

Part One – Beginnings



Canadian

My sister, Debbie, and I had it made. We lived way out in the country in an old farmhouse with Dad. The nearest town was Canadian, Texas, but we didn't go there much. Traffic seldom came down the dirt road - but when they did, you could see them coming for miles. There was a bunch of chickens and rabbits we had to take care of — but other than that and a few basic chores, we could do as we pleased. There was a huge yard to play in and miles of fields where we could roam.

This is the first time we had gone to stay with Dad after my grandparents took us in. Dad was going through some rough times back then, or maybe he was heartbroken because his wife had left him. Dad was twenty when I was born, so he must have been about twenty-five when we lived in Canadian. Whatever the reason, he didn't come around much the first five years we were living with our grandparents.

Dad worked in the oil field. He was a derrick man working on a drilling rig sixty feet off the ground. Standing on the tubing board, his height of six feet six inches made it easy for him to reach way up over his head and latch the elevators when the rig was running stands of pipe into the hole.

He was very thin, but deceptively strong. In my mind he was Superman. You would never know it by looking at his skinny frame, but he could lift things no human should be able to lift. I was there. I saw him do it. Huge drums of hydraulic oil were nothing to him. He would just hunker down on the barrel, hug it with his long arms, then lean back and straighten up. That barrel would come off the ground like it weighed only a few pounds. He used to make money doing that - betting guys from work.

All the guys on the crew called him Red, because he had a shock of orange hair, contrasting starkly with his freckled pale skin. The crew came to our farmhouse quite a bit that summer. They would cook up one or two rabbits over a firepit and play horseshoes for hours. I liked to sit and watch them, because occasionally one of them would give me a sip of his beer. Then they would all laugh at me when I made a face.

I do not know if there were any women in Dad's life back then. I suppose there were - because he was handsome, young, and made good money on the rigs. But if he had a girlfriend, my sister and I were not aware of it. He never brought anyone to the house, other than the guys he worked with.

He was close with his crew. Judging by the stories he told us, it sounded like they had fun at work. Dad was prone to playing pranks whenever the opportunity presented itself and

he loved to tell us about them. He had a truckload of stories to tell and every morning he would sit at the kitchen table telling us about his night at work.

My sister and I would listen intently as we carefully arranged the dishes on the table and then served food from the pots. Many a meal was interrupted by our choking laughter as he narrated his Story of the Day.

One story he told us stands out in my mind.

They were working the night shift and it was bitter cold on the rig, with the north wind blowing snow and biting into the men. The frigid cold worked its way through any little opening it could find. All the men were dressed in insulated overalls with thick sweaters and pants underneath. Some even had insulated long-johns underneath all that.

Whatever it took to stay warm. If you have never experienced the Panhandle region of Texas in the dead of winter, let me tell you - it gets extremely cold there.

Every night, the crew alternated vehicles and rode to work together to save money on gas, since it was so far out to the rig. Typically, the drive could take upwards of two hours. So, everyone got a nap – except the driver - on the way there.

Finally, the rig came into view. A bright speck in the distance quickly growing larger and larger as they approached the well-pad. The light plants were running full tilt and the rig was an island of brilliant color in a sea of inky darkness.

As soon as the car came to a stop, the men piled out. Quickly turning their collars up against the biting wind, they scampered up the long stairway to the floor of the rig and the welcoming warmth of the doghouse.

The doghouse was a room next to the rig floor where the crew could take shelter from inclement weather. It was a kind of general-purpose room, located conveniently close to the driller's controls. The doghouse is where they changed clothes, ate lunch, and relaxed. It was furnished with benches along both walls- littered with the crew's clothes - and a table positioned in the middle.

The crew quickly changed out of their comfortable 'street clothes' and put on their work clothes, then stepped out of the warmth of the doghouse and onto the rig floor.

They assembled in a small group, ready to work. Dad was just about to climb the ladder up to the tubing board when the floor-hand said he had to take a dump. Excuse me for being vulgar. But that is just what he said.

Of course, the crew gave the guy a hard time about it. He should have taken care of business a few minutes ago when he had a lot less clothing to remove. The floor-hand said it would only take a minute.

“I’ll run over there behind the frac tank,” he assured them, “I’ll be back in a jiffy!”

Then he ran down the steps and disappeared into the darkness.

Dad told the driller that he would be right back. Then he grabbed a shovel that he found propped up on the edge of the floor and he ran down the steps, too. Then he disappeared into the darkness, running in the same direction as the floor hand.

Dad told us that he quietly approached the guy, walking silently in the snow. With the wind howling, it was not overly difficult to be stealthy. But he approached carefully, just the same. He crept up close behind just as the floor hand managed to pull his overalls off his shoulders and down past his knees. Dad laughed as he described the ridiculous vision of the guy squatting down, precariously teetering on unsteady legs.

Dad said he waited until delivery was eminent, then he silently slid the shovel underneath the grunting man. As soon as the load was delivered, Dad quickly withdrew the shovel and hid behind the corner of the water tank. He laid the shovel down next to the tank, careful not to dislodge the prize.

He watched as the guy struggled to get his coveralls back over his shoulders and buttoned up against the bitter wind. Then, as the floor hand was about to head back to work, he turned to look behind him.

It was all Dad could do to keep from bursting with laughter as he watched the guy’s reaction. There was nothing lying in the snow. The man squatted down to take a closer look and brushed snow around with his hand. Then he grabbed a stick and vigorously scraped the whole area where he had squatted. But there was nothing.

Dad quickly ran back to the floor of the rig and gathered the crew together. He told them what he had done and as the crew began laughing, he stopped them.

“Wait,” he said, “I’m not done yet.”

“When he comes back,” he instructed, “just act natural.”

Then he grinned that boyish grin of his and added, “But act like you smell shit.”

So that is what the crew did. When the floor-hand came back, the guys all made smart-ass remarks, like “It’s about time!” or another one said, “You need to shit on your own time! It’s time to work now!”

Then the chain-hand said, “What the *fuck* is that smell?”

They all made a big deal about sniffing the air and looking all around the rig floor. Trying to locate the source of the offending odor. The other guys chimed in, “Yeah! What the fuck is that!!” and another, “Oh my God! It smells like something died up here!”

While they were yelling and carrying on, the floor-hand unobtrusively slipped off the floor and ran into the doghouse. He wasted no time pulling his coveralls down off his shoulders. He struggled, but finally worked them down far enough that he could step out of them.

The crew followed him immediately and crowded into the entranceway. They watched silently as he scrutinized every crevice in his clothing. Then they parted, clearing a path for Dad as he stepped through the door. He was holding the shovel out in front of him, presenting it like a prize trophy.

The hapless victim was totally engrossed in searching through his coveralls, and he was completely unaware of the guys watching him. Or Dad approaching him.

Then he laid the shovel on the guy’s coveralls right under his nose.

“Looking for this?” Dad asked.

I have no idea what happened after that. Because at that point in the story we would all bust out laughing.

Dad had quite a few stories like that and I loved listening to him.

Working the night shift meant he slept all day. Which allowed us kids the freedom to do whatever we wanted. And one day, we were walking down the dirt road that goes past our house. We had walked about a mile when we came upon a creek.

That creek is over five feet deep in places and it has lots of fish in it. And turtles. And snakes. There is a bridge over the creek and I hopped up on the guardrail to show my sister how well I could walk a tightrope. You know. Showing off.

“Look at me Sis!” I yelled, “Tight-rope!” I thought I was ready for the circus.

I was doing really well for a while. Almost made it the full length of the bridge. Then without warning, my feet slipped on the rail and down I went.

This story could have easily turned out differently if Rex had not been with us.

Rex was a huge German Shepherd that one of the guys on the crew gave Dad. He weighed about ninety pounds, roughly twice my weight. Rex and I were best friends. We went everywhere together. So, when I fell off the bridge that day he was right there. Barking furiously at me with his front paws on the rail. Then he turned and barked at Debbie. As she began running towards him, he suddenly leapt over the rail and sailed down to the water fifteen feet below.

I did not see any of that, of course. Debbie told me about it later. I was too busy trying to figure out how to swim. My sister and I had never learned how. Because frankly, it had never come up before.

I was caught in the current, being dragged downstream. Bouncing off boulders, logs, tires, and who knows what all. Sucking in water with every ragged breath.

Suddenly, Rex was there. He grabbed my shirt in that huge mouth of his and pulled me towards shore. Then he dragged me completely out of the water and up onto the bank.

Debbie ran down, screaming like a banshee. When she got to me, she threw her arms around my neck and held on like she was never going to let go. We both sat there for a bit. Crying. Rex licking my face. I guess it scared the hell out of all three of us.

After that, I was convinced that Rex was the bravest dog in the whole world. I was only five and I hadn't been around many dogs up to that point, but I was still convinced. I had seen the *Rin Tin Tin* television show, and the *Lassie* television show – And my buddy Rex was just as brave as *either* of them.

Debbie loved to boss me around back then. She was about a year older than me and she felt that it gave her seniority. I guess it *did* now that I reflect on it. But at the time, I would not have any of that. I bucked her at every turn. That caused us to fight constantly. Real knock-down, drag-out fights.

I was not allowed to hit her - because she was a girl. Dad would have my ass if he caught me hitting her. So, she usually came out ahead in whatever disagreement we were fighting over.

Even though we fought a lot, we were still best friends. The entire day was spent together - running around whooping and hollering and having a ball. Just so long we did not wake Dad.

Debbie and I quickly learned the art of creeping silently through the house like a couple of Indians.

Dad was my hero. He was the smartest man I knew. He knew all the secrets of the universe. I did not actually know what a universe was at the time, but you get the idea.

I will never forget the morning he was trying to start his old Studebaker. The engine would not crank - it just made a clicking sound when he pushed the starter. I was helping him peer under the hood, when he turned to me and said, "Son, go in the house and get me some aspirin."

"Sure Dad," I said as I jumped down from the fender, "I'll get 'em!"

When I returned with the box of aspirin, I was amazed when he removed the vent covers on the battery and began dropping one aspirin into each hole.

"Whatcha doin,' Dad?"

"The car has a head-ache," he said knowingly. As he slammed the hood shut, he continued, "We'll give it awhile. Let's go eat breakfast and try again in a bit."

We headed toward the house and I noticed a delicious aroma of pancakes and bacon wafting through the back door. Debbie had made us pancakes! I gobbled mine down after drenching everything in syrup. I love syrup almost as much as the pancakes. Debbie gave me another plateful and I started to work on those. It took me a while to eat because Dad and I both had a huge stack on our plates.

Then I helped Debbie clean up afterward. She washed and I dried. Teamwork. After finishing up, Dad and I went back out to the yard to check on the old Studebaker.

The sad old car waited in the shade under my favorite climbing tree. Back in the day it had been my great-grandfather's pride and joy, but he eventually got too old to drive and he gave it to Dad. That old car had faithfully served my great grandpa for many, many years. But... now it was tired. Ready to quit.

"Go ahead," Dad said, "Hop inside and try it."

I jumped into the driver's seat, wiggled the gear shift to make sure it was in neutral and pushed the starter button. The motor turned over! But it didn't start. The second time I pushed the starter button, Dad gave it some gas from under the hood and the engine backfired, then roared to life.

I was amazed! But I also learned a couple of things from this. First, I got my wit and sarcastic sense of humor from Dad. Second, he was a pretty smart guy. He knew that the aspirin would react with the battery acid and recharge the battery. Dad had plenty of 'horse sense,' as he called it.

He was lenient when it came to rules around the house. So long as we let him sleep, Debbie and I could do just about anything we wanted. The only chores we had to do, was keep our room clean, clean the kitchen, and make Dad's lunch. My sister and I also cleaned up the kitchen after meals.

One day Dad came home and surprised us with a box full of firecrackers. He explained that today was a holiday. July Fourth. I didn't know what we were celebrating, but this was my first July Fourth and I was excited anyway.

Dad meticulously divided the Black Cats into three equal piles. One for him, one for Debbie, and one for me. The piles were huge.

Then he gave each of us a book of matches and said, "OK. Listen up. The main thing ya'll want to watch out for is try not to throw a firecracker in somebody's face."

Pointing his finger at each of us in turn - to make sure we understood the rules - we both nodded our heads in agreement.

"OK, then... the war's on!" He cried.

Somehow, while this discussion was going on, he had secretly lit the fuse on a string of black cats. As soon as he cried, 'the war's on,' that string of firecrackers went off right under our feet. I swear, I almost shit myself.

For the next hour or so, we had a full-scale battle going in the living room and the kitchen. Dad had a stronghold behind the couch, but I was working on his defenses by launching a full-frontal assault from the hallway, while Debbie kept lobbing her artillery barrage from the kitchen.

Finally, the last firecracker had been thrown. The living room was hazy with wisps of gray smoke, slowly dissipating. The silence was almost deafening.

I carefully peeked around the big rocker by the hall entrance and saw Dad and my sister standing in the center of the living room, looking around at the devastation. I walked over to join them just as Dad picked up a handful of paper shards from the couch and tossed them into the air. I watched as they fluttered down like confetti.

“Wow! Look at the mess ya’ll made,” Dad said. He grinned at us and added, “Get it cleaned up quick and I’ll take ya’ll into town for dinner.”

Debbie grabbed the broom, while I grabbed the dustpan and the trash can. Then we got busy cleaning up the millions of bits of paper that were scattered throughout the rooms. Each time one of the Black Cats exploded, it would instantly obliterate its paper casing.

Paper pieces were everywhere. Under the couch. On the couch. On the coffee table, and in the kitchen, too. The hallway, the table... literally everywhere.

I saw Debbie rubbing a reddish splotch on her leg and I grinned, “Hurts, don’t it!”

She glared at me, but her glare faded and morphed into a smirk when she saw me rubbing a similar wound on my stomach. “Hurts like hell, don’t it bro!” she mimicked.

I must admit, my sister always seemed to get the best of me. Whenever we fought, she always seemed to get the last lick in, or outsmart me and lock me outside. But we always got over it. Like I said, we were the best of friends. But we fought like mortal enemies every single day.

We were a surprisingly good team when we had to be. Like cleaning up all that firecracker paper. Or doing the dishes. Or that night we took on a gang of thugs and defended our home.

I was sleeping soundly, chasing an ice cream truck down the road. Because I had blazing speed, I quickly caught the truck. The driver was impressed by my amazing speed and concocted a huge triple-decker ice cream cone to reward me. He held it out to me from the side window of the truck and I was reaching up for it. I was stretching, up, up, waaay up on my toes... then just as my fingers were closing around the cone, my sister suddenly began shaking my shoulder. Hard.

“Billy!” she hissed, “Get up! There’s somebody breakin’ into the house!”

I jumped up, rubbing the sleep out of my eyes. “You made me drop my cone!” I accused her.

She was confused for a second, then said, "WAKE UP! There's somebody in our house!"

I was awake now. And scared. "What are we gonna do?" I asked her. She was my big sister. She was supposed to know these things.

I stared bug-eyed at the huge gun she was holding and watched her as she gripped it tightly with both hands. Debbie was shaking, but she had a look of determination on her face as she held Dad's pistol. The barrel of that that big .38 revolver was wavering, but she kept it pointed down the hall.

When we first arrived in Canadian, Dad taught both of us how to shoot. He showed us how to aim, and then shoot tin cans lined up on the fence. He took a lot of time teaching us, explaining that someday it would come in handy if we could shoot. He also insisted that we learn firearm safety.

Countless hours of shooting tin cans behind the barn - coupled with his critique of our performance afterward - had eventually paid off. We could shoot.

Dad worked almost every night, leaving us alone in the house. He was determined that we would become competent with his guns. Just in case we ever needed to use them. He instructed us to shoot anybody that came into the house while he was gone.

Now, that time had come.

Debbie said matter-of-factly, "We're gonna shoot em."

She held the pistol out - offering it to me. I took it and wrapped both my trembling hands around the huge grip.

Using our Indian skills, we crept silently down the hall towards the muffled noises of someone talking in the kitchen. Cabinet doors creaking open and then seconds later banging shut. In my fear and excitement, the noises were amplified. As we crept slowly through the dark house towards the unknown, my heart was in my throat.

As scared as we were, we didn't hesitate. Someone was in our house and Dad was depending on us to defend our home. We silently crept through the hallway with the big pistol leading the way. Me following close behind. Debbie bringing up the rear.

We entered the kitchen, and two people were silhouetted by the bright moonlight streaming through the screen door. With their attention focused on the contents of the cabinets - neither of them noticed us.

“STICK EM UP!!!” I screamed.

I was a huge fan of *The Lone Ranger* TV show and he always yelled ‘Stick em up!’ at the bad guys so I assumed it was the thing to do.

But my bad guys did not stick em up. Instead, they scrambled towards the door. I started squeezing the trigger as fast as I could and unloaded the pistol at the two dark shapes. Six shots fired in about three seconds.

I killed the wall, the icebox, and the screen door - but I completely missed the burglars.

When Dad came home a few hours later, he called us into the kitchen. We were awake, still excited from the events of the night, so we quickly joined Dad in the kitchen. He was examining some of the bullet holes when we stampeded into the room.

For the next few minutes, we stammered and chattered excitedly about how we had heard noises and then found burglars in the house. I told him how I had shot at them and run them off. I remember hoping he wouldn’t be disappointed in me because I had failed to kill them. I was fervently hoping that he would be happy with the successful defense of our home and maybe overlook the poor marksmanship.

“Good job kids,” he said, “Ya’ll were serious, huh!”

I didn’t find out until many years later that Dad had sent a couple of his friends over to the house to get some whiskey which he had stashed in the cabinet above the ice box. Evidently, Dad wasn’t working that night, so he and his friends decided a party was in order. When his friends came back to the diner where he was waiting, they told him that his kids had tried to kill them.

It’s amazing to me- many years later, as I write this – that I was able to fire six shots at a distance of ten feet and not hit a damn thing. It’s only amazing, because one day, I would become an Expert Marine Corps competition shooter.

Dad was a good shot, though. Hell, he was a GREAT shot. I’ve seen him make shots that were damn near impossible and make them look easy. One day when I thought Dad was asleep, I heard him call out my name, “Billy, come in here!”

I raced down the hall and slid to a stop beside his bed. He was lying very still, like a red-headed mannequin.

“Hand me my gun!” he whispered.

I took the pistol off the dresser and handed it to him, "What the heck are you doin, Dad?"

Suddenly, in one fluid motion that could have put Wild Bill Hickok to shame, he took the pistol from me, swung toward the wall and rapidly squeezed off two shots!

Blue smoky haze filled the room as he sat up and yelled, "I got him!"

"What?" I was standing there with my mouth hanging open. Trying to rub the ringing out of my ears.

"That damn fly!" he chortled.

He jumped up from the bed and went over to the wall, closely examining one area. I ran over and sure enough, there were two neat holes about a half inch apart.

"Where's he at, Dad?" I was struggling to see the dead fly, but I couldn't see anything but those two holes in the wall.

"Here he is!" He bent down on the floor beneath the bullet holes and picked something up from the floor.

"I didn't wanna kill him." He was studying the object in his hand closely, "I just wanted to shoot his wings off so he would quit botherin' me while I was tryin' to sleep."

I stood up on my tiptoes, straining to see whatever it was that he was studying so closely. Then he bent down and opened his hand a little for me. There was a fly staggering around in circles on his palm, pitifully buzzing with only one wing.

"Holy cow, Dad!" Jumping up and down. "Great shot!"

"Nahhh, it wasn't," he drawled, "I only got one wing."

That summer is also when Dad taught me to shoot his rifle. It was an old 1896 Mauser that he won in a poker game and it was awesome. I helped Dad set up some cans behind the barn and watched as he blasted away at them with the 7.65 caliber bullets. Every time he fired, a can would fly off the fence.

He shot four cans in a row, then stopped. Two cans still standing. He motioned me over to him and handed me the rifle. Then he walked a few paces away and turned to watch.

I stood holding the rifle up to my shoulder, just like Dad had taught me. The damn thing was heavy. I struggled to keep it from moving around so much as I squinted down the peep sight at the two enemy cans.

“It’s too heavy, Dad,” I whimpered.

“No, it’s not. You can do it. Just squeeze the trigger.”

By now, the rifle barrel was really wobbling around and my knees were beginning to shake. I wanted to get this over with as soon as I could, so I closed my eyes and pulled the trigger. The recoil knocked me on my ass. Literally.

Dad laughed and said, “Get off your ass, son!” He helped me chamber another round and said, “Go on! Take another shot.”

It was the absolute LAST thing I wanted to do at that moment, but I had to do it. Dad was watching.

I squeezed off another shot. And again, the recoil put me on my ass. But I had done it! I felt the excitement of knowing I had accomplished some remarkable thing. With pride welling up inside my chest, I looked up at Dad, waiting for his praise.

He towered above me, disappointment clouding his features. Reaching down, he picked me up and dusted the barnyard dirt off my ass. When he spoke, his words cut deep.

“Well, maybe with more practice you’ll be able to hit something,” he said. Then as he turned to go back to the house, he pointed towards the still living cans and added, “You missed both times.”

I was heartbroken. I resolved then and there to do better next time. I knew in my heart that I could kill those damn cans if I just tried hard enough. *Wouldn’t Dad be proud of me then!!!*

I watched his lanky frame walking away. As he passed by the rabbit hutches, I suddenly remembered that I had not fed them. Or cleaned their cages. I hurried to the barn to get the wash pale and their food. If I hurried, maybe I could get it done before Dad noticed.

There were about fifty rabbits in the pens. I had the responsibility of cleaning their cages, feeding them and giving them fresh water. When we first arrived at Dad’s house, I enjoyed taking care of them. I had never had a rabbit before.

As time went on, though - the daily routine of cleaning shit out of their cages became tedious. Then a chore. And not long after that, I began to hate those rabbits. I resented having to clean their cages when I would rather be exploring the fields with Rex.

Those rabbits were nasty little fuckers, and I was getting sick of them. Well, that's not entirely accurate. I wasn't sick of ALL of them. Debbie and I had adopted one right after we first arrived. We named him Peter, as in Peter Rabbit. He followed us around like a little floppy-eared dog. If we went in the house, he was right behind us. He even slept in Debbie's room at night. So, no... I wasn't sick of him. In fact, Debbie and I loved him. Not as much as I loved Rex, but still.

One day, Dad announced that we would be moving soon. His rig had completed drilling at their location, so we were moving to Ft. Stockton. On to the next job. He also told us that we had to get rid of the rabbits before we left. He planned on selling the ones he could and eating the rest. I was thrilled at this news! *No more damn rabbit shit to clean up!*

After that, our meals all had rabbit in them somewhere. We ate fried rabbit, boiled rabbit stew, rabbit sandwiches, roasted rabbit, and even barbecued rabbit a couple of times.

He also sold some of them to the neighbor, until finally, there wasn't even one rabbit left in the pens out back. We had eaten or sold every single one of them. *Good riddance.*

We were all packed up and just about ready to move. I was tired from packing stuff in boxes all day and I needed a break. I was lounging on the couch when Debbie walked in and sat down. She had a concerned look on her face and I could tell something was wrong.

"Wassa matter? You look like you been cryin'," I said.

"Have you seen Peter today?"

"No..." I said, as I thought about it. "I haven't seen him all day."

"Help me look for him," she said, "I think he's runned off."

We looked high and low for Peter but could not find him. We kept looking even after Dad woke up and started cooking supper. My sister and I searched everywhere. Rex helped, too. But even with his keen nose, we came up empty. Peter was not here. Anywhere. He had disappeared.

Just about then, Dad called us to the table. "Come 'n git it!" he yelled.

We both quickly ran to the kitchen and sat down.

"Ya'll eat up," Dad said.

By now, I was damn tired of eating rabbit. But I was hungry, so I piled the meat on my plate and immediately began stuffing my mouth full. Debbie served herself, then after taking a few bites, she put her fork down.

“Dad, have you seen Peter Rabbit today?” she asked.

Dad looked up as she continued, “We can’t find him *anywhere...*”

Dad held up his index finger as if to say he would answer in a second. We both waited and watched as he chewed his food. Then he put his fork down, swallowed, and said, “You’re eating him.”

He took a drink, “He was the last one...”

Suddenly, I had lost my appetite. I watched in shock as Debbie jumped up and ran screaming from the table. Just about as upset as a six-year-old girl could be, I guess.

That’s about all I can recall about Canadian.

Fort Stockton

Dad's rig was working outside Fort Stockton, Texas and we were living in a red brick house there. He was still working the evening tower, which is oil field slang for the night shift. My sister and I fended for ourselves while he was gone to work. We were new to the house, and every little sound at night used to freak us out. The old house made strange creaking noises at night, which we were certain was the sounds of ghosts and monsters and such.

How I wished that Rex was with us. But Dad gave him to the neighbor right before we left the farm in Canadian. If my dog was here, I would be a lot braver at night. He was a fierce protector. Those creaking sounds would not bother me at all if he was with me. The thoughts of Rex got me wondering if he missed me as much as I was missing him.

We soon settled into the same routine we had in Canadian. Dad slept all day and worked all night. Luckily, my sister and me were good at taking care of ourselves. It didn't seem all that unusual for a six-year-old kid to fix his own breakfast or stay alone in the house at night. It was normal for us.

Fort Stockton is where I first wet the bed. Now... wetting the bed once or twice at that age is not that big of a deal. I think everyone has probably wet the bed at some point in their childhood. But it was here that it became a big problem for me.

It was a nightly occurrence.

Dad tried a number of things to make me stop. Starting with stern lectures, and then spankings. When that didn't work, he tried grounding me. Then, he began whipping me with his belt. But nothing worked.

It didn't matter if I went to the bathroom right before I went to bed, or not. Or if I didn't drink any liquids after supper. Every morning I would wake up lying in my own piss. Pajamas soaked, sheets soaked, and the mattress too. After a few weeks, Dad got a plastic cover to put on my bed, so I wouldn't ruin the mattress.

Dad checked me every morning when he came home from work. And every morning he would find me lying in a puddle of piss.

Finally, Dad decided to put an end to it. He called me into the kitchen one morning and checked me. With my throat choked by a knot of shame, I stood silently in front of him as he frowned at my soaked pajamas.

“Pissed yourself again, huh?”

“I’m sorry, Dad!” My lips quivered and my face screwed up in preparation for the full-fledged crying that was eminent.

“Quit your sniveling.”

He had a big brown bottle of Aunt Jemima syrup in his hand, and he used it to motion me over closer. As I hesitantly complied, I saw he also had some of my clothes folded on the kitchen table.

“Strip off them wet things and put these on,” he indicated the pile on the table.

I quickly shucked off my pajamas and wet underwear and he handed me the pile of fresh clothes.

When I finished dressing, he motioned me over even closer. So, I stepped up next to his chair, not knowing what to expect. Dad was kind of unpredictable, that way.

Without a word of explanation, he reached over and pulled the waist of my blue jeans out a few inches from my skinny frame. Just enough to squirt syrup into the gap.

I felt the thick, sticky fluid running down my legs. Then he pulled out the elastic waistband of my underwear and emptied the rest of the bottle in there.

“There,” he said, “that oughta do it.”

“What you do that for Dad?”

“To break you from pissin’ yourself,” he stated, “You’re gonna wear that syrup all day. And today’s gonna be a scorcher. Hot and sunny.”

“I gotta work a double shift,” he added, “so, I won’t be home until tomorrow morning.”

Dad picked up the sack lunch that Debbie had made for him and headed off to work.

At the door, he paused and added a parting shot, “I just imagine you gonna get mighty uncomfortable – but if I find out that you took off these clothes, or washed the syrup off you... well, it’s not gonna be good for you.”

“I won’t Dad.”

“I’m gonna check you in the morning and I better see syrup.”

Just after noon, Debbie and I went outside to play. Some of the neighborhood kids joined us and I tried to just ignore the stickiness. The bright sunshine warmed up the day in typical West Texas fashion and the heat caused the syrup to become even stickier.

The kids were soon all making fun of me. Especially when the cloud of flies began following me around. Buzzing and biting.

“Sticky pants! Sticky pants, run yore ass home!” they chanted.

Kids can be cruel sometimes.

Eventually, I went inside the house and curled up on the plastic cover of my bed. I remember crying until I couldn't cry anymore. And waiting.

It was a long day.

I couldn't sleep that night. I remember just lying on that crinkly plastic – waiting for Dad to get home.

He finally walked into my room the next morning. I jumped up as he entered the room and stood still as he checked my sticky drawers. Then he checked my bed.

“Well!” he chortled, “It looks like it worked! You didn't piss the bed last night.”

“No, Dad!”

“Go get yourself cleaned up,” he ordered.

Then he went to bed and I soaked in a hot tub of soapy water. For a long time. So long that my fingers were all dimpled when I finally climbed out and dressed myself in some clean clothes.

Did his method work? Not exactly. At least, not in the way he hoped. After Syrup Day, I just became really good at cleaning up my mess before he found out. *What he doesn't know won't hurt me.*

As I said before, my sister and me were real good at taking care of ourselves while Dad was gone. Sometimes we would run out of food in the icebox and that's when our ingenuity really kicked in. For instance, we ran out of milk one time and didn't have anything to put on our bowl of Cheerios, so we experimented with water. That didn't work out too well, so we tried Kool-Aid. I can't remember which flavor it was, but it was

an instant hit. From then on, Kool-Aid flavored cereal became a staple whenever we ran out of milk.

Our Thanksgiving dinner that year was amazing. Debbie and I were watching cartoons - working up the motivation to do our chores - when during a commercial break, the guy on TV started talking about a big parade and how they were going to have a huge feast later.

My sister did not know anything about it, except she knew that we were supposed to have a special dinner on that day. So, we put our heads together and decided to make ourselves a grand meal. Really do it up in style.

We searched the cupboards and the icebox to see what we had to work with. As we rummaged through the kitchen, we found bread, bologna, mustard, and Kool-Aid. Soon we had a big pile growing on the kitchen counter. I found some paper napkins and added them to the stash.

We placed the napkins under our plates as I had seen it done in movies and then filled our glasses with Kool-Aid. When Debbie brought out the sandwiches, I saw she had cut the sandwiches diagonally as they do in only the absolute best restaurants.

We both sat down to eat, but Debbie stopped me, "Wait a second, bro."

She jumped up and ran to the kitchen sink.

"Wassa matter?" I asked.

She opened the junk drawer, rummaging around, "This is a special dinner and we s'posed to have candlelight."

She dug out three candles that we used sometimes when the electricity went out. She raised them over her head triumphantly.

"Yes!" she cried. "Now, we got us a special dinner!"

I ran into Dad's room and came back with a box of matches. Soon, we had all three candles going.

I will never forget sitting at that table eating our bologna sandwiches and watching the candles flicker. It felt special. By golly, it WAS special.

About the time we were finishing our meal, someone knocked on the door. It turned out to be one of the guys that Dad worked with. He seemed a little concerned that Dad had left us there all alone on Thanksgiving Day and he became even more concerned when he saw our meal — or what was left of it — on the table.

“Did you guys eat this today?” he asked.

“Yessir! That’s our candlelight special dinner,” my sister proudly responded.

“Well, this just won’t do,” he growled. His lips were in a tight line and his eyes were squinting like that guy on *The Rifleman* television show. I glanced over at Debbie, but she shrugged her shoulders as if to say she didn’t know what he was getting upset about either.

“You kids grab your coats and come with me. We’re going to have a REAL Thanksgiving dinner at my house.”

He left a note on the table for Dad, in case he returned and wanted to know what happened to us kids. Then he loaded us into his pickup and the next thing I know - we are stuffing ourselves with more food than I thought was possible.

I ate and ate. Then ate some more. Until finally, I was full as a tick.

After the feast, he put us in his spare bedroom and soon we were both sleeping soundly.

Suddenly, G-mom and Papa were waking us up. It was like a miracle! I knew I must be dreaming... but no! I have no idea how it happened, but they were actually there!

In no time at all we were loaded into their car for the ninety-minute drive back to Odessa. When we arrived and I climbed into my old familiar bed, I felt the relief and comfort of knowing I was home again.

Home. Such a small word - but packed so full of meaning and emotion.

June

Dad did not show up again until the summer after I finished first grade at Alamo Elementary. One day, there he was. Standing on the front porch with another wife. Her name was June and they wanted us to come visit for the summer. So, off we went. On another adventure with Dad.

After Dad loaded our clothes and stuff, Debbie and I squeezed into the back seat of their huge wood-paneled station wagon. We had two new sisters now, sitting ahead of us, in the middle seat. They were both older than Debbie, by a few years, so they had seniority.

It was a refreshing turn of events, seeing Debbie outranked like that. I guess I was just used to her always being the oldest. And in charge. Then we all settled in for the long ride. We were off to see Dad's home in Woodward, Oklahoma.

His home turned out to be a farm. He had negotiated a deal to take care of the owner's animals in exchange for reduced rent. There was an old farmhouse, an apple orchard and a musty old barn. We had a bunch of chickens, constantly squawking and making a fuss, and a pond full of frogs we could chase. If we really felt adventurous, we could jump out of the hay loft in the barn and land buried up to our neck in the itchy pile of hay.

The barn was also a good place to chase mice. We had a big German Shepherd dog named Rex and together we perfected our mice hunting skills. He was better at it than me. But not by much.

By the way, I should mention that this is not the same dog that rescued me in Canadian. Dad gave that one away - to the neighbor - when we left. This dog just had the same name. Dad always seemed to have German Shepherd dogs. His favorite breed, I guess. And he always named them 'Rex.' I suppose it was easier to remember the dog's name that way.

Dad and June liked to go out drinking and dancing and they would leave us kids alone when they went out. Our new sisters, Isie and Harper, were both old enough to babysit me and Debbie.

Our new sisters always came up with great game ideas to entertain us when Dad and June were gone drinking. There were many amazing games, but the one that really stands out in my mind is the one they called 'King and Queen.' Debbie and I had never heard of this game, but Isie insisted it was easy to learn. (When we first met her, Isie said her name was Isadora. But that was way too big of a name for us, so she became Isie.)

Since I was the only male, I was always the King, and my bed was the royal throne. The game was simple, really. All I had to do was get naked and rule my subjects from the throne. Then the girls would do a strip dance for the King - prancing and gyrating until one of them had impressed me enough to win my favor. She would then be crowned my Queen.

When the newly crowned Queen climbed into the throne next to me, the other two girls became our servants. They had to do everything we commanded them to do. Because, well - we were the King and Queen. They were mere servant girls.

I'm not sure why we were always naked, though. I asked both Isie and her older sister Harper why, but they said to just go along. I was a kid - so my opinion did not carry much weight. When my new sisters insisted that those were the rules, I just stripped off my pajamas and climbed into bed like I was supposed to.

Debbie was always a servant girl. I intentionally never chose her to be my Queen. Because, well... It was one thing to watch her dance around the room naked - but something else entirely to lie in bed with her like that. That would have been a little weird.

I don't remember if there was an object to the game. I just remember getting my first close experience with tits.

Harper was fifteen and Isie was fourteen. Both girls had developed nice firm breasts and I remember how they felt the first time I touched them. And how the nipple would get hard when I sucked it or twirled it between my fingers. They really liked that.

I was about seven then and just beginning to get erections. It was all new to me, I had no idea. But occasionally, my little wanker would get hard while we were playing that game. Harper sometimes caused it by squeezing it. Or when she ordered Isie to squeeze it and rub it up and down.

One time, the two sisters had a contest to see which one could make my wanker spurt. They rubbed it with their titties and even put it in their mouths. That was the best. Even though it never spurted, it still felt good. They took turns, working hard. While they played with my wanker, I was playing with their titties. And I absolutely love titties.

There were many variations of the game and we played them all.

Sometimes they liked me to kiss their furry paddoodle. Or stick my fingers in there and search for the prize. It must have been hidden deep because I never did find a prize. But they liked it anyway.

One particularly warm day, Dad announced that it was time for me and Debbie to learn how to swim. He marched us out to the pond, giving us valuable tips as we walked along the path. Then we climbed into the rowboat and Dad paddled us out to the middle of the pond. He finished up his lecture with detailed instructions on the importance of staying afloat and the usage of legs and arms to achieve propulsion through the water. He emphasized the futility of trying to breathe underwater because, well, it simply would not work.

Then, without further ado, he threw my sister into the pond. I didn't have much time to react, because the next thing I know, I was in the water beside her. I came up sputtering and crying like a baby. Flailing away with my arms, splashing like hell.

Dad was laughing so hard there were tears in his eyes. "Swim!" he yelled.

I was vaguely aware of my sister having the same trouble I was — but self-preservation kicked in and I began concentrating on keeping my nose above the water surface. Dad was right. Breathing water didn't work worth a damn.

After a while though, I learned to paddle the water like a dog and keep my nose up. Once I realized that I wasn't going to die, I even began to enjoy it. My sister had figured it out, too. We both had a good old time paddling around in that pond with Dad yelling his encouragement.

That's how we learned to swim. Some people may think Dad was a little rough on us, but his methods worked - we could swim. *What doesn't kill you, makes you stronger.*

A good example of that is the time Rex got into trouble with the chickens.

We had a bunch of chickens there in Woodward and Rex loved to chase them. He would dig under the chicken wire to get into their pen and then raise hell.

He would chase them around and around the chicken coop and occasionally, he even caught one. He got better with practice, until finally one day he went a little too far. He managed to kill six chickens and scattered their bloody feathers all over the place.

Dad was pissed.

He took one look at the dead chickens, then he spun around and headed off in a dead run toward the house. I thought he was going after his gun. *He's gonna kill him for sure!*

"Don't kill him, Dad!" I screamed. Tears streaming down my face. My arms wrapped around Rex protectively, "He didn't mean to do it!"

Dad didn't say a word as he stormed into the house. When he came back, he was carrying some wire, a roll of duct tape and a dog collar. *He left his gun inside. Thank you, Jesus!*

Dad called Rex over to him and the dog reluctantly slunk up to his side with his head down — as if he knew he had really fucked up. As soon as he was within reach, Dad grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and put on the collar.

I saw that the collar had wire strung through it and woven around it. Dad took one of the dead chickens and ran the wire through meat and around bones, to secure it.

I almost puked, but Dad just kept working and fastened the dead chicken to the dog's neck. He used copious amounts of wire and duct tape to do the job and when he finished, he stood back to survey his work. No amount of head shaking, pawing, scratching, or rolling in the dirt would dislodge the corpse from his neck. We stood there and watched as Rex tested that theory, rolling around in the dust, scratching like hell, with feathers and bloody bits of dead chicken meat flying everywhere.

Dad laughed at Rex as he turned to leave, "You think it's bad now... wait a week or two and see how you like it then!"

After a week, the smell got so bad that no one allowed Rex to approach anywhere near them. Even me. I was his best friend, and even I didn't want anything to do with him. The smell was putrid.

As time dragged on, Rex tried everything he could think of to get that damn chicken off his neck. Some nights, we could hear him howling out in the yard, proclaiming his misery. It was almost as if he was begging someone to take it off.

Rex got sick after the second week and wouldn't eat. He would just lay out behind the barn and moan occasionally. I honestly thought he was going to die. But he didn't - and finally, the chicken rotted off. It had taken almost a month.

One day Rex came trotting up to me with a big toothy grin on his face and his tail wagging to beat hell. I immediately saw the chicken was gone. When he approached, the stench almost gagged me. I had to give him a bath in tomato juice to kill the smell. It

worked pretty well - in fact, that is what we used the time he was sprayed by a skunk. But this time the smell was more persistent. Even after two baths, Rex still smelled like rotting meat.

I guess it was about two weeks later before Dad finally allowed him to come up to the house. But eventually he was accepted as part of the family again. One thing's for certain though, Rex had most assuredly lost all interest in chickens. He never even looked at a chicken after that, much less chased one. He was cured.

Not long after that, Debbie and I went back to live with G-mom again. Summer vacation was over. Soon I was back in Odessa again and going to second grade class at Alamo Elementary.

Debbie and I settled back into a normal life. Comfortable bed, plenty to eat, and nice clothes to wear. A good normal home. We were blessed with loving grandparents and we had a bunch of friends - both in school and the neighborhood around our house on Muskingum.

Davy and Jayce lived next door to us, and they were the same age as my sister and me. Davy, or Davena, was in the same grade as me. Her brother Jayce was a year younger. We played together every day after school and in the summer, we were inseparable. Perfect friends. Looking back on it now, it seems like we had a perfect life.

But our lives were about to change again.

Later that year, Dad left June. I do not know why. I remember their constant arguing, so maybe he finally had enough and left. Or it is possible that she kicked him out. I hope you will understand when I say I am a little short on details. I was living in another state. Besides, no one ever told me anything.

But a thought just occurred to me as I write this. June's oldest daughter, Harper, was incredibly good looking. Beautiful face draped in silky black hair, big firm breasts that she loved to show off and a perfect ass to complement her trim waist. When I think back to the games we played, I cannot help but wonder if she and her sister might have been sex addicts. It is not too far-fetched to imagine them coming on to Dad - wearing their flimsy see-through lingerie. If he had sampled either of them, or both... well, maybe he got caught. Anyway, that is still a mystery. All I can say is, he left Oklahoma in a big hurry.

Judy

He went down to Louisiana to roughneck on another rig. He stayed there for a while, I guess. While he was living there, he must have met another wife – because the next time I saw him he was moving her and their baby girl back to Odessa.

They moved into a house only one street away from us. In fact, their house was directly behind ours, across the alley. Close enough that I could walk over and visit them as often as I wanted.

Dad's new wife was named Judy. She was very friendly and went out of her way to make us feel welcome every time we came over. She was much younger than Dad and seemed to be a breath of fresh air. Dad could be fun at times, but he was usually serious. Or extremely tired. Judy was constantly laughing. Singing. Full of life and fun to be around.

I remember her jade green eyes sparkling when she laughed. She was very pretty, even so soon after having her baby. She was thin, too. And energetic. Dad was around thirty years old then and she was eight years younger. She was young enough that she felt more like an older sister than our Mother. My sister and I were both convinced - we thought she was cool. Debbie and I went to visit quite a bit. Almost every day. And we always had a fun time.

After a few months, Dad moved his family across town. Up to that point, everything had been wonderful whenever my sister and I visited. So, we did not hesitate when Dad asked us to come live with them. I was happy to be around Dad again and his new wife was a bonus. Like icing on the cake.

But things changed after we moved in with them. Judy, who had been so friendly before, suddenly changed personalities. Her moods seemed to fluctuate without logical reason or cause. Some days she would be sweet and other days she could not tolerate us at all. Her moods got so bad that we learned to avoid her as much as possible.

We also learned that she was a great actress. She would always be pleasant to us when other people were present. The perfect mother personified. But when she had no witnesses, she became a total snarling bitch. We did our best to stay off her radar. We could only hope that soon she would revert to the sweet lady we had first met.

Like everyone else in America, I remember the day John F. Kennedy died. I was in my third-grade class when the teacher came into the room and announced that they were

canceling school for the rest of the day because a great man had died. She was crying. I remember thinking at the time that she must have known him.

All three TV networks were covering the story and I remember watching the funeral procession. I was too young to realize the significance of the event, or even be sad about it. I just remember sitting cross-legged in front of the television, watching. People were lined up on both sides of the street as the procession passed. First in line were a bunch of drummers marching, keeping cadence. A team of white horses pulling a wagon were following close behind. On the wagon was a flag-draped coffin and there was a riderless black horse being led along behind the wagon. What was strange, is there were black boots in the saddle stirrups. Facing backwards. That struck me as odd back then.

Not long after that, Dad moved us up to Santa Fe, New Mexico. He was training to be the assistant manager at Furr's cafeteria. He worked long hours at the cafeteria, which meant that we were stuck alone at home with Judy. Alternatively, from her perspective — I guess she was stuck with us.

Judy grew more and more intolerant of us as time dragged on. Whenever Dad was around, she would be a shining example of the perfect loving mother. I can remember her kissing Dad goodbye at the door, with her loving arms around the shoulders of us kids. We would all watch him walk down the sidewalk and get into the car. Then, watch him from the doorway as he pulled away from the curb. She would be smiling and waving like Mrs. Cleaver on that *'Leave It to Beaver'* TV show. Then, as soon as his car disappeared around the corner, she suddenly morphed into the nasty bitch that we had learned to dread.

Nasty Judy would be with us every morning until we scrambled out the door to get to school. Away from her. Then she would be there that afternoon when we got back. She would only turn into Nice Judy when Dad got home from work, or if someone came to visit.

Judy did not allow us to come into the house after school. She told us to stay outside until it was time for Dad to get home. Nevertheless, we had better be in the house when he walked in, or we would have hell to pay the next day. That was the thing with her —we knew that no matter what, she would bust our asses if Dad ever caught on to what she was doing. So, we made sure he didn't find out.

I was still in the third grade at the time. Debbie was two grades ahead of me. We were both very skinny kids and way too small to stand up to her. The few times we tried to tell Dad what was happening, he refused to listen.

We were screwed. We realized it was hopeless. Judy was a good actress. She was always the perfect mother when witnesses were present. Left with no resources or leverage, we could only do our best to make Judy look good. It was in our best interest to keep her from getting caught.

That sounds stupid now, I know. At the time, it seemed to make sense.

There was a small tool shed in the backyard where we waited every day for Dad to come home. I remember sitting there for hours, huddling with Debbie and shivering our asses off. We had on our school clothes and jackets, but they were no match for the snow and wind. The one thing I will always remember about Santa Fe is the damn cold.

When it was almost time for Dad to be arriving home, Judy would call us in. She always made sure to get us into the house with enough time for our hands to thaw out, because she didn't want Dad to notice that we had just come inside.

We had a little poodle puppy named Frenchie and we were in the process of trying to paper train him. He was stupid - being a puppy and all - and didn't catch on. Naturally, it was my job to clean up after him. One day, I came home from school and Judy met me at the door with a black look on her face.

"Get your ass in here!" she spit out.

"Wassa matter?" I whimpered. I knew an imminent ass whipping when I saw one.

"Go clean up the fuckin' dog shit in my closet!"

I grabbed some paper towels and hurried into her bedroom. Sure enough, Frenchie had taken a dump in her closet. Not only that, but he had scored a direct hit on one of her shoes.

She stood over me as I wiped the poop off her shoe. When I was done, she inspected it.

One side of her shoe had some poop still visible. It was a lot cleaner than it was, but still... As soon as I saw it, I knew I was screwed.

"You call that clean?" she snarled.

“I’m sorry, Mother!” (She insisted that we call her that.)

“You’re fucking useless!” she screamed.

She grabbed the shitty shoe and smeared my nose in the poop. Then she slapped my ear with it and threw it across the room.

I ran over and picked it up off the floor. Wiping furiously.

“I’ll get it clean, Mother,” I screamed, “Don’t hit me!!!”

“Bullshit! Lick it off.”

I saw with disbelief that she was dead serious. She wanted me to lick it clean.

Have you ever hesitated while you tried to process your thoughts... like when you have just encountered something just too strange to be true? Well, it happened to me.

I hesitated just a second too long and earned a belt across my back. And then another. Before she could take another swing, I began fervently licking the shoe.

When I had it spotless, she inspected it again. This time, it was clean enough I guess, because she threw it in the closet and sent me to my room.

I was hiding in there when I heard Debbie screeching in the kitchen. I ran in to see why she was screaming and saw Judy whipping the backs of her hands with a wire clothes hanger. Judy did not like the way Debbie had washed the dishes.

Every time Judy whipped her hands, Debbie would yank them back in agony. That just pissed Judy off even worse.

“Get your fuckin’ hands back on that counter!” she screamed, “Every time you move, I’m gonna wack you again!”

I stood there watching and crying as Debbie took the beating. She flinched at every blow and her knees almost buckled a few times, but she didn’t move her hands off the countertop.

Finally, Judy stopped.

“Now run some more water and wash them again!” she hissed, “You’re gonna wash them until I say they’re clean. We can do this shit all day.”

Debbie's hands were cut and bleeding from the hanger-whipping and she screamed when her hands touched the hot, soapy water — but somehow, she did it. She finished the dishes and got them all sparkling clean.

Judy also made sure that Debbie wore white gloves to school every day. I wasn't smart enough back then to realize why — but now I know that it was to cover the cuts and bruises on her hands. Judy was smart like that.

We didn't have a chance.

By now, the beatings had become a daily affair. Dad's belts, rolled up newspapers, clothes hangers, and shoes were her favorite implements. Strangely enough, she seldom used her bare hands. It probably hurt her too much.

Then one day the school nurse summoned my sister to her office. The P.E. teacher had noticed some suspicious bruises on her back and notified the nurse. Now, the nurse wanted to know how she got them.

Later that day, the Principal called me to his office and I saw that Debbie and the nurse were already there. The nurse had me lift my shirt and she examined my back while the Principal started asking me about our life at home.

We lied and said nothing was wrong at home. If we told the truth and laid it all out for them, we knew that Judy would somehow convince everyone we were lying. Then we would have to pay the consequences later when she had us alone.

Besides, we already had a plan.

We were going to run away and go back home to Odessa. We talked about it in depth for weeks before we found enough courage to actually do it. But finally, one bright sunny day, we decided that now was the time - and we started walking.

We had no detailed plan of action. Our goal was to get to Odessa, Texas. Any way we could.

We walked and walked in the general direction of the highway we needed. When we came upon a railroad crossing, we discussed jumping a train like the hobos do. Debbie wasn't too keen on that idea, but I thought it would work. We waited a long time there by the tracks, but a train never came by.

Our next idea had more merit. We planned to hitch a ride with one of the cars passing by. Even at eight years of age, I guess I had already learned how to manipulate people — because the plan I came up with was pure genius.

“When a car stops, Sis, we’ll just say we got left by our school bus,” I explained.

“Why will a car stop for us?” she asked.

“Cuz we’re kids,” I said. “They’ll stop.”

“Then what?”

“We tell ‘em that we got separated from our group and somehow they ran off and left us.”

“Yeah!” She exclaimed. “A school trip... like when we went to the zoo!”

She was beginning to like the idea.

“Right,” I added, “Only, our school is back in Odessa.”

“Somebody will pick us up for sure!” she grinned.

Now with a solid plan of action, I stood on the side of the road with my thumb out, trying to look pathetic. I guess I did a decent job of it, because I didn’t have to stand there long.

A car pulled over almost immediately and the driver got out to see what we were doing. He was a nice enough old guy, and I could sense that his wife felt sorry for us. Her mothering instincts were kicking in. As I explained how our school bus had left us stranded, she kept cooing, “Oh, you poor things!”

“Ya’ll were on a school trip?” asked the old guy.

“Yessir. And all we wanna do is get home,” I sniveled a little for good measure and Debbie broke down and started bawling.

“Oh, Harold!” the nice old lady said as she was hugging me, “Get them into the car!”

Harold didn’t seem like he was totally convinced, but he dutifully complied with her orders. Soon, we were rolling down the highway.

Harold was driving and I could see him continuously looking at us in the back seat. His eyes were watching the road, but every few seconds he would look back at me or my sister. In the meantime, the old lady turned around in her seat and engaged us in

conversation. She wanted to know our names, our ages, where we went to school, I mean it was like she was writing a book.

Harold pulled into a dusty truck stop in Clines Corners, New Mexico. The car squeaked to a stop in front of the truck stop diner and he asked, "You kids hungry?"

"Yessir," we said in unison.

For the next half-hour, we ate our hamburgers and fries while the lady continued with her quest for knowledge. Debbie and I expounded and embellished on our story between mouthfuls, until we had even convinced ourselves that we were the victims of a huge mix up. And all we had to do to fix it was get ourselves back to Odessa.

It was a believable story.

We finished up our meal and went back out to their car. Harold was about to pull out onto the highway again, when he noticed a Greyhound bus that was parked on the shoulder of the road. They had blown a tire and were trying to get it fixed. Behind the bus, a police car was sitting there with his roof lights flashing and the officer was directing traffic around the bus.

Harold immediately stopped the car and walked over to the officer. I knew we were done. He was spilling the beans.

Sure enough, the officer came over to the car and asked us to come with him. The old couple drove off as the officer led us over to the police car. I was pissed. *Fuckin assholes! They could have just let us go!*

The police officer put us in the back seat and then went back to directing traffic around the bus. My sister and I knew we were in deep shit. There we were, locked inside a police car, about to go to jail and scared shit-less.

We tried to make light of the situation by singing a song we had heard — 'Runaways,' I think it was called.

"They're runaways!" we sang, "Run, run, run, run, runaways!"

I don't remember anything else of the song, just that little bit. But it was enough to cheer us up. We sat there laughing and joking for a good while.

Then Dad pulled up behind the police car.

He didn't say much on the sixty-mile drive back to Santa Fe. We didn't either. We both sat in the back seat and tried to disappear. When we pulled into the driveway, Dad finally spoke.

"Ya'll go to your rooms and wait for me. I'll be there in a minute."

I sat on my bed for an eternity, waiting for the ass whipping I knew was coming. Dad had given me whippings with his belt before and I was dreading it. The waiting was almost as bad as the actual whipping.

Finally, I heard some weird noises coming from Debbie's room. She was screaming, which I kind of expected. But the screaming was punctuated by strange thumping noises which I couldn't figure out.

When Dad finally came into my room, he didn't say a word. He just walked over to me, picked me up off the bed and slung me across the room. I hit the far wall just to the left of the light switch and crumpled in a heap on the floor. I was too shocked to cry or speak.

He didn't speak either. He just walked over, grabbed me by the leg and threw me across the room against the other wall.

This time, I found my voice. As I slid down the wall, I began screeching and begging for mercy. But Dad didn't hear me. He just threw me against the far wall again. After the fifth or sixth time, I lost count. Then after awhile, I stopped screaming. Just thump into the wall... slide down... then the dull realization that he was coming for me again.

Every time I hit the wall, I remember feeling the impact, but it didn't hurt anymore. It was kind of like watching the scene as it happened to someone else. *Oh...that poor kid! Holy shit look at that... he almost broke his neck on that one!*

Finally, Dad stopped. He gazed silently at me lying motionless on the floor. As he turned to leave, he muttered, "You'll never forget this day as long as you live."

Once again, Dad was right.

The next morning, Judy told us we didn't have to go to school. Debbie and I took the whole week off, recuperating. Nursing our sore bodies and limping around. Both of us were in bad shape, but nothing was broken. As we healed, our determination to escape grew stronger. By the next weekend, we felt we were healthy enough.

And we ran away again.

The first time we had managed to travel sixty-six miles — all the way to the truck stop restaurant in Clines Corners, before the old couple turned us in to the cop. This time though, we didn't get nearly that far.

It was snowing when we left the house and bitterly cold. We walked for a few miles trying to make it to the highway before we froze to death. We figured we could thumb a ride like before if we could just tough it out long enough to get a ride.

Finally, we made it to the highway. I spotted a culvert and pointed it out to my sister. We both knew we needed to get out of the bitter wind. Our light jackets were not nearly warm enough.

The culvert helped block the wind and we cuddled together trying to keep warm, but it was no use. After awhile, we knew that we were in very real danger of freezing to death. We decided that there was no other option. We had to call Dad.

We gathered our courage and walked out of the culvert and limped up to the highway. There was a motel about a hundred yards away, brightly lit with floodlights. The snow was coming down in earnest now and a fuzzy halo surrounded each light, but they still did their job.

We walked out of the dark and into the cocoon of light. Then, I took a deep breath and went inside to borrow their phone.

For some reason, I was the one nominated to call. Looking back on it, I wonder why my sister did not do it. She *was* older, after all. But I made the call.

I dialed our home number and when Judy answered, I kept the message short and simple. I just told her where we were and asked her if she would send Dad to come get us.

After walking almost five miles in freezing snow and bitter wind we were exhausted, wet, and frozen to the core. We were at once filled with relief... and trepidation — if that's even possible. *Dad is on the way.*

Back then, Dad drove a 1957 Chevy Bel Air. I remember the distinctive tailfins and the vivid yellow paint job. I also remember that the car had the distinctive odor of meat. Probably because Dad was a butcher at Furr's cafeteria for so long, while he was training to be Manager. Anyway, when Dad's car pulled into the motel parking lot, we saw it right away.

As the car pulled in and parked, I could see that Dad wasn't driving. It was Judy.

She informed us that Dad had left us. He probably wasn't coming back. He had become terribly angry when we ran away from home again, and he packed his things in a suitcase and left.

During the ride home, I tried to digest that information. *We're stuck with her forever.*

The next morning was a Monday, but we didn't go to school. Judy was being super nice to us and told us that we could stay home and watch television or do whatever we wanted. She was staying in her room. In bed. I saw her bloodshot eyes and puffy pink eyelids and I almost felt sorry for her. Almost.

Debbie and I were really freaked out by her being nice to us. It was almost as bad as being on the receiving end of one of her beatings, because we kept expecting her to revert to normal. Towards the end of the day, we realized Dad wasn't coming back. *He's really gone. And he left us with HER.*

We gave up. No hope. Debbie and I sat on the couch holding each other and sobbing.

Then, suddenly G-mom and Papa magically burst through the front door we were rescued. Relief. Instant relief. That is the only way I can describe the moment I saw them.

It did not take us long to pack our things in Papa's car. In short order we were on our way back home to Odessa.

It was a long drive back to Texas. Debbie and I talked non-stop and told them about all the terrible things that Judy had done to us and how Dad didn't believe us when we told him about her. We told them about having to wait outside in the cold shed for Dad to get home and how we had finally just run away. We told them about almost becoming hoboes on a train and hitch-hiking with the old couple and how we almost froze to death in a culvert. Chatterboxes. That's what G-mom used to call us.

She listened attentively, only interrupting once to say, "Why didn't you kids just find a phone and call me?"

To this day, I have never been able to answer that question.

G-Mom

My sister and I had no trouble adjusting to the good life. We each had our own room. Big comfortable bed and nice clothes to wear. I am positive that my grandmother was the world's best cook and she loved making huge meals for us.

The routine of going to school every day and getting dressed up in nice clothes for church became a welcome way of life.

Our grandmother was a fine religious woman. She tried her absolute best to teach us the difference between right and wrong. Not only just that. She not only taught us - she also showed us. Her life was an example to us every day.

She used to say, "If you cain't say something good, don't say anything at all."

I tested her on that theory once. I cornered her in the kitchen and asked her about the most worthless person I could think of - my biological mother.

"What about Theresa?" I said, "You gonna tell me something good about *her*?"

She pursed her lips, and her brow furrowed a bit. She took a long pause before answering and I was beginning to think I had actually stumped her.

"Oh honey!" she cooed, "Everybody has good in them. With some people you just gotta look a little harder."

"Ok," I countered, "So what's *good* about her?"

Her face lit up with an angelic smile and she said, "Well... the best thing she ever did was bring you kids into the world!"

"God has a plan," she continued, "and Theresa did her part. I just thank Him every day for that!"

Her answer floored me. Even though I did not fully agree with her on that assessment, I could see where she was coming from. Then she wrapped her arms around me. I could feel her love emanating and washing over me. I felt safe. Loved.

She turned me loose and stepped back. She was looking at me with her beautiful blue eyes and she added, "You know honey... you get into things sometimes and make mistakes, just like we all do. But there is still good in you."

She smiled and continued, "That's the way it is with everybody. Even people that *you* think are worthless. If you look hard enough, you can find the good in them."

As I turned towards my room, she added, "You're a real stinker sometimes. But I wouldn't trade you for a speckled pup!"

We went to church three times a week, twice on Sunday and every Wednesday night. Unless there was a revival. Then we went every night. If you have never been to a Pentecostal revival service, you really ought to go check it out. The sermons were never boring, I can vouch for that.

My grandmother encouraged us to do the best we could in school and even signed us up for the public library Bookmobile in the summer. It would come through the neighborhood twice a week and we could get all the books we wanted.

I loved to read. In fact, I had discovered an old set of Encyclopedia Britannica that G-mom had bought when Dad was a kid. There were twenty-six books filling the bookcase and I had read every one of them from cover to cover. She gave them to me years later because I was the only one that had ever used them.

I discovered fish when I was in the fourth grade. We had a show-and-tell day in class and some kid brought a fishbowl with tiny Guppies in it. They were beautiful. I was transfixed as I watched them glide around in the bowl. After class, I noticed that suddenly there was a bunch of baby fish in there with the first two. I pointed them out to my teacher, Mrs. Allgood.

She explained that Guppies were live bearers. They didn't lay eggs like you would expect from a fish. After school, she gave me four of the baby Guppies and I took them home in a coffee can.

G-mom took me to the Walgreens store when I showed her my new fish. She bought me a cool fishbowl to keep them in. We got everything else we needed to take care of them, too. We bought flake food, a light for the bowl, gravel, an air compressor, and a little diver that blew bubbles. Most importantly, she bought me a fish book so I could learn how to take care of them.

After a few months, the babies grew and grew. As they matured, I could tell that three of them were females and one was a beautiful male. Over the next few months, I watched as he courted the females constantly. Fabulous displays of flowing fins and shimmering dances to impress the ladies.

After six months, that fishbowl was full of Guppies. All they did was eat, chase each other around, and fuck. The bowl was now overcrowded.

I asked G-mom if I could buy another fishbowl and she said she would pick one up for me on her way home from work. I was pleasantly surprised that afternoon when she came home.

Two guys came in behind her, carrying a fifty-five-gallon aquarium instead of the fishbowl I was expecting. She had bought it from someone at work and it had everything you could possibly want in an aquarium - even a solid oak cabinet to set it on.

I was in heaven for the next few days, getting everything set up and running. When I finally put the Guppies into the tank, I sat back in content and watched them check out their new home.

From then on, I was hooked. My love of fish grew each day, complimented by my love of reading. I read everything there was to know about Guppies. Then I began reading about all the various kinds of fish and started buying some of them at the pet store. Soon, I was a bona fide fish expert.

The fifth grade at Alamo was uneventful, except that we started getting more and more homework. I hated homework. I guess I was lazy because I very seldom took anything home with me from school. My grades suffered, of course, but I was never in danger of failing the grade. I always did just well enough to pass.

That all changed in the sixth grade. My teacher pulled me off to the side on the first day of class. Her name was Mrs. Pulte and she had been my sister's teacher a few years before. Mrs. Pulte told me that if I was anything like my sister, then I was going to be an excellent student. *Boy is she in for a shock!*

After a month or so of my being tardy to class, incomplete homework assignments, and general shitty attitude — she surprised me one day after school by showing up at my house. Evidently, she was not the type to give up easily. She had decided I was going to be a good student and BY GOD... she was there to make it happen.

She and G-mom had a heart-to-heart talk about how gifted I was and how I was simply wasting my God-given brilliance by being lazy. This was all news to me. I had not realized how damn smart I really was.

As I sat there listening to everything they said, I suddenly wanted to impress them both. It was like a light went off in my head, or something. I wanted to show them that they were right.

After that, I was a changed student. I participated in class discussions. My assignments were always on time and I did my best to score 100% on every test I took. I discovered that I loved taking tests. It was an opportunity for me to show my brilliance, so I embraced the challenge and excelled.

By the end of the school year, I had become Mrs. Pulte's favorite student — just as she had predicted that first day of class. In return, she had become my favorite teacher.

When I started seventh grade at Bowie Jr. High School, they gave me a placement test and discovered that I was reading and writing at college level. *G-mom, that bookmobile really paid off, didn't it!*

We had been going to church at Hiway Temple Assembly of God for as long as I could remember. I had friends there and really enjoyed going. But it was about this time that Debbie started going to another church that she liked better. She began pressing me to check the new church out, claiming that there were many more kids at this church than there were at the old one. I finally relented and went with her on a Sunday night. This was my first visit to First Assembly of God, and I saw she was right. The place was full of kids my age. I was thirteen years old and such things were important to me.

By the end of the night, I had decided to change churches. Everyone was very friendly and I felt welcome. However, a bigger factor in my decision was an angel with red hair that melted my heart when she smiled at me. Her name was Sandy Jones and I instantly fell head-over-heels in love with her. Sandy was like no one I had ever met before. She was beautiful but not conceited, very smart but not nerdy, and feminine without being helpless.

After the school year ended, G-mom announced we were moving into a new house over on Kenwood. My Aunt Jeanene had previously owned the house, but since they were moving into a house in the Country Club Estates, we were going to take up residence in their old house.

Junction

Shortly after we moved, Dad came back from Santa Fe with another new wife, and they moved their family into our old house on Muskingum.

Dad had met Consuelo, or Connie, while he was working at Furr's in Santa Fe. I guess he and Judy had split up after he found out what she was doing to us kids - and sometime after that - he and Connie had hooked up.

Having Dad in the same town again was great. I loved that I was able to spend time with them and I began hanging out there as much as I could. Dad and Connie had brought back a new baby brother named Alan. Along with two stepbrothers - David and Ralph - they made up a little family with which I was soon bonding.

There I was, living in the perfect home with loving grandparents that would do anything for me, attending a church filled with kids my age, a beautiful girl that I adored and close enough to Dad that I could visit every day if I wanted to. I had it all.

Then, Life thru me a curve ball. One of those forked-road kind of decisions where you have two options and no way of knowing which fork to take. Dad told me that they were moving to Junction for his new job.

He said the town was a lot smaller, and quieter. Where Odessa had close to ninety thousand people living there, Junction had maybe two thousand. Interstate 10 went right by the town, which is why Dad was moving there. To build new bridges on the interstate.

They would be moving in a week. Just as I was absorbing this new development, Dad asked me if I wanted to go with them. He said I belonged with him. He was my father, after all. Nevertheless, he told me, the decision was mine.

I thought about it all the next week. As the deadline approached, I began to agonize over my decision. I loved my Dad. He was my hero. However, I loved G-mom and Papa, too. This decision was way over my head. I seesawed back and forth, struggling with it. Writing a pros and cons list and studying it. Making a decision and then reversing it five minutes later.

Finally, the deadline arrived. I still had not made up my mind. It was an impossible decision. I was not qualified to be making decisions like that.

Finally, the thought entered my head that if I did not go with Dad, I would always regret it. So, I steeled myself for what was to come and marched into the kitchen where G-mom was getting dinner ready.

I motioned towards the table and said, "G-mom, could you sit down a sec? I need to tell you something."

She wiped her hands on her apron and sat down – gazing over towards the stove at her pot of boiling beans. As she sat there distracted, it suddenly occurred to me that it was not too late. I could just say, “Oh, never mind,” and then ask what was for dinner. *You are such a pussy! Tell her!*

So, reluctantly, I took a deep breath and started talking.

I can tell you the instant her heart broke. I saw it. One minute she was sitting there listening with a little half-smile on her face, distractedly keeping an eye on dinner. Then suddenly - my words hit home. And she realized what I was saying.

Her eyes brimmed over with tears and she reached across the table to hold my hand. As she had told me so many times before, she said I belonged with my father. And she would always love me no matter where I went.

Then she pulled me over to her and hugged me for a really long time.

There was another person I had to say goodbye to. Debbie was not leaving G-mom. After what had happened to us with Judy, there was no way she was ever leaving G-mom again. This time I was on my own.

This would be the first time I had ever lived away from my sister.

As soon as we had all settled into the car for the long ride to Junction, Dad told me that my sister and I had been using G-mom as a crutch for a long time and had always run back to her when things got a little tough.

“That’s gonna change,” he said, “you’re not going back to your grand mommy again.”

As soon as he uttered those words, I regretted my decision to leave with him. But it was too late. We were already heading out of Odessa. I vividly remember watching as the radio tower atop the First National Bank faded into the horizon.

Once we arrived in Junction, I surveyed our new house. We were living in a low-income housing project and all the houses were identical. It was a duplex, not a house. Two houses sharing the same roof. And as far as the eye could see, were identical houses with identical dusty front yards.

All of the neighbors were Mexican and since I didn’t speak Spanish, we didn’t have a whole lot to talk about. I just kept to myself.

I enrolled in the eighth grade and began classes. The school there in Junction was an ancient two-story brownstone monstrosity. The classrooms were always stifling hot - which the teachers tried to alleviate by opening the windows. Each classroom had a row of windows tilted out, letting fresh air in along with the occasional bird or flying bug. That always provided a few minutes of excitement as the teacher tried to get the critter out of her classroom. There were ceiling fans in each room, slowly turning. Not really doing anything.

The old school had about one hundred students in the entire student body. I felt like I had stepped back in time. In Odessa, the schools were much bigger. Bowie Junior High School had about two thousand kids there when I was in the seventh grade. Now, here in the eighth grade I felt like I had slipped through a time warp. This is what it must have been like when my dad was in school.

I didn't get along with the other kids in school. To them, I was a big-city pansy and not worthy of their attention. The school bullies, however, always seemed to find time to include me in their daily schedule. Every day they harassed me. Sometimes pushing me down, other times they would knock my books out of my hands. On good days, they would just make fun of the way I dressed. But a day never went by that they didn't find time for me.

I was absolutely miserable.

After only a few weeks, I told Dad I wanted to go back to Odessa. I pleaded with him, trying to make him understand. But he flatly refused. I was here to stay. I continued asking him every few weeks, until it began to infuriate him.

I had been in Junction for three months now. One Saturday afternoon I asked Dad if I could just maybe go home to visit for a weekend or something and he blew up at me.

"There you go again!" he seethed, "Running back to G-mom when things don't go your way!"

"Please Dad, I don't like it here," I whimpered.

"Fine!" he waved his hand at me in a dismissing gesture. "You wanna go back to Grand mommy? Fine! But you're gonna wait until the end of the school year. You hear me?"

With that, he stormed out of the kitchen. But I didn't care! I could not believe my luck. I was going home!

The next months flew by with me dreaming of Odessa while dealing with the rednecks in school. I was still miserable, but now I had something to hold onto. The end of the school year finally arrived and I graduated the eighth grade. True to his word, Dad let me go home to Odessa. One of the guys on his crew lived in Odessa and Dad made arrangements for me to get a ride with him.

The day we left Junction was the happiest day of my life up to that point.

Kenwood

As soon as I returned home from Junction, I began calling Sandy daily. She had never been far from my thoughts the entire time I was gone. Within a brief time, Sandy and I were “going steady.” She was everything to me. My entire world revolved around her smile. We went to different schools, so the only time we saw each other was at church functions. Before long, it seemed like I was at church every time the Pastor opened the doors.

I settled into life on Kenwood Avenue in no time. I met a kid that lived down the block from us and we became best friends. Glen Bailey’s hobby was building model rockets and shooting them off. It was spectacular. I was immediately enthralled and we began spending all our time that summer building bigger and better rockets.

One of the rocket kits we bought was called the “Scrambler.” This rocket’s design allowed us to place a raw egg in the payload — with the idea of launching and retrieving the payload after flight with the egg still intact. We built the rocket, launched it carrying a raw egg, and watched as the rocket climbed to two thousand feet. The two-stage rocket performed flawlessly.

I remember how anxious I felt watching as the parachute deployed and then floated our payload back to earth. We both sprinted over to the landing site and opened the payload compartment. We had done it. The egg was still intact.

The next logical step was to try it with a live astronaut. Glenn and I decided that a mouse would be just about the right size and weight, so we went to the pet store and bought three mice. We intended to put the astronauts thru rigorous flight training and then choose the best candidate.

Our centrifuge test proved the hardest on the astronauts, as only one of them actually survived the test. Our centrifuge consisted of securing the rocket payload to the spokes of my upside-down bicycle, then spinning the wheel as fast as I could. The test was supposed to simulate the rocket flight, so we limited the duration of the test to thirty seconds. With two of the mice, it turned out to be just a tad too long.

The third mouse survived, however and we prepared to launch our astronaut the next day. It was a big deal. We told all of our friends and family, so on the day of the launch there was quite a crowd observing our launch pad.

The rocket flight went off exactly as planned. Just like our earlier flight with the raw egg, the parachute popped at two thousand feet and floated gently back to earth. Our “mousetronaut,” as we called him, came thru with flying colors. As a reward for his bravery, we released him in the field to live out his mouse years in freedom. *Well Done!*

I was fourteen years old when I started my freshman year at Nimitz Junior High. I felt older than my years and began sneaking cigarettes whenever I had a chance. Of course, Sandy didn't approve. She was a good Christian girl. No smoking around her.

I was also flirting with other girls. A lot. My behavior was driving a wedge between us. Thinking back on it now, I guess I had placed Sandy on such a high pedestal that I revered her — almost to the point that I felt unworthy of her affections. The entire time we were together, we never kissed. Not once. We held hands and I put my arm around her — but I never mustered enough courage to actually kiss her.

Looking back on it now, that's one of my life's biggest regrets.

Nimitz was about a mile from our house on Kenwood. So, I walked to school every day, or rode my bicycle. The ninth grade was enjoyable for me because Nimitz was such a stark difference from the ancient school in Junction. The buildings were modern, with air-conditioning. I loved that part. Plus, there were almost a thousand students there. The lunchroom cafeteria was completely full during each of the three shifts.

Nimitz had three grades, ninth thru twelfth. Because Nimitz was a feeder school for Permian High School, there was quite a bit of student pride. We had a great football team, and everyone knew that someday our team would be playing for Permian.

Football is huge in West Texas. The fever starts early.

My sister got married about this time. She was dating him for almost a year before they got married. His name was Don Johnson and she met him at church. He joined the Army and they decided to get married before he shipped out. Debbie was sixteen. After he completed Basic Training, she moved to Alabama to be with him.

They lived in Alabama while he completed his training, then they all moved overseas to some base in Germany. I missed my sister, but life went on. She would call occasionally, so I got to say hello once or twice a month. Things were changing.

One day I rode my bicycle home from Nimitz at lunchtime. I had spent my lunch money on cigarettes and now I was hungry. I knew the house would be empty because G-mom

and Papa both worked. It was only a ten-minute ride if I hurried, so I figured I could get home, eat lunch and get back to school before the next class.

I hurriedly made myself some bologna sandwiches and opened up a can of Wolf's Brand chili. As it was heating up on the stove, I fired up a cigarette and stood in the kitchen smoking and stirring the pot of chili. A couple of times, I heard a noise outside that sounded like a car door slamming shut. Each time, I ran into G-mom's room to peek out of the windows – terrified that I would see her sitting in the driveway. But, the noise turned out to be nothing, so I went back into the kitchen to check on my chili.

I was only in the kitchen for a few minutes when I noticed a peculiar smell. At first, I assumed it was my cigarette smoke, so I stubbed it out in the empty chili can. But it did no good. The smell was still there. In fact, it became more noticeable when I stood up from the table. I walked over to the stove, thinking the chili was burning — but no, it was fine. As I turned to go sit back down, I saw an orange glow on the hallway wall that led into G-mom's room. The same room I had run into minutes before and peeked thru the windows.

Instantly, I knew what that flickering glow was. I ran into the hallway hoping I was wrong. Then I froze and gaped in total shock at a wall of fire.

The curtains ran the entire width of the room and they were blazing. I knew it was only a matter of seconds before the whole room would be on fire. Then the house would be a goner. Without further hesitation, I ran to the kitchen wall-phone.

G-mom had stuck emergency telephone numbers on the icebox, next to the phone. The 9-1-1 emergency dialing system had not yet been introduced to Texas. That would not happen until 1970 and this fire occurred in 1968. But, thanks to G-mom's foresight and placing the emergency numbers in a handy location, I was able to quickly dial the fire department.

I reported the fire, saying I was just walking by and there didn't seem to be anyone at home. They wanted to know my name, but I just screamed the address again and hung up. I jumped on my bicycle and pedaled as fast as I could, back to Nimitz. I could hear sirens screaming in the distance, as I arrived and went into class.

After school was out, I rode my bike home. Dreading what was about to happen. I decided to lie, say that I knew nothing about it and hope that none of the neighbors had seen me during my mad dash back to school.

As I pulled up on the sidewalk in front of the house, Papa was out in the front yard — going thru piles of charred clothes and furniture. Everything was soaking wet from the fire hose. I jumped off my bike and let it fall on its side.

“Papa!!!” I exclaimed, “What happened?”

“Well, I was hopin’ you could tell me.”

“Me?” I said with all the indignation I could muster.

“Why would I know anything about it?” I said, “I’ve been at school.”

That was my story. I didn’t waver one little bit and after a while, Papa seemed to believe me.

G-mom’s bedroom was a total loss. There was smoke damage to the kitchen, but luckily, it was minor. The fire trucks had arrived in time to save the house and for that, I was thankful.

The fire investigator poked around awhile and finally gave Papa his assessment of what had caused the fire. “It appears to me that the fire was caused by the sun. It focused through them windows there and lit the curtains.”

Then as an afterthought, he said, “Kinda like a magnifyin’ glass.”

Papa asked, “So it was accidental?”

“Yep. Just one of them things.”

I was relieved when Papa told me. The insurance covered the repairs and soon life was back to normal again. I have never told anyone what really happened - until now. Papa and G-mom had a lot more to worry about than me and I didn’t want to cause them any more problems than they already had.

Papa had been diagnosed with cancer and it was slowly consuming him. At the time, I didn’t understand how much pain he was in. I was too wrapped up in my own life, I suppose. I was just a stupid kid.

Papa managed to last ten years, fighting his cancer. Today I look back and realize he was one of the strongest men I have ever known. At the time, though, I was totally clueless.

I wish I had been a better kid for him. This is another of my life’s regrets.

Muskingum

The summer after I completed ninth grade at Nimitz, we moved back into our old house on Muskingum. I was now beginning the tenth grade at Odessa High School and I had become a real hooligan. I skipped school more than I went — spending my days down at the pool hall and hanging out with a pretty rough crowd. I had begun sneaking out almost every night, running around with my buddies. We would go to someone's house and smoke pot or ride around looking for girls.

Because of this, Papa decided to teach me a lesson. One night when I returned home, I couldn't get back in through my bedroom window. Papa had nailed it shut. In fact, he had nailed every window shut in every room. I know because I tried them all.

I finally had to knock on the side door and wake them up, in order to get back inside. I hated to do it, because it was three in the morning, but hell... it was freezing outside.

Not long after this, I convinced G-mom that I was old enough to live in Papa Thornton's old house. It was a just small shack, out behind G-mom's house. It had just one bedroom, a kitchen, bathroom and a living room — but I loved it. I felt like I was on my own, even though I still ate at the big house and stuff.

I didn't get to stay there long, though. My running around, skipping school and general bad attitude finally caught up with me. G-mom decided that I was out of control and called my dad to come get me.

He roused me out of bed one night with a flashlight in my eyes and told me to pack my shit. I was coming with him. That was it. No discussion. I was on my way to his new home in Cedar Park, TX.

They enrolled me in Leander High School there and I hated it. Leander was a small school, nothing like Nimitz. It reminded me of the school in Junction and that was it. I never really gave Leander a chance. I decided that I hated it before I even sat down in my first class.

I wanted to go back to Odessa so bad that I couldn't think of anything else. I began to plan my escape almost immediately.

I stayed until the next weekend. While Dad was gone to work, I packed a suitcase and hitched a ride to the bus stop in Leander. I only had enough money for a ticket to Eden, so I had to hitch-hike from there. But I eventually made it home to Odessa. I knew better than to go back to G-mom's house, though. I stayed with a friend at his uncle's house.

I tried to stay out of sight, but after only two days, the police caught me. I was standing at a pinball game in the local arcade when some guy walked up behind me and asked if I was Billy Hester. I soon discovered that he was a cop when he handcuffed me and led me to his unmarked police car.

He took me to the Ector County Jail and put me in a bare cell. I was terrified. I was fifteen and I had never been to jail before. I didn't know what to expect. I had seen movies, though. I worried myself, thinking they might put me in a cell with "Bubba." You know... that big, hairy biker dude in all the movies. He loves young boys.

But they didn't. I had a cell all to myself and I laid there on the stainless-steel cot and wondered how long I'd be there. When I woke up the next morning, I was still there. I was half hoping that it was all a bad dream.

Dad showed up that evening to get me. We loaded up in his truck and headed out of town. He wasn't saying much, and I knew what was coming. Sure enough, just as we got past the city limit sign, he pulled into a vacant lot.

"Go ahead and git out of the truck." He muttered. *Here we go...*

"Wassup, Dad?" I heard my shaky voice ask.

"Shuddup and assume the position!" He ordered.

I hadn't heard that phrase in a long time, but I knew all too well what he meant. I leaned over the hood of the truck and hugged it with my arms out wide and my ass sticking out.

He took off his belt and went to whipping me with it. I was determined that I wasn't going to cry. So, I just stood there hugging that hood. And took it. I flinched occasionally when he really connected with a good one — but I never whimpered.

That was a mistake.

Dad assumed he wasn't doing a good enough job of it, since I wasn't begging for mercy, so the whipping continued. For a long time.

Finally, he stopped. I stood up and saw with amazement that his shirt was on fire. His arm movements had somehow caused the book of matches in his shirt pocket to flare up and as he pounded the front of his shirt to extinguish the fire, I just stood there gaping. Once he had the fire out, he told me to get back in the truck.

"You're driving," he said. "I gotta get some sleep for work tomorrow."

“Where we goin,’ Dad?”

“Austin.” He stated. “Your school days are over.”

As he laid back and closed his eyes, he added, “You’re goin’ to work with me now.”

Working Man

I began working with Dad on the Interstate 35 upper-deck project. The company we worked for drilled holes for the foundations of bridges and buildings. The upper deck was basically a long bridge across downtown Austin. It ran directly over the existing interstate and once it was completed, it would help alleviate some of the traffic. This was early 1971 and Austin was growing fast.

I was a greenhorn laborer, or “worm” as Dad referred to me. My job was to keep dirt shoveled away from the holes that Dad drilled, change drill teeth on the auger when they wore out, change augers when he needed and anything else that came up.

The machine, or ‘rig,’ that Dad was running was a Hugh Williams LLDH 100T, mounted on an old Army issue ‘deuce and a half’ truck bed. The story was that the company had purchased the drill rig at a surplus auction from the government. Supposedly, a government bean counter had noticed records of a bunch of heavy equipment that had been shipped to Iceland back in the 1950’s, in order to build an Army base there. No records indicated what had happened to them after the base was built, so he began an inquiry. They soon discovered the equipment buried under snow and ice. The surplus auction was held to get rid of them.

The rig was painted army green and that’s probably how it got the name, “Sarge,” as we all called it. Dad was drilling seventy-two-inch diameter shafts thirty-five feet deep, and my job was to go down and clean them once the final depth was achieved.

Typically, Dad would lower me down on the winch line along with a five-gallon bucket and a small shovel. I would fill the bucket with loose dirt and wait nervously until the bucket was hoisted out of the hole, emptied, and then returned for another load.

Since I am severely claustrophobic, going down into those holes was a major achievement for me. I filled those buckets as fast as possible, trying to minimize the time I was down there.

No matter how I hurried, it still took a long while to clean the hole out to the satisfaction of the inspector - who would be coming down to look at it as soon as I completed cleaning it. If there was any loose material remaining, he would reject the hole and I’d have to go back down and clean it again. So, I made damn sure the hole was clean before I came up.

One day the crew was all sitting under a shade tree, eating lunch, when Glenn Hertzag came and sat down with us. He was part owner of the company and I have to admit I was impressed by such a big powerful man sitting with us on the grass.

He joined in with the conversation, laughing and joking like guys do. Making the rounds, talking a bit with each one. When I was the next person in line, he smiled at me for a second, then turned towards Dad.

“Hey Red,” he said, “I been hearin’ good things about your boy here.”

Dad was chewing a sandwich, so he didn’t reply. He just glanced over at me, then back to Glenn.

“I been watching him, too,” Glenn continued, “Ever time somebody needs something, he hits it at a dead run!”

Dad still sat silently chewing, so Glenn kept going.

“The inspector said Billy goes down there and does whatever it takes to get the hole spotless clean before asking him to check it. He said he doesn’t have to worry a bit about ya’ll.”

Finally, Dad spoke, “Yeah... he’s been doin’ pretty good, I guess.”

Glenn smiled and suddenly stood up. Brushing off his pants, he said, “I gotta run. But as soon as I get back to the office, how ‘bout I put your boy in for a raise?”

When I heard those words, my pride swelled. I was doing good. *The big boss said I was good at my job. Awesome.*

Dad shook his head slowly, “Nahhh... not yet,” he stated flatly, “I’ll let you know when he’s ready for a raise.”

Even though my raise was shot down by Dad, one good thing came of it - I was being noticed by the big boss. In fact, the next day, the foreman came over to the rig and told me I had to go get some papers signed and notarized.

“What papers?” I asked.

He handed me a form. “This,” he said, “Get em signed and notarized by Monday. We can’t get you on insurance until then.”

I studied the form and read Minor's Release in the big conspicuous heading. Basically, the form said I needed my parents to give me permission to work. And release the insurance company from liability if I got hurt. So, the next day, I took off work and got my Dad's wife to run me over to the Notary Public office.

Now, one thing I should point out. Connie - my stepmother - was much younger than Dad. She also appeared much younger than her actual years. She was in her twenties and very pretty. She was also very tiny. When I stood next to her, I towered over her. To the casual observer, she could be my age, even.

So, you might imagine the awkwardness we caused at the notary public.

Connie and I walked into the notary office together. Then we approached the desk, where a man was sitting in a big leather rocker.

"Can I help ya'll?" he asked.

I was about to become an adult, so I decided to handle my own affairs. I quickly interjected, "Howdy. I just need to get this form notarized, please."

I handed him the form, which I had already filled out. I just needed to sign it in front of the guy. That's what the paper said.

The notary studied the form, then handed it back to me.

"Sure! No problem," he said, "but I need you to bring one of your parents in. They gotta sign it, too."

I took the paper from him and without thinking, I heard myself saying, "Oh... ok."

And Connie echoed me, "Sure. No problem."

Then we both turned and walked out of the office. We got all the way to the car, when suddenly Connie said, "Hey! Wait a minute. I'm your parent!"

"Yeah! You're right!" I said, "What are we thinking?"

Then we both turned around and entered the notary office again. The notary looked up as we entered, questioning us with his expression.

"I *am* his step-mother," Connie said, "I can sign the papers for him."

The guy appeared a little dubious, so I quickly added, "For real, man. This is my Mom."

I have to give the guy credit, he never questioned us. I'm not sure he actually believed us, but he went ahead and notarized the form.

I was legal now. I could go forth and work.

We finally finished up work on the Upper Deck project. Then the company got another bridge project on Interstate 10. And it was just before this IH 10 bridge project began, that I finally got my raise. I was almost sixteen now and I was making \$2.50 an hour.

I was rich.

Dad and I were driving to Sonora, Texas every week for work. Typically, we would drive down Sunday night, or rather, early Monday morning. Arriving in Sonora about six in the morning, we would usually have a quick breakfast. Then go to work.

We would get us a motel room Monday after work. Then our routine seldom varied. Each day after work, Dad and I would eat supper at the little Mexican restaurant, then go back to our room and watch TV or read books. Dad and I both liked to read. It was a great way to pass the time. Plus, it was like a magic time warp that could transport you to far away lands, or back in the mists of time to medieval Europe, or the wild west and bloody gunfights. In short, reading was an escape. An adventure. And a pleasure.

One day, we woke up to a strange sight. Sonora was getting soaked with a torrential rain. This is pretty rare in west Texas, trust me. At any rate, we didn't work that day. Rained out.

It also happened to be my birthday. I was sixteen. *A grown damn man. Hell yeah!*

"Hey, Dad!"

He had already kicked back on his bed, cracking open his latest book.

"Yeah?" he said.

"Let's go do somethin,' it's my birthday," I told him.

Dad made a big scene about looking at his watch, then checking his newspaper, then finally said, "You sure? That's today?"

At first, I was irritated that Dad could forget such a momentous occasion as my birthday. Then I realized that he was pulling my leg. As usual.

"Oh Dad!"

He laughed and put his book down on the bed stand, "Whatcha have in mind?"

"Hell, I dunno... I just wanna do something!"

"Like what?" he asked.

"Hell, I dunno, let's go for a drive, maybe."

Dad thought about it for a minute, then said, "Ok get dressed. I'm takin you to Mexico."

And that's what we did.

Ciudad Acuña is a Mexican town, sharing the border with Del Rio. Dad stopped at a liquor store and bought us some beer and a fifth of Windsor Canadian whisky. For the road, he said.

It is not even a two-hour drive from Sonora, but by the time we got to Mexico, I was drunk already. In my defense, though, this was my first real drinking experience.

I had never been to Mexico before, but I had heard stories. Wild stories. Stories about young Mexican girls supporting their entire family by working at the whore house. Stories about old women doing the same thing. Stories about donkey shows. All kinds of stuff happened in Mexico.

Dad parked at the border and we took a taxi into the "red light district." He told the driver something in Spanish that I didn't understand. The driver peered at me in the back seat and laughed.

I didn't understand him. I guess it was obvious, because the driver made a circle with the fingers of one hand and inserted a finger from his other hand. Then he rapidly worked it in and out. Laughing hysterically.

The taxi dropped us off at a cantina and the driver made another snide remark as we walked inside. I didn't understand what he said, but I could tell it was sarcastic because of the way he was laughing.

It was very dimly lit inside the cantina and it took a few minutes for my eyes to adjust. Even then, I could barely see. We sat down at a table, and before we had time to look around or even order a drink, we were mobbed by a group of young girls. All five were dressed in skimpy lingerie and they were starving for attention.

One of them sat in Dad's lap and two of them began working on me. Each of them had one of my arms, pulling me like a game of tug-of-war. As they chattered non-stop in gibberish, I had no idea how I was supposed to act. So, I just sat there like a dumb ass.

One of the girls could speak English a little, so she became the focus of my attention. Next thing you know, all the other girls left. Just the one girl in Dad's lap and the other one in mine. We kept the bartender busy, bringing everyone drinks. And then I slowly became aware that Dad was gone.

I asked the girl in my lap, "Pardon me, young lady. Did you happen to notice where my father and your young friend got off to?"

But what actually came out of my mouth was, "Heyy... excooz emwha, wha hoppn to Papasito and yo leetl fien?"

As I mentioned earlier, I was pretty drunk by this point. But amazingly, she understood me. I guess she spoke Drunk.

Turns out they had gone upstairs. My lap girl took my hand and led me up to a room. She opened the door and motioned me to the bed. I sat on the edge of the bed and watched as she put on a show. A private dance. I heard of these before.

She slowly stripped off her clothing, piece by piece until she was gyrating around the bed totally naked. Then she came over to me and began removing my clothes. Piece by piece.

I'd like to tell you more details... but, about then I woke up.

Dad was shaking my shoulders. "Hey! Wake the hell up!" he said.

My head was pounding, and the floor was heaving like a rowboat. I climbed out of the bed and saw my lap girl sitting in the corner. Fully dressed. So now, I felt awkward since I was butt naked.

Dad got me dressed and soon we were in a taxi headed back to the border. I passed out as soon as we got into the truck, so I don't remember the ride back to Sonora at all. I remember Dad half carrying me into our motel room and depositing me on my bed. Then, the next thing I remember is waking up as Dad was fixing himself a drink of the whiskey he had bought earlier.

"Hey Dad! Lemme have a shot of that."

Dad studied me for a second, then shrugged and poured me a shot.

“Before you drink that, you gotta sign for it.”

Then he handed me his little notebook that he kept his daily logs in. I signed my name and handed it back.

I turned the drink up and downed it in one gulp. It burned a little going down and I almost gagged. But I recovered quickly.

Soon, I was asking for another.

Dad handed me the logbook, “You know what to do...”

So, I signed my name and downed another shot.

Then before long, I was wanting another. Then another.

By this time, it was already dark. I had not eaten since breakfast, so I decided to walk across the highway to a little corner store. They had chili dogs there.

When I came back into the room, I had a sack full of chili dogs and a half gallon of chocolate milk. I sat on the bed watching TV and eating my supper. Then I finished up and laid back on my bed. Closed my eyes.

Then suddenly I was staggering to the bathroom. Spewing my guts out. All over the floor, the dresser, the wall... everywhere. I kneeled in front of the toilet for the rest of the night. Every time I tried to get up and go back to bed, I would puke up some more.

The next morning found me still hugging the toilet, sound asleep. Dad informed me that we were rained out again. No work today. *Thank God.*

Because it was Friday, we were headed home to Austin. We loaded up in the truck and I blearily watched out the window as Dad drove past the truck stop, leaving Sonora behind.

“Hey... hand me that bottle, would ja?”

He was pointing to the glove box, so I opened it. Sure enough, there was the bottle of Windsor Canadian he had bought yesterday. It was almost empty now.

I handed it to him, and he steered with his elbow as he opened the bottle. He took a swig and then before I could react, he shoved the bottle under my nose.

“Here, take a swig!” he said.

As soon as the vapors hit my nostrils, my body revolted. Right there. Instantly, I was throwing up again. Then after I puked up everything inside me, I had dry heaves the whole time it took to clean the mess off the dash and seat.

That was my sixteenth birthday. I wish I could remember more of it.

I was making \$2.50 an hour, which was rather good money for a sixteen-year-old kid. I didn't have any bills, so I thought I was rich. My goal was to move out on my own as soon as I turned seventeen, which is the age Texas state law said I could legally leave. Dad and I had discussed this many times and he was well aware that I was simply "doing time" there until my birthday.

I boasted to him on numerous occasions that I would have no trouble supporting myself. In fact - I would probably have steak and potatoes every night for supper if I wanted to! Seems funny now, but I was damn sure positive at the time.

The days went by quickly, one after the other, until the big day finally arrived - my seventeenth birthday. As soon as I said goodbye to everyone, I packed up everything I owned in a backpack and headed for the highway.

Little House

Once I arrived in Odessa, I received a pleasant surprise. My sister was back!

Evidently, Debbie and Don had experienced some problems. Bad problems. There was no coming back from them. Of course, at the time I did not know all the details. All I knew was Debbie had left him over there in Germany and they were getting a divorce.

While I was concerned about the tough time she was going through - at the same time I was also thrilled to have my sister back. I had really missed her.

She moved into G-mom's house with my little niece, Kathryn. Because Kathryn was a toddler, Debbie had converted my old bedroom into a nursery. So, I moved into the old house that Papa Thornton used to live in.

Tucked in behind G-mom's house, the old house was in pretty bad shape. It was over forty years old, missing shingles on the siding and the roof. Faded paint flaking on the front steps. The floor creaked and groaned when you walked on it and sometimes the house made noises all on its own. I almost thought it was haunted at times, but it was probably just the foundation settling.

The small house wasn't much to brag about, even back when it was brand new. But I was proud of it. After all, it was my first place. I was living on my own! The living room sported a couch, a gas heater, a coffee table, and Papa Thornton's old leather rocker - which seemed to dominate the room.

I remember when I was a kid, watching him play his harmonica in that chair while his dog, Tiny, sang along with him. Papa Thornton had supported his brothers and sisters when he was a kid, by performing in vaudeville. As he belted out a tune, Tiny would really get into it, singing along with him. Tiny was grossly overweight because Papa Thornton constantly fed her chicken scraps from a coffee can that he kept next to his chair.

If I close my eyes and think about it, I can still hear that fat little dog wailing mournfully as Papa Thornton inhaled his harmonica and slapped his knee in time with her wails. That was years ago. Now, Papa Thornton was at the nursing home and Tiny... well, Tiny had become a faded memory, only occasionally surfacing as someone recalled her antics.

And I had become the new resident in his little house - out behind the big house where my grandparents lived.

I got a job at Furr's Pie Kitchen, so I had a little spending money, but I seemed to go thru it way too fast. I seemed to be perpetually broke. Anyone that knows me will tell you, I have never been particularly good at saving money.

It was great having my sister around! Because of all the prior shit we went thru together, we were close. We knew we could count on each other, come what may. Best friends.

Debbie had a beat-up Toyota Corona, which she had lovingly named 'Doobie.' And every chance we got, we cruised the main drag there in Odessa, looking for friends to hang out with, or a party to go to. Back then, just about everyone our age was cruising "The Drag" at night, especially on the weekend.

Sometimes we would go out to "The Loop" and cruise all the way around Odessa. Loop 338 - its official name - was fairly deserted back then. The businesses crowded alongside it now, would not be built until many years later. It was a desolate stretch. Perfect for cruising, smoking pot and listening to our eight-track music at full volume.

The first time I heard Pink Floyd's *'Dark Side of the Moon'* album, I was smoking pot in Doobie with my sister. She had pulled off the side of the road and killed the engine, so there was no other sound. Only the stereo. We sat there for a long time, listening to the genius of Pink Floyd and getting high.

Moonlight was streaming down thru the moon roof and we had the seats reclined all the way back. As I gazed at my sister illuminated in the silver moonlight - I was flooded with love for her. Total peace of mind. It might have been the pot... In fact, that was probably a big part of it. But I choose to think it was one of those special moments that are forever cherished in my memory.

One day, a friend came by the house to catch up. I had not seen him in a long time. Steve Clower and I had been buddies years ago, back when I was going to church at Hiway Temple.

Seeing him again was a pleasant surprise, and we spent the afternoon talking about things most young guys talk about. Mainly girls. And cars. He wanted to show off his new eight-track stereo that he had just installed in his truck. He had a new tape he wanted to show me, and he plugged it in.

We sat in his truck listening to the most amazing drum solo I had ever heard. *'In A Gadda Da Vida'* by a new rock band named Iron Butterfly. His new tape deck really sounded

good. He cranked the volume up until the windows were vibrating. The song stretched on and on. It was the longest song I had ever heard. And it was awesome.

When the song finished, Steve turned off the stereo. Then with a somber tone, he said, "Hey ... you oughta join the Marines with me."

"What?"

This is the first time anyone I knew was considering going into the military. I was seventeen, technically still a minor, so I had not even thought about the military yet. Joining up had never crossed my mind. *Hell, I haven't even registered for the draft yet.*

"Seriously? You're joining the Marines?" I asked.

"Yep. It's a done deal."

"When are you shippin' out?"

"Well, I dunno yet," he replied, "I still gotta do the tests and stuff."

"What tests?"

"You know... physical test. But I'm healthy, so no problem there."

He had one arm hanging out the window and the other grasping the steering wheel and he was doing that muscle thing he always did when he was around girls. He usually did it when his shirt was off – but even now, I could see his muscles rippling and bulging under the fabric.

He had played football in high school, so he had that 'jock' attitude and the mannerisms that were typical of that crowd. Always strutting, never just walking. Preening his hair constantly. Checking his reflection whenever he passed a mirror.

I had to admit, he was not going to have a problem passing a physical.

"You oughta come with me," he said.

"Yeah, right!" I thought he was kidding, but one look at his face told me he was dead serious.

"No! Really!" he said. Pulling his arm in from the window and pivoting in the seat, he was facing me fully. His eyes sparkling with intensity as he continued, "They have this thing called a Buddy Plan. We go thru boot camp together and get stationed together."

“I dunno,” I mumbled. Not convinced. Hadn’t even considered it until now. But he could see I was definitely thinking about it.

“C’mon! Just come with me and talk to the recruiter. You can do that much, can’t you?”

Suddenly, I felt the urge. I was thinking about how hard boot camp was going to be. I had heard stories and watched a few movies. I knew what I was getting into. And suddenly, the impulse hit me hard. This would be a test. The supreme test to see if I had what it takes to be a man. A Marine.

“Yeah. Let’s go talk to the recruiter,” I said.

Steve was grinning from ear to ear. He shoved his hand out, “Put her there, partner!”

I excitedly shook his hand, and almost instantly began to regret it. *What the hell am I doing?*

Steve talked non-stop all the way to the recruiter’s office. By the time we got there, he had me convinced we were going to be heroes. And the girls love shit like that.

Two days later, I told my sister that I was joining the Marines. She tried hard to talk me out of it. However, it was too late to change my mind. I had already signed up and we were leaving in less than a week.

She took it pretty hard. She had been looking forward to spending a lot of time with me, now that she had come back from Germany. She was finally home. And now, I was leaving.

MCRD San Diego

From the moment Steve and I stepped off the bus at Marine Corps Recruit Depot — MCRD San Diego — we knew we were in deep shit. Up to that moment, we had been given first-class treatment. The plane ride was awesome, with the stewardess giving us free drinks and chatting it up with us. Then when the plane landed, we were met by a Sergeant that couldn't have been any more pleasant. He led us to the military transport bus, and we took seats along with about twenty other recruits. However, when that bus creaked to a stop at MCRD, a Drill Instructor climbed aboard and began barking orders. As we scurried off that bus under a barrage of verbal abuse, we knew this was a whole different world.

I had seen a few movies where the hero suffered through Boot Camp, so I had an idea of what we were in for — but the moment we were ordered to stand on those yellow footprints painted on the sidewalk, it became all too real. Evidently, those footprints were painted there because maggots like us didn't have enough sense to know where to stand. The Drill Sergeant was happy to point that out to us.

The next thirteen weeks went by in a mind-numbing blur. Lots of yelling, cussing, and name calling by the Drill Instructors and an unbelievable amount of running and exercise. Every hour was filled with frenetic activity and every hour passed agonizingly slow. How could so much be done in an hour, yet feel as if three hours had passed? I learned quickly that it was best to ignore any clocks we passed in the hallway. It was better not knowing the time.

We were roused before dawn by the sound of a bugle blowing a scratchy 'Reveille' on the loudspeakers and we had to get dressed, make our racks, shave, shit, piss, and be standing at attention when the DI walked in. We did all of this in less than fifteen minutes, or we had hell to pay.

Then assemble in formation outside the barracks for Physical Training, or PT. Run in formation for a few miles before breakfast and then quickly inhale as much food as we could during the fifteen-minute chow break. Then we were running again to the next class, or to the Corpsman to get shots, or picking up our uniforms and gear. Then run in formation to chow again.

On and on — it never stopped. The days dragged on, never ending repetition blending into the next day. If the DI's noticed you, life became hard. Real quick. They had a knack

of persecuting the slow guys and the dumb ones, to the point where they would quit. I didn't want them to get their eyes focused on me, so I tried my best to keep a low profile.

Then, we began our Rifle training and went to the range. After many hours of classroom instruction and hours of practice on the rifle range, I became a rather good shot with my M-14 rifle. I knew I had blown my plan of laying low when the Drill Sergeant watched me shoot one day.

He stood there behind me, ramrod straight with his hands crossed behind his back and said, "Well, I'll be damned Hester! We finally found something you're good at."

After a week of training, the platoon commenced our Qualification Day. The three levels of marksmanship qualification — Marksman, Sharpshooter, and Expert — would be determined by our score on the range that day. That qualification would become a permanent part of our record, so we were all pretty nervous.

We had to fire twenty rounds from two hundred yards out, in the offhand position at silhouette targets that had rings radiating from the center. The X-ring – used to determine ties — was dead center inside the bull's eye. Next came the bull's eye, then the four-ring. Anywhere outside the four ring was 'off target' and no points were given for that shot.

Next, we had twenty rounds from the kneeling position, and then twenty more from the sitting position. Both of these from three hundred yards. The last stage was in the prone position from five hundred yards. We had another twenty rounds from there.

When I finished the course, I had qualified Expert at 232 points. It was the highest score in the platoon.

After the Rifle Range, the next phase of training was precision drill, classroom instruction and of course, more running. Ask any San Diego Marine what it was like running up 'Mount Motherfucker' and his reaction will give you some idea of what we went through. One big difference though, the DI's began treating us like actual humans. They addressed us by our name, instead of calling us 'Maggot,' or 'Shit-for-brains.' It was a welcome change.

Then, finally, it was over. Thirteen weeks of intensive training - physical and mental - had molded us into a finely tuned machine. If the Drill Sergeant ordered me to jump, I jumped. No hesitation.

When Graduation Day finally arrived, we were all thrilled to be going home for leave. Based on my performance qualification and aptitude tests, I was selected to become an Artillery Ballistic Meteorologist. But I wasn't thinking about that right now.

I was going home for leave. I made it. I was seventeen and I was a Marine. *OohRah!*

The next two weeks' vacation flew by in a blur and then it was time to report to Fort Sill for Advanced Infantry Training.

I was a little surprised to discover that Fort Sill was an Army base. As a Marine, I guess I had expected to be sent to school at a Marine Corps camp.

Fort Sill

The base was huge and covered with Army pukes. There were six other Marines in my class, so I wasn't totally alone. Like me, they were surprised at the lack of discipline in the regular Army pukes. It seemed that the Army didn't worry about their appearance or physical conditioning and to us, they all seemed like lazy slobs.

The classroom instruction was easy. I fell back into my routine from high school of just listening intently to the instructor, participating in discussions, and reading the material in class. I found that if I did all of this, I did not have to study after hours. I retained the information in my head.

I discovered my wild side while I was there at Fort Sill. This was 1973 and the legal age for drinking was twenty-one. Because I was only seventeen, I wasn't supposed to drink in the clubs off base. There were a few places that let me get away with it, though. Also, there was the Enlisted Men's club on base where I could drink all I wanted.

My eighteenth birthday rolled around while I was attending classes there and some of my buddies took me drinking at the EM club. We partied until closing time and then standing on the sidewalk outside, we decided that the party wasn't over yet. One of the guys said his grandmother lived there in Lawton so we all piled into a taxi.

When we arrived, he introduced us to his grandmother and then pointing at me, he said, "...and this is the birthday boy! He's eighteen today, Grandma."

"Happy Birthday!" she said.

"Thanks," I replied, "it feels good to finally be an adult."

"You guys go ahead and sit down," she said, "Make yourself at home."

Someone had brought a case of beer and a bottle of tequila. We were all pretty wasted, even before we went to Grandma's house, so it wasn't long before the guys began passing out. One by one, dropping like flies.

Until finally, it was just me and Grandma. She and I were getting along fine without the others, though. The old bird could really hold her liquor! She matched me, shot for shot.

"I gotta piss, Grandma," I said as I stood up, "Where's the head?"

"Down the hall and first door on the right."

“Thanks!” I replied and staggered into the hall.

I was standing there, leaning my forehead on the medicine cabinet, pouring a steady stream into the frothing toilet when Grandma suddenly reached around with both hands and grabbed me.

I was shocked but didn’t show it. Instantly, I realized what was happening and decided to just go with it. This trait of instantly grasping a situation was new to me then, but over the years, I found that it came naturally. It is really hard to surprise me or shock me.

At any rate, there I was — pissing into the toilet with Grandma holding on with both hands.

Now... she had to be in her late sixties, from the looks of her — but, she still had a surprisingly good body. She had taken good care of herself and it showed. She was thin, with a pleasant smile, and hey... she had a grip on my privates.

The next thing I know, we were in her bed going at it. I like to think I performed admirably, but the truth is, I don’t remember much.

The next morning found me lying entwined with Grandma in her bed. Because it was warm, we were lying on top of the sheets and we must have been a sight to see when my buddy walked into the room.

He saw me lying there with his grandmother and began screaming like a banshee.

“Oh, my Gawd!” he covered his eyes, backing out the door, “Grandma!?! What the fuck!?”

His high-pitched screeches continued as he ran out and slammed the door. The commotion continued until we heard the front door slam. Then car tires peeling out of the driveway.

I was wide awake now.

I looked over at Grandma and said, “That’s a hell of a way to wake up, huh!”

“Oh my God” she cried, “He’s never going to forgive me!”

“Aww hell, don’t worry about it. He’ll probably blame me.”

I was right. We still had about a month left in school — and he never spoke to me again. I hope he eventually worked it out with his grandmother, though. She was a nice lady.

Shortly after that, I discovered roller skating there in Lawton. This would become a major past-time for me later on in life, but right then, I was barely able to stand up on the damn things. I frequently went to the rink on my weekends off, though, because there were a lot of girls there. And I love girls.

It didn't take long before I became quite proficient on roller skates. I was soon skating backwards, balancing on the two rear wheels, doing splits, and even dancing on them.

The girls loved it.

Another favorite place to visit there, was a place called Dodo Park. It was a typical park, with lots of grass and picnic areas and it was also a favorite hangout for the local hippie crowd. They would congregate there, drinking wine, smoking pot, and playing 'hacky sack' or throwing a Frisbee around. I fit right in with them, even though my 'high and tight' haircut screamed Marine Corps.

One weekend, there was a festival going on at Dodo Park and there was a live band playing. I arrived late, because I had been partying at one of the local clubs that didn't card me at the door. I was already pretty wasted when I arrived. I remember the band was playing a really good imitation of Deep Purple, so I sat at one of the tables and listened. There were a bunch of people dancing and I enjoyed myself watching them and drinking the warm tap beer from the concession stand.

After a bit, an Indian girl — I should say Native American, I guess — came up to me and asked me to dance with her. She was a good dancer, and we spent the rest of the night getting even more drunk while we danced. Turns out, she was Apache. She had been born right there in Lawton, Oklahoma.

We hit it off pretty well, so when the floodlights came on and the band was packing up, I wasn't too surprised when she asked me to come home with her. It was a Saturday night, and I didn't have to be back at base until Monday morning, so I agreed that it sounded good to me.

I don't know how we got there, but the next thing I remember is walking thru the back door of her house. We stepped into a small kitchen that was made to seem even smaller because it was packed full of people. Wall to wall. Sitting at the table, standing around the room, some perched on counter tops.

My Indian maiden introduced me to her parents, grandparents, sisters, and brothers, and even a few uncles and aunts. I lost count. My head was spinning. It all seemed so surreal.

She said, "Wait here a sec, hon, I gotta get us some pillows."

She disappeared into the house and left me standing there in the kitchen.

They all stared at me staring at them.

I gave one of my patented 'Good Ole Boy' grins and casually waved at the room.

"How ya'll doin'?" I asked.

No one replied.

I don't know if they didn't like me, or if they didn't understand me. Or maybe they were pissed about me hooking up with their baby girl. Who knows?

Luckily, my Apache angel wasn't gone long. She came back into the kitchen, carrying a blanket and some pillows. Holding them aloft as she crowded her way thru, she announced, "We're gonna sleep in the front yard. Don't worry none about us!"

I followed her out the back door, pausing just long enough to grin sheepishly at her glaring mom and say, "Nice to meet ya'll!"

Then I escaped into the welcoming darkness of her backyard.

I followed her around the house and watched as she spread the blanket out on the grass. Soon we were lost in the throes of youthful passion. She was beautiful in the moonlight and I remember thinking how lucky I was to discover my nubile Pocahontas.

The lovemaking continued throughout the night. Eagerly discovering her body, experimenting with new ways of giving pleasure. Discovering how to make her moan in passion, then weep in relief as I gave her a fleeting moment of respite. I was working hard on every inch of her glistening body, taking her to throes of passion she had never dreamt possible.

Then we were both dead to the world. Passed smooth out in blissful peace.

The piercing rays of the morning sun woke me. Squinting against the glare and shielding my eyes with a raised palm - I took in my surroundings - struggling to make sense of it.

I was lying on a blanket in the front yard of a housing complex. Identical front yards, driveways, and houses stretched as far as I could see. The only thing that stood out as glaringly different, was that in this particular front yard, two naked bodies were sprawled out on a blanket in full view of the street and all of the neighboring houses.

It took a second or two for me to remember what the hell I was doing there, especially when I saw the monstrosity that had my arm pinned underneath her bulk.

My little Pocahontas, as it turned out, was grossly overweight. She would easily tip the scales at four hundred pounds. The sight of her nakedness brought visions of beached whales to mind. My scrawny body was insignificantly lost, lying next to hers.

I quickly — but, oh so carefully — extricated my arm.

Hopping around on one foot as I pulled on my pants, I noticed the neighbors were enjoying the show. An old white-haired guy, well over eighty years old, was strolling down the sidewalk - and as he passed us, he stopped for a moment to take in the view.

“Howdy!” I waved.

“Mornin’,” he replied.

“Which way’s the bus stop?” I asked.

He pointed the direction to freedom, as he informed me, “It’s about 6 blocks, or so...”

I was probably blushing beet red, embarrassed as hell, and that old guy probably had a good laugh with his buddies later. But, luckily, I was able to get the hell out of there before Pocahontas woke up.

That was my very first experience with ‘beer goggles.’ That is a slang term, for those of you that have never experienced it, which describes the condition you are in when you have become so intoxicated that you have lost the ability to discern reality from fantasy.

It was my first experience with it. As time would tell, however, it would not be my last.

Life went on and the days blurred together until I had finally completed the Advanced Infantry Training course. After three months of intensive study in Artillery Ballistic Meteorology, I graduated top of my class.

The Marine Corps rewarded me for my achievement with a meritorious promotion to Private First Class and I received my Change of Duty Station orders. I was being shipped to the other side of the world - Camp Hague, in Okinawa, Japan.

Okinawa

The flight to Alaska was on a commercial jetliner, but I was switched to a military transport for the thirteen-hour flight across the Pacific. That old prop-driven airplane had me worried sick. I nervously watched the wings through my view port. Every time we hit turbulence, they flexed dramatically. I couldn't take my eyes off of them. It was like only my diligent attention was keeping them attached. That and my non-stop prayers.

I swear, I just KNEW the wings were going to fall off and we were going to plummet to our deaths in the sea far below. But, somehow, the old war horse held together.

When I arrived, I was assigned my rack in the barracks of the 12th Marines, 3rd Marine Division. The barracks were straight out of the Gomer Pyle TV show. Quonset huts left over from World War Two. There were thirty men living inside. No walls. No separate rooms. Just cubicles made from pushing wall lockers together. In this fashion, we each had a small private area we called home.

Inside my space, I had a bunk-bed rack, a table, and a huge wooden box to contain my new stereo system. The day after I arrived in Okinawa, I received a signing bonus of twelve hundred bucks for enlisting and I immediately bought myself a killer stereo and a Yashica 35mm SLR camera.

With the wall lockers surrounding my area, it was fairly cozy. Everyone kept to themselves, for the most part, other than a few that came over to welcome me to 'The Rock.'

I reported for duty and was assigned to the Survey building. It also contained the Artillery Ballistic Meteorology Section, although we never actually did anything. I swear, we never sent up one weather balloon the entire time I was there. We didn't do any Surveying, either. In fact, we didn't do much of anything at all. Just showed up for work every morning, went to chow, then went back to our barracks at the end of the day. Boredom was rampant.

Luckily, I was spared the continuing boredom when Temporary Duty, or TDY orders came in for me to report to Camp Hanson. Evidently, my qualification score in Boot Camp had caught the eye of someone in the upper echelon of command. They figured with a score like that, I should compete in the Far East Division Matches that were coming up. So, I was ordered to report to the Marksmanship School.

Far East Division Matches

I reported for duty at Camp Hanson and was escorted to a barracks. Inside, there was a long hallway with doors spaced evenly, like you'd see in a hotel. My escort said I was free to pick a room. Get settled in and report to class tomorrow at 0700 hours.

There were only seven other Marines in the barracks, so we each had a room to ourselves. After living in a Quonset hut at Camp Hague, this was a huge step up in comfort. I didn't have a clue why I had been given TDY orders, or what I would be doing there, but I was damn sure going to be comfortable.

The next morning, I began what would turn out to be three months of classroom instruction and hands-on practical experience at the weapon range. We typically spent the first four hours of the day in class, then after chow, we'd spend another four hours on the range.

In the classroom, we learned about all the factors that affected the trajectory of a round, or the ballistic properties. We learned about compensating for wind and how to determine the wind speed and direction at long distances through a spotting scope. We learned how our weapons were manufactured and how to make them more accurate. This section covered the history and evolution of firearms, so it was pretty interesting.

Every day, four hours of classroom instruction covered proper shooting techniques, ballistics, meteorology and how it affects the trajectory of a round. We even covered some of the sniper training. For instance, we learned about stealth tactics, camouflage and how to control our breathing.

When we were on the range, we would shoot a full course — meaning fire 20 rounds from every station. That meant offhand position from two hundred yards, kneeling and sitting from three hundred yards, and prone position from five hundred yards. That is eighty rounds per day.

My weapon was an M-14 Match Condition rifle, firing match grade 7.62 mm NATO rounds. We were shooting with an open sight, no scope — just the iron sights on the rifle. We did this every day, for three months. Then we took a few days off to relax before the competition began.

I was extremely nervous when I registered, the morning of the big day. The Far East Division Matches was open to all branches of the military and it appeared that quite a few of them did this for a living.

When Competition Day was over, I had performed as well as could be expected. I didn't come close to winning — but I placed pretty well for a newbie. Out of one hundred-twenty-seven rifle contestants, I placed thirteenth. Out of sixty-seven pistol participants, I placed twenty second. Both of those scores placed me in the “better than average” category of the Expert competitors. I was happy with the result.

The main thing I remember about Competition Day, is how the targets shimmered in the spotting scope from five hundred yards away. Shooting from the prone position, I fired my first round at the target and then leaned over slightly to check my shot placement thru the scope. I watched as my target dropped down and then popped up again a few seconds later with a marker placed in the bullet hole. The guys in the target pits were working fast, placing black markers on the white portion of a target and white markers inside the black portion.

My first shot had gone into the four-ring, just left of the silhouette.

I adjusted the windage knob one click to the right and fired. Again, I watched thru the spotting scope as my target was marked. The second round was just to the right of the silhouette, again in the four-ring.

So, I adjusted windage back a half-click and the next eighteen shots were all in the bullseye. Of those eighteen shots, thirteen of them were in the X-ring.

As soon as the competition was over, it was time to go back to my regular job at Camp Hague. The day after the competition, I packed my things, said good-bye to my buddies in the barracks and caught a ‘Kamikazi Taxi’ back home.

Off the Deep End

There still wasn't anything to do at work during the day. No meteorologist duties to perform and no survey duties either. We basically just sat around the office all day, reading books, or sweeping the floor. Since I was the lowest rank in the building, I did the sweeping and cleaning stuff.

I quickly became bored with the lifestyle and began venturing off-base into the nearby village. It was typical of military towns, in that it had a red-light district that catered to the service men looking for fun, romance, or a quick blow job.

There were areas that you could walk down the street and literally hundreds of young girls would proposition you, "Psssst GI! Wanna short time?"

They'd say, "Come on! Me love you long time!"

The going rate for a 'short time' was \$12.00 and 'long time' was \$30.00. The price also varied by which street you wandered down. The higher priced girls congregated in the outskirts of the town. As you went in further, the price dropped considerably.

This was all new to me and I enjoyed it like any eighteen-year-old kid would. I was halfway around the world from my folks and no one to answer to, other than the Marine Corps.

I heard that the local pharmacies were off-limits to military personnel — which made me want to visit one even worse. The first chance I got, I snuck into one and checked it out. There were bottles of pills, liquid, and all kinds of medicine on shelves surrounding the shop. Since the labels were all in Japanese, I didn't have a clue what they were, but the shop owner helped me out.

"Hey GI!" he said, "You looky for blues?"

I didn't know what Blues were, but I said, "Sure! How much?"

He handed me a foil-covered sheet of ten pills and said, "Ten dolla."

I gave him the money, pocketed the pills, and snuck back out into the street. I didn't know it then, but my life was about to change. I had just bought my first sheet of blues.

I went next door to a bar with a live band playing rock music and took two of the pills. I washed them down with a shot of tequila and finished it off with a cold beer. It didn't take long before I began feeling the effects of the pills.

It turns out, 'Blues' were a slang name for barbiturates. About thirty minutes after I had taken them, I felt as drunk as if I had been guzzling double shot tequila all night. I also felt bullet proof and ten feet tall. And I was the best-looking sumbitch in the Marine Corps. Ever.

I was sold. An instant fan. Soon, I was taking ten pills a night, along with my drinking. I didn't notice it at first, but I was having to take more and more of the little pills to get the same level of euphoric high. By the time I was taking two sheets a day, everyone but me knew I had a problem. The barracks NCO - Sergeant Wallace - tried to talk to me a few times, because he could see I was going down the wrong path. But I didn't listen to him.

By this time, I was a full-blown party animal. I would leave work at Camp Hague and go straight to a pharmacy in town, then begin bar-hopping all night. Usually I would stagger back to base by 0300, just allowing myself an hour or two of sleep before reveille at 0530.

Soon, I was oversleeping every morning. It became a problem. Then, there was the day that I overslept, and they couldn't wake me up. I was out. Dead to the world. A few of the guys helped the barracks NCO drag me into the shower.

As they turned on the cold water, they yelled, "Wake your ass up, Hester!"

They held my head under the stream of water, and I finally came around.

"I'm up!" I cried.

Sputtering through the water running down my face, I tried to convince them that I was good to go. But even after all that - I still refused to admit that I had a problem.

Things became a blur after that. I recall some things, but there are huge blocks of time that I don't remember at all. And some things that they say I did, that I don't remember. Like taking a swing at the Company Commanding Officer when he was trying to wake me up one morning.

Evidently, the CO heard that I was passed out in my rack again, and he decided it was high time to teach me a lesson. He came into my cubicle and grabbed me by the shoulders.

"Wake up, Marine!" he yelled.

I jolted awake instantly and unloaded a right hand that caught him square on the jaw. He fell back and I leapt out of the rack, ready to fight.

Then I saw it was the CO and snapped to attention.

“Oh shit! Sorry sir! I didn’t know it was you!”

He was pissed, as you can imagine. He wrote me up on charges of assaulting an officer, an Article 31, I think it was called. My defense was simple and straightforward. I was abruptly jarred from a deep sleep by someone shaking me and screaming. My reaction was understandable, under the circumstances. What would YOU do?

At any rate, I got off. Which pissed off the CO even worse. After that, he wouldn’t talk to me at all, or even acknowledge a salute when I met him outdoors.

It became very apparent that I had gone off the deep end, so to speak, when one weekend I went totally fucking nuts. I took a cab over to Kadena Air Force Base and proceeded to do things that made absolutely no sense.

For instance, I went to a gift shop on the base there. Looking around inside the shop, I was drawn to a beautiful chess set. The board was marble, and the pieces were intricately carved alabaster. I love chess, and I have a taste for nice things — so naturally, I wanted it.

The lone salesclerk was busy with another customer, but she told me that she would help me in a minute.

I said, “No problem, take your time.”

Then I wandered around looking at other stuff in the shop.

When her attention was focused back on her customer, I snatched up the chess set, stuck it under my arm and walked outside like it was a perfectly normal thing to do. There was a public bathroom next door to the gift shop, and I placed the chess set inside one of the stalls, hidden behind the toilet. Then, I walked back into the little shop and continued looking around. I was gone maybe thirty seconds. The clerk was still busy with her customer and hadn’t noticed my absence.

Finally, the customer left, and the clerk was free. She immediately came over to me.

“Yes sir, what can I get for you?”

“Howdy!”

Grinning my disarming smile, I added, “Yes, ma’am, I would like to get that chess set over here...” and walked over to where I had been admiring the chess set earlier.

Of course, the chess set was nowhere to be seen.

“Where’d it go?” I asked, puzzled. “Did you sell it already?”

The shop clerk saw the empty space on the shelf and became agitated. Then she pointed a shaking finger at me and accused, “You take!” she yelled, “You better bring back before I call MP!”

“Go ahead and call ‘em. I didn’t do anything,” I said innocently. Then, I patiently waited for fifteen minutes or so for the Military Police to arrive.

As soon as they walked in, the clerk began frantically telling them her story. She told them I had been looking at the chess set and it had vanished. I stood there quietly, waiting for my turn to speak.

Finally, the MP turned to me, “Let’s hear your side now.”

“Well, it’s obviously some kind of misunderstanding!” I said with total confidence, “Sure, I was looking at the damn chess set, but she was busy with another customer, so I wandered off. When she finally got around to helping me, the chess set was gone.”

The MP turned back to the clerk, “Ma’am, did you see this man take your chess set?” he asked.

“No!” she cried, “He very sneaky!”

“You say you wandered off.” the MP turned back to me, glancing quickly at his notepad, “Where did you go?”

“I was looking around the shop here for a while, but she was taking a really long time with that customer, so I went to the head to take a leak.” I replied matter-of-factly.

“When I came back, she finally came over to see what I wanted. That’s when we noticed the chess set was gone.”

“You went to the head?”

“Yessir, the one outside.”

So naturally, he wanted to look in the head. You can't really blame him. Good police work. And, sure enough, there it was — the chess set was peeking out from behind the toilet.

He put handcuffs on me and in the process of arresting me he searched me, finding two sheets of blues in my coat pocket. Then he transported me back to the MP barracks, where I was eventually turned over to the custody of my CO.

For the shop-lifting charge, my CO restricted me to my barracks for 30 days. This meant I could work, and go eat at the mess hall, but then I had to immediately return to my barracks. He took my ID card and told me I was not allowed off-base. Then, he informed me that there would be an investigation into the drug possession charge, and I would be getting a Special Court Martial to address that.

For the next thirty days I was stuck on base. I worked every day and then came back to my barracks, where I listened to music on my stereo. The only other past time that I was allowed was the game room, which was next door to my barracks. In the game room you could play chess, pool, and ping-pong. That kept me pretty busy, I guess. By the end of the thirty days, I was good at all three.

But, more importantly, by then my stash of blues was running out. I needed more.

I went to the CO and gave him a sob story. This is the same officer that I had punched months before, so it had to be a really GOOD story.

I rapped on his office door and heard a muffled, "Enter!"

Marching smartly into the room, I planted myself at attention, ramrod straight, centered in front of his desk.

"Sir! PFC Hester requests a conference with the Commanding Officer, sir!"

He was obviously impressed with my 'squared away' Marine demeanor.

"At Ease Marine," he barked, "What is it?"

I went to Parade Rest and stated, "Sir! My girlfriend needs my assistance, sir. She lives off-base over by Kadena."

"What's that got to do with me?" he asked.

“Sir, she needs me to help her with her mother. Her father is Colonel Sharp, and he is gone on temporary duty. She is alone at home trying to care for her sick mother and she needs me to go shopping for them. Groceries and stuff, sir!”

“But you are restricted to base, Marine.”

“Yes sir! That’s why I am here today,” I smartly replied. “Sir, I request permission to leave base, go shopping for them and come directly back.”

The Captain looked at me for a long moment, then opened his desk drawer and removed my Military Identification Card. He held it up between two fingers and said, “If you fuck up Hester, I’m going to *have your ass!*”

“Yessir! Not gonna happen, sir!”

With that he handed me the ID card and said, “Dismissed.”

I snapped to attention, “Yessir!” Then performed a perfect About Face, “Thank you sir!”

With ID card in hand, I went straight to the taxi stand just outside the main gate. I showed my card to the MP at the gate, and he waved me through. Within minutes, I was riding down the road to town, free as a bird.

And of course, I headed straight for the drug store.

I don’t remember much of anything that happened next. I know what people tell me I did, and I can remember little fragments, but it is all in a fog. Like someone else was doing it.

I will recount the actions of the following events, but please remember — I am reconstructing the events based on fragmented memory and other people’s accounts of my actions.

After leaving the base and scoring some more blues from the drug store, I found myself on Kadena Air Force Base walking around. I walked past a recording studio where the month before I had helped my buddy set up his equipment. His band played there often, practicing hard, trying to get their sound exactly right.

Inside the studio were musical instruments, microphones, amplifiers, speakers, tables, and folding chairs. Just about what you’d expect in a recording studio, I guess.

I crawled through an unlocked window and went inside the dark building. Then, I turned on all the lights. Inside and outside.

I carried the drum kit out to the parking lot and set it up. Then, I grabbed guitars, amps, speakers, and microphone stands. Basically, I carted everything inside the studio out to the parking lot and set it up as if a band was about to play a concert.

I don't remember, but it had to have taken a long time. I finished up by arranging the chairs in two neat rows in front of the microphones, facing the amplifiers.

Then, I walked away.

About two blocks from the recording studio, a patrolling MP vehicle saw me. Actually, I think the proper term for Air Force military police, is SP or Special Police. At any rate, they stopped and asked me what I was doing.

I replied that I was walking to the bus stop to go home.

One of the officers got out and approached me, "Why are you walking around at 0400 hours?" he asked.

"Sir, I was visiting my girlfriend," I replied smoothly. "Now I gotta go so I won't be late for roll call on base."

Evidently satisfied, he said, "Have a good night." Then he got into the cruiser and they drove off.

It was just my bad luck that they chose to drive off in the direction of the recording studio, which was lit up like a ZZ Top concert. In just a few minutes, the SP patrol was back.

When they arrested me, I guess they were pissed off, because they were pretty rough while they were getting me hand-cuffed and subdued. There must have been a struggle, because one of them got a black eye and the other had cuts and scrapes from when he slipped and fell on the pavement. But they eventually got me stuffed into the back of their cruiser.

In the process of arresting me, they found the pills I had purchased earlier, all ten sheets, so now I had more drug charges to deal with. Then, they drove me back to my base and turned me over to the MP station, where I sat hand-cuffed for hours.

The CO was pissed. He had warned me that he was “going to have my ass, if I fucked up,” and he followed through on that promise. I was taken straight to the brig, where I was to wait for court martial proceedings.

I was loaded into a transport jeep and off we went. After about two hours, we arrived at Correctional Custody Unit, MCB Camp Butler. I was strip searched and processed in, then escorted to a maximum-security cell.

Camp Butler Brig

I was classified as dangerous. I suppose it was because of the last arrest and possibly because I had hit my commanding officer a few months back. As a result of that, they put me in Maximum Security. This is solitary confinement, with no bars on the door. The door was solid steel with only a small slit just wide enough to allow passage of a food tray at chow time.

The lights stayed on twenty-four hours a day, so chow became the only way of knowing what time of day it was. If they served me imitation eggs and spam — it was morning. If I got a slice of bread and spam, it was lunch. Supper was usually special. Sometimes they even gave me real meat.

My cell measured six feet wide and ten feet long. It contained a small bunk, toilet, and sink - all made of stainless steel and bolted to the floor. There was a wafer-thin mattress on the bunk and a thin blanket. That was it.

With nothing to do, I counted the tiles in the floor and the ceiling, studying the cell until I knew every crack or blemish in the wall by heart. I wasn't looking for weaknesses in the plaster and planning an escape or anything exotic like that — I was simply bored and there was nothing else to look at.

After a week of staring at the walls, I asked my guard if I could have a pencil and some paper. He brought me a lined notebook and a pencil. I turned the notepad over and drew a chess board pattern on the back. I already had a bar of soap that they had issued me, but I asked the guard for another one. A different color bar. He asked why and I told him that I wanted to carve chess pieces out of the bars of soap. He brought me a pink bar and he also gave me a small pair of fingernail clippers! I used those clippers to carve out chess pieces, one set in blue and the other one in pink.

I don't know how long it took... but eventually, I had my chess set ready to go. Then, I played chess with myself.

I would study the board and choose the best move to counter what I had just done on the other side of the board. Then switch sides, study it... and counter my last move. This went on for hours. The game was pretty evenly matched, so it was hard to predict which side would win. Besides that, sometimes I cheated.

I had been in Solitary Confinement for almost two weeks when one day the guard opened the cell door and told me I was being moved to Cell Block D. This block is where they

housed major crime offenders, unruly inmates, or for whatever reason - inmates they considered a security risk.

The guards escorted me into D block and the Sergeant pointed to one of the racks.

“That’s your rack there,” he said.

I unrolled my blanket and spread it on the rack as the guards filed out. Everyone was out for chow, so I had the place to myself. With nothing better to do, I surveyed my new surroundings.

The block was laid out in one large room. About twenty bunkbeds arranged in two rows spaced evenly down the center of the area. Near the entrance to the block, there were four stainless-steel tables lined up. This large area was our home. Completely surrounded by bars. No exterior walls. The guards had full view of the block twenty-four hours a day.

On one side of the main area, there was a low wall running the length of the block. It had bars running from the top of the wall to the ceiling. This wall partitioned the head from the main block. Walk spaces at each end gave access. Along the wall, shower heads were spaced at ten-foot intervals. On the opposing side there was another wall, identical to the shower wall. On this one, there were toilets spaced at ten-foot intervals.

Suddenly my attention was focused on the entrance. Prisoners were lined up outside the opening and being frisked one-by-one before they were allowed entry. The line was long. Maybe thirty guys. Eventually, they all made their way inside and wandered off to their racks, or over to the day table to sit and bullshit with their friends.

And every one of them checked me out as they entered. I was new meat. A fish. And they all scrutinized me on their way past my rack.

Suddenly, I realized my rack was surrounded by prisoners. I counted ten guys pressing in on me. All of them were black - or African American, as we said back then - and every one of them seemed upset by my presence.

“Yo honky!” one of them snarled, “Whatchoo doin’ here?”

I tried to get up, but they were all pressing in too close. The best I could manage was perching precariously on the edge of my rack.

I was scared shitless, but I forced myself to remain calm and speak with confidence.

“This is where the Sergeant put me,” I replied.

The guy talking seemed to be the ringleader of this bunch, and he made a big show of pointing out his friends to me.

“Look around *CRACKER*. Does this look like the hood you ‘spose to be in?”

I stood up and faced him. Because of the pressing flesh, we were standing nose to nose. Well, not literally – because the guy stood an easy six inches taller than me and outweighed me a hundred pounds. Standing so close to him, he seemed even bigger than he was. I felt like a bug about to be squashed.

Suddenly a memory from my childhood flashed into my head. Rex had cornered a raccoon down by the creek. The coon was puffing up and hissing at Rex. Lunging at the huge dog and showing his teeth, feinting one way, then another. Then after a while, the coon stopped moving and just sat quietly staring at Rex. Rex had been snarling and carrying on, but when the coon stopped – he quieted down, too.

The two animals sat staring at each other until Rex got bored just sitting there. He decided to make his move and when he lunged at the smaller animal, the coon pounced on his head and began tearing him up.

I can still hear the yelps of my poor dog as he tried to shake that demon coon off his head. He stumbled around and fell into the creek with the coon still gouging and biting his head. It only took a few seconds, but it seemed like an eternity. Rex was in serious trouble now. The coon damned near drowned him. But he finally shook him off and the coon swam across to the other side of the creek.

And like that cornered coon I was trying to make myself look bigger. Badder. Don’t show weakness to this bull-necked giant.

“I axed you a question white boy,” his deep voice boomed, “Wassa matta, you gon cry?”

“I didn’t choose the neighborhood, they put me here,” my voice seemed tinny compared to his, but at least I was calm. Then more forcefully, I added, “I *TOLD* you that already! You deaf?”

This smart-ass remark caused an instant reaction. One – the crowd all stepped back a bit, as if anticipating what was about to happen. Two – The bull-necked leader was caught off guard by my insolence, and he was suddenly pissed that a skinny white boy like me would dare speak to him like that. In front of his boys.

He couldn't tell, but I was terrified. Instinctively I knew if I showed fear the situation would only get worse. There was no doubt in my mind how this was going to go. I was about to get my ass beat. Bad.

But as bad as it was going to be, it was still better than punking out. I had to stand up to them. Like that little coon years ago, I had no choice.

I was closely watching the veins bulging in his bull-neck, and as soon as I saw his muscles twitch – I cut loose and chopped him in the throat with everything I could put into it. Dead center on the Adam's apple.

He instantly dropped. But I didn't even get to see him hit the floor. As soon as I hit him, his boys were all over me. Hitting, kicking, and getting in each other's way mostly. But still getting the job done on me.

I curled up on the floor, covering up and protecting my head and face as best I could. They laid into me for a few more minutes before the guards finally pulled them off.

Once the guards broke it up, the black prisoners all gave me one last blistering look before dispersing and settling into their own rack. The big guy was rolled onto a stretcher and carried to the medical station to get checked out by the Navy Corpsman.

Surprisingly, for the next few days – nothing happened. I mean, I was expecting more trouble, but the black prisoners all made a point of ignoring me. I was still smack in the middle of their area and they plainly didn't like it, but no one said anything.

Then, six days had gone by since the trouble and still nothing had happened. On the evening of that sixth day, I found out why.

One of the black guys - Runt was what they called him - sneered at me and said, "You gonna git it now boy! They bringin' Atlas back tonight!"

"Who's Atlas?" I asked. But I knew who he was referring to. The bull-necked guy.

"You gonna find out soon nuf, Cracker!" he chortled, "I cain't wait to see what he gonna do to yo sorry ass!"

And a few hours later, Atlas was escorted into the block. He was walking a little unsteadily - but still -he was walking. Honestly, I feel like he should have been dead. I had hit him square in the throat with everything I had.

I watched him closely as he made his way over to our area. I noticed the bandage wrapped around his throat as he walked over to my rack. I stood up as he approached, waiting for the inevitable.

Runt was cackling like a crazed hen, barely able to contain himself.

All of the black dudes came over and surrounded my rack again. Just like before. I reconciled myself to another ass-whipping. I knew it was coming.

Then, Atlas raised a huge mitt of a hand up, waving off his boys. When he spoke, it was barely a whisper, but everyone heard him plainly.

“Back off!” he rasped weakly, “No one touches him.”

Atlas made eye contact with each of his boys - making sure they understood.

“He got heart,” he added, “and you gonna respect that, or answer to me!”

Then he stuck that huge paw out at me, offering a handshake. I took it and my hand seemed puny in comparison to his. After he shook my hand, he went over to his rack and laid down. Nothing more needed to be said.

About a week after Atlas came back, he walked over to where I was sitting at the day table. I had been talking to a couple of white guys, but as soon as he walked up, they left.

His voice was stronger now, still raspy, but no longer a whisper.

“We goin’ out on the courts to play some ball,” he said. Then he added, “You play?”

“Yeah! I used to play a bit in high school.”

“C’mon then!”

I followed his huge frame out to the basketball court and as soon as we walked up, one of his boys threw me the ball.

“Let’s see what you got!” Runt chortled.

I turned and shot a three-pointer from just outside the key and we all watched as it swished the net.

“You got game!” Runt blurted, “Not bad for a white boy!”

And that's how it started. Every day the prisoners in D block got an hour of recreation time, and every day the black prisoners always hogged the basketball court. White prisoners were not allowed to play. At least, not until they invited me to join them.

There were a few other white guys that tried to join in occasionally, but they were always instantly turned away. I guess I was the exception.

As you can imagine, privacy was non-existent in D-block. There was nowhere on the block where you could escape the watchful eyes of the guards. I can still hear their boots clicking as they paced around the perimeter of the block. Watching.

Sitting on the toilet and wiping your ass in full view of forty inmates, not to mention the guards, well... it was humiliating. But we got used to it. It is amazing what you can get used to. Before long, I lost all my inhibitions and began crapping like a pro.

In 'D' block, you weren't allowed to do chores. You were confined inside the block, only coming out for chow time in the mess hall, or recreation time in the yard. For chow, we were all lined up single file and marched to the mess hall for our meals. We were given twenty minutes to eat, then the order was given and we all stood as one, then marched back to our block.

At the entrance of the block, we were patted down by one of the guards before getting the go ahead to enter. This was to prevent smuggling in silverware, or other contraband. The guards were vigilant. Nothing escaped their watchful eyes. Every move we made was with their permission, or by their orders.

I was being held here until my Court Martial and I did not know how long that was going to take. I decided to focus on being a model prisoner and try to earn my way into C Block. Security there was much more relaxed. Prisoners even got to go on work details. I had heard that the best duty was working in the chow hall. So, I told a few guards that I wanted to volunteer for mess hall duty. I knew it would take a while to get moved over to the next block, but I wanted to put a bug in their ear. So, they would maybe evaluate me sooner.

I was on my best behavior. And after three more weeks, I had earned enough trust that they transferred me to C Block. This block contained minor offenders, non-violent offenders, and short-term inmates. My kind of place.

I immediately volunteered for mess hall duty. I started out washing pots. Then, as people did their mandatory two-week stint in the mess hall and rotated out, I moved up a

position. From pot washer I went to washing dishes, then carrying empty line bins back to be washed after the food had been served out of them. Then I was moved to serving food on the chow line, then janitor and then finally - washing and counting silverware.

This job was the last job in the rotation. It was the best job that the mess hall had to offer. Once I achieved that job, I kept it. It was easy duty and I had my own little room where the silverware was stored. This is where I would hang out all day, listening to the radio, talking to buddies, and counting silverware as I tightly rolled the sets in their cloth napkins.

By this time, I had been in the brig for about two months. I had been provided a military lawyer from Judge Advocate General offices. That JAG lawyer advised me to try to plead out and get a lower sentence, but I wasn't inclined to make their job easy. If they were going to send me to Leavenworth, I wanted them to have to work at it. Hard.

So, I fired him. Then requested the services of a civilian lawyer that was representing some of the guys in my cell block. The word on him was fairly good.

The first time I visited with him, he told me not to worry about payment — because he was doing pro-bono work. He would represent me for free. I was thrilled to hear that because I didn't have any way of paying him. But I figured that I could borrow whatever I needed from my G-mom. I just hated doing that.

I told him the whole story of the events that had put me in here, or at least, to the best of my recollection. He took copious notes, only interrupting occasionally to clarify some detail or another.

Finally, when I finished recounting my tale, he shuffled his papers around, then shoved them into his briefcase. Standing up briskly, he thrust his hand out towards me to shake.

“OK Private Hester, I'll get to work on this,” he said, “I'll see you next week.”

I looked him straight in the eye and firmly shook his hand.

“Thanks,” I said, “Do you think there's a chance that I might go to Leavenworth?”

He hesitated, then confidently asserted, “Not if I can help it, son.”

Then he took the time to explain how a Special Court Martial worked and the different paths that we could take. He explained that a Summary Court was used for minor incidents of misconduct. My charges were substantially more serious, so I would be going

to a Special Court-Martial. This was the intermediate court-martial level. It was serious, but not as serious as a General Court-Martial. They can sentence you to life at hard labor, or even execute you in a General. Luckily, I had not committed that level of offense.

The Special Court-Martial allowed me to choose between being judged by one judge alone, or having a judge preside over a panel of four officers, who were in effect, a jury.

“I think it would be in your best interest to go with the panel, instead of the judge alone,” he finished.

“Yes sir! My Papa always said never put all your eggs in the same basket.”

“Your Papa was a smart man,” he said.

With that, he turned on his heel and stepped through the gate that had magically been opened by the guard just in time. I watched his back recede down the hallway, then lost sight as he turned the corner.

Then I went back to my little room and began counting silverware.

I had quite a few more talks with my lawyer over the next month and together we laid out a decent defense. Since no one had actually seen me take the chess set or move all the musical equipment outside — the prosecution was left with only circumstantial evidence.

Yes, my fingerprints were all over the drum kit and the amplifiers — But that was easily explained because I had been to the recording studio many times before. I had even helped set up the equipment on a number of occasions.

My fingerprints were all over the chess set, but I had already admitted to handling the set while I waited for the shopkeeper to come assist me. The fact that the chess set was found stashed in the head - where I had admitted going - was again just a coincidence. Anyone could have taken the chess set and placed it there.

Ninety-seven days after I had been processed into the Butler brig, the day of my Special Court Martial finally came. I marched into the chambers, looking good in my starched Marine Corps utility uniform. I was one squared away Marine. *No way this fine young man deserved to be sentenced to Leavenworth.*

I marched smartly up to address the military judge and the panel. Snapped to attention. Ramrod straight. *Even my creases have creases!*

“Sir! Private Hester reporting as ordered, sir!”

“Have a seat, Marine.”

I marched smartly over to the table where my lawyer was waiting and sat down next to him. At attention. With my hands folded neatly in front of me on the table, I sat facing the panel.

My lawyer began speaking, alternately addressing the judge and then the panel. I already knew what he was going to say. We had covered it backwards and forwards every day for the past month. So, instead of listening to him, I focused on appearances.

I was not satisfied with just being squared away, I wanted to look like I was auditioning for the cover of the next Leatherneck Magazine. I wanted the panel to see the most Marine that I could muster. I wanted this panel to wish their son could be like me. Someone they could be proud of.

Finally, after recounting our defense to the panel, my lawyer sat down.

Now, it was the trial counsel, or prosecutor's turn. Again, I appeared to be listening. Nodding my head as if I understood and agreed that yep – it happened just like that. Or almost imperceptibly shaking my head and frowning, to convey that – hell no, that's bullshit. I was channeling my inner Marine, stoking it into a full-blown Chesty Puller.

Lewis Burwell "Chesty" Puller enlisted in the United States Marine Corps in 1918 as a private and finished his thirty-seven-year career as a lieutenant general. Puller is the most decorated Marine in American history. He was awarded five Navy Crosses and one Army Distinguished Service Cross. He is every Marine's idea of what it means to be a Marine.

So yeah... I was channeling Chesty as hard as I could.

The trial counsel spoke for just a few minutes. Not nearly as long as my attorney had addressed the panel. The prosecutor paused and rustled a few papers on his table, like he was looking for something else I had done. After a few minutes, it was obvious that he was having some sort of difficulty.

The military judge finally spoke, “Is trial counsel satisfied with their case?”

“Sir!” the prosecutor answered, “If I could just have a moment sir...”

The judge did not seem to be a patient man. I watched him discreetly as he fidgeted at his bench. After a few minutes, his patience wore thin and he spoke again.

“Is the prosecution prepared to continue with their case?” he boomed.

“Sir... may we approach?”

The presiding judge glared at him, then motioned over to my lawyer and said, “Approach.”

I tried to hear what was going on, but of course they were speaking in subdued tones. From a distance of over twenty feet. All I could do was watch.

After a few minutes, the two lawyers walked back to their seats and sat down.

The judge declared, “These proceedings will take a fifteen-minute break. Please do not leave the premises.”

My lawyer said he might be needed, so he was staying in the room. I needed a smoke in the worst way, so I asked my guard and he escorted me out for a quick one by the entrance. As soon as I finished my smoke and snuffed it out in the ash tray, we went back into the court room.

I walked over to my place at the defense table and sat down. My lawyer and the prosecutor were having a discussion with the judge and the members. I watched and wondered.

The two lawyers came back to their tables and as mine sat down, the judge spoke.

“Court is now in session.”

He looked over to the prosecutor and asked, “Does the trial counsel have additional arguments to be made before the members of this Special-Court Martial proceeding?”

The prosecutor rose and stated, “No sir. We do not.”

The judge then turned to look at me.

“Private Hester, stand and face the court,” he ordered.

I stood up and snapped to attention. My lawyer standing beside me.

The judge continued, “Private Hester, it appears to this Court that a Guardian Angel is watching out for you.”

His words instantly gave me hope. Then he continued, “All of the evidence against you is either circumstantial, or cannot be used because of technical issues. The members conferred and all agree, the prosecution has not proven its case against you.”

My knees were shaking as he continued, "I am therefore ordering that this case be dropped, due to lack of evidence."

I was standing at attention and my knees were suddenly weak. I thought I was about to crater right there in front of the judge.

He wasn't through speaking yet, "Private Hester, you are one lucky Marine. Report for duty at Camp Hague immediately."

With that, he banged his gavel, and I was free to go. I stood there in shock for a few seconds, trying to digest his words.

It was over.

My lawyer explained that the drug charges were dropped because they had sent the pills to mainland Japan for analysis and somehow, the chain of custody had been violated. That meant the results could not be used to convict me. The resisting arrest and assault charges occurred when they arrested me for the breaking and entering, trespassing, and possession of contraband drug charges. Since those charges had all been dropped, the resisting arrest and assault charges were dropped as well. They were related to the dropped charges.

Then he also explained that since Okinawa was a prefecture of Japan, the charges would be reviewed by a Japanese panel. They would determine if charges should be brought against me. He said that it wasn't likely, but it was still a possibility that I could face Japanese charges.

I thanked him for everything he had done for me, shook his hand and watched as he walked away.

I saw my Company C.O. standing by the door and I figured I would ask him for a ride. He was the officer I had punched a while back, and also the same one I had connived into letting me off base when I was on restriction.

But I was hoping he was over that by now.

I walked over to him and asked, "Sir, do you think I could catch a ride with you back to base?"

His eyes went cold and he spit out, "Hester, I don't care if you have to crawl every fuckin' inch of the way back, but you're damn sure not riding with me!"

I guess he wasn't over it, after all.

"As soon as you get to the base," he continued, "You are to report to my desk."

"Sir! Yes sir." I replied smartly.

He flicked his wrist up, studied his watch and said, "It is now eleven hundred hours. You will be in front of my desk no later than fifteen hundred hours. Do you understand?"

"Sir! Yes sir! Fifteen hundred hours, sir!"

With that, I marched out of the courthouse, down the hall and stepped out into the sunlight of freedom. I walked to the main gate and continued off the base, to the edge of the main road. I stood on the shoulder with my thumb out, trying to catch a ride.

Years ago in Austin, I had perfected the art of hitch-hiking. The trick is to look pathetic and harmless... and sure enough, someone stopped and gave me a ride. They were going right past Camp Hague, so I made it back even before the Captain.

Since I had some time to kill — it was only thirteen hundred hours — I went to the mess hall to eat. I was starving for some real chow.

Legal Hold

I snapped to attention in front of the Captain's desk with exactly three minutes to spare.

"Sir!" I yelled, "Private Hester reporting as ordered, SIR!"

He looked up and said, "At Ease, Hester."

I went to Parade Rest, then he gestured at one of the chairs in front of his desk.

"Have a seat," he said, "Hester, you have become a major pain in my butt."

"Sir, yes sir."

"Stop with the formalities," he snapped, "let's have a chat, you and me, off the record."

I replied, albeit hesitantly, "OK by me, sir."

"The Marine Corps doesn't need fuck-ups, Hester. If you stay in, you'll be in Leavenworth before long."

Leavenworth Prison is where military felony convicts spend their time. It is hard time, not your easy civilian Federal prison. It is a truly hard core, very bad place to be incarcerated. It's not somewhere I wanted to go.

"I hope not sir."

"Well, the way you're going, that's where you'll end up."

"I'll try to stay out of trouble, sir."

He shuffled some papers around, then picked one up and studied it. "If I could offer you a way out of the Corps, would you take it?"

"I won't take anything less than an Honorable Discharge, sir. I have the rest of my life to think about."

"I can get you an Honorable," he replied, "It's an Administrative Discharge. The title would be General Under Honorable Conditions."

"Yes, sir. If I can get out with an Honorable, then count me in! I would like to get out early."

He shook his head affirmatively, "OK. I'll start the paperwork. You will be headed Stateside for discharge soon."

I stood up and snapped to attention, “Thank you sir!”

“Don’t thank me, Hester. I am doing the Corps a favor.”

“Yes, sir! And me too.”

He stood and glared at me, “You fuck up one time before these papers come thru and I swear I will see you *rot* in the brig. Then, I will make it my business to get you kicked out with a Bad Conduct Discharge. Do you understand me?”

“Sir! Yes sir!”

“Dismissed,” he muttered.

I performed a flawless About-face, heels clicking sharply. Then I marched out of his office.

I went about my daily routine after that meeting with a little more enthusiasm — knowing that it was just a matter of time before I would be headed home. Every day brought me just a little closer to being discharged.

Then, about a month after I had been released from the brig, my lawyer called. My case had been picked up and was being reviewed by the Japanese government for possible prosecution. Since the drug related charges had occurred on their land, they had the sovereign right to prosecute me under their laws.

This was not good.

If I was convicted by the Japanese for even one of the drug charges, I could be given a life sentence in their prison. Eating fish heads and rice, doing hard labor in a prison half-way around the world was something that I didn’t even want to think about.

I was on Legal Hold — meaning I could not leave Okinawa — for almost four months.

Then finally, one morning, I received a phone call from the CO. He told me that my legal hold status had terminated. I was free to leave the island. He also said that transportation would pick me up in front of my barracks in thirty minutes.

Later, I found out from my lawyer that the Japanese had declined to pursue the drug charges, because the drugs were legal for Japanese citizens to use. They were just illegal for United States citizens to use. A frigging technicality had saved my ass.

I rushed to my barracks and quickly threw all my things into duffel bags. The things that I could not pack, I gave away to some of the guys in the barracks.

It all went by in a blur, until finally I was sitting in a window seat of a military transport plane on the runway at Kadena Air Force Base. I stared anxiously out of the window, fervently praying that we would get airborne before I saw a gang of police cars swarming the plane with lights flashing. I was afraid the Japanese had made a mistake, or they would change their mind.

When the wheels lifted off the tarmac and we were climbing to altitude, I breathed a sigh of relief. I fervently thanked God for watching out for me, even though I didn't deserve His protection.

Once I arrived at Camp Pendleton, in California, I settled into the Separations barracks to wait for my paperwork to be processed. It took about ten days, but finally I was processed out and became a civilian again.