just grabbed the leader and jerked the fish up over the side and into the boat, no need for the gaff. This species was not a respected catch by anyone, but it was the first fish I’d ever caught on the troll alone in the ocean, and into the fish box he went. I was going to eat that fish no matter what it tasted like.

Morning turned to afternoon without further event. The sea had turned to glass, and I was ready to call it a day, rolling up my lines and heading for shore. Content with my catch, humble at heart, I stopped my vessel when I was about halfway back, shut it off, and paid homage to my God and His Son with a prayer, thanking them for this day. I had not done what I set out to do, but I had made some effort in this affair. I had done something other than cower in my bed. Returning to the helm, back to the west I went, trying to ignore a haunting voice whispering in the back of my mind, telling me to turn around and head east. A chill ran up my spine at the thought of doing this deed, and I knew my moment of brief celebration was over. The weight of conviction had returned.

After arriving back at the dock, I loaded my boat back on the trailer. Staring at it, I could not ignore the obligation that I had now bound to it, which was now more than I could endure. I set my sights on next year. “Perhaps my faith will have grown more by then,” I told myself. I wasn’t sure if this stance was procrastination, sense, or just a plain lie, but it put my soul to rest for the time being.

Several weeks of convalescence unfolded as September turned to October, and cowardice, fear, and failure had beaten me into a state of worthlessness such as I was unable to exist with. I was raised to never quit, never give up, and fight no matter the odds if what I was fighting was worth the pursuit. This world is a violent place. Perhaps it doesn’t have to be, but it is. And no matter how many sugar coatings you try to put on it, it’s still sour in the middle. You just can’t ever quit or give up or you will have nothing, not even your self-esteem. I could not bear to live any longer as a quitter or a coward. I must go and accept this challenge that was before me.

All that week, I honed my skills, pinpointing my weaknesses and strengthening them, abstaining from entertainment and outside influences, eating very little, engaging in deep prayer, and asking Jesus to let me believe in Him. There was no reason to ask for faith since I guess I really didn’t have belief, and you can’t have faith without belief—first things first. The night before the day I had prescribed for the execution of this quest, my campaign was in place, spirits were strong, and the truth was clear: I would rather be dead than go on a coward. If I died trying to prove my belief, then there never was anything to believe in. If I died trying to get a better understanding of God, then He certainly would be pleased that I tried, since it is said that the Lord hates a coward. And if everything that was written was true, I would have an arm. After going over all the facts, there really was no way to lose. Everybody dies sooner or later. I was a boy yesterday, a man today, and tomorrow I would be an old man. It all is over so quickly.

My spirit was weakest in the morning at dawn, when I would awaken, so I decided I would sleep at home and then make my journey to the beach in the twilight hours of the morning, giving myself some time to wake up and get my wits about me before I launched my boat and headed out to victory.

On the morning of October 6, 1994, at 2:37 a.m., I rose to fight, to shake off the chains of failure I had shackled myself to. I knelt down beside my bed, laid my head on the floor, and prayed the Lord’s Prayer—and as always, I added, “and do not subject us to the final test.” With somewhat of a grin on my face, I knew this was going to be the day, not questioning myself and my actions, no judgments, just unstoppable determination. As Matthew 6:3 advises, don’t let your left hand know what your right is doing. Not a thought of disenchantment was to be minded. Constant prayer repeated over and over in my head as I made my way through the frosty October morning toward my destiny. There was to be no more discussion on this matter, no turning back. Death before dishonor.

Beating down the pavement, closing the gap, success in the air, a hint of daylight on the horizon, soon I would leave the land, the safety of her solid surface, trading her sure footing for true matter. Just as soon as I had climbed into my truck to head to the beach, there I was, getting out, standing before the boat that took my arm and would take me to get it back. After hitching my truck up to the trailer, I jumped back in the cab, dropped the truck into gear, and hit the gas. The boat didn’t budge; the brakes on the trailer were frozen, not allowing the boat to move. For a split second, I thought maybe God was just testing me to see if I would really go through with this, like when He tested Abraham with the sacrifice of his son. But that thought soon passed, and I knew this was just another barricade, a stumbling block. No, today was it, even if I had to drag this boat to the ramp with all the tires on the trailer locked up, squealing and smoking. Fortunately, behind the seat of the truck lay a can of lubricant. Seizing the can, I hosed down the brake drums, leaped back into the truck, and gave her the gas. The tires sank into the gravel driveway as they spun furiously, unable to break free the frozen hubs. My next move was putting the truck into reverse, and upon doing this, the hubs moved a little. Back and forth, I rocked the trailer with the truck—first gear, then reverse—until she broke free and rolled.

The sun had made its appearance on the horizon and was on its way up. It was maybe seven thirty. I only had one more stop, and that was for fuel. Then I would make my way to the water’s edge.

On board the vessel were three gas tanks, a large one below deck that held about a hundred gallons and two portable tanks, one holding eight gallons and the other holding twelve gallons. I topped off the large tank and skeptically looked at the two portable ones. “If ya got three, ya gotta fill three. Ya gotta give it all ya got or ya might get nothin’. What’s another twenty gallons further at this point?” That inner voice that could not be silenced or ignored in these matters made its opinion known, backing up its argument with the parable from Matthew 25:1–13, of the maidens with their lamp oil: Some took enough, others didn’t, and those who didn’t did not fare well. There was no room for failure in this matter; the two spare tanks were filled as well.

I had arrived at the threshold, the boat ramp, with the water before me, the challenge finally accepted. I launched the boat while constantly telling myself, “When the sun sets here today, I will have my arm and this burden lifted,” never thinking of anything else, never thinking of failure, not the task at hand or how things would go, just the end result. The rest would take care of itself. The motors roared to life, how they seemed to long for this quest, like horses chomping at the bit, raring to go. Across the bay, past where this boat had taken my arm, under the drawbridge, and out through the inlet, I went into the great barrier that divided the lands, into the Atlantic, praying in between bursts of an almost maniacally insane chuckle I could not contain, spilling over with joy at the strength the Lord had bestowed upon me, the strength to do what I myself alone could not. The motors roared as I headed due east into the rising sun. The sea was calm, the air was now warming up, and I shed the sweatshirt I had on as I waited for the fuel to burn off. I had taken the VHF radio and life jackets off the boat so there would be no question of my sincerity and commitment.

Hour after hour rolled by as I tried to maintain my faith with prayer and aspiration. Land had long since disappeared on the horizon behind me. Every now and again, I would look back to see where the land used to be until it began weakening my spirit, crippling my hope, and feeding my fears until finally I decided there was no reason to look back anymore—its only value served not my purpose. Into the sun like a moth to the flame, I rode to this new shore, to a shore that wasn’t on any chart, to the final frontier. No rocket ships, no planes, no cars or trains, no ships, no tanks or guns could storm this shore. The flesh of man could overtake this kingdom. With man’s vessels, he had already overstepped his boundaries on and around this earth, always the same result, always the same destruction, violence. Nothing ever changed; it just changed hands. Never happiness for more than a moment.

The ocean had slowly become coarse with an easterly breeze. I was now in a steep four-foot sea, which had caused me to reduce my rate of travel. The sun had moved well into the sky, and bright-blue water now slapped the bow of the boat and lay in the wake behind me. I was out in Gulf Stream blue water. I had been running for hours. There was no way I could make it back now even if I wanted to. I could not believe the gas had lasted as long as it had, and as I trekked farther into the deep blue waters, my faith was slowly being shaken. The reality of a cold watery grave was upon me. Thoughts of the comforting soil of solid earth were starting to take root, though onward I still proceeded. Despite my growing fears, I continued to progress. Not a boat had I seen in the blue water, nothing but the wind, waves, the sea grass, and the occasional sea bird. The shearwaters scouted the cobalt sea, searching for prey, and the Wilson’s storm petrels flew back and forth across the bow, occasionally falling back to walk on the water. The indigenous petrel supposedly had a nickname that was derived from the name of Simon Peter the apostle, for the way they appeared to walk on the water. I wasn’t sure exactly how these two were segued. Peter actually started to sink when he tried walking on water, and these little birds didn’t. Anyway, that was just something I had heard.

After what felt like an eternity, the motors began to sputter until they died. The main tank was dry. I turned on the gas gauge, and it read empty. Advancing to the bow, I hooked up the eight-gallon can to the motors, squeezed the siphon bulbs till they were filled with fuel, returned to the helm, and went back to my fleece. Courage and cowardice rolled over me in waves, dividing my ambition. The sun had been on the down side in the sky now for a little while, evidence that it was going away as it always did, reminding me that it would be dark at some point today. I hoped when it did set, I would be on land.

The waves had grown scales as the wind slowly reviled its power. How powerful the wind, it blew its breath into the lifeless sea, giving the sea form and the power to move about. Such an invincible power was the wind, completely invisible, no one had ever seen it, only its works. It was a welcome friend on a hot day, when it would dance with a leaf on a breeze, displaying its grace and kindness. But on a bad day, it snapped trees like toothpicks, made its mark in stone, and built mountains out of water. It could not be caught, contained, stopped, or reckoned with, making the earth and all its inhabitants subject to its power.

Traveling southeast, halfheartedly, my desires becoming uncertain, I continued to burn off the eight-gallon tank with reluctance. All distraction was now gone from my mind. I had complete clarity, not the slightest trace of anything except the moment, and nothing else existed. “What do you want? What have you come out here for?” a voice in my head asked as the motors once again sputtered to silence. I stood there thinking about the question, gazing around at the nothingness that surrounded me in this desperate land that was waiting to consume me hungrily. No lie could be spoken, no bravery or cowardice displayed, no acting, only the crisp, clean truth and nothing but. “I just want to go home, Lord. I just want to be back on dry, warm land. I have no other wish. I would like to have an arm, but that is of little importance to me right now.” Then, looking at the last tank, the last twelve gallons of the journey, I said, “Lord, I can go no further. I have come out to what most certainly will be my death, but I would rather die twelve gallons of fuel closer to land than go another step further into this abyss.” I then hooked up the final tank, squeezed the siphon bulbs, fired her back up, and turned the boat around, heading back into the sun, to the west, hoping maybe Jesus would take me back to the safety of the shore with this mere twelve gallons of fuel—kind of like when He multiplied the loaves.

Unfortunately, this did not happen, and unlike the fuel in the other tanks, which seemed to burn forever, this tank appeared to run dry in an instant. The moment of truth was upon me. Safety was now out of my hands (or hand, in this case). Though I had cast my bread upon the waters, I had not done it completely as I had said I would. The fear for my life had shaken my faith in the eleventh hour. Placing my last ounce of hope in the hands of my only resort, I humbly knelt down in the open bow of the boat and, with a ghost of a smile, prayed the Lord’s Prayer and said, “God, Jesus, I guess this is it. I truly have no way back. If You do not save me, I do not know what will happen. I have come out here, and I hope You will return me home before the sun sets. I need some gas.” Saying one last “Our Father” and rising to my feet, I made my way to the fuel lines and hooked up the line to the main tank. I then squeezed the bulbs several times. With every squeeze, I could feel them get a little firmer until they were as hard as a rock—I HAD FUEL, I HAD FUEL. My bones were filled with joy for a brief moment until my skeptical thoughts had overcome them, thinking perhaps there was a little gas left sloshing around in the main tank, just enough to trick me. I returned to my position at the helm and fired her up. She roared to life, rejuvenating my hopes and happiness. Truly, this was a miracle. Throwing her into gear, I headed off into the afternoon sun, praying, praising Jesus and God for this divine intervention into the life of perhaps one of the worst men on earth.

The seas were beginning to subside, enabling the craft to run at full cruising speed as I raced to the west at around thirty-five knots toward dry land, to the only salvation I knew, spilling over with joy, hoping to beat the darkness that I knew was coming up behind me. I pondered the great gifts the Lord had given to me—the gift of my life, the deliverance from this wasteland, and perhaps the greatest gift, the gift of belief, the treasure of undoubted belief, one of the most important ingredients in faith. Without belief, it is impossible to have faith. How can you place your undoubting trust into something you don’t really know is even real?

Several hours into my return, the sun sinking, land made its grand appearance on the horizon. Its soft tan shore off in the distance never looked so inviting, though not a single structure except a lone lighthouse graced its soil. I knew I must have been south of Ocean City. Silhouettes of several fishing boats loomed in the distance, working the shoals off the beach in the now-glassy waters as I contemplated my position, trying to decide which direction to head to find an inlet to leave this ocean and this day behind me. Amidst my planning, calculating, and celebration, the unthinkable occurred: The vessel, once so full of life, sputtered and then sank into a silent slumber in the still waters of fate. Gripped with fear, panic, and paranoia, I scrambled to the fuel bulbs, squeezing them furiously without result, nothing but emptiness. There was no more fuel.

The last trace of hope whisked away with the unanswered prayers I pled to the Lord. “Maybe now I don’t need gas. Maybe now it will run on nothing,” I thought, in total desperation as I cranked and cranked the lifeless motors, over and over, like a paramedic performing CPR on a dead body, trying to bring it back to life. Slowly being reduced to muttering profanity against the God I had just praised moments ago, I frantically scrambled about the vessel. My thoughts now in disarray, a mad man fit for the insane asylum, I began screaming at the top of my lungs for help from the boats off in the distance—the hell of my own construction consuming me like a snack. After finding some flares on board, I ignited one as I waved and screamed, hoping to gain some attention. I was now regretting all the trust I had placed in God and Jesus. “I trusted You, I believed in You, and this is how You treat one of Your followers? What good are You? I would be better off if I had died hours ago. Then this would all be over. All You want is to torment me.”

Time was spent howling and muttering profanity at the Lord, accompanied by cries for help at the fishermen until my voice went hoarse, the sun set, and the reign of darkness was enthroned. There I remained, pacing back and forth on the deck, muttering blasphemies to the Lord with what little sound I could muster, my head turned toward the deck, my eyes turned up, spewing all hell’s anger and accusation with my every action as the cold night slithered into my flesh. After denouncing my faith, I climbed into my sweatshirt and curled up on the deck. “The only companion I have is this growling in my belly and this thirst in my throat from where I trusted You enough not to take anything with me.” I had not had anything to eat or drink since the night before, and it was becoming quite evident. I charged the Lord with every accusation I could find as I lay there angrily, curled up in a ball in the cold, trembling, though this did not help or change my situation.

The boat lay motionless on the still sea as I fought for slumber, for some escape from this predicament, from this hopelessness. The only comfort to be found was from my lungs exhaling their warm exhaust onto my chest. I had tucked my head inside my sweatshirt to efficiently utilize my body’s heat, and I guess it was just enough because I slowly drifted off to sleep, into painlessness, away from this cursed abode, off into the land of fleshless existence—no law, no chores, and no responsibilities. So much could happen in dreams. You could see without your eyes, hear without ears, talk without speaking, all the senses in another form, in a form that could not be touched by anyone but yourself, freedom from everything but your soul.

After what was probably an hour or so, I awoke, returning to where I had left myself, in the ever-growing-colder night. Sounds from diesel engines hung in the air, making for pleasant company, as I sat perched upon the fish box centered in the front of my boat, watching the fishing boats lit up like tiny cities off in the distance, working back and forth through the twilight hours, endlessly working to maintain man’s existence, answering the call of the demanding master—the flesh we are all subject to, the same way Jesus had to, with the sweat of their brows. How I longed to be on one of those boats, working for the endeavor of the flesh right now, to be warm, my belly full, and content for the moment. But I had made my choice, and the decision could now not be changed. How stern and hard this God was. Taking into account all that had happened that day, as I sat there exhausted from my displays of anger, a little dazed from sleep and the lack of food, I began to make amends with Jesus and God, realizing that I wasn’t in any real danger and I hadn’t been harmed. The only thing I was really angry about was the fact that I couldn’t call the shots, the fact that I thought things were going to go one way and they didn’t, the fact that just because I believed something was true in my heart didn’t make it true unless it really was true, and the fact that it wasn’t going to be over until God said it was over. And God had not shared any of this information with me; I had assumed it. After digesting these truths, I knelt down and prayed to the God who had always been there for me, no matter what I had done to Him.

The night passed slowly, filled with restless sleep, shivering bones, and the occasional prayer as I stared at the night sky, searching for signs of the new day approaching, and checked to make sure I wasn’t sinking. The moon shone brightly overhead and stars filled the sky as I waited to be delivered from the sea, hoping to either drift ashore or be discovered by another boat. Hour after hour went by until the glorious light made known it was on its way with its ever-so-pleasing rays warding off the darkness on the horizon. As welcome as this event was and as much as it stirred my heart and hope, the fatigue of the journey was greater than the joy of the sunrise, and back into slumber I slipped.

Sometime after I had passed out, my state of unconsciousness was shattered by the magnificent roar from the diesel engine of the fishing vessel that would be the first link in the chain of events of my rescue from this agonizing adventure. I sat up on the deck, peering over the side of my boat. A huge commercial fishing vessel sat idling off my starboard bow, and several puzzled fisherman lined up on the rail looking back at me.

“You having trouble?” one of the men yelled over the rumbling of the machinery. (No wonder they couldn’t hear me screaming over all the noise from their operation.)

“Yeah, I ran out of gas.” I kept my reply short, not wanting to go into any further details. The thought of telling anyone what I was really doing out here was scarier than the actual event.

The line of questioning proceeded from their deck. “What time did you break down?”

“Last night, right before dark,” I replied.

“You were out here all night?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you radio the Coast Guard?”

“No, I don’t have a radio on board.”

Their faces looked a little more puzzled. “What were you doing out here?”

“I was just taking one last cruise of the season before I put the boat up for the winter.” The lie rolled right off my tongue as I denied my Lord and waited to hear if a cock was going to crow at this point.

“We’ll radio the Coast Guard and give them your coordinates so they can come get you.”

“You hungry or thirsty?” one of the men asked.

“Yeah,” I responded.

One of the men disappeared from the deck and returned shortly with a bag of hot sausage biscuits and a jar of coffee, which they lowered down to me on a rope—one of the best meals of my life. Another man stepped out on the deck and yelled, “We contacted the Coast Guard, and they’re going to send out a boat with some gas. Put on a life jacket—it’s part of their rescue procedure.”

“I don’t have any on board,” I told them, yet another response that would lead into more confused expressions. These men must have thought I was the biggest fool in the world, but I would rather look like a fool at this point than appear completely insane—the world is more tolerant of fools than it is of religion. They threw me a life jacket, wished me luck, and then went back to work as I sat waiting for the Coast Guard and the next line of questioning and confusion that was on its way.

An hour or so had passed by when the Coast Guard arrived with a carbon copy of questions, followed by the same answers I had given to the men on the ship earlier. Their reaction was much the same. They brought with them two five-gallon cans of gas. We poured the gas into the boat’s fuel tank. I primed the siphon bulbs, started her up, and headed for the Chincoteague Inlet, where I could refuel and then head back to Ocean City. I followed behind the Coast Guard vessel as we ran parallel down the beach toward the inlet. With another beautiful day, a calm sea, and the undisputed merriment of knowing I would be on land shortly, all the anger and fear of my “night at sea” became only a memory now. After clearing the inlet, we wound our way through the channel, and silence once again fell upon the motors—out of gas again. The small Coast Guard boat circled back around, noticing my progress had ceased. They threw me a line to tie off to the bow and informed me they would tow me the rest of the way in.

Arriving at the dock moments later, I celebrated my reunion with the earth, which I had been dreaming of since this journey began. It suddenly felt like it was truly over, with the safety of solid ground. I refueled my boat, answered a few more questions while they filled out a rescue report, and then fired up my boat and headed for home. I traveled back to Ocean City through the comfort of the back bay’s calm isolated waters, protected by the barrier island, thinking about what had happened, how fortunate I was to have made it back, and how an arm didn’t seem that important anymore, vowing not to tell anyone what had really gone on. There is such a fine line between insanity and religion, and those in charge of defining it rarely know the first thing about God. Man wants so badly to come up with his own explanations for things with his microscopes, telescopes, probes, and potions, but he can only study matter with these tools. He can’t study its intent, and some things you can’t understand if you are not willing to accept where they have come from.

Making my way through the bay, nearing Ocean City, I approached the end of the channel, which emptied out into the harbor on the south end of the town. As I entered into the harbor, there were several directions that could be taken. One veered off to the right, which could take me out the Ocean City Inlet. As I passed through this intersection, that horrible voice with its relentless persistence invoked its spine-tingling demands: “Go back out and finish what you started. Get it over with. You’re not done yet.” Not even responding with thought to this invocation, completely ignoring this insane proposal, I continued on to the boat ramp to where I had left my truck. I did not care if I ever set foot on a boat again. I had had enough.

As I lay in bed the following day, browsing the scriptures of the New Testament, the meaning of Matthew 7:2 jumped out and hit me: Judge not the Lord or you will be judged, and what you measure out will be measured back to you. I had turned back from my goal with twelve gallons of fuel left, and when the Coast Guard rescued me, they brought ten gallons of gas, not quite enough, and I would be willing to bet anything, exactly two more gallons of fuel would have landed me right at the dock. My own prejudice, my own judgment, that flaw in every man and woman that is the architect of our demise—my judgment had once again misled me. Trusting my feelings instead of trusting the words of Jesus had once again proven their power of deception, causing me to break the commitment I had made with the Lord, to do what I had said I would do, and the result of this detour had landed me in a bad situation, like Peter losing faith and sinking when Jesus told him he could walk on water.

Everything this world had taught me about matter really didn’t matter when it came to God and faith. It was just a facade to elude me from my goals, to divide me from the truth, to strengthen my fears. Prejudice has so many faces, and every human being that walks this earth is filled with it, and is steered by it, and most don’t even know it, from happiness through wealth, to the appearance of men, the beauty of women, fame and fortune. Though I did not gain an arm on this quest, a little more wisdom was acquired, not that I wanted it, but there it was, a lesson learned at the price of pain. Sirach 2:1 says Jesus told us to be prepared for trials when we come to serve the Lord (Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition, RSVCE),[[1]](#footnote-1) and although I was really just trying to serve myself a helping of some of the Lord’s power, this passage seemed to have some relevance here. God was stern when it came to the truth and judgment. He would not budge an inch with His law, the only true law, and there were no exceptions, no matter how much screaming, yelling, cursing, or begging you did. The truth would not be bent, though His patience for teaching seemed limitless if you were willing. He would work with you until you got it right.

**Chapter 3**

**Mountains**

Fall turned to winter. The meaninglessness of daily life without a goal, a purpose, or a mission had returned, one day spilling into the next until my desire to separate myself from failure began rekindling my passion to achieve what I had set out to do. Reevaluating my strategy, studying Jesus’s life, His words, and His actions, I noticed that He went out into the desert for forty days and forty nights before any miracles were performed through Him. Perhaps the quick fix I wanted was going to take some time, maybe forty days, and maybe I had to learn the responsibility and discipline that went along with power such as faith. Not having access to a desert where I could hang out undisturbed for a long period of time, I set my sights on the Appalachian Trail, the closest secluded spot I could think of.

In the middle of January 1995, I set out to accomplish what I had started so many months back, my plan laid out and my courage strong. A friend and I were returning from Florida. My friend knew nothing of my plans, and I didn’t think it necessary to inform her until the last minute that I would not be riding all the way back to Northern Virginia with her. There was no sense in traveling twelve hours in a truck with someone who thought you were insane when you could spare them the discomfort that accompanies strange and bizarre behavior and any discussion of it.

I never spoke to anyone about what my plans were on matters involving my beliefs or the strengthening of my faith. I sometimes wondered if anyone really believed in Jesus as I did or trusted Him to do what He claimed, and there was no reason to start an argument over these things. These decisions were my own to make, and who was to argue with what Jesus said anyway. Everything was said very plainly.

The pavement rolled by under the wheels of my truck in the cold January night as we approached my unannounced route change. As I veered off the highway and onto the exit ramp, I informed her that I wasn’t going back with her tonight and that I wanted her to drop me off in the mountains at Skyline Drive (a state park in the Appalachian Mountains). She had a puzzled look about her but didn’t say anything.

An hour or so after our route change, I was greeted by darkness and the frigid winter mountain air as I stepped out of the truck and onto the pavement of the parking lot at Skyland—a park facility, now closed for the season, located in the national park of Skyline Drive. Fumbling through my suitcase, I extracted some winter garments I had packed for the trip and stuffed them into a green trash bag: long underwear, two sweatshirts (one with a hood and one without), two pairs of wool socks, and a hat. I said goodbye, pretending like this was something I wanted to do, turned away from the truck, and started to head off.

“Hey, don’t forget your wallet,” she said. I hadn’t wanted to take that life jacket, but now I didn’t have a choice. I couldn’t let her think I was going to walk around with no money. She’d be liable to call someone to stop me. I guess it really didn’t matter if I had money or not since there was no place to spend it up here this time of the year. I took my wallet.

I stood watching as the taillights of my truck disappeared around the winding turns, slithering off into the darkness. Chuckling, I thought to myself, “I did it. I made the first step toward the execution of my plan.” These escapades seemed like just worthless daydreams in their gestation period, but once they started to happen, to become real, they were a glorious thing, even if it meant being stranded in the mountains in the middle of winter at midnight. Though I can’t say I would have considered this the environment of my choice, or how I envision a peaceful setting, I can say that there was no place I felt I needed to be more than right here, right now, with a purpose—cowardice and fear far behind.

Walking over to the curb in front of the dormant building that was the Skyland lodge, I geared up for the night’s events, putting on the layers of clothing I had brought to insulate me from the cold of the season. The night was cold but docile as I headed south along the side of the parkway, which ran through the trees of the forest that covered the hills, their now-barren branches stretched like thin, bony, scraggly fingers up into the clear night sky, illuminated by the glowing moon.

I swam my way through time, one step after the other, watching the breaths of steam rolling out of my mouth, listening to the occasional stirring of leaves by the creatures in the woods, perhaps deer, squirrels, or birds, doing whatever it is they do to survive. The hike had warmed my body enough to where if I didn’t shed some clothing, I would be sweating profusely, so I removed my hat and one sweatshirt, and then traveled on. I had planned to sleep at a place in the park called “Hawksbill.” I had been there when I was younger and remembered that there was a stone shelter perched atop that pinnacle, which I thought would make for a comfortable stay for the night before I picked up the Appalachian Trail—running right through Hawksbill—in the morning.

Arriving at the Hawksbill parking area, shortly after embarking on my journey, I said goodbye to the luxury of the paved road and stepped into the woods, onto a gravel and dirt trail. Hawksbill was the highest point in the park and could not be reached by car, only by a hiking trail that wound up the side of the mountain. The trail was about a mile long, and it twisted and turned as it made its way to its destination. Roots and rocks protruded from its steep incline, a far cry from the smooth, clean surface of the parkway. The additional effort required to travel this path caused me to perspire under the insulation of all my clothing. The body never quits doing its thing, such an efficient machine, cooling itself, warming itself, defending itself from the forces on this earth. It has so many chores, this great machine we all must exist in or else not exist, passed down in a seed and then constructed with the same components, the same atoms, elements, and compounds as the earth, the same solids, liquids, and gases.

No sooner had I shed another layer of clothing than the peak where Hawksbill resided came into sight. I could hear the earth breathe its breath across the mountaintop, rustling the branches on the trees now whispering the tales of torment to come. The wind was coming from a westerly direction, and until now the mountain had been shielding me from the wind’s harsh currents. Much to my discontent, the hope of a semi-comfortable night’s stay, under a roof, was dwindling rapidly.

Arriving at the stone shelter, standing right where I remembered it so many years ago, I flopped down my trash bag of clothes while overlooking the frigid concrete floor that graced this structure, its surface now plagued with puddles of water scattered about it. I guess the fact that they weren’t frozen should have cheered me up, but it was of little consolation at this point. I would have gladly traded a few lower degrees for a silent night. The shelter stood made of stone, consisting of three walls, a roof, and a concrete floor. Unfortunately, the wall that was missing was the only one I needed: the west wall. The wind howled straight into the structure as I attempted to make the best of things, putting on every piece of clothing I had. I said a few prayers and curled up in a dry spot on the floor as nature jogged my memory of the cold night I had spent on the boat. I was, however, glad I wasn’t stranded in a completely unpredictable environment such as the sea. The wind howled at my back as I twisted and contorted on the slab, desperately seeking slumber, though finding none.

Perhaps an hour or two had passed, and it had become quite evident that there was no sleep to be had here unless you were dead. I rose to my feet and headed back down the trail I had so recently ascended, hoping to find somewhere to get some rest. The Appalachian Trail would have to wait till later, when there was daylight. I descended down the trail from Hawksbill and returned to the pavement heading south, the wind only a memory now that I was back on the east side of the mountain. I crept through the night, onward, thinking and walking, the usual tone and routine, not too exciting, not too torturous.

I had traveled five or six miles when I came upon Big Meadows visitor center, a small complex resting on the edge of a field. Several buildings were grouped together in man’s image, that is to say, how man pictured them in his mind and then formed them from the components of the earth, making them a reality—the same procedure through which all that is created comes about. Everything is so similar, with different levels of complexity. Stalking the facility for any sign of inhabitants, I peered in the windows of the scarcely lit buildings that appeared to be closed for the season. After scouring the compound, I found a nook between a wall and an out-of-service soda machine that would serve as my oasis for the remainder of the night. I tucked into the nook, out of the sight of a first glance if someone were to patrol the facility. I sat down, my back against one wall, my head leaning against another, and traipsed in and out of slumber. It was the first hint of unconsciousness I had seen in about twenty-four hours. Hard to believe I was just in warm, sunny Florida the last time I went to sleep.

Man has come a long way with his inventions, traveling to wherever he wants in mere hours, transmitting information and entertainment through thin air. So much has transpired here on earth over the years, and who can really say if these things are good or bad? Certainly, I love the comfort and companionship they offer, but what is to be the outcome from their existence?

The damp, cold, lonely night seemed to last forever, broken only by prayer, thoughts of happier times, and intervals of sleep filled with restless dreams, dreams so real I hardly knew if I was asleep or not.

As the first signs of light made their way through the thick, dense fog that had settled in, I embarked once again on my journey. As I traveled south, I could hear the sounds of deer hoofs on the paved road ahead, though the fog was too thick to see them with anything other than my ears. The wondrous human body with its so many senses, all capable of pleasure and torment, could be such a double-edged sword. All I have learned in my life has been taught to me through these senses, and all my life, I have been held prisoner through these senses, all the pleasures and all the pains, black and white, hot and cold, fresh and rancid, harmony and caterwaul, acids and bases, good and evil. The power of the flesh is so strong and so clever when it comes to its matters; it’s hard to see through the fog, its arguments very strong, its education very stern. There is so much to learn in this world, so many schools, so much struggling to understand things to be able to survive, and nothing is given up without a fight.

From the time we are born, the information man has gathered through the centuries is passed down to us in hopes life will be better, through mathematics, language, science, history, and religion. Your interests lead you to your schools, and the school that now held my interests was the Catholic Church, for what I was seeking was said to be only possible by the power of God. I stuck with the church I was brought up to believe in because Jesus plainly declared in Matthew 16:18–19, “That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church . . . and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Since Peter was the one who built the Catholic Church and his body is buried under the Vatican, I was pretty sure I had gone to the right place; this was where Jesus said to go to be saved. I fortunately was raised in this church and did not have to change my Christian faith, unlike my mother and her family, who changed from Baptist to Catholic later in life. I only had to change everything else in my lifestyle so I could actually act as a Christian. Just because someone gives you a car doesn’t mean you know how to drive it—it is useless for what it was intended for if you simply show it off in your driveway and never move it.

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I was no stranger to the “extreme.” Whatever I committed to, I would allow it to consume me. I had a horrible drug problem in the mid- to late eighties, and cocaine found me sitting around waiting on it. There are many ways things enter into our minds, and TV is one among the many. I typically did not watch a lot of TV during that point in my life, as life was more entertaining than TV ever could be; however, there had been a tremendous amount of advertising about a special investigative report that was coming up on a popular TV show, titled “48 Hours on Crack Street.” I have to believe, to most people, this was a look into the crack epidemic and the culture it had spawned, a firsthand look into the latest plague to sweep the nation; to me, someone who loved crack, this was to become a travel guide. I remember seeing the reporter standing on the side of a New York street, reaching down into the gutter, and coming up with handfuls of empty crack vials, claiming that you could buy enormous amounts of crack for very little cash. They had my full attention, and I knew I needed to head north, where the streets were paved with crack. I can only assume that the majority of the people who viewed this program were probably in shock and awe that drug use and abuse was that extreme in the Big Apple and in our great nation; however, if you’re part of the drug problem, it looked like the place to be. The wheels in my mind turned quickly and without resistance. After about an hour of watching the program, I had a plan to go to New York. Later, I had conversations with a few of my buddies, and it was decided, I would skip out of school the following Friday, pick them up as soon as they could get out of work, and head to New York, where we would bask in an “all-we-could-smoke crack fest”—thank you very much, television, you were entirely to blame for this field trip.

Friday finally rolled around after days of anticipation. God only knows what lie I told my folks as to where I was going, but it definitely was not the truth. They were not going to be able to handle the truth: “See you all Sunday night. Heading to New York to smoke crack for the weekend. It’s dirt cheap up there.” That was not going to be uttered from my lips. It is amazing the lies that will come out of someone’s mouth when they want something they are forbidden to have but are going to do everything in their power to try to get regardless. I don’t know if my folks believed a thing I told them at that point in my life, but that didn’t stop me from pouring out the lies—standard protocol at this point. I recall my dad saying at one point to me, “Do you even know how to tell the truth?”

I skipped out of school around lunch on our appointed day, my bags already packed and loaded into the car. I then picked up the other two members of the party who would accompany me on this magical trip to crack town. I picked them up where they were patiently waiting for me at the one’s mom’s house, where he lived. We had one last quick stop left at the bank so they could cash their paychecks from that week; I had already secured my financial provisions earlier. I had saved thousands from roofing all summer and on weekends. Roofing was a trade that was so brutal a young man could make fast money legally because not many people could handle the physical demand it placed on your body, and not many wanted anything to do with it for obvious reasons. We all roofed. The other two had just dropped out of school to do it full time, but my folks wouldn’t allow me to drop out and continue to live at home, so I stuck it out in school against my wishes. Roofing was one of the hardest ways to earn a dollar, which would make you think we would have known the value of a dollar better than most. Unfortunately, when you work that hard, you have to play hard if you want to escape the nightmare you have become entangled in. It was a vicious cycle.

We all hear from our folks, peers, and society (publicly) our entire lives, from the time we are born until we die, about how bad drugs are, but the truth is, a huge portion of the world is on one kind or another, from cigarettes to pharmaceuticals. And they don’t do them because they don’t work—they work phenomenally. The repercussions are the problem, and every drug has them, unfortunately leaving you worse than you were before you partook of them. I couldn’t stand it when all the anti-drug campaigns would come out and try to scare you into not doing drugs because you weren’t going to have a good time. That was the biggest load of shit they ever tried to feed us. You were going to have incredible experiences; however, they were not wrong about the price you would pay. In fact, they were probably way low on that estimation. The price was always more than you could afford, and it was going to cost everything you had plus some. The greater the experience, the more you were going to pay. (I am still paying thirty years later.)

We got on the Capital Beltway, headed for Interstate 95 to New York, loaded with great expectations. Five hours from now, if everything went according to plan, our ears would be ringing from the seductive fumes of the glass pipe. We started the journey with a joint of weed we passed around, something to pacify us until we could get to the main attraction. We had almost gotten to Baltimore when a cheesy-looking dude pulled up next to us as we were doing seventy miles per hour on the highway and yelled for me to roll down the window.

“You all want to buy some acid?” he yelled.

“Yeah,” I responded.

He motioned for me to pull over on the shoulder. We both pulled over and got out on the side of I-95 north and proceeded to negotiate a drug deal in broad daylight, all of us looking seedy as hell—it was a wonder we had managed to remain in the free world as long as we had. The guy opened his conversation with, “I was driving by you all and saw that you had a boom box with a power cord plugged into your cigarette lighter just like I have, and I thought to myself, ‘Hey, I bet those guys want to buy some acid.’” Well, he was right. We never turned it down.

The drug world was extremely bizarre, with weird things occurring constantly. What were the odds of getting pulled over on an interstate and being sold LSD?

“What do you have?” we asked.

“I can only sell you ten hits. It’s globe acid.”

“We will take all of it,” we said. We had all taken this brand before, and it was never bad. Acid was definitely one of those drugs that a lot of people would try to rip you off with because it looked just like paper with some kind of print on it (globe acid had a print of Earth on it), and there was no way to tell if it was good until you ate it. And then it took about an hour before you knew whether it was good or not, so it was easy to rip someone off. We bought the ten doses for about thirty dollars, parted ways with this stranger with candy, and got back on our quest for cheap crack, all in agreement that we would not eat the acid until the trip to New York was over. We just could not pass up the opportunity to acquire some acid.

I don’t remember how long it takes to get from Baltimore to Philadelphia on I-95, but that was as long as we could sit in the car without eating any of the acid. “We’ll just each eat half a tab. That way we won’t be too fucked up to buy crack”—once again, we were all in agreement that it was a good idea. We each dropped a half a hit as we headed to the “Big Apple” on our last leg of the journey, with snow flurries starting to fall in the winter afternoon as visions of crack rocks danced in our heads. Obviously, looking back on this, I can recognize that there were serious issues with our group’s idea of a good time, between the complete disregard for common sense and decency, and the fact that there was no line that couldn’t be crossed. When we descended on the city in the early evening, flurries still falling, we were starting to trip. This was definitely good acid.

The combination of media influence and now LSD had me believing that you could acquire crack anywhere and everywhere in this city. I had been under the impression that it was going to be very easy to find, maybe even with free maps to help tourists find crack easily, available from a crack welcome center. But that was not the case. There were no road signs that said “Crack Street.” This was not the way to start out our crack vacation—we could not even do drugs right. We drove around on the highways until we saw a sign for Brooklyn. We had all heard of Brooklyn, so we made our way off the highway.

Descending on the streets of Brooklyn, beneath the L train tracks, we saw a white guy standing on the corner in front of a little convenience store, burning a box. This looked like someone who could help with our quest. As we pulled over to the curb, the man approached us before we could say anything, and in a very heavy New York accent, he began his sales pitch. “You all want to buy some weed? I got dimes, quarters, and if you want to talk quantity, I got ounces.” We engaged in brief conversation after his pitch. I don’t remember exactly what words were exchanged other than him saying, “Hey, you guys are from Jersey, aren’t you?” I remember that seeming completely ridiculous, as we were all from Virginia and definitely did not have New Jersey accents. As it was with everyone we came in contact with and were solicited by on this trip, we bought some of his wares, a quarter ounce to be exact.

After the purchase of the weed, we presented our inquiry regarding obtaining some crack. “Hey, you know where we can get some crack?” It was very straightforward, to the point.

“You don’t want to mess with that crack. You’ll steal from your family. Stick with the weed,” he responded.

“Do you know where we can get some,” we asked again.

He told us to try looking in some place I had not heard of before, nor was I in any condition to remember, rendering that portion of the conversation useless. As we pulled away from the curb with another addition to our collection in what was turning into an illegal drug shopping spree, he was rambling off what apparently were hours of operation for his weed business that he was running on that particular corner.

As the snow flurries fell and darkness descended on the city, we scurried about in the little Toyota hatchback, searching for this crack that was said to be plaguing the town. I have no idea how we ended up in Times Square, but there we were, tripping on acid, surrounded by what appeared to be a huge, open-air drug venue, just as TV had told us. The indigenous populates knew exactly why we were there as they surrounded the car, each one jockeying for a position at a window, with hopes of getting their foot in the door so as to close a deal, trading one desire for another. “Two for twenty, workin’ fifties,” they barked—the generic crack sales pitches you typically hear in this situation.

We started extracting a few twenties from our pockets as we proceeded to make all the mistakes of an open-air drug buy from strangers—taking the LSD was not a wise decision. As a rule, you never buy crack without checking it out carefully, and if you’re dealing with someone who will not let you check it out, then it probably is junk. It was not uncommon to have people try to pawn off pieces of peanuts or macadamia nuts, or in this case some sort of hard bread. We shelled out about sixty dollars as the rear passenger door was opened from the outside by a black man who proceeded to jump in the car, yelling, “You all are buying bread. You’re buying bread. Drive the fuck out of here.”

I pulled away, shaking off the salesmen, leaving them in the rearview, as we were now faced with an additional passenger we knew nothing about, other than his probable crack problem and no way to feed it.

“That’s bread. You all just bought bread. That shit ain’t real,” he said, appearing to be almost frustrated, as if it was his money that had been lost.

I did not know what to believe. Was this guy telling the truth, or was he attempting to trick us into thinking that what we had just bought wasn’t real so he could try to take it and smoke it? I was not in a good position to try to sort out what was going on here, and the acid was making me paranoid. Not wanting to take any chances on being fooled, I attempted to smoke what did turn out to be something other than crack, with no entertaining value other than perhaps asphyxiation.

“You all wanna get real high, I’ll hook you up. I just got out of Rikers today,” the black man of about forty years of age, with a scar on his cheek, who had let himself into our car said as he held up his prison release papers like some sort of credential. (Rikers Island is a prison in New York.) Under normal circumstances—that is, not being under the influence of LSD—this man would never have gotten into our car, much less be riding around with us. We weren’t the sharpest tools in the shed, but we weren’t normally this stupid. He made idle conversation as he gave us directions to where we were to take him so we could finally get what we were after. We ended up at some sort of general store, where he asked us to give him some money so he could get some crack, which he would bring back to us. I don’t remember how much we gave him at that time, maybe a hundred dollars. He left the car and went into the store, and we sat there, all thinking, “How stupid are we? We just gave some black dude a hundred bucks, and we will never see him again. He will probably go out the back door.”

After ten minutes or so, much to our surprise, he came back out, carrying a boom box, and got back in the car. He pulled a small bottle of apricot brandy out of his pocket, offered us a sip, and started rambling about his idea of how this night was going to go. I can’t remember exactly what he said, but there was talk of getting “real high” and “do you all like the Whispers?” (The Whispers are apparently a musical group, and he had just purchased one of their tapes for his newly acquired boom box.) He took it upon himself to start playing his tape and then pulled out a plastic bag with a few of the “as seen on TV” crack vials filled with crack. We found it, thank you very much, *60 Minutes*—from television to reality.

Not really knowing what to do at this point, we continued to follow the instructions of our new “crack” tour guide in hopes things would turn out well. He gave directions as I drove to the destination of his choice, the destination where we would finally get down to business. As I drove, he and the other member of our original party now riding in the back with him started to smoke some crack. I could hear him whispering, “We gonna get real high,” to the other passenger, almost like they were conspiring to have a separate party excluding the people in the front of the car. Once again, taking LSD and trying to do any type of calculation was hopeless if you actually expected any kind of result.

When we finally were informed that we had arrived at our destination, we were at Central Park. After pulling over on the edge of the road, in a dimly lit area, we all finally got what we were after. Smoking crack was probably one of the most pathetic things in the world (not that taking LSD was brilliant), sitting around impatiently waiting your turn to experience a fleeting moment of ecstasy in exchange for your, health, money, and soul, your brain releasing intense sensations throughout your body just before it leaves you in a state of desolation.

Every drug has its own lie it tells, and they all sound so sweet in the beginning. Looking back, I think the thing I hated the most about cocaine (snorting it, smoking it, or shooting it) was the complete bullshit that poured out of people’s mouths, mine included, when they were on it, the big plans they had, their ingenious ideas that were going to change the world for them and those around them, and all the “I love you’s,” when the bottom line was, not a damn thing was going to get done other than more cocaine. And when the coke ran out, so did the love. You would steal from your brother if you had to, to get more. Cocaine was truly a disgusting and fruitless spell.

We each took a turn on the pipe until it was gone. Then it was time to go get more. We had not done but a couple hits each at this point, and the intense power of the cocaine had dulled the buzz from the acid just a bit. I pulled away from the curb, listening for direction as we headed to our next stop. We had not traveled very far when I was instructed to pull over again, followed by the request for more money to be handed over so he could go get more crack for us from the apartments we were parked near. For whatever ridiculous reason, we gave him a pile of money. I don’t remember exactly what it was, at least five hundred dollars, but he took the money and disappeared into the night. We sat there in the dark, in the car, waiting, now wondering if this guy was going to return or if we had been ripped off. Looking back on this now, we were so pathetic. He probably would have been doing us a favor by ripping us off.

When things were really starting to look bleak, much to our surprise, he came back out of the shadows of the cold winter night. I could not believe how gullible we were to trust this guy to come back, yet he did, and with a big bag filled with crack vials, just like the ones on TV. “We gonna get real high, and get some girls, and get a motel room and party,” he said to us. This definitely was not in the plans, nor did we have any interest in hanging out with this guy any longer. We just needed to get the rocks and ditch this guy—the rocks we had already paid for that he was holding. The next half hour or so was spent with the stranger and the one member of our party in the back seat with him doing a few hits while I navigated the streets of New York City to what ended up being the “Harlem Motel.” I knew absolutely nothing about New York except what we have all heard from TV, and that is, if you are white, you don’t belong in Harlem.

I parked the car as instructed as he wove some tale that we had no choice but to believe at this point. As we informed him we needed to get on our way soon, he got out of the car and said he would be right back. Then he went into the only building on the street that wasn’t boarded up, the “Harlem Motel.” We sat there in the car like a bunch of rubes, still tripping on acid, the snow falling, and the occasional blacks that inhabited the streets there looking at us completely bewildered as they passed by our car. Time ticked on as people came and went from the motel, a very industrious establishment for late-night customers, although our guy never came back out.

After sitting there for close to an hour, we were pretty sure it was over. Our conversation had turned to what we were going to do to him if we found him as we got out of the car and approached the entrance to the motel. The snow fell, illuminated by the pinkish hue of the sodium street lights, as three lost souls stood in front of a building they would never enter, unable to completely accept the fact that they had been ripped off. We had practically forced him to rip us off in the state we were in. Who plans to go buy drugs somewhere they have never been, in what could be a hostile environment, from people they don’t know, and eats acid on the way there? After standing out front of the motel for thirty minutes as the passersby steered clear of us while they gazed upon us as though there was something seriously wrong with these three white boys standing on the streets of Harlem in the middle of the night, we returned to the car. This trip was over, and it was time to head home with what little money we had left.

I attempted to find my way out of the city as one member of our party tore up our street map and threw it out the window after growing tired of listening to the self-appointed navigator try to read the map while still tripping. We finally found our way to I-95 south and eventually made it to Ocean City, Maryland, where the remainder of the weekend would be spent consuming the last of the LSD and then drinking tequila until we all threw up and passed out. As an adult, looking back, I don’t even know what I thought I would accomplish or why I did anything I did, perhaps for the same reason people watch horror movies.

I think everyone who ends up using drugs has their own reasons for why they do them. There is something in their lives that they cannot deal with or come to terms with, something missing or something they can’t get rid of, and before they know it, they have been sucked into a world that does offer some form of consolation as well as intense entertainment and adventure. I think I probably started, as so many do, to be accepted by the people I thought were cool so that I could be cool, and I think the abuse began because my existence as a youth seemed completely hopeless, and drugs definitely take you out of this world for a price.

My teenage years were horrible. I was a lanky kid with terrible acne and a big nose. I had a strict old man who put up with zero shit at home, who only said no to anything I wanted to do, which forced me to have to sneak around and lie a lot to get what little freedom I could. I could maybe blame my dad for my desire to escape reality, but I may also have just been a bad kid who was using someone else as an excuse for my actions. I don’t know, and it really didn’t matter at this point because here I was, and once you bite that apple, everything changes—you have now been introduced to your new friends who hold great powers.

Matthew 12:43–45 says something like, when an evil spirit leaves someone, it goes out of that person and travels around in arid places, looking for rest. When it can find none, it decides to go back to the person it left. Finding that person in order when it returns, it goes and gets seven more spirits worse than itself and returns to the person, and then their condition is worse than before.

That definitely sums up the drug world pretty well, and I followed that path like a rat behind the piper, of my own will, and my condition got worse and worse. Could I blame these “evil spirits” if I could prove their existence, or should I have just simply had enough discipline to have never let them in in the first place? If they never come in, you will never know them, so they can’t go out and get seven of their brood to come back to continue to work on you. As discomforting as it is to have to bear the burden of guilt, we have no one to blame for our actions but ourselves. This, too, can be something very hard to come to terms with. Many people seek out counseling just to try to have someone tell them, “It’s not your fault,” or, “You are a victim,” when the truth is, it really is your fault. You may not have intended for things to end up the way they did, and you may not have been able to handle a feeling that you had, but you are definitely guilty. The only consolation is, you are not alone. Everyone has some horrible sin, and they all feed each other. Some just refuse to accept this, and ignorance is no excuse. This world is a festering cesspool of feelings and emotions that are constantly trying to take root.

Who is to blame here for this epic crack journey I went on, the drug manufacturers, the dealers, television, or me? I can tell you that I didn’t do drugs because of TV, but the only reason I went to New York was because of TV. I wonder if that program helped one single person. I would guess it did not change anything for the better. It just gave most of us believable entertainment from the comfort of our sofas for an hour and something to talk about for a few more hours, basically watching the horrors of addiction, watching real people, foaming at the mouth, as they destroy themselves and areas of a city that have been designated for this type of behavior. After all, that is what our hearts desire. If it wasn’t, it wouldn’t be here.

Cocaine, when smoked or shot, is a conquering, mindless rush of euphoria that knocks out any other emotion, thought, or trace of reality for a few brief moments as you desperately trade anything and everything at your disposal, from your money to your morals, to maybe even your soul, all just to visit this deceptive state of bliss that this chemical concoction delivers, this glorious spell that aggressively assaults you and your very existence while it entertains you in ways nothing else can—supercharged consciouslessness. The unfortunate companions of this drug are the brutal demands it has and the authority it possesses to enforce these demands. It will and does take every dollar you have until you have no more. It will have you defile and disgrace yourself for the pleasure of others in exchange for more, and it will leave you so depressed and desolate when the music is over that you may even take your own life. Regardless of all this, it is so powerful that those who indulge in it worship it by devoting every moment of their existence, scheming how to get more when they are not currently indulging in it at that moment. I had gone to the extreme with this false prophet, as I would with so many others during that period of my life. Some memories you just wish you could erase. Unfortunately, that part of my life is something I probably will never forget, not even when walking around in the mountains in the middle of winter.

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The day passed uneventfully, mile after mile, periods of damp, dismal fog briefly interrupted by scattered sun and scattered thought. Around noon, as I was walking, a police car pulled up behind me in the usual fashion—lights flashing, the signal to comply or run, because you’re going to be accused or suspected of something. I chose to comply and stood there waiting as he got out of his car and approached me, all the while knowing I was going to have to go through the formality of the generic questioning that accompanies all police interactions. I had no reason to put up any resistance. I had done nothing wrong.

“What are you doing up here? Can I see some ID?” He rambled off exactly what I knew he would.

I explained I was simply on a hike through the park and nothing more as I pulled my wallet from the trash bag that held my belongings and displayed my driver’s license, which bore the number that stood for me—you can’t go anywhere without it. The government needs to keep track of all its subjects. The officer told me to wait there, and he returned to his car to run my number. I was no stranger to the police and had my share of problems with them some years ago, nothing too serious, mostly good times gone bad. He returned from his computer check, handed me my identification card, milled around in my bag, told me to stop at the ranger station up ahead and get a hiking permit, and went on his way.

The world is filled with soldiers of every kind, fighting for whatever they believe in or whoever feeds them the best. On earth, a town, city, or country could not stand or exist without a military or they would be defeated by ones who were more powerful—the strongest rule, a true competition. One, whoever could defeat you on this earth, would make you subject to their laws, their wishes, or else you’d suffer the consequences imposed by them. From the schoolyard bully to the greatest army, one will do just about anything for their life. There are many strategies, so many tactics, and so many beliefs, twisted and polished as need be. The kings of the earth conquered countries through bloodshed, through the mortality of the flesh, through wielding the power of fear for one’s life or the pains they might inflict on one’s flesh, and those who lived in those kingdoms traded with that conquering ruler’s currency, with what the kingdom told them was of value, with what the kingdom told them to observe. If you bought land instead of conquering it, in order to acquire it, you paid for that land with the currency observed by the ruler of the kingdom in which the land resided, and even though you purchased the land, you were still subject to the power (the king) and paid taxes to him and abided by his laws, and those who did not abide by what the king proclaimed felt his wrath if they could not overcome him. The world is such a big picture, and it’s so hard to see it all, though it is sometimes easier to see things when you are alone and can get away from others and all the distractions we have created.

I could see the sun through the clouds high overhead when I arrived at the ranger station at Swift Run Gap, another location in the park. I had gone about twenty-six miles since I started, since I got out of the truck last night, and fatigue was now starting to set in. The bottoms of my feet were sore, my legs were tired, and the temperature was dropping. My thoughts were now turning toward abandonment of this trip, for this was no place to learn about anything except pain. I stood there at the intersection of the parkway and Route 33, contemplating whether to hike down to the nearest town and go home or continue on. My lack of effort at this point and time was too much to bear, and I decided to stick it out until I reached the end of the park some forty miles ahead. I figured I could arrive there in about thirty-six hours if everything went well. The ranger station I was told to check in at sat right off the side of the parkway, and after some brief self-deliberation, I chose not to check in for a hiking permit. I didn’t feel like talking to anyone about anything, and there was no need to waste any time when I could be getting nearer to my destination. I also did not want to take a chance of backing out. My mind was very clever when it came to excuses, as many are. If I let myself have an opportunity to get out the easy way, I would usually take it, convincing myself it was the right decision, though over the years, I had noticed success was never achieved with this approach. I recognized the obstacles that may arise from a visit to the ranger station and avoided them.

I pounded the pavement up into the final section of the park. The grades were getting harder to climb, and my desires were shackled to images of warmth, food, and rest—a bad combination for accomplishing a goal that was not in clear sight. I could see some rocks up ahead on the side of the road, with water trickling off them, and I sure wanted a drink right now. That was probably what I wanted the most. After saying the blessing, I drank my fill. God had a way of taking care of the absolute necessities. It’s funny how the simplest things mean so much in a crisis: water, light, and warmth. A little ways up ahead lay another rock off to the side of an overlook parking lot. This rock was graced with the rays of the sun, the perfect opportunity to rest and perhaps get some much-needed sleep. I found a smooth area on its surface and reclined there, my feet throbbing, my legs aching and stiffening. I had to get rest where I could, not knowing what conditions the night would bring, perhaps the wind and the cold, and if so, there was no rest to be had with those conditions. I lay there restlessly, unable to find comfort on the hard, cold surface of the rock. The sun’s rays were too weak to provide warmth, and the cold from the rock was sucking the warmth from my body, prohibiting any form of relaxation. I staggered back to my feet, and onward I pressed, forced by my cruel master—the same one we are all subject to, the flesh—like a beaten slave, gravity enforcing its law with every movement, the immaculate magnet, relentlessly sucking every form of matter toward the center of the earth, without prejudice, with unquestionable enforcement. Perhaps the Lord of the flesh was imprisoned deep down there in the fiery core in his bottomless pit, in his topless pit, waiting, tumbling over and over as the earth makes its revolutions.

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Earth has no top or bottom (we call the north “up” and the south “down,” but there really is no up or down on this planet), so neither does its core, and no man really knows what’s down there. They only speculate with what they have seen, though there is much man has not seen. I envisioned a bottomless pit once, while under the influence of a hard drug, a cavity in the core of the planet, rolling over and over with every revolution Earth makes. Again, every drug has its own lie, and PCP lies like nothing I have ever experienced—and so convincingly so as to lead you where it wants you to go until it is too late. Cocaine had become a huge problem very rapidly in my life when I was a teen, and it had ruined it as well as taken all my money and what little dignity I had. From sniffing to smoking to shooting it, it had left me feeling so disgusted and sick about what I had let it reduce me to that I could not bring myself to continue believing in it. Unfortunately, at that time, I needed something to fill the void it had left behind. I have no idea what drug is worse for an individual, cocaine or PCP. They both can do you in, in so many ways, but I will say that PCP will take you places, whereas with cocaine, you never get anywhere—like a kid in a car who is so excited that he is going to Disney World but never quite makes it there, just thrives on the thought. PCP will take you there, but you just may not like what is there when you arrive, and there will be collateral damage.

I fell fast into the PCP world. I took to it like a duck to water. It offered an almost “living dream” state of mind, sometimes so much that I did not know if I was dreaming. I think all of us while growing up had heard the horror stories about people on PCP, and maybe that made it seem almost more appealing to try, more exciting. I don’t know, but I remember I tried it the first time it was offered to me, like so many foolish choices I had made before, and I instantly fell in love with it, spending all the time I could on it, which was almost every day. It is impossible to describe what that stuff does, but its intentions are nothing less than sinister, and it accomplishes its works with an almost-divine intervention, to the extent that you can completely justify to yourself any action you may execute, no matter how insane it may actually be, like a mad crusader, guiltless, vindicated. I had seen plenty of people completely lose control on the stuff, end up in jail, and die all because of this drug, but unfortunately that was not enough of a reason to stay away from it. PCP is a very mystical drug like no other. They call it “angel dust” in certain circles. (We had a lot of names for it, but I never referred to it as “angel dust,” which was usually a term used by the media.) I can only assume it got that title because it was as if there was a very real presence of something with you when you were on it. At times, in extreme experiences, it would actually control you to the point that you had no power over yourself.

People who used PCP regularly tended to be very spiritual, quoting the Bible and praising God, probably due to the presence felt from the experience of the drug. Unfortunately, the presence is anything but God, and the religious messages received were not from God, no matter how convincing they may have seemed. People have a natural desire for adventure, exploration, and excitement, although nowadays we like to make our own rules, set our own boundaries, try to keep things safe, wear a helmet. PCP has no boundaries or rules. Anything goes, and it doesn’t just want to kill you; it wants to take you to hell along with everything around you. I don’t need to share all the experiences I have had on the stuff. I am not advocating it. It is extremely dangerous, and I was very lucky to get away from it before it was too late. I will share one experience, however, because it is of some consequence.

One summer night, I had been waiting to meet some friends down by the river, a spot in the neighborhood we frequently hung out at. Sitting in my truck, impatiently, I elected to smoke a dipper, a cigarette that had been dipped in liquid PCP. (PCP typically came in liquid form and could then be put on any number of things and then smoked.) I took a few puffs as I sat listening to the radio in the early stages of the summer night. I had a very high tolerance for this drug by this point in my life; however, the one thing about this drug was that no matter how much you had or had not done, it could and would at some time overtake you and leave you helpless to stop it—if there ever was a magic potion, this was it. I don’t recall how long it took before it hit me, and I have no idea how long I was tormented, but I will never forget what took place.

At some point, I became trapped, although I was actually just in my truck. I had no idea that was where I was. I was violently being rolled over and over, and I was unable to stop tumbling, all the while trying to get out of where I was trapped, grabbing at anything that I might catch a brief glimpse of as I passed it by, hoping that I might get free of what I had come to the conclusion was hell. Helplessness and hopelessness had fully consumed my being. Now I was just tumbling, rolling, as I fell in a bottomless pit, a topless pit, never stopping, rolling over and over in the darkness of the night. After some time (after the drug had peaked), I managed to grab hold of the door handle and get free of the truck. It was as if I had escaped from hell. I remember yelling, rejoicing, as I slowly regained control of my body, while further distancing myself from the truck as I headed down the road, barefoot and wearing a torn shirt.

As I was celebrating my freedom by shaking and then tearing out a small street sign, a friend pulled up. He recognized the signs of a PCP meltdown, for he himself was no stranger to the stuff. He got me into the car he and his girlfriend were in and drove me to the 7-Eleven store, where he bought me a jug of milk. Milk was what you drank when you were trying to come down. I’m not sure what it does, but it definitely helps. After I was finished with the milk, the questioning began. I didn’t go into a lot of detail other than I had gotten so fucked up that I couldn’t get out of my truck, and I left it at that. They took me back to my truck to find that I had ripped out the stereo and the speakers and broken the door handle. This was the most intense experience I have ever had on PCP, and I have had plenty, but that one was the only time where something actually controlled my body without my will.

They say man only knows what he has seen; he does not create but simply recognizes something and expands on it—for instance, maybe witnessing an apple fall off a tree and roll down a hill and then maybe going and inventing the wheel as a result. In the same way, I had always heard that hell was a bottomless pit, which seemed ridiculous, but after what I experienced, it made total sense. If there was a hell, it could easily be a hollow sphere that never stopped turning, something without a bottom or a top. Earth never stops turning, and it has a core. No one really knows if it is solid or not, so we can only speculate, but it does have all the characteristics of a bottomless pit if there was a small cavity in it. And how hard is it to escape from something when you are constantly falling?

PCP is the cleverest of liars. It feeds you things that seem almost truthful so as to deceive, to keep you enchanted, and when you are under its influence, you will be deceived; however, in this particular experience, it did show me a hell, and I will never forget it in this life and hope never to see it again. The one thing I learned from drugs was that you will never communicate with God when you are under their influence. The only thing God may give you is perhaps a second chance, maybe warning you that you are lost and headed for destruction. You will hear plenty when you are on drugs, but you should know that it is not God who is speaking to you. PCP will definitely show you things, but the things it reveals are evil and that which belongs to evil. Knowing any details about hell is actually useless information, inconsequential. We already have been told it is torture, torment, and inescapable. The mechanics of it are trivial. Some things that we think are of some significance really aren’t. Entertainment comes in many forms, but most of it only distracts. The more elaborate and convincing it is, the longer it keeps you enchanted.

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The afternoon passed, as all things do. Thoughts of the dreaded darkness imposed on my consciousness, while Earth’s star hung just above the mountain peaks. Such a beautiful vision this would have been if I wasn’t in such a desperate state.

I wandered up on a picnic table that sat at the side of the road and slumped over it, exhausted, dreaming of some way to get out of here, though I knew all too well that there was only one way out, and I was the only one who could get me there. It was now quite obvious that it was only going to get harder and harder. I prayed to Mary the Mother of God for comfort. The prayers to her seemed to get answered more frequently. Perhaps she was more compassionate—arguably the greatest woman who ever lived, perhaps the greatest person born through man who ever lived, for without her, Jesus would not have come into the world, or so those who believe in Jesus believe, to others just another fable or fairy tale.

The path was calling to me while the cold of the evening bored its way through my skin—onward. I had seen signs on the road for a facility called “Loft Mountain,” with camping, showers, a gift shop, you name it, though all closed for the season, perfect for a vagrant like myself. All I craved at this point was a dry place to lay my head and somewhere to get some sleep for the night. Hopefully I would find it there. Driven by my passion to rest, I poured on the steam, stopping only to get a drink when there was water bubbling over the rocks on the side of the road. Mile after mile I trudged, hoping there would be sanctuary for the night at the Loft Mountain facility. When I finally arrived, darkness had long since been instated, rest long past due. As usual, I surveyed the area for any signs of inhabitants—not a soul but mine. Slithering around the buildings, I found a suitable spot to make camp, a space between the entrances of the locked bathhouse, providing three walls and a roof over my head. I put on all the clothes I had, said my prayers, and drifted off into restless sleep for very brief periods, rolling and twisting on the concrete slab, trying to find comfort and maximize my body heat in every position I could think of. As always, nothing worked, and this trip was beginning to remind me of Jesus’s three days in hell. No place to rest, no tolerable climate, not an ounce of sympathy did this place harbor. I had come to the conclusion that I would not find rest until I was out of here. The human body is such a fragile and vulnerable machine compared to the environment it resides in, and its demands are many.

Not a star could I see in the sky. The night was plagued by thick, heavy darkness while spirits of desperation descended upon me. Frustrated and impatient, unable to summon unconsciousness, I returned to my feet and resumed where I had left off, with twenty-five miles to go until I reached the entrance to the park. How I longed to be out of here. With every step, I dreamed of what it would be like when I got back to civilization, to a warm bed and a hot meal, with this nightmare behind me. As if things weren’t bad enough, sleet began to fall from the darkened sky, filling the air with the sounds of ice hitting the dried, fallen leaves on the forest floor. There was to be no mercy shown out here tonight. I traveled on, as always, never stopping, just looking at the pavement pass beneath my feet as I passed over it, my head hung down, broken, too tired to be angry. Not paying any attention to what lay up ahead on the now-wet pavement from where the sleet had been melting on its surface, I walked right up on a skunk who was traveling toward me from the opposite direction, right down the middle of the road, looking about as miserable as I was. Fortunately, upon approach, we just looked at one another, veered around each other, and kept on our separate ways, never stopping. The last thing I needed was to get sprayed by a skunk on top of everything else. I guess I could be thankful that didn’t happen.

The sleet soon turned to rain, and if someone had asked which one I preferred, I don’t know if I would have been so bold as to make that judgment. I have been the victim of my own wishes too many times. I was slowly learning not to think, just to deal with whatever came my way and try not to do anything stupid. I guess the fact that it was no longer sleeting meant it was getting warmer, and it also meant that I would be getting wet. I raised the hood on my jacket over the cap I was already wearing, hoping to stay as dry as possible. The water dripped off my hood and onto my face, irritating but not too devastating, and fortunately my layers held back the moisture from my body for the time being.

Water is such a fascinating thing, the main ingredient in just about everything. Water is more valuable, more precious, than just about anything if you don’t have it. You can’t live with it, can’t live without it, like so many things on this earth. Water can change into many forms, solid, liquid, or gas. When it’s cold, it is solid, hard. When it’s above thirty-two degrees, it is liquid. When it’s heated, it becomes a gas and rises into the air, leaving behind any impurities that might have been in it. It is truly amazing how billions of tons of matter can rise into the air and disappear and then reappear in another location in its previous form. What a crazy world, with so many things you would never believe if you hadn’t seen them with your own eyes, and water is beautiful in all its forms.

An hour or two had passed when I heard the sound of a car approaching, the only one I had seen all night. The car passed by me, the passengers looking at me in the rain, and then stopped a couple hundred feet past me. A man got out. I couldn’t really see what he looked like, and I kept my distance.

“Hey, you need a ride?” he yelled.

“No,” I replied.

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I’m alright.”

He got back in his car and drove off. Man, did I need a ride, but it just seemed like some sort of test, a temptation, the kind of temptation that could put me in a bad spot, maybe even cost me my life. I had taken plenty of rides with strangers, but not tonight. In my heart, I knew I was supposed to walk out of this place, and if I could not at least do that, perhaps judgment might fall upon me tonight. A short time later, I heard the car coming back, and I went up off the road and into the woods till it passed, so as not to be seen. As the taillights disappeared into the darkness, all I could think about was how nice it would have been to ride out of here and leave all this behind me; however, sometimes what seems like the easy way out is not.

The rain finally subsided, but it was too late. The damage was done, and the outer layers of my clothes were now soaked. The water hadn’t penetrated through to my skin yet, except on my legs. My legs were now having to struggle with the saturated pants that were desperately trying to constrict their every movement, the latest obstacle to contend with. It seemed as though around every corner was an additional unforeseeable twist. I knew this trip was going to be hard, but I had no idea it would be like this. Things seem so easy when you are sitting in a warm, dry house, but actually going out and doing them is a completely different story. As a rule, though so hard to observe in this world, it is always wise to walk in someone else’s shoes for a few steps before you start running your mouth.

I stopped to rest, get a drink off the rocks, and pray for the strength to get out of here. I filled a plastic bag I had in my belongings (which used to house my toothbrush) with water and drank it down as my body quaked with exhaustion. “Should I fill the bag and carry it with me for later?” I thought. “No,” came the reply from my thoughts, “drink when the water is rolling off the rocks, and then only.” Too tired to argue with my invocation, I kept moving and didn’t fill the bag.

The journey was growing more painful with every step, and the darkness seemed to have no end. The thought of maybe being able to find rest here was slowly distracting me more and more, diverting my attention, overcoming the necessity to get out of here, seducing me. I fought these desires, knowing that the only rest to be had was when I would stop at every mile marker just long enough to catch my breath. I would lean on the markers like a cane, say a prayer as I mustered what strength I had left, and then travel on, dreaming of the brief moment of relaxation I would experience at the next marker and the joy that would embrace me when I arrived at the last one, when it would truly be over.

My eyelids were growing heavy and my body had reached its limit when I simply had to stop and collapse. No longer could impatience or the thought of getting out of here fuel my body. If I was going to make it, I was going to have to take my time. I sat there on a cold, wet stone wall at the side of the road, my legs throbbing, my feet pounding, my clothes half soaked, with seven more miles to go.

The morning light was making its appearance on the horizon when I lost consciousness, passed out, and fell off the wall. I was fortunate enough not to have hit my head, though it probably wouldn’t have mattered much at this point. This was not an intended place to fall asleep. It just happened, and the thought of sleeping there on that cold, wet wall for any period of time was not appealing. The reality of what the wall had to offer in the way of comfort was becoming quite clear. Even in my utter state of confusion and exhaustion, I couldn’t bring myself to believe I could get any real rest here. There was a better place to be, and I had to be there at all costs.

Getting to my feet had become an agonizing, pain-filled task. My legs had grown stiff, the muscles not wanting to comply with my brain’s wishes. Each time I would try to move them, they would retort with shooting pains. The bottoms of my feet were wrecked. I had to change the way I positioned my feet when they came in contact with the ground as I walked, so as to allow progress to continue. When one part of my foot could stand no more, I focused my weight to another part of it, constantly alternating between all possible areas of my feet so as not to completely destroy one area. After I had put a few hundred feet between the wall and myself, I managed to get my legs loosened up somewhat to where I was making a little better time. The second sunrise of the trip was in full swing while I prayed and hobbled on, mile after mile.

Only hours ago, I had thought to myself, “I will be so happy to get out of here I will probably run the last mile,” though that was turning out not to be the case. I would have loved to run out of here, but I could barely stand, and even though the spirit may be willing, the flesh was truly weak—and mine was shot.

When I had about three miles to go, pain began to prove its power over my flesh, a power I could not contend with. It now felt like I was walking on the bones of my feet, my ankles like old worn-out hinges as I flipped my feet out in front of me on them. My knees barely moved, and my ass could hardly lift the weight of my now-crippled legs. Hallucinations plagued my vision, and the sounds of people—who weren’t really there—talking filled my ears from out of every corner of the forest, though I could not make out any words. I, at this point, could not go any farther if my life depended on it. I truly understood the meaning of exhaustion. With those three miles or so to go to the end, I collapsed on the edge of a sewer on the roadside. It was a large, open drain with a bottom a few feet below the opening. Sitting on the edge of the sewer, I hung my legs down into its mouth and lay back on the concrete, drifting in and out of consciousness—so close yet so far.

No thoughts of my grand exit from the park entered my head, no dreams of celebration, no thought at all of anything. My body and my brains were beaten to a pulp, too weak to even pray. I just lay there. I had walked about sixty-two miles, but I just couldn’t go on anymore right now, not without some form of brief rest. No matter how much my spirit wanted to be out of here, my flesh could not move until it had time to rest. After I’d relaxed for a spell, my present situation invaded my consciousness and made its presence known once again: “Get up, get up.” This time, as much as I wanted to climb to my feet, I found myself lying there, struggling, making attempt after attempt to get my body moving again, until I was eventually successful at climbing to my feet. Things were getting harder and harder, but as so many times before, I was able to make it to my feet and journey on, though at not much more than a crawl at this point.

The next mile lasted forever. I wasn’t sure if I had missed the marker, because it took so long to get to it, but finally, I arrived. I rested on the tiny obelisk marker, said a prayer, and then resumed—standard practice. The clouds had returned overhead and brought with them some light rain, though I couldn’t have cared less at this point. If someone had run up and beaten me with a pipe, I don’t think it would have bothered me now. Any care or concern I had in the world was gone. Nothing seemed to matter at this point.

As all things do pass one way or another, so was this self-inflicted nightmare running its course. Off in the distance, I could hear the sounds of the highway. It would be over soon, or at least I was convinced it would be.

Dragging my bones down the last leg of the journey, I saw in the center of the road the ranger station to the entrance of the park—my beacon of hope. It was just a shack in the road, but it meant so much to see it there. Unfortunately, though, just as when I ran out of gas on my boat trip, this plight wasn’t over, for on the other side of the station, the road stretched on. There wasn’t a finish line with a crowd or a car to take me home. Staggering on, drawn to the sounds of the highway, maybe a mile or so more, I arrived at the overpass of Highway 64, atop Afton Mountain, and there, standing in the rain, I accepted defeat, beaten once again by the pains of the flesh—a slave I would remain, unable to defeat this master. And of the quest for my arm, its priority was set aside once again.

There was a little restaurant sitting off to the side of the road, which I made my way toward, all the while a voice telling me, “Why do you not travel on?” To this question, I gave neither reply nor further attention, much like when I brought my boat back to Ocean City, not even wanting to look at the inlet. I crawled into the diner, looking like a hobo, my trash bag in hand, soaked, filthy, and there I stood, waiting to be seated, not sure if I would be. A waitress came over, looking a little confused as she stared at me, and then, surprisingly enough, she seated me at a table, where I consumed a glutton’s portion. When I had finished my meal, I gladly paid the bill with this land’s currency and then called a cab to take me to the bus station in Charlottesville, from where I would then head home.

I barely had enough money for the breakfast, cab ride, and bus fare, but nonetheless, as always, the Lord had provided me with just enough. Though some would say it was just a coincidence or “what luck,” those who know, know.

I slept all the way back to Washington, only waking once. When I arrived there, it was dark. The only thing that stood between me and the shower and bed was the subway and a bus ride—I couldn’t wait. When I got to the subway, much to my chagrin, I did not have enough money left to purchase a ticket for the train and the bus, just a little short. As I stood there, bewildered, a man came up to me and asked for change.

“Man, I don’t have enough to get home,” I replied.

Then, reluctantly, he reached into his pocket, held out his hand, and said, “Man, here,” and he gave me the change he had. This was one of the most generous acts I had ever witnessed. What he had done may have been greater than what I had just done—I was going home, and I don’t know if he even had a home.

A short train ride and a transfer to a bus were the final link to uninterrupted rest. Shortly, I would be home.

As so many times before, my calculations were incorrect and I had boarded the wrong bus. The bus I had gotten on didn’t go by my house, and at the last stop, I had no choice but to step off and return to the night. The bus driver informed me that another bus would be by shortly and go by the stop I needed. Onto a dark corner, in a residential neighborhood, I stood—no phone, no store, nothing but restful houses and a Catholic Church silently staring me right in the face from the other side of the street. There I waited in the damp darkness, confused and growing angry as the second bus failed to arrive. Forty minutes, fifty minutes, maybe an hour or so passed, and I lost control. Anger consuming me, I began cursing the Lord as I had done on the boat trip. I told Him I loved Him all the time, but when things got to be too much, I would turn on Him. I was only willing to do what I wished and nothing more. I wanted to call the shots, but that just isn’t the way it works. What was I capable of doing? I always thought I knew everything, but the truth is, I didn’t know a damn thing. If I did, my life wouldn’t be in the mess it was always in. Right after I finished my barrage of profanity, the bus appeared and took me to my home.

“Still so much to learn,” I thought as I lay in bed that night, trying to make amends to Jesus and God, remembering the night that had just passed, lamenting the pain that still dwelt in my body and the cold of the winter I had now escaped from.

“Pray ye that your flight be not in the winter,” Jesus said in Matthew 24:20, and that was all too clear to me now. There was nothing but pain and relentless suffering in the cold of winter. The sun was weak, the nights long, and there was no rest to be had in those times, only desperation and the struggle to protect the body’s existence.

If you would like to read the rest of the book it can be purchased in its entirety at [www.GoodAndEvil.Biz](http://www.GoodAndEvil.Biz) in either Paperback or Kindle

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