

# Chicken Farmer

(An American Fable)

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St. Louis, Missouri, USA



Second Edition.

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**I dedicate this novel to my wife, Irene, without whose long and unwavering support this project would not have been completed.**



# Chapter 1

"The child is Father of the Man. ... The things which I have seen [as a child] I now can see no more. Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting. ... Heaven lies about us in our infancy! Shades of the prison-house begin to close upon the growing boy." William Wordsworth, Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood.

"Truly I say to you, unless you become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of God. Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Matthew, 18:3-4.

I am no longer a child. Innocence empowers the child to commune with the divine. With every step into adulthood, a veil closes over innocence. My veil closed shut on September 22, 2003 in Anbar Province, Iraq. An improvised explosive device ("IED") blew up the Hummer in which I rode as gunner mangling my right leg and damaging the left. The doctors amputated the right below the knee but were able to save the left. Funny thing: my artificial right leg supplied by the United States Government gives me less trouble these days than the left one that was original issue from God.

My squad mates in the Hummer, Sergeant Barnes and Corporal Kelly, didn't come out of it quite as well. Sergeant Barnes bled to death, stomach wound, guts a jumbled mess. Corporal Kelly lost an arm and a leg. Last time I saw him, he

was learning how to wipe his ass with his left hand. I thank God every time I wipe my ass.

When Captain Ahab lost his leg, he had Moby Dick to focus his venom upon. Ahab had a mission, a jihad against the white whale. I couldn't rightfully get mad at the Iraqis. We arrived as foreign invaders. One was not surprised they shot back. I reenlisted in the Army knowing full well it meant deployment to a war zone. The circumstances of the occupation were asinine. There was no plan. We destroyed the Iraqi government, its military, its police force, and the civilian infrastructure. The country descended into chaos entrenching us in the middle of a civil war. But I'm not a blameless man. I asked Uncle George to stamp my ticket to the Sunni Triangle free fire zone. And I was a happy gunner popping away at any "hajji" that dared make a false move in my presence, until the second of the explosion. No white whale. Got no one to blame but myself.

I bought a small farm in rural Missouri with my military disability income and a loan from Mom. Started raising chickens, lots of chickens. 20,000 chickens. Once you get over the perfume wafting at you from the droppings left by 20,000 little shitting machines, it's not a bad life. Every six hours you walk through the sheds, remove the dead and dying birds, check the heat lamps, check the feed and water, shovel some bird poop. Then you get the next 5 hours to yourself. To pass the time I engaged in biological warfare with my nearest neighbor, the hog farmer. We'd pile nasty rotting animal waste in the corners of our land closest to one another. Mother nature's whimsy of which way the wind blew on a given day determined the winner. Unfortunately, the prevailing winds were west to east. I was east of the hog farmer. Only a discriminating nose can discern the aroma of pig from chicken shit when mixed in the morning breeze.

The pickings for ladies in rural Missouri must not have been all that grand as Mom capably rounded up a bevy of prospective brides from the surrounding area. One leg, ankle deep in chicken poop, and women were actually interested in signing up for duty in my world. Mom interviewed 'em. Those that passed muster she sent on over for me to kick the tires.

Upon mutual consent, I'd then get a test-drive after the tire kick. Liked the test-drive part of this exercise. Seeing how Mom enjoyed pimping for her son, I lacked the heart to tell her I had no intention of selecting a bride. Twenty-three years of age already with enough shit, literally, on my plate. Best to hunker down and lick my wounds before rolling the dice in the marital crap shoot game. Might roll snake eyes and end up hitched to a crazy diva. One could never tell and I knew less about women than I did chickens.

One summer afternoon about a year into the chicken-farming gig, I drove a few towns up the highway to visit my father's grave. He died when I was twelve. Mom remarried but Dad walks with me to this day. A grave up the hill from Dad's was recently dug up to add a new body to the plot. Rain the day before washed mud over his marker. This is how the conversation went as I knelt at his grave.

"How goes it Dad? Got mud all over your marker. Let me clean that off for you."

The conversation could be a trifle one-sided. Now and again Dad chipped in his two-cents but he generally didn't say much. Perhaps his one-quarter Native American ancestry made him that way.

"You want to know how I'm getting along? Well, still shoveling the bird shit and test-driving bride wannabe's. It's not bad duty Dad. I'm content to just work this thing until the urge comes to do something else."

Didn't want to make my life sound too depressing for Dad. I moved over to a bench near his grave.

"The only visions I had in life were playing football and being a soldier. Now those two are done so I'm sorting out life presently. Lots of stuff to figure."

I sat back enjoying the caress of a warm summer breeze upon my face. The smell of wild flowers blooming along the fence entered my nostrils. My ears perked with the sounds of squirrels in the trees, birds in the air. Then complete silence. Within this silence, my father spoke to me. What came were not words but a thought: "There is more."

“More what? More work? I can handle it. More bride wannabe’s to test-drive? Cool. More money? Certainly could use it. Help me out here Dad.”

I again went silent hoping for other thoughts to be sent on the wind but Dad didn’t answer. He was a man of few words. On my way home from the cemetery, I came upon an odd sight—a van perpendicular to the road partially blocking one lane with two tires in the mud. At 2 a.m. on a weekend, one could understand such a scene but not midday on a Wednesday. A short, balding man stood beside the van talking on a cell phone gesturing as he spoke. I slowed my pickup and rolled down the window. He spoke first.

“Where is this?”

A strange question from my point of view. Everyone from around here knew where “this” was and only locals traveled this stretch of road. But he obviously wasn’t from around here.

“Are you lost Mister?” I responded.

“Yes and no, I just need directions to tell the tow truck driver how to find me.”

“What you need a tow truck for?”

He gave me an exasperated look and pointed at his van in the mud.

“You don’t need a tow truck for that. It’s barely stuck. Just a little yank and you’ll be out.”

I pulled the pickup past his van and retrieved rope from a toolbox in the back. Tied one end to my back bumper and the other to his front axle.

“Get in and put your van in neutral.”

A couple of taps on the pickup accelerator and he was out. As I coiled the rope back up, the guy came and pumped my hand like I’d just performed a major feat of magic.

“Why don’t you let me buy us lunch at that diner I saw up the road?”

A noble gesture but I was reluctant. When meeting a stranger, the conversation inevitably turned to the whole wounded soldier to chicken farmer saga. I was tired of explaining myself.

“You don’t owe me nothing buddy.”

“Now it’s only fair you give me the opportunity to repay your kindness. Do you want me to have to walk around the rest of my days carrying this indebtedness to you?”

This fellow was different.

“If it’s that important to you, then fine, we’ll get a bite.”

I jumped back into my pickup and led the way to the diner. Didn’t want the fella getting lost again. Pulled into the parking lot at Tara’s Diner and went inside. This really wasn’t my neck of the woods, so to speak, but Tara knew who I was. My picture was in the county paper when I returned home after a long rehab at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. She greeted me as an old friend when I came through the door.

“Hi Travis. By yourself?”

“No, that dude getting out of the van shall be joining me.”

“Pick any open booth you want.”

She handed me two menus.

“Thanks.”

Tara was a bit old for the bride wannabe list. A good thing because, after a test-drive, I wouldn’t be able to eat at the diner no more. My lunch mate came through the door and joined me in the booth. He asked my advice while checking out the menu.

“What’s good here?”

“I’m not a regular but, if you’re hungry, the slinger will fix you up.”

“Slinger?”

“Two sausage patties, two eggs over easy, covered in chili. It’s a St. Louis thing Tara borrowed for her place.”

“Good lord! When in Rome ... .”

Tara approached the table.

“What’ll you boys have?”

I ordered steak and eggs. He got adventurous and went with the slinger. Tara’s Diner had a staff of one—Tara. She went to cook our lunch.

“Where was you heading when you got stuck?”

“St. Louis. Got off the highway to get gas and somehow ended up on that road rather than the entrance ramp to the highway. Stuff happens. Life goes on.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” I responded.

“My name’s Robert.”

“Travis.”

Tara arrived with our coffee. Decided to make small talk with Robert as he seemed like an agreeable sort.

“Just visiting St. Louis?”

“You could say that. I’m a magician. I’ve got a show tomorrow night at the Pageant in University City. You know where that’s at?”

“Don’t go to St. Louis much but I know the neighborhood. Went to a bar in University City to see Chuck Berry. Thought I better catch the legend before he dies.”

“Or you die.”

Had to smile at that comment. This guy seemed to know me.

“How does one go about becoming a professional magician?”

“Like any other craft in life—lots of training with a dash of imagination. How about you? Is there something in life that you are passionate about?”

Had to think about that question for a moment. As a boy I was passionate about sports. As a teenager, I was passionate about hunting. As an adult it was the military. Then I worked my ass off rehabbing just to walk again. There was no focus to my life at that time. Nothing I cared about. Just the chicken farming treadmill as a way to make a buck.

I replied with a simple “no”.

Robert was undeterred. “Do you read?”

“I used to be into Civil War history but I guess I kinda grew out of it.”

“Did Iraq change your perspective on war?”

How did he know I’d been to Iraq? Tara couldn’t have told him, she was never out of my sight. Is it just tattooed on my forehead?

“It’s that obvious?”

“An eye for detail is part of my craft. You have an Army sticker on your truck with a limp in your gate. A reasonable deduction.”

I batted the topic in another direction. Really didn't feel like getting into the Iraq stuff.

"I guess road signs are not one of the details your eye is trained for?"

Robert respected my change in conversation.

"Bad habit. My curious mind fixates upon details of the scenery as I drive causing me to miss turns, occasionally drive off the road. I don't even know I'm doing it."

Tara showed up with the food. She was quick. Robert's eyes took in the work that lay before him, the majestic slinger. Hadn't noticed amongst all the conversing that hunger engulfed my belly. I dug into my plate and left Robert to his own devices. We ate in silence except for words necessary to the business of eating, such as, "pass the salt."

I pushed back from my empty plate and sipped coffee while Robert worked on his food. Finally he declared defeat dropping the fork with a few bites remaining on his plate. I kicked off round two of the conversation.

"What are you looking for when you watch stuff?"

I was just making small talk but Robert paused and thought about that one for a moment like it was important.

"What is magic? At the core is illusion. How does one create illusion? By tricking human perception."

Made sense but I still didn't get how that related to his habit of gawking at the details of life. I just nodded.

Robert continued. "I started down this path simply trying to understand how people perceive life. Get into their shoes, see and hear what they see and hear. Then use that information to bend their perception creating a false reality which the public sees as 'magic'."

OK, making more sense.

"But why watch cows in a field or trucks pulling into a truck stop? What does that have to do with the audience at your magic show?"

"Probably nothing. I've evolved into an observer of life, all aspects of life. Magic is just a way to pay the bills and have a little fun along the way. Tulsa yesterday. St. Louis tomorrow. Memphis a few days after that. Just me and the van."

"Barnstorming the Midwest. A gypsy's magician dude."

“Might say so. Anything wrong with the gypsy’s life?”

“Nothing at all. I was just thinking that it sure must beat to hell shoveling chicken shit. That’s how I pay the bills and the shit is piling up while we gab away.”

Robert smiled.

“Chicken farmer. And I thought it was cheap aftershave giving you the aroma.”

I chuckled in response to the joke told at my expense. No offense taken.

“I take it you’re not planning on being a lifer as a chicken farmer?”

“Nahh. Just killing time trying to figure stuff out.”

Tara dropped the check on the table. Robert grabbed it before I could move a muscle.

“Well you have to let me get the tip,” I said and dropped my gaze for a fraction of a second to get my wallet.

“Somebody already left a tip. Look, there it is.”

He pointed to the middle of the table. There, Abe Lincoln stared back up at me from the face of a \$5 bill. Oh, he was crafty. Robert paid the bill and we walked out to our vehicles.

Robert, “Hold on a second. I’ve got something for you.”

He rushed over to his van and returned with a small book, The Alchemist by Paulo Coelho. I looked it over not knowing what to make of the gift.

“This isn’t necessary. You’ve already thanked me enough.”

“It’s a used paperback, probably \$3 on Amazon in that condition. Check out a couple of pages and see if it grabs you. If not, toss the book. I’m done with it.”

We shook hands and got into our vehicles. I followed Robert up to the highway just to make sure he got on the road going the correct direction. That was the only time I ever saw him but he altered my life in those 45 minutes. God only knows, I might still be shoveling chicken shit to this day had I not stopped to help Robert out of the mud.

## Chapter 2

"Whereas I didn't like sex at all ... idiotically, I thought sex seemed to matter so desperately to the man who wanted it that to withhold it was like withholding bread, an act of selfishness. Sex, that seemed to be their delight and all I got was the pleasure of being wanted." Martha Gellhorn (1908-1998)-- author, war correspondent and third wife of Ernest Hemingway.

### **Grace Ellsworth, Washington D.C.**

I'd never have another bowel movement if I gave up cigarettes. Forget that idea, which leads us to my sore ass. The long lunch with Oliver Cromwell, his nom de guerre, caused that discomfort. The term "long" was relative when used in conjunction with Oliver—possessed of a rumped, short member that he only wished to deposit in my anus. Oh well, at least he was quick about it. Never made \$500 any faster. The generosity of a discreet few kept me afloat financially in those days. How was a girl to live in Washington, DC on the peanuts the government pays staff assistants? Men run Washington and hire young, attractive women (and, yes, some teenage boys for those who swing from the other side) to perform all the mind-numbing paper pushing that government offices require. Only they pay slave wages, which, naturally, makes their young, attractive employees financially indigent. Now a man of power and means wouldn't take advantage of that situation, would he? I'm sure I wasn't the only girl in Washington supplementing her income between the sheets, on the couch, bent over the kitchen table, et cetera. I accepted long ago I was going to hell so that

did not enter into the equation. Best I could determine all the fun people would be in hell with me.

My first job in DC was as an intern on Capitol Hill, the worst paying branch of the federal government. Congress votes itself annual raises while its members rain shit on their staffs. But I learned how to play the game. Sleep with the right guy and you land a better job. So I fucked my way to the White House. Well, it was a lowly staff assistant position in the East Wing assigned to the First Lady's correspondence staff. But my foot was in the White House door. Who could say where it went from there, Monica Lewinsky anyone?

Back then I thought sex was a game invented by the gods solely for the pleasure of men. They were the only ones who seemed to enjoy it. The mechanics of it were rigged for their satisfaction. Does a drunken man ever bother with foreplay? Tell me girlfriend, do men even care whether we climax? No man I knew at this time did. So I accepted sex for what I saw it to be: a man's game in which the girl was along for the ride. What did I get out of it? The pleasure of being wanted ... and lots of free dinners, occasional presents, and cash from a discriminating few.

My poor mother, worrying for my soul, sent me to a psychologist a few years back. She tried the nuns first but to no avail. According to the psychologist, it all was due to the fact that my father left my mother and I a few months after my birth. There was little of a male presence, a father figure, around during my early years. And this psychologist opined that my adventures with men were a mechanism for receiving that male attention I lacked as a young girl. Whatever. Everybody on this planet is screwed up in one way or another so I might as well have a male attention deficit disorder as anything else.

2:30 p.m. and I already needed another caffeine fix. Those Starbucks people are like drug pushers. I think they're into me for \$200 per month! And on a salary of \$28,000 per year, that was big money. Not enough time to get out of the building and make it to my pusher (Starbucks) so I bolted for the takeout window at the White House cafeteria in the basement of the West Wing. The power of the White House was located in the West Wing. Males held the positions of influence in the

Bush White House. Men of power were born with roving eyes. I looked good that day so a walk through the corridors of power was a nice ego boost. Catching furtive glances from men constituted an affirmation for me. Why did I desire their attention? As validation of my self-worth? I'll leave it to the medical professionals to decipher. I just knew it felt good so I never passed up an opportunity to strut through the West Wing working a gentle swing of my hips with a slight bounce in my step. Too exaggerated of a hip swing and you look like a hood girl in a rap video. The bounce gives the breasts a slight giggle that catches a man's eye. Mine were medium sized but even a slender girl can work her assets if she knows what she's doing. There is a fine line between alluring and trashy. I often dressed against the edge of that line. It was frowned upon in the Office of the First Lady but to hell with them. They weren't my audience.

Although looking only to renew my caffeine buzz plus cop a small ego stroke, the trip took on added dimension when I spotted two of my bed mates separately eating a late lunch. James was an aide on the National Security Council staff and Lawrence, a high ranking staff member to the White House Congressional Liaison. They were social acquaintances of mine, not business (i.e., they didn't pay for it). Most girls would find the situation uncomfortable but I reveled in it. James was a player, so no harm giving him a rap on the balls. He hit all the available ass in both wings of the White House. I made eye contact with James first but routed my walk to his table past Lawrence. Sure enough, Lawrence got up out of his seat and practically grabbed my arm to make sure I stopped to speak with him. Now that was refreshing. Lawrence usually asked me on dates via bland emails betraying no desire for the meeting. You'd think he was setting up an engagement for bridge instead of animal sex. So I got a public display of emotion, nice.

"Grace, hey didn't you see me?"

"Why sorry, no. I spotted a friend across the way and was heading for a quick 'hello'."

I nodded over to James (sitting there looking stupid like a hurt puppy) just to let Lawrence know I had other fish that were friable. It was Lawrence, never Larry. He hated Larry. I gave

him a half step in James' direction just to see what kind of rise it got. Bingo.

"Hold on a sec. I meant to call you today."

"You call me? What, no email?"

"Look, you know I have a girlfriend on the Hill. It's best we keep this thing on the down low."

"Just keep it between the sheets, is that what you mean Larry?"

I called him Larry just to add fuel to the fire and see what gives.

"Grace, that's not fair. I'm talking to you right now. Here in the White House cafeteria. That's pretty up front, isn't it?"

"What did you wish to speak with me about Lawrence?"

"Are you free tonight?"

"Tonight?"

"Yeah, tonight."

"Like a few hours from now? You ever hear of giving a girl some sort of advance notice?"

"Sorry. You know the hours I work. I just learned today that I would be free tonight and I'd like to spend it with you."

"And what did you have in mind for this evening?"

"Dinner."

He was at least willing to spend some money on me.

Grace, "A nice start."

"Then drinks at your venue of choice. I don't care if we are seen together, it's cool."

"And if I'm tired after drinks and wish to be taken home ... alone?"

"I shall kiss you at the doorstep and be thankful for the interesting evening of conversation."

"Lawrence, contrary to office gossip you do have a romantic bone in your body. You might get lucky after all. Pick me up at seven."

With that I turned and walked toward James leaving Lawrence to sort the situation out for himself. James sat with a smirk on his face as I walked up. He knew a pro had just busted his balls.

"My, my, the princess of the White House cafeteria has deigned to lower herself and visit a commoner. I am touched."

“Get off the pouting James. We both know you’re a dog.”

“Saw Lawrence chatting you up. You work in the East Wing. What exactly did he need to speak with you about?”

Guys are just fragile eggs once you get to know them. Here was a guy screwing a harem full of women but now his poor feelings were hurt finding out one of his lesser harem girls was fielding other offers. Cry me a river James.

“Up until now I was 50/50 on whether or not I have sex with that guy after dinner and drinks. But you’ve settled it. I’m going full boat. Anywhere he wants it: car, parking lot, the living room floor.”

James was too easy. The arrow found its mark. I could see desire welling in his eyes. But the desire was only to possess me as a sexual object. Once he owned me, he would throw me in the gutter.

“Grace, have him drop you off at home at 10. I’ll be there at 10:15.”

I smiled for I was the one who possessed this man for the time being. And once I had a man, I really didn’t want him anymore. If he had been gracious about his little defeat in the cafeteria and laughed it off, he would have gotten another round with me. I was a catch and release huntress. This quarry was caught so it was over for James.

“Sorry honey. Not tonight.”

Left unsaid was “not ever”. Business concluded, I walked over to the counter and got my coffee.

## Chapter 3

"Humanity is what fills the little gaps between all the broken shit. It's sand slipping out of grasping fingers. I spent about two hours cleaning and inspecting my weapon systems so that I may face the enemies you all have placed me in proximity of. All this scares the shit out of me. So I clean. I prepare. I shower. I write. I meditate. I'm not the first soldier to be twitchy about doing what I've agreed to do. And I hope it doesn't stop. And I hope there are others like me. And I hope you understand that war needs people like me ... who can't dehumanize your enemy." Sgt. Thomas Strickland, KIA (killed in action) Iraq, August 16, 2005.<sup>1</sup>

### **Travis, The Chicken Farm, South Central Missouri**

Healing the body is a difficult task yet progress can be measured. Amputation. Reduce swelling in leg, heal wound. Begin physical therapy to avoid stiffness and contractures in muscles and joints. Fit prosthesis. Test walking in prosthesis. Adjust fit of prosthesis. Walk aided by parallel bars. Walk unaided on even surfaces. Walk on uneven surfaces. Ascend and descend steps. Go to therapy, take drugs, your body heals ... or at least becomes more functional. You never fully heal.

Not every soldier came home from war with physical injuries but every soldier who touched death has scars, scars of the soul. For killing, even acting as a mere witness to killing,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://rev-wayfarer.livejournal.com/51460.html> and <http://rev-wayfarer.livejournal.com/45600.html>.

saps one's humanity. It's unavoidable. I didn't understand this until years later. The process of dehumanizing the enemy started in basic training and became engrained during deployment. The enemy was given a name, something alien, even animal:

“Nips” = Japanese (WWII)

“Gooks” = Koreans (Korean War)

“Dinks” = Vietnamese (Vietnam War)

“Skinnies” = Somalis (Operation Restore Hope)

“Hajji” = Iraqis (Iraq Occupation).

I'd like to tell you this was all deeply troubling to me at the time but that would be a lie. To have an enemy was to have purpose. In Iraq, I embraced my purpose: machine gunner, killer of Hajji. So focused on the mission was I that little bits of my own humanity melted away without notice.

Getting blown up sucked. I lost not only my leg but, also, my purpose. Much later I learned that getting blown up actually saved me, the real me. Rehabilitation served as a temporary life purpose. Doctors, nurses, physical therapists, chaplains hovered around assisting in this mission. However, one day they pronounced me rehabilitated and sent me home. Home to do what? They didn't say and just shipped me home. Home to face the boredom, the tedium of life.

Perverse as it may sound, the dangers of Iraq invigorated my senses. The safety of chicken farming sucked the life out of me. The same routine every six hours of every day of every year until you die and they plant your broken, shriveled body in the ground. My bride wannabe test-drive thing was drying up due to lack of fresh test-drivees. It was getting to the point where I had to go a few counties over just to drink in peace without one of the spurned bride applicants showing up.

As I shoveled chicken shit the afternoon after meeting Robert, my mind cogitated how to get my ass out of this stink hole. Would Blackwater accept a one-legged ex-machine gunner for private security duty in Iraq? Those dudes pulled down some serious scratch. Can't hurt to ask.

“Tonight, just need to get drunk,” was the only thought forefront on my brain.

I drove 90 miles to south St. Louis to meet up with a Vietnam vet, amputee. I met Sam in the waiting room at the St. Louis VA hospital a few months prior. Every Wednesday night, Sam and his posse of aging, blue-collar biker types gathered at the Southside Roadhouse on famed Route 66. I had an open invitation from Sam to sit and get drunk in peace with his crew. The Southside Roadhouse had hardwood floors, tin ceiling, exposed brick walls, and old neon beer signs. This place was so old that it was retro-chic. Neighborhoods change over time like the wild flowers of the prairie. This formerly white, Catholic, blue collar area was now interspersed with Bosnians and blacks and religiously unaffiliated white urban pioneers. Sam and his crew were from the old guard trying to hold their turf and pretend nothing had changed. But the bar was now owned by a Bosnian whose countrymen (and women) occupied one corner of the bar. And in a third corner camped a young mixed crowd of grungers, gays, and artsy types. Each corner played its own music but the old guys had the bar's only television. Seniority hath privilege even here. Each faction pretended the others didn't exist. It was the most balkanized room I'd ever entered that wasn't a high school cafeteria. The Southside Roadhouse was really a confederation of three bars that just happened to be housed under one roof. If the Shia, Sunni, and Kurds of Iraq could only peacefully co-exist like this.

I plunked myself down in Sam's colony receiving head-nods and a few "what up Travis?" in greeting. Three topics dominated conversation with the tribe: sports, nostalgia, and solving the world's problems. As I sat down, it was nostalgia; the old Coral Courts Motel formerly located a few miles further down Route 66 just outside the city limits in the municipality of Marlborough. An art-deco motel in a little town named after a cigarette brand, a Holliday Inn it was not. According to Sam's crowd this was where you went to cheat on your spouse, where mobsters holed up, prostitutes plied their trade, underage kids drank, all night poker parties flourished. What happened at the Coral Courts stayed at the Coral Courts. The Marlborough Police? See no evil, hear no evil.

"Now why did they have to go and tear the place down?"

“What a man does behind closed doors is between him, God and the woman in the room.”

“Best to get the girls off the street anyhow.”

“And if a grown man wants to smoke some pot, what’s wrong with that? Why George Washington grew pot on his farm there in Virginia.”

“Did he now?”

“Yeah, they called it hemp but same thing.”

“I miss the Coral Courts.”

These guys liked to talk about shacking up with women for carnal purposes but I doubt half of ‘em could get a rise out of their peckers absent a double dose of Viagra. That wasn’t the point though. They were defending their right to go to the Coral Courts Motel on principle forgetting that the motel was torn down a decade ago and their peckers had been flaccid for god-knows how long. So the conversation went.

“Why bother having the Boston Tea Party and all if there’s no Coral Courts Motel!”

“Friggin’ right!”

All nodded in approval. I too nodded my approval of this mythical mini-Las Vegas.

“Like we had to go all the way over there to Vietnam to help the Dinks save their freedom from Charlie but we can’t even save the Coral Courts.”

“Charlie won and we lost the Coral Courts.”

“This country is going to hell.”

All member of the crew, in unison, silently took long pulls on his drink of choice. I kept an eye fixed on Sam’s buddy Charlie a/k/a “Hammer” who sat to my right. Charlie was a 300 pound, old, gnarly biker dude who looked close to weeping snot into his beer. The Coral Courts saga had him all broke up. Charlie possessed a unique skill of controlling the snot that drained from his nose while in an emotional state. He’d sob a spell with the snot inching ever lower from his nose down toward his beer. Just as it reached the foam, he’d inhale sucking the goo ball back up from whence it came.

Patrons came to a bar like the Southside to drink. Conversation was just a time-filler in between swigs. The group shifted its collective focus to the St. Louis Cardinals baseball

game on the television. It was the 5<sup>th</sup> inning of a listless, scoreless game against the Florida Marlins. Albert Pujols stood in the on-deck circle preparing to come to the plate. Just as Mithras was the personal god of the Roman legions prior to Constantine, Albert Pujols of the Cardinals was this city's local god (as had been Stan Musial in an earlier era). This worship of Pujols crossed the boundaries between the various camps within the Southside Roadhouse. A few Mexicans, grungers, and artsy types wandered over to Sam's camp where the television was located. Silence descended as Sir Albert, majestic gladiator, weapon in hand, strode to the plate to face the Marlins' Sergio Mitre. The high priest was at the altar.

The rest of the Cardinal batters had been choking on their own spit that night. They couldn't have batted their way through a team of Vatican nuns much less the Florida Marlins. It was on nights like this that either Albert Pujols lifted the rest of the Cardinals on his broad shoulders carrying them to victory or the team crashed in defeat. First pitch, a strike down the middle. Albert looked indifferent at the offering, like a dog quixotically sniffing a steak. The prior season, in Game 5 of the National League Championship Series, the Cardinals were all but dead. Two outs in the 9th, two runs down, two runners on, George and Barbara Bush on their feet cheering for their beloved Astros. Pujols crushed a Brad Lidge pitch completely over the toy train tracks above the left-field seats in Minutemade Park. Brad Lidge, practically unhittable that entire season, has never been the same. He remained a shell of his former self the entire 2006 season. Next pitch from Mitre, ball inside, high and tight. Mitre brushed Pujols back off the plate. Big mistake. The only thing worse than facing Achilles sword drawn was facing a pissed off Achilles. From 1200 miles away, we huddled around the Southside's only television to see the inevitable destruction about to occur in Miami. Sir Albert was not pleased, someone was gonna pay. The Marlins catcher set up outside placing his glove almost on the ground. He wanted his pitcher to stay away from Albert's power zone. Maybe he would chase a bad pitch leading to a weak groundout. Mitre delivered a knee-high tailing slider several inches off the plate. Any mere mortal would have had difficulty lifting that pitch out of the infield. But Pujols was

not mortal. He unleashed a controlled yet powerful stroke launching the ball 376 feet deep into the right field bleachers. A wave of celebration washed over us, hand slapping, smiles all around, more drinking.

The hand-slapee to my left turned out to be an attractive woman, 20ish. But something about her didn't fit. She was too neat, too polished. What was a classy youthful woman doing in the Southside Roadhouse? Better yet, what was this woman doing sitting between Sam and I, each possessed of a leg and a half? Whatever, it's a free country. Sam's crew were mystified how and why this stylish young lady landed in their midst. The typical male response to a situation he doesn't understand is to ignore it. Thus Samantha and I found ourselves completely alone amongst the sea of patrons at the Southside. We became invisible to all in close proximity. After I slapped her hand in celebration of the Pujols homerun, she just sat there smiling at me. She took a drink then turned her attention not to the ballgame but to me. No words came out of her mouth. She just patiently waited for me to engage her in conversation.

How unnerving? I tried watching the game pretending this wasn't happening. After a few minutes, I looked left and, sure enough, there she was with eyes fixed on moi. I mumbled out something lame to see if she would help me out of my predicament. Maybe lead in breaking the ice.

"You a big Cards fan?"

"Not really."

No help. She threw it right back in my face. I took another drink turning to watch the game for several minutes. When I finally looked back, she was still there with that expectant look on her face. I took yet another swig killing the bottle as a feeling of calm descended upon me. What the hell was I worried about? I just came here to drink with Sam and the boys. Why let some young chick with a superiority complex upset my evening? Hell no, ain't gonna happen.

"Listen, I'm a chicken farmer from a small town. Whatever you're looking for, I think you're looking in the wrong place."

Ha, that put her in her place or so I imagined. She smiled and paused for a moment.

“Come on, let’s get out of here.”

She stood gently pulling me to my feet by the arm. It was only then that I noticed Samantha was taller than I. Was it the heels? Out the door we went arms interlocked. She was driving this show and where it was heading was a mystery to me.

Samantha, “Which truck is yours?”

Travis, “Can’t you tell?”

She walked over to the dirtiest, oldest vehicle on the lot, opened the door, and got in. Damn, she knew. I fired up the old beast.

“Where to?”

“Just a few blocks away. These heels are killing me.”

“So why do you wear them?”

“To feel like a lady.”

I thought that reply a bit odd at the time. She had a second floor apartment in an old brick building typical of South City: high ceilings, big period windows, lots of wood trim, ancient fixtures, bad plumbing and electrical. My eyes took a tour as we came through the door trying to get a sense of the mistress of the house (of whom I had not a clue). A shrine of pictures to her mother hung on one wall but none of dad.

Travis, “Why no pictures of dad?”

“I don’t have any.”

A non-answer if ever I heard one, obviously a sore subject. Best to move on. A book sat on the coffee table, corners bent, cover worn. She’d read this one a few times. I picked it up, Meditation by Eknath Easwaran. Returning from wherever women go off to the moment they enter their home with a strange man in tow, she stood by my side.

Samantha, “It’s an interesting book if you’d like to borrow it.”

“A guy gave me a book earlier today. Do I look like I’m badly in need of education?”

“No, like a guy who is searching for something.”

She moved off to the kitchen.

“Wine?”

Wine? I’m a beer guy. Whatever, it’s her party.

“Sure.”

“Cabernet or chardonnay?”

“Is there a difference?”

Didn’t hear a response. That comment must have stopped her in her tracks. She’d finally realized that a redneck, ex-army machine gunner was standing in her living room. Maybe she was rappelling out the back window. Samantha finally appeared with two glasses of red wine handing me one, whether cabernet or chardonnay was lost on me.

Samantha, “Wine virgin, eh?”

After downing a gulp, I tried to look like a guy who had some clue about the merits of what had passed between his lips. I bobbed my head up and down giving it the obligatory, “Not bad” then picked back up the meditation book.

Samantha, “Ever meditate?”

“Tell me what it is then I can answer the question.”

“According to the author of this book, meditation entails stilling the body and mind.”

“Oh, then I do it every night. Except I call it sleep.”

Samantha smiled the smile of one in the presence of a smart ass.

“Is there more to you than the body and the mind?”

“All I got is what God and my mother gave me. And one of those parts I lost but the United States Army issued me a replacement.”

“You lost a part?”

“Yeah, my leg. Uncle Sam gave me a new one though.”

I lifted up the leg of my jeans to show her the artificial leg. She took it in stride, like guys lift up their pants to reveal artificial legs to her on a regular basis. Rather than taking the conversation down this new road, she kept up on the philosophy.

“I see. But that’s not really what I was getting at.”

“Oh?”

“You are made of three elements--body, mind and spirit--are you not?”

“That’s what the Bible says.”

“Meditation is a means to connect with the spirit of God that resides within you.”

“Really, that’s what them guys are doing when they sit there with their legs crossed?”

“I can’t speak for others, only myself.”

She took another drink of her wine, walked past me to the couch, and took a seat.

“How do you connect with God? Church?”

Never before had a woman taken me from a bar to her apartment, handed me alcohol, and then talked to me about God. They’re all a little different. Best to go with the flow. I accepted the implied invitation to join her on the couch.

“Church is all singing, clapping, and speech making. Enjoyed it when I was younger but haven’t found much use for it of late. This may sound silly.”

“Nothing you say is silly Travis.”

That was the first time she said my name and the sound of it gave me pleasure.

“The closest I ever felt to God was during a dark, cold night in the desert of Iraq.”

She nodded encouraging me to continue the story.

“We were raiding an outlying village at first light with an entire company, intelligence gathering mission, a smash and grab. During the night, we took up positions surrounding the town and waited. Sunrise was more than an hour away. The Lieutenant picked a few of us for guard duty while everyone else caught a few winks. I was set up on my platoon’s backside away from town, the furthest into the desert. When you haven’t slept in 36 hours and the caffeine begins to wear off, it’s easy to hallucinate. As I sat there shivering in the cold clutching my machine gun, the brightest stars I’d ever seen twinkled at me. Blink, blink. Bright as the billboard lights at the theater cutting through the darkness. The longer I stared, the more I felt the stars were blinking right at me. Like they knew me. ‘Hello Travis,’ they said. There was a presence with me in that empty desert. I wasn’t alone. God was there. I ... I can’t explain it.”

“You don’t have to Travis. I understand.”

It’s embarrassing to say something silly to a strange woman, especially an attractive one. So I put my head down for a moment to collect myself. Her two arms came around me pulling my head to her shoulder. She held me the way a mother

comforts a child. And I felt comforted. No matter the bizarreness of my condition—one-legged rural chicken farmer who thinks the stars talked to him in the desert of Iraq—she accepted me.

I'd never felt maternally comforted yet erotically moved all at once but this was how it went down with Samantha. First she gave me her lips to kiss. I accepted. Whether they were offered or taken, I have no memory but next came her breasts--beautiful, full. I suckled them to my heart's content. Men are engrained with an anti-Oedipus gene shielding us from ever viewing our mothers as erotic objects. But this thing had Oedipus written all over it. Her hand gently stroked my hair as I nursed at her breasts. Words cannot relate how fulfilling this was for me. Her femininity completely satisfied me without the climax of orgasm. I could have died right there with my head buried between those tits and been laid to rest a smiling corpse. But I did not die although my smile was short-lived. Samantha took my hand.

“Grab your glass. Let's go.”

I did as told and was led into her bedroom. The place was aglow in scented candles. I don't know when she slipped away to light them but the effect was magical. I kicked off my shoes and stretched out on the bed. While finishing my glass of wine, Samantha treated me with the visual pleasure of her undressing. A tall, slender and toned body was more and more revealed. She ducked into a walk-in closet for removal of the very last article of clothing and came back out wearing only a sheer nightgown, nipples erect. She came to me and began undressing me as the last of the wine flowed down my throat. I was naked. Her hand found my manhood bringing it to attention in short order.

If I could teleport myself back in time, I would stop this scene here. It was a beautiful experience up to that point. You would think a guy who has been in the Army and traveled to other countries possessed a clue but I had none. Her hand left my manhood. She dropped her gown to the floor. My eyes moved from top to bottom taking in the revealed naked figure before me: the soft lips, the full breasts, the bellybutton, and the

penis staring back at me. What the fuck! She's got a penis and it's loaded!!! Holy crap!

In combat, when a surprise attack happens, something primal inside you snaps. Your only thought is survival by any means necessary. You'll kill, you'll maim. I rolled away from her / him to the floor on the other side of the bed.

Samantha, "Travis, calm down. I thought you knew."

I got to my feet moving quickly as possible for my clothes. She / he tried to stop me from escape but I bowled it over in my flight for the door. Now in full crisis mode, Samantha (nee Samuel) was no longer human to me but merely a terrifying object to run from. Thank God I still had on my artificial leg. Grabbed my jeans off the floor before hobbling out the door as fast as my damaged legs could carry me. The rest of my clothes remained at the scene of the crime. Drove all the way home barefoot, shirtless, and still in a state of shock.

The shrinks call it post-traumatic stress disorder but I don't know what that means. However, I can rightfully say my emotions were then as fragile as a little boy. Any unexpected incident caused an outpouring of sentimentality. I cried that night like I hadn't done since the death of my father. It wasn't about the encounter with Samantha per se. She broke the damn disgorging a lifetime of pain, frustration, and loneliness. But as the causal agent of my depression, I focused on the incident with her / him while trying to make sense of the place I now found myself.

## Chapter 4

### **Travis, The Chicken Farm, South Central Missouri**

I just tried to go about my chores and pretend nothing happened. But something happened! A recurring nightmare. I would have given anything to go back to the nightmares about being blown up in Iraq. Those were ordinary by comparison. Now it was visions of me sucking on Samantha's luscious tits while a hard dick poked me in the belly. Even Rusty my dog could tell something was up. He gave me that look like "what's the matter boy?" His world was much less complicated. The bitch dogs have only one set of sexual equipment. If Rusty goes to mount one after a good sniff of the tail, there's no chance for an error. A girl dog is a girl dog. I never could have explained my pain to Rusty so I didn't even try. Only the chickens treated me the same. They were indifferent. A chicken's life was eat, shit, eat, shit ... get butchered for Sunday dinner. Right now they were eating. It was all they focused on. It was their one care in the world. I'd even tried visiting my father's grave and talking the issue over with him. No luck. Dad didn't want to talk to me about it. I guess he wasn't much of an expert on shaking off a sexual encounter with a shemale.

There must be a God and God must truly care about the suffering of his children or so I reasoned. As I sat in the house staring at the ceiling working on my third beer of the morning, the phone rang. My old childhood friend Lance called collect from the bus station a few towns over. How he found me, I don't know. There he sat penniless having just been released from prison.

"Sure you can stay with me for a spell Lance."

What were friends for? While I was in the Army, Lance became a meth addict. One day he burned down his parents' house trying to cook a batch of drugs in the kitchen. His parents disowned him right then and there. He got three years for possession with intent to distribute. I didn't care about any of that. My brain lasered in on one thing and one thing only—a drinking buddy to share the misery with.

Pulled into the bus station parking lot. Lance sat on the curb out front like a kid whose parents forgot to pick him up from soccer practice. His mood brightened as he spotted me coming around the truck. I sensed he wasn't sure I'd come for him. We hugged that man hug--bend at the waist, one shoulder forward for the arm wrap, then thump each other violently on the back.

"Welcome home brother," I said.

A decade earlier Lance, I and a few other restless teenagers ran together tight like brothers. Those had been the golden years of innocence. If only we could turn back the clock. The intervening years had not been overly generous to Lance or myself. Lance's family disowned him so, for better or worse, I was his brother once more. A six-pack of beer waited for us in the truck. The minute we got in, I handed him one and opened another for myself. Lance didn't need prodding. He hadn't consumed alcohol in 2 years, 3 months.

My mortal enemy, the fly, buzzed the interior of the pickup truck as we pulled out of the bus station parking lot. This fly took up residence in my pickup truck two weeks ago rebuffing all efforts at eviction. With a beer in one hand, I let go of the steering wheel to swing wildly at the fly. Lance grabbed the wheel from the passenger seat saving us from running off the road.

"Yo brother, what's up with you and the fly?"

"I've issued a fatwa on this fly. He's trying to wear me down, get inside my head. But I'll win eventually."

"OK, I see I'm not the only one with some issues to work through. How about you get us to the farm before launching an offensive in your bug war?"

It took all my strength to block out the fly for the remainder of the ride home. The son of a bitch had the balls to land on my nose at one point. How did the fly know a temporary

cease-fire was in effect? Bugs are cunning creatures. Upon arrival home, I showed Lance around the farm (and he thought prison smelled bad). While I shoveled chicken poop, Lance and Rusty the dog got to know one another. For a guy locked up for over two years, the simple pleasure of playing fetch with a dog out in the grass was exhilarating. I could see they were both enjoying the experience. Rusty was tired of my “woe is me”, sorry ass disposition so having a guy around who wanted to play was a big plus for the dog. I approached the joyful pair on the front lawn after finishing my chores.

Travis, “I’ve got five hours till the next round of shoveling chicken poop. Whatta you want to do?”

“Whatever.”

“No man. This is your day. Not every day a guy gets sprung out of prison. What will it be?”

“OK, let’s go down to the river and fish. Bring the dog and a cooler full of beer. Maybe throw the barbeque in the back of the truck too and grill us up some burgers while we’re at it. How’s that?”

“Beautiful.”

All I cared about was keeping my beer buzz going. And fishing is one of the top outdoor activities for drunks. So we packed up the truck, loaded in Rusty, and headed out to the river making for our favorite spot, a gravel bank close enough to shore that you could wade out to it. We humped the cooler, beer, ice, barbeque, food, and everything out to the gravel bank. Caught a few bluegill and catfish. Rusty chased birds and squirrels. We drank, ate and basked in the sun. It was a glorious late-summer afternoon.

Activity gives the mind something to focus upon. Nothing worse for depression than sitting around allowing one’s demons a chance to work on the head. I was grateful to Lance for the diversion. But there’s an old saying: you can run from your problems but never hide from them. If a man shuts himself up in a cave, his problems surely follow him inside. Many are aware of this but few know the corollary: solve one problem and life gives you another. All human beings are burdened with problems. It’s inherent in the human condition.

Eventually Lance and I just put the fishing poles aside and settled into the gravel. We reminisced about bygone days surfing the river. A group of us called ourselves the Missouri Surf Team, even had t-shirts printed up. As far as I know, we were the first ones doing it in Missouri. There are a few river surfing methods. One is to find a spot on the river with a rapid that crashes in such a way as to create a natural eddy producing an endless wave just outside the eddy. Another is tying off a rope to a bridge or tree on the bank. As teenagers, we skateboarded and fished. Kids can be inventive. The river in our area was only surfable after heavy rain causing the current to pick up speed and volume. One of us got the bright idea one listless, rainy summer day to try and ride the river on a boogie board. It was dangerous. We often fell and crashed against the rocks downstream. But it delivered an adrenaline rush addictive to youth. Eventually we graduated to small surfboards and figured out how to hang a towline from a bridge. It was a cross between surfing and water skiing. The final evolution of the sport came when we swapped a bungee cord for the towrope. The surfer used the bungee cord to catapult from one side of the river to the other at high speed jumping waves in the process.

What goes up must come down. Lance and I were on a high reliving our river surfing days when the conversation took a turn for the dark side. Lance talked about his time in prison. To avoid getting raped he joined a skinhead gang.

“It was like the movie *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* in there. McMurphy went into the nuthouse a sane human and ended up crazy as a loon.”

“You went crazy?”

“No, I was already crazy. I mean prison makes you a hardened criminal. I never had no trouble with the law except for being a drug addict. Prison is like a college prep school for criminals. Most of the guys in there spend all their time planning the next crime on the outside. If you weren't a real criminal when you went in, you'll be one by the time you come out. Why didn't they just send me to drug counseling?”

“It's like trying to ask a general why we're doing something. You have a better chance finding a snowball in hell

than searching for a good rational explanation for military decisions. ‘General, why we kicking down the doors of these poor Iraqi people in the middle of the night and pissing them off? Aren’t we supposed to be here winning over the hearts and minds of the locals?’

Lance, “You shoot anybody when you was over in Iraq?”

“Yeah.”

I didn’t elaborate hoping Lance would get the hint that this was not a road I wanted our conversation to go down.

“Those skinheads want to set me up in an internet scam business. They think the internet is god’s gift to criminals. Told ‘em I took a couple of computer courses at a junior college and that set them off to planning my computer theft business.”

“How they gonna set you up?”

“There’s some kahuna white supremacist down in Oklahoma who runs a credit card scam operation. He’s built an empire down there. I’m supposed to apprentice under the dude.”

I could tell this was not idle chatter. Lance had given the proposition serious thought. What sort of future can an x-con, former meth addict with a high school diploma look forward to? The prospects weren’t exactly bright.

“You hang with me and stuff will sort itself out.”

Those were the words Lance needed to hear. I sensed the weight roll off his shoulders. He fell asleep / passed out on the gravel bar. Lance wasn’t in drinking shape just yet. I loaded the barbeque, Rusty the dog, and Lance back into the pickup truck for the short ride home. Rusty and Lance slept piled on top of each other in the passenger’s seat as we made our way home leaving me alone in thought with an old Johnny Cash tune (“I Walk the Line”) playing in the background.

A message on the answering machine awaited my return. Aunt Bessie, my father’s older sister, finally surrendered in her long battle with cancer. I remembered her fondly from bygone days. She had a house full of seven kids and three dogs close enough that I could ride my bike. As an only child, the commotion of children in Aunt Bessie’s home was a welcome change from the tranquil loneliness of my own. My grandfather (Bessie’s father) was still alive then and I often saw him at Aunt

Bessie's place. He was one-half Osage Indian. He and I would go on walks in the woods escaping the perpetual madness of Aunt Bessie's. Grandpa never said much as we walked. He tried to show me how to observe life in the forest, to become one with the elements. For Native Americans, the entire world was imbued with spirits. He told me of the nature spirits. I cherished those walks with Grandpa. Grandpa also took me to a sweat lodge ceremony on an Indian reservation in Oklahoma. It was my first venture outside the white man's world and I'm grateful for the experience. He died a year after my father.

Not long after Grandpa's passing, Aunt Bessie and her tribe moved 30 miles away. I pretty much lost touch with them; however, she did host a big "welcome home" celebration for me after my release from Walter Reed Hospital. I appreciated the gesture and it was the last time I saw her alive. My cousin Virgil gave me the word. The funeral was at noon three days hence and he hoped I would attend.