Searching for the Seagull Motel.

"Every door to the Truth which I approached was crowded with other seekers attempting to gain entry. I went from door to door, but at each door I encountered a crowd. Finally, I came to a door at which no one was waiting. It was the door called "humiliation," and through that door I passed to the Truth very quickly."

- Attributed to the Sufi poet Bayazid Bistami

"Pickwick goes through life with that god-like gullibility which is the key to all adventures. The greenhorn is the ultimate victor in everything; it is he that gets the most out of life...His soul will never starve for exploits or excitements who is wise enough to be made a fool of. He will make himself happy in the traps that have been laid for him; he will roll in their nets and sleep. All doors will fly open to him who has a mildness more defiant than mere courage. The whole is unerringly expressed in one fortunate phrase -- he will be always "taken in." To be taken in everywhere is to see the inside of everything. It is the hospitality of circumstance. With torches and trumpets, like a guest, the greenhorn is taken in by Life."

– G.K. Chesterton

"Everything in nature is lyrical in its ideal essence, tragic in its fate, and comic in its existence."

– George Santayana

With the exception of historical figures, most of the names in this book have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved. There are no composite or fictional characters, nor any second-hand accounts. All occurrences related in this narrative are based on my memory of personal experiences, supported by numerous letters and documents from the time period covered by this book, and, where practicable, by present-day research.

Chapter One: **The Fall Through A Crumbling Wall**

It is only possible to understand our motivations many years after the fact, when the actions we have taken are irrevocable. At that point, all that remains is to laugh.

This is something that everyone sooner or later accepts as axiomatic, yet no one truly believes. Otherwise, we would all be paralyzed. But because existing in a miasma of confusion and misapprehension is not only the way we live but the only way we possibly *can* live, we should not attempt to look back on our lives and derive any conclusions until the fog has lifted at least a bit. For this reason, no one under the age of 50 or so should ever be encouraged to write a memoir of his earlier years.

In the spring of 1976, when I was 21 years old, I walked out of a college classroom in the Midwest where I had been a graduate student, a carbon copy of a blank contract bearing my signature indenturing me to a nationwide door-to-door Bible-selling operation tucked into the right-hand pocket of my blue Duofold notebook, and found myself, a few weeks later, stranded in an abandoned trailer with no hook-ups – in other words, no water, lights, air conditioning, refrigerator or toilets – that rested on a little lake of mud behind a Texaco gas station, also abandoned, in the gritty industrial city of Port Arthur, Texas on the Gulf Coast just across the border from Louisiana.

The mud had dried unevenly, or perhaps rested on an uneven substratum, so that the back end of my trailer was raised by several inches, just enough so that a stale sweet roll placed on the trailer's one little plastic pull-out table would slide slowly forward and onto the floor. I don't think I ever saw the floor; it was too dark, day and night.

Between my trailer and the gas station was a second tilted trailer, also without hook-ups and even more dented than mine, occupied by a retired fisherman who I once observed dining on barbecue potato chips and bourbon, and who told me his name was Blackie. He was about six feet tall -- almost as tall as me -- but so gaunt and stooped that he had to tilt his head sideways and squint one eye to look up at me. He walked with a cane, and had hobbled over to my trailer at 10:00 p.m. on a couple of evenings to say goodnight and share a drink. But his cane would sink into the mud, even deeper than his boots would, and I never could understand how it helped him to walk. He stood there in the still, oppressive evening, waiting for me to come out of my trailer so that he could tell me about his lonely life, and he was not only stooped, but sunken, and not only sunken, but tilted, at a 7 degree angle from true. He looked like he was keeping watch on the deck of a sloop bowing before the force of a terrible storm.

"You gotta radio in there?" Blackie would ask, peering around me into the depths of my trailer. Even in our limited milieu, he was like any other neighbor on any other block in America – friendly, helpful in a crisis, but intensely curious and competitive about what I might possess that he did not.

"I sure don't," I'd say. This was a formulation I'd never used in Chicago, but I'd gotten used to hearing people say it here, and I'd started dropping it into my conversation, along with "sumbitch." If you were in Texas, you'd employ "sumbitch" in the same manner that a visitor to Italy would casually drop *"ciao"* or *"basta"* into his conversation to let the Romans know he wasn't just some clueless tourist. "You know this sumbitch" – I jerked my thumb behind me to indicate the trailer – "dudn't have any electricity."

"Well, I'd sure like to hear some music. Maybe today you could buy a radio, huh?" Blackie licked his lips and tilted his head to peer around me into the trailer, adding yet another corkscrew turn to his sinking and tilting and stooping.

My trailer was not a double-wide; rather, it was the kind of rolling stock one would attach to a car to take on a two-day camping trip in the Poconos. Inside my little home was one pull-down cot, a fresh loaf of Wonder Bread, a cleanly scraped jar of peanut butter and a half stick of summer sausage, two heavy salesmen's sample cases with two identical sets of Bible reference books and storybooks, and a blanket on the floor, where my Bible-selling buddy John slept.

On the tiny table underneath the peanut butter jar was the same blue Duofold notebook I'd carried out of that college classroom. It contained my copy of the blank contract I'd signed, now filled in, and some sales scripts, and, tucked in the left-hand pocket, a couple of dozen sheets ripped out of a spiral pocket notebook – the torn edges where the holes once had been were now entangled with each other like scrabbling claws, so that the pages had to be carefully separated – filled with crude schematics I'd created of city blocks in Port Arthur and Nederland and Beaumont, and the names of hundreds of sales prospects next to the outlines of their homes. I was a Jewish Bible salesman in the Deep South; I needed every bit of preparation I could possibly muster.

On the cover of the old notebook was a palimpsest in blue ballpoint pen, a stanza from a Yeats poem that I had been using as a personal guidepost and hopeful prophecy since I was a college sophomore, but was now smeared to near-illegibility, here in the Texas heat, by the humidity, petrochemicals and mosquito foggers in the air, and the sweat and liquid mosquito repellent on my hands:

"The intellect of man is forced to choose
Perfection of the life or of the art.
And if it pick the second must refuse
A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark."

I had grand plans to rise in the world, even there in the trailer, where I couldn't stand up straight without hitting my head on the tinny ceiling. I intended to become another Wallace Stevens, the magnificently opaque poet who was also an esteemed businessman, or perhaps a socially conscious pundit with a personal driver on 24-hour call. I was not in the habit of taking my physical circumstances as a clue to my prospects for future success.

Indeed, my life in a trailer in Texas was more or less a lateral move from my childhood in Chicago, where my dreams were no less grandiose, though I lived in a dimly lit railroad apartment with ragged holes in the walls, and terrible things in the refrigerator. When I went to college on a loan and a prayer, I was stunned by how wonderful the dorm food was, and doubly stunned that my new friends didn't share my delight. I thought everybody and everything I encountered was great, and fascinating; I had lived in such straitened circumstances in my childhood, having traveled little, nor having been to the kinds of restaurants and plays that my middle-class friends were exposed to, that everything was a fresh and delightful revelation to me. I made no value judgments; like an infant batting at the objects dangled above his crib, I thought every phenomenon was equally novel and equally interesting. The exceptions were paintings and literature – my father, though he worked in a hellish aluminum smelting plant, was an impressionist painter on the weekends, creating Cezanne-like landscapes and skillful nudes, and a reader of the great Russian novelists – and he must have influenced me, because on these topics I was fearlessly outspoken, though not necessarily compelling.

I was an affable, agreeable, intensely curious guy – not a man, no longer a boy, but a "guy" and young for my age at that – with huge, nebulous ambitions and no clue about how infinitely far I was from achieving them. I wasn't exactly naïve, but stunningly unworldly, even though I had cashed in an insurance policy and worked long hours the summer before as a busboy in order to earn the final two credits for my undergraduate degree at Oxford, England with my girlfriend. It had been my first plane trip ever; my girlfriend and I broke up somewhere over the Atlantic and went our separate ways as soon as we arrived in Europe. I wrote tremendously ambitious poems that weren't tremendously successful, and I had a sophomoric fixation on the dilemma that I imagined I faced in choosing between "perfection of the life or of the art," not understanding that it is given to very few of us to have such a choice at all, rather than a choice between, say, a fixed and adjustable-rate mortgage. Always, always, at home or at school, or over the Atlantic, or in Texas, I floated from squalor to disappointment to defeat with a sort of innocent arrogance, existing in a cloud of wishful thinking that screened me from the truth and cushioned me from despair.

After we had a bourbon with Blackie, John – a partially deaf, chain-smoking Portuguese kid from Rhode Island with a thick mat of jet-black "bear hair" on his back, a chronic cough, and a bad case of sleep apnea who also was stranded in Port Arthur and who was bunking with me – and I would go to one or the other of the two topless bars downtown. Each had one resident stripper, the same ones nearly every time we were there, and we would shuttle back and forth between the two all evening in order to avoid being kicked out because we couldn't afford more than one beer per person.

I remember one of the topless dancers clearly; a tall and somewhat ungainly brown-haired woman in her early thirties, she danced on a narrow stage, more like a ledge, directly behind the bar, and every time she kicked one of her legs out, she looked like she might lose her balance and fall forward onto the bar. With every kick I could see that the soles of her bare feet were black. But I loved her all the more for this, and sometimes she'd smile back at me; the dancer at the other bar, whose face I cannot recall, was younger and more sylph-like but more distant. After midnight, John and I would return to the trailer, where I would fall asleep to his snores – they sounded like a Chrysler being slowly shredded by great metal blades – and the gasping

and choking that came between them. I had never heard of sleep apnea at the time; I thought he snored that loudly because, being partly deaf, he just couldn't hear how he sounded.

Tonight, however, instead of going to the bars, we were scheduled to meet with a longshoreman we knew named Gilbert at a roadhouse in Port Neches, near Port Arthur. John had met Gilbert a couple of nights previously while out drinking alone, and Gilbert had said, "why don't you and your buddy come to work for me on the docks?" The job, as Gilbert described it, involved tying up the oil tankers that came in from the Gulf and up to the immense, complex and noisome oil refineries that hemmed in Port Arthur on all sides. I had never before in my life given any thought to supertankers, or to how they were tied up when they came in to dock, or for that matter to the fact that crude oil came to our shores from other countries.

We'd met Gilbert once before, at his house in a desolate, unincorporated-looking area outside Port Arthur. Now, before offering us the job, Gilbert wanted to meet us again, this time at the roadhouse in order, John reported back to me, "to see if he can break our balls or something."

This was a Rhode Island expression that I'd never heard before. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know, give us a hard time. See how tough we are."

That wasn't necessarily what I'd wanted to hear. John was nervous too, I could tell, and although he looked like a tough street kid with a hide that would survive being scraped a mile or two along an asphalt road, he was just as unworldly as I was. We weren't even sure what a "roadhouse" was. But after a brutal day of door-to-door selling in the heat, humidity and petroleum stench of the city, we were eager for a new opportunity.

John and I met up at the trailer, bolted down salami sandwiches, and headed out to the highway to hitchhike into Port Neches. We were picked up by a taciturn man with dark green stains on his hands – the stains, whatever they were, also were visible on the filter tip of his cigarette – who, when asked if he'd ever been to this roadhouse, just said, "hunh." Afterwards, as we loitered in the parking lot while I waited for John to finish a joint he was smoking to settle his nerves, I said to him, "do you think that was a yes hunh or a no hunh?"

The roadhouse, we discovered, was a cinderblock cube set well back from the highway, which created an enormous parking lot that was nonetheless occupied by only two dozen or so cars. I remember wondering, as we were dropped off in front – we felt flicked away by the driver, who seemed wearied by our company – why such a small establishment needed such an enormous parking lot, and why there were no other buildings within a football field's length on either side of the roadhouse. It didn't occur to me until much later that whatever went on inside required privacy.

The roadhouse had only a single, rectangular window, set high up in the left-hand corner of the façade. It was too high for anyone to look into, or out of, unless you wanted to gaze at the moon, and in any event was mostly obscured by a bright-red buzzing neon beer sign. This, too, puzzled me at first.

Once inside, I discovered that it was merely a very crowded bar, though the patrons looked every bit as dangerous as I'd imagined they would – "shitkickers" was the term. My biggest fear was that everyone would stop talking when we entered and look at me, but nobody even glanced our way. I had a ride-along advantage everywhere I went in Texas; though I was 6'3" and a rail-thin 155 pounds – the result of years of never having had quite enough to eat – and Jewish, and raggedly dressed and, with my big glasses, somewhat "intellectual" looking, nobody ever looked at me askance as long as I was traveling with the obese, hirsute and heavy-breathing John, who had a Rhode Island accent so strong that people in Texas looked at him as if he were from – well, from Rhode Island, which to most of them was an unimaginably irrelevant corner of the world. John, by his very presence, created a diversion, though he had no idea of the role he played in deflecting glances and, relatively speaking, normalizing me.

Not sure what to do with myself, I drifted over to the jukebox and looked at the songs that were available; at the moment, it was playing Tanya Tucker's "San Antonio Stroll." For some reason, I fixated immediately on another record title – "Reconsider Me" by Narvel Felts, and there was something about that name, the alien quality of it, that scared me. I wasn't sure which was worse, the "Narvel" or the "Felts," but it was very clear to me that this was the kind of guy who belonged in a place like this – either dancing with Tanya Tucker or having a drunken screaming match with her in the parking lot – and I, very clearly, did not.

I felt like William Wordsworth in a whorehouse.

At this moment, John, looking pleased with himself but also very jittery and self-conscious, walked over with Gilbert. Though John was a heavy guy, seeing the two of them together was like looking at a tugboat escorting a supertanker. Gilbert was built on a grand, expansive scale, with the most impressive biceps I'd ever seen, even bigger than those of my father, who'd spent the Second World War hoisting turrets onto tanks at a Chicago factory. I understood instantly that it would take biceps like these to tie up tankers and assumed that this was why we had been invited here – to be assessed for our physical strength. I was a pretty good schoolyard athlete, and strong enough despite my lack of heft, but there was no way I could compete. I was just beginning to mentally relax – I wasn't sure I wanted this job anyway, even though our jar of peanut butter was empty – when Gilbert handed me a bottle of beer and tilted his chin up just a bit. It was a delicate gesture, I thought, for such a hulking man, his way of indicating that I should drink. After I finished most of the bottle, he shook my hand heartily as if I'd accomplished something of value and wandered off again.

John said, “I think he likes us. This is gonna be so fucking wicked! *Supertankers!* And he said he can get us fifteen bucks an hour under the table!”

“What’s under the table?”

“Whaddya mean? The money, numb nuts. The money’s under the table.”

“No, I mean, what does that mean?”

“What does *what* mean?”

“What does it mean that the money is under the table?” This was yet another subject I hadn’t given a lot of thought to.

I discovered a bit later in the evening – I don’t recall how I came to this conclusion, but it was obvious – that the job interview in fact consisted of Gilbert assessing John and me to see how much beer we could guzzle. Gilbert was a master welder, a car mechanic who had a engine he was rebuilding dangling from heavy chains in a shed behind his property, a bow-and-arrow hunter, a married man, and a student of modern history who could discourse on the Inchon Invasion, but he seemed to care above all for beer. In the topless joints, I was usually done after one, having figured out in college that the first one always tasted the best, but tonight I managed to drink, and somehow to pay for, four. There was some tension between me and the bartender, I recall, about the brand of beer I’d ordered, which apparently wasn’t the “right” one – the one advertised in the neon sign in the one window was the right one, apparently, though why they carried the “wrong” one as well, other than to test outsiders like me, wasn’t clear. It was as if I’d tried to order a Fernet Branca! Maybe the approved brand was Lone Star, or maybe that was the one that only idiots and outsiders ordered; but very late in the evening, Gilbert reeled up to me belligerently and said, “you’d better learn how to drink beer.”

“Huh?”

“Nobody works for me who don’t like to get drunk. That’s shit, man.”

That was his way of telling me I’d gotten the job.

There were two fistfights that evening. One involved me. John was playing a game of nine ball with a diminutive one-armed man, and handed the cue to me so he could go to the washroom. I took a shot, whereupon the one-armed man erupted in a Rumpelstiltskinesque fury, leaping up and down and shouting, “you don’t do that! You don’t take nobody’s turn for him! We was playing for money! You don’t *do* that!” The thing was, I instantly knew that he was right and, doubly shamed (I’d also missed the shot), I knew that I was now faced with the classic quandary of any man fighting someone smaller and weaker, and, worse, justified in his anger: knock him down and look like a bully, or walk away and seem a coward. I decided it would be safer to take the bully route, but just as we began to circle each other – my opponent’s one fist circling warily in front of, and well below, my two – there was a far bigger uproar at the other end of the roadhouse. A young guy named, or maybe nicknamed, Buck, was screaming at a Mexican friend of Gilbert’s, calling him a “fuckin’ spic” and a “pepper gut.” I’d noticed Buck earlier in the evening – he looked a bit like a teenaged Paul McCartney, during his tenure with the Quarrymen – and had felt a certain jumpy intensity radiating from him, although that was true of most of the bar’s denizens.

Buck’s very pregnant wife, Belinda, was seated nearby, placidly observing him heap abuse on the Mexican, and it was very clear to me – the one-armed guy and I thankfully had lost interest in our fight at this point – that Buck was trying to show off for his wife; his anger seemed forced, rather than genuine, and the insults rote. The Mexican leapt at Buck, but Gilbert intervened, and got Buck to sit down by pressing hard on both of his shoulders. Buck immediately sprang up, whereupon Gilbert pressed him down again. Once again, Buck sprang up, like some broken jackass-in-the-box. Finally, Gilbert managed to get Buck to sit and then seated himself in a chair across from him.

Gilbert gently positioned his elbow in the center of the wooden table and raised a massive index finger in order to make a point to Buck. Buck swatted at the finger and screamed, “Fuck you, Gilbert!” Gilbert snapped the back of his hand at Buck’s mouth – his elbow remained on the table, and only his hand moved, but very quickly – and suddenly there appeared on the table in front of Buck a little splash of blood and, like a tiny iceberg floating in the center of it, a single snow-white tooth. Another broken tooth remained in Buck’s bloody mouth, and there was a twiglet of blood on Gilbert’s thumb as well. The kid, humiliated, spat the other tooth and some more blood on the floor and dragged Belinda out of the roadhouse, screaming that he would return with a shotgun and blow off Gilbert’s head, and the Mexican’s, and “anyone who got between me and them.” It was then that I understood why the only window in the roadhouse was situated way up high in the corner; it would be difficult for anyone to fire or throw anything through it, and the bullets would either ricochet off the ceiling, or fly over the heads of the patrons.

Nonetheless, the bar owner – a calm, gnomish old woman who seemed to intimidate everyone there, including Gilbert – locked the door from the inside and turned off all of the overhead lights. Other than a few lights behind the bar, the only illumination remaining was from the neon sign, the jukebox, and the pinball machines. She ordered everyone to hide under a table; when a couple of people tried to unlock the front door and leave, she pulled out a shotgun of her own and ordered them to stay, concerned, I suppose, that Buck was lurking in the parking lot.

I was crouched under the only pool table in the place, and felt a bit selfish about it, because its dense, slate construction offered the best protection against bullets; to my right, crouched under a tiny table with her forearms and elbows resting on the filthy floor, her head hidden and her backside sticking out and up, was a prostitute I had noticed earlier that evening sipping a glass of white wine by herself and smiling pleasantly. At the time, I had thought that she looked remarkably like Florence Henderson, the wholesome, wide-eyed actress who played the mom on the Brady Bunch. Now her face, pressed to the floor as she struggled to hide under the table, was not visible. So I looked at her legs, revealed almost to the hips by her hiked-up skirt. Even in the semi-darkness, I could see that they were sleek and smooth, that she wore no stockings, and that her panties were white. I stared at them and thought, "these legs might be the last thing I ever see in my life," and tried to decide whether this was a terrible prospect or a pleasant one.

After a moment had passed and we heard a pickup – presumably Buck's – squeal away from the parking lot, I called over to her. "Excuse me, do you know you look like someone?" I realized after I spoke that she must have thought I was addressing her rump. She did not pull her head out from under the table to look at me, but I could hear her soft, muffled voice from underneath the table. "Sweetheart," she said. "Please shut up."

Thirty years later, this single evening, like all of the others I spent in Texas and New Orleans while I struggled to earn enough money to get back home, seems shrouded in smoke. It isn't that I don't remember it all clearly – my memory for distant details has always been very strong, and I saved, or later gathered, the long letters I wrote to my friends at the time recounting my experience, and the careful, tactful and (as I read them now) deeply worried responses they sent to me. So it isn't so much the specifics of what happened that are now shrouded and obscured, but rather the perhaps ungraspable issue of motivation.

It was to try to understand this – not just my motivation in going down to Texas and the stupid decisions I made that ground me deeper into the mud while I there, but whatever it was in the insalubrious air or water of Port Arthur that caused so many of the odd people I met to do the odd things they did – that thirty years to the day after my involuntary exile in Texas, I made plans to return. I would return to see what, if anything, I might have learned about my time there, why I dropped out of graduate school, why I signed a blank contract when every one of the 25 other job seekers with me in the rented classroom had drifted away, one by one, in incredulous contempt, and why I ended up working as a door-to-door Bible salesman, as a longshoreman tying up oil tankers, as a warehouse worker, and, while living with a sweet old woman named Granny Davis, as the administrative assistant to a pimp.

I'd come back to see if the Seagull Motel, where I'd stayed my first night in Port Arthur, sleeping next to a wall that had a four-inch hole in it, still existed. This room had been a wild extravagance – I have among my piles of paper saved from that time a tiny note, in John's block printing, that reads: "MOTEL BILL PAYED 4.40 JOHN 5/16/76," which would suggest either that John had lent me the money for my half of the room bill, or that I'd lent it to him. Regardless, $4.40 was more than our food budget for a day. Worried about how I'd survive in Texas with nowhere to sleep after I left the Seagull, and with no money in my pocket, I'd listened to the traffic rumbling overhead – in my memory, the hotel was situated directly under a highway overpass – and worked my fingers through the hole to feel for just a moment the cool, oily rain that came down all night.

If the Seagull Motel still existed – there was a listing for one on the Internet, though I found it hard to believe that it was the same establishment – I planned to spend another night in it, presumably at a higher rate than $4.40 per person. I'd see if the hole was still there, in the wall above my bed. I'd see if I could find the remains of the abandoned Texaco station, though my trailer, and Blackie's, and Blackie himself, would almost certainly be gone. The docks where I'd worked would still be there, and perhaps also the roadhouse, which looked like it could withstand a direct hit from a mortar, and maybe the churches where I'd looked for a place to sleep, and the bars and roadhouses and topless joints.

And I'd come back to see if any of the remarkable characters I'd encountered were still to be found. Thirty years down the road, Granny Davis, who took me in and cooked me fried chicken or Cajun food every night, had probably passed on, and likely the man who never told me his name who'd hired me to organize his whores, and Jasper Stultz, who'd rented me the abandoned trailer and later set the district attorney on me, and of course the drinking buddy who'd died at 19, one or two nights after I'd met him, when he plowed his car into an oak tree on Sara Jane Road after carousing all night at Doc's Pressure Cooker on Highway 87.

But I believed that his widow, Hazel, was only 19 when he died; I still have the article I clipped out of the *Port Arthur News*, recounting how he'd walked into Doc's "waving a sawed-off shotgun cloaked under an American flag" and how he'd threatened to kill Hazel before his own suicide, and I wondered if enough time has passed for her to be willing to talk to me about her late husband, or so much time that it didn't really matter. The Reverend Terry Alvin, who'd absconded with my money and his church's audio-visual equipment, might be back in the area, though like Hazel probably not available for interviews. And there was the painter with whom I rode through a long night in a Greyhound bus from Port Arthur to New Orleans, an ascetic artist who worked in the tradition of the great Armenian abstractionist Arshile Gorky and who was reading *The Magic Mountain* when I met him. He was still young enough to be working, though likely difficult to track down because he was, at least at the time, unemployed and living in an attic room reading Stevens and Eliot.

Others might be around as well, though I also had to consider the damage caused by Hurricane Rita, which had devastated Port Arthur, and which could well have driven some of the people I knew back then out of the area for good; with at least another decade of "super storms" predicted by some climatologists, I wondered who would want to stay. But then it wasn't a matter of "wanting," for them, or for me at the time – I was trapped, though, as it turned out, temporarily; for better or for worse, they had been born there.

And if any of those people from back then gave me any thought today – they probably wouldn't remember my name, but might remember the tall, undernourished Jewish kid from Chicago – wouldn't they also assume that I wasn't any longer with the living? I picture now, as some of the longshoremen did then, the spectacle of John and me racing down a narrow wharf to reach a small motorboat piloted by Gilbert, which he was using to take us out to one of the supertankers. In our excitement and in our eagerness to look good to Gilbert, we ran onto the wharf at exactly the same time, but John was wide and the wharf was narrow, so we collided and staggered in opposite directions. Because the water there had an average depth of 35 feet, and because we were wearing hard hats and heavy boots, we would have sunk fast, but we both managed to save ourselves from the oily water by flapping our arms like fledgling birds.

Gilbert had laughed and said, "one at a time, you fucking morons."

How could the likes of us have survived?

And by going back I wanted to get a sense of Port Arthur itself, at the time of my exile one of the ugliest, most polluted and most crime-ridden cities in North America, to see how it had survived Rita – like many cities on the Gulf after the storms, its fate had been almost completely overshadowed by the news from New Orleans – and to see how it was preparing for what seemed to be a fearsome long-range forecast.

Or perhaps I'd come back to discover a rejuvenated city. There were only a handful of people I'd met down there who struck me, while they were sober, as not especially smart, and nearly all were more accomplished than me, who wasn't capable of much more at the time than playing touch football or composing a villanelle. Too, the milieu I'd found myself in might've distorted my vision of the city; I didn't spend a lot of time consorting with the executive class, which, though it worked under the same blanket of pollution as everyone else, still had built a petrochemical center that was of critical importance to the American economy. After all, Chicago was a mess in 1976 too, as was New York. It was not inconceivable that Port Arthur had rebounded as they had.

Shortly after Hurricane Rita – the neglected successor to Katrina – struck Port Arthur and environs, I happened to see a black and white photograph in a Chicago newspaper of a Port Arthur residential neighborhood, showing some ordinary-looking houses sunk to the middle of their living-room windows in turbid-looking water. Though it probably was not the same street I had lived on, it looked very much like it, and got me thinking about Port Arthur again. This began the train of thought that led me to come back to the city to discover whether the buildings that Rita had damaged were new, or falling apart to begin with.

I am a corporate branding consultant now, 51 years old, but not so far removed from Port Arthur that I can't recall how the air smelled or where that garage was that my nameless employer might have used for his clients' afternoon assignations. I did not want to go back to Port Arthur to remember, but rather to try to understand.

But understand what? That wasn't easy to answer. I earned only $270 a month as a teaching assistant in graduate school, and had no other source of money, and little or no family support. I needed a job, and the Bible-selling company had promised me the prospect of earning big money for the summer, but there were summer jobs in Chicago that wouldn't have left me stranded in a strange land when they didn't work out. So perhaps I'd decided to go back to Port Arthur just to understand how I'd allowed myself to fall through a ragged hole in a wall only to end up caught in another, deeper, one.

In a broad sense, I wanted to reacquaint myself with myself as a 21-year-old, so long ago that I was nearer in time to the Second World War than I am now to who I was then. In a more narrow sense, armed with the advantages of time and perspective, I wanted to answer a question that didn't even occur to me to ask back then, or for a great many years after that. That question, put into the simplest terms, was: "What on earth could I have been thinking?"

Chapter Two: Eudora Welty And The Spirit Of '76

There were many critical decision points on my way from graduate school in the Midwest to becoming an administrative assistant to a pimp in Port Arthur, Texas that any reasonable person, looking at the matter objectively, might have gently questioned. The first such decision occurred one March afternoon – before I ever knew there was such a place as Port Arthur – in Oxford, Mississippi, coincidentally the first place I had traveled to since I spent the previous summer completing my undergraduate degree in Oxford, England.

I had come to Mississippi with some fellow graduate students to attend a national English honorary society's convention in the town where the great literary critic Cleanth Brooks taught and William Faulkner wrote and drank and raged. It was my first trip as an adult to the South, and I would have gone for any reason, but I was there in particular because I had published a long poem, influenced (at least in my fevered mind) by Wallace Stevens' "Sunday Morning," in the honorary society's bi-annual magazine that was eligible for a $1,000 annual prize, and I wanted to be there at the convention banquet when I was announced as the winner. It was America's bicentennial year, and, having seen even less of the American West than the American South, I was looking forward to taking the much-publicized bicentennial bike tour, a convoy of fellow free spirits that was to start in San Francisco and traverse the midsection of the country before arriving on the East Coast. The $1,000 would just about cover my plane fare to the West Coast, the purchase of a bicycle, and my living expenses on the road, and I had already begun to plan my trip, based on the knowledge that the editor of the magazine, Dr. Eldon Hall, was one of my professors, and that he had been for several weeks giving me smug sidelong looks that suggested to me that I was as good as on my way to San Francisco. It was the first and last time in my life that I felt possessed of some sort of literary influence: I had a friend in the Academy.

Because I am an inveterate saver of scraps – maybe I thought my papers would be of interest to archivists and historians someday – I still have a copy of my budget for the month of March, 1976, written in blue ballpoint on the cover of another one of those Duofold folders:

$40 - Mississippi
50 - Food
70 - Rent
15 - Bills
25 - Books
____
225
$8 - Drivers License

233 – Exactly

The "exactly" was inscribed with a sort of triumphant flourish. Even after spending $40 in Mississippi on food and perhaps on one or two Faulkner paperbacks, I still would have $37 left from my salary as a graduate teaching assistant to supplement my $1,000 prize. This might allow me to buy a better bicycle, or to have some fun before I left for San Francisco.

The night before the banquet, several of us went out to dinner at a small café in Oxford Square. With a portion of my $40, I order a porterhouse steak with baked potatoes and vegetables. One of my fellow students observed me eating for a moment and said, "boy, you'd better go into business when you get back from here." I asked him why. "Because you like to eat," he said simply. But everybody likes to eat, I thought; what's your point?

But then it occurred to me that everybody had a job, too – or at least understood that they needed one. It hadn't much occurred to me then, because – well, it's difficult to say why, exactly. It wasn't as if I didn't need the money, even dwelling as I did in the Empyrean; I subsisted on Velveeta sandwiches, three-bean salad and macaroni. But I hadn't thought about getting a regular job beyond a graduate assistantship because it was too far beyond me; there was nothing I knew how to do, my father shoveled aluminum scrap into furnaces for a living, and nobody in my family had ever so much as worn a suit to work. I wasn't skilled enough for a simple office job, and yet I inexplicably believed that greatness lay before me like a golden road.

After the banquet, but before the $1,000 prize was to be announced, Eudora Welty, the great Southern short story writer and novelist, read us a selection from her novel "The Golden Apples." I don't recall much of her reading – I was focused on my friends, who were excited for me, and on my professor, who was seated across the table at me and continued to give me that odd sidelong smile. But there was a moment in Welty's reading when I suddenly snapped to attention, a moment when one of her images rang so clearly and truly in the air that I was instantly chagrined at the unbridgeable gap that lay between her talent and my own. The image, as I recall, had something to do with the moon, and the image itself lingered like a harvest moon that shone with mild admonishment over my head in that darkened banquet room.

Abruptly, at the end of her reading, she began to discuss her deliberation process in determining the winner of the prize, and it was only then that I realized that she was the judge. My heart sank again, a bit, because my poem, such as it was, didn't strike

me as being from the same world as Welty, but my friends looked so excited for me that I actually pushed my chair back to head up to the stage at the very moment she pronounced someone else's name. Oddly enough, as I looked around the table to ensure that none of my friends had noticed my gaffe, my professor continued to smile that odd smile – in other words, *after* I had already lost. It was a measure of my lack of worldliness that I had no idea then, or for many years thereafter, what that smile meant.

Somewhere on the road back from Oxford, I determined not to return to graduate school, and instead starting wasting my days on campus playing table tennis and basketball and reading listlessly. I decided to get a good-paying job that required no physical or mental effort whatsoever, and when I saw that students were being recruited to help move hundreds of thousands of books from the old library to the newly constructed one, I decided that was for me. But by the time I got around to applying, the positions were filled. That's when I saw, in the student activity center where I was playing table tennis, a sign that read:

SEE AMERICA THIS SUMMER
EARNING POTENTIAL IS UNLIMITED
BE YOUR OWN BOSS

The following evening, I followed the sign's instructions and found myself in a little-used campus classroom that had been rented for the day by a company that would not reveal its name. The classroom, as I recall, was almost full; that would mean there were about 25 fellow students. The presenter, a slick, folksy young guy in a burgundy corduroy sports jacket and deep-red knit tie (this was, remember, 1976) began by pointing out that everything in the classroom, including the clothes on our backs, everything on campus, and indeed every man-made object that existed in the non-Communist world, had at one point been sold by somebody to somebody else. The clothes on the back of Jesus Christ? Purchased, he said, and therefore sold. Sales, he said, was the most important job there was.

So. This was a sales job. I was okay with that. Having been a busboy and dishwasher, a night watchman, a typist and guard in a mental hospital, and a stock boy in an electronics repair shop, I was interested in trying something new. It didn't seem like hard work, and I knew how to talk.

But what kind of salesman, someone asked. The presenter replied, "I can only tell you that this is a wonderful set of products that have been successfully sold around the country for many years. But I really can't tell you more about these products until you agree to come on board."

The presenter's name was Rick, and he would later become my regional manager. He had longish blond hair that touched the back of his burgundy collar and a blond mustache, and eyes that were unnaturally wide, as if he were on a double dose of No-Doz, and he would steeple his long, slender fingers together and smile benevolently whenever any kind of objections were raised. Like all good salesmen, he knew verbal jiu-jitsu; he'd acknowledge your objections and turn them into benefits. He stood in the same spot where various English and philosophy professors had stood at one time or another, and unlike them, had access to knowledge that appeared to be more than merely theoretical, though he was no less gnomic, as it turns out, than they were.

Someone else said, irritatedly, "but why can't you tell us? Seems like complete bullshit to me."

Rick smiled. "Of course, I can understand your curiosity. Believe me, curious and skeptical people make the best salespeople of all. The only small problem is, if I tell you what's involved, you'll form preconceptions, and I want you to come into this with an open mind and trust us. If you do, we'll repay that trust by giving you a wonderful, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

"The sign said 'see the country this summer.' Where would we be going?"

"I *know.* I *know.* Isn't that one of the most exciting parts of this program? The fact that a couple of weeks from today, you could be anywhere in the United States? I don't know about you, but I think that's just tremendous. *Tremendous.* While your friends from the dorm are frying their brains on some beach somewhere, you'll be out there learning about the world and making money and seeing a part of the country you maybe didn't even know existed."

"Frying my brains on a beach sounds pretty good," someone muttered. "So how much money would we expect to make?"

"Why don't you all take a piece of paper out so you can write this down. Ready? Okay. 'I – don't – know.' And the *reason* I don't know is because it's entirely, *entirely*, up to you. Isn't that incredible? You hold the power in your hands and your minds to make thousands of dollars this summer, and it doesn't depend on your boss, or your parents, or a social worker, or a teacher, or anyone else. Just on you. Just on how hard you can work. I can tell you that some of the people that work for our organization earn as much as $25,000 for the summer. But if you want to be one of them, you have to, a, stick around for the rest of my presentation, and, b, join our organization and, c, work your ass off this summer. If that doesn't seem to quite up your alley, then by all means, go bake yourself on a beach."

Several people got up and left, presumably to do just that.

One of the remaining students said, "can you at least tell us the name of your company?

"Of course. Absolutely. It's on the contract. And as soon as you sign the contract, you'll know who we are, and you'll start to get a lot of your other questions answered."

"So what you're saying is that we have to sign a contract first before we know what we're getting ourselves into."

"What I'm saying is that very seldom in our lives do we get a chance to try something that offers almost unlimited opportunity, exposes us to a new way of life, and allows us to see another part of the country. Without any cost obligations of your own, and just by signing a contract."

"Fuck this shit," somebody said, and seven or eight more students walked out.

One of the remaining students asked, "well, can we agree to come on board but then change our mind if we don't like the set-up?"

"No, we shoot you if you try to leave." No one laughed. "Seriously, you're free to leave at any time if our 'set-up' isn't right for you. We find that every summer, a few people do leave the field before they're finished, and of course they're liable for any materials we've advanced to them that they haven't paid for, but otherwise they're free to go. And a lot of them have written to us later and said they regretted leaving and thanked us for the incredible experience we gave them."

At this point, there were only three or four people left in the classroom. One of them said, "okay, thanks for the incredible experience, asshole" and walked out, followed by everyone else except for me.

Rick eyed me pleasantly, utterly unperturbed by the response. "So what about you? You interested?"

I thought his burgundy corduroy coat was cool. I wanted one like it. I admired his confidence, or perhaps bravado, in the face of nearly universal contempt. I didn't want to be like everyone else, stalking out merely because they were being asked to sign a blank contract; I thought I had more imagination and daring than that. I thought maybe they'd send me to San Francisco anyway. I thought maybe I could learn sales skills like he possessed, though it didn't occur to me that they weren't so good that they couldn't prevent everyone else but me from walking out on him.

I was hungry; I wanted to get out of that classroom and get back to my basement apartment to make a cheese sandwich. But I didn't want to feel as if I'd just wasted ninety minutes for nothing.

"Sure," I concluded. "Why not?"

Certainly, like the other 24 people in that classroom with me, I could have walked out of that room without having signed the contract, and gone back to graduate school and eventually become a professor of philology or linguistics or a teacher of creative writing; or gone back to Chicago and gotten an internship in an advertising agency and become a copywriter for Kraft Cheese; or gone on spring break to Fort Lauderdale and transferred to a better school and picked up an MBA, and might have done one of these things if I'd had the family connections and the resources, or known what an internship was, or owned a suit, or possessed the imagination, the understanding, and the initiative.

Instead, I signed the contract – not literally blank, of course, but with most of the relevant information missing – and, three weeks and several follow-up meetings later, I had packed a duffel bag with some worn jeans and underwear and a few editions of the college literary magazine with my poems in them (in case I should run into James Dickey or any other eminent poet-critics along the way) and was headed down to Nashville, Tennessee for sales training school with three other students from nearby universities, using one student's beat-up blue Dodge.

The car owner's name was Larry. He was a college baseball player from Wisconsin, a bit older than the rest of us, and a solid-looking guy we all immediately trusted and turned to for advice, despite the fact that his nickname was "Diz." We drove all day and night, taking turns at the wheel, and some time after midnight I remember biting the inside of my cheek and pinching my ear as I drove, the other passengers sacked out next to me or in the back seat, in order to stay awake. I'd flop my left hand outside the window in the strong breeze, or place it on top of the rearview mirror; when I turned the mirror towards me, I looked as if I were patting myself on the head.

I have a notation, written on a yellow legal pad in red marker, that delineates my budget for this road trip:

Food & miscellaneous until Nashville 12:00 noon: $7.71

And, on another part of the same page, this time in blue ballpoint pen, there is this notation:

Gas – 8.30
Toll - .67
First night Room – 2.45
Gas - .67
Nashville Room – 21.20

$2 a meal until Saturday: 10x2= 20. EXACT.

I have no memory of staying in a motel on our trip down to Nashville, though I suppose we must have, three to a room, nor of any $2 meals; at those prices, the experiences were likely to be either quickly forgotten, or very memorable indeed.

Given that the students at sales training school were ingathered from all over the country, and that we were a motley collection of college students and dropouts, factory workers, hopeful fools, young entrepreneurs, future software billionaires, and at least one aspiring poet, the purpose of the school seemed to be to use classic propaganda techniques to mold us into one unquestioning mass mind that would, no matter where in the country we were from or where we were subsequently sent, market the company's products in exactly the same way. This required an incredible and, frankly, admirable educational program. For 12 hours a day with lunch and bathroom breaks, a succession of successful salespeople and skilled public speakers taught all 560 of us the most basic of sales and presentation techniques, helped us to memorize our sales presentations, and transformed us from feckless, dope smoking drifters into – some of us, at least – moderately competent salespeople.

To keep us motivated and excited during these twelve-hour sessions, we were required periodically to stand up en masse, sing songs, chant slogans and shout, sometimes in unison, and sometimes pitting one section of the auditorium, or one part of the country, against another. Required? More like compelled. The slogans and songs were moronic upon reflection, but reflection was irrelevant in the dark din of that auditorium, and it was impossible not to become a member of the mob.

When you're up you're up
When you're down you're down
When you're up against giants
You're upside down.

What the fuck was that supposed to mean? But it didn't matter. On the way from the Alamo Motel where we were staying to the auditorium at 4:30 a.m., on lunch breaks, late at night when we studying our sales scripts, we repeated the little chants.

When you're up you're up
When you're down you're down
When you're up against giants
You're upside down.

At lunch, we'd study our sales scripts and find ourselves – even out of the purview of our instructors – talking with the same bluff, booming optimism they employed. There wasn't anything religious about the content of their lectures, except to the extent that positive thinking and profit are an American religion, but these creeds were so pervasive that even the most cynical among us (certainly not me) got caught up in the spirit.

After breakfast, one of the students, a glum little guy with a bit of a hunchback, raced in a stiff-limbed way around the plaza where the auditorium was set in order to pump himself and the rest of us up, and, when we were seated for the morning sessions, promptly vomited his breakfast – I'd watched him earlier, at an all-night diner, consume bacon, oatmeal, eggs, orange juice and grits – all over the seat, and student, in front of him. The instructor said, "why don't we take a five-minute break while we take care of some business," and he had the same cheery tone that he employed when talking about overcoming any other obstacle to success.

At one point during the week, we were asked to transcribe a vision of our future. After allowing us fifteen minutes to reflect and write, the presenter collected our sheets, and said that the company would hold them in their files in perpetuity; mine might be there still. The reason for all this wasn't clear; maybe it was a way of acknowledging our dreams, and then putting them in a vault so that we could forget them and concentrate on the task at hand: selling books.

My vision, as I recall, was almost anguished in its optimism, and had something to do with becoming a true Renaissance man, an adept in any number of fields of artistic and intellectual endeavor. Like many late adolescents, I wanted to vault quite cleanly from nonentity to magnificence without troubling to touch upon competence. My role model, as I made clear in my little essay, was James Dickey, the Southern American poet, author of *Deliverance* and distinguished critic who also was a successful advertising executive who concocted slogans for Coca-Cola, accomplished guitar and banjo player, bow hunter, college track

star and World War II fighter pilot. Many years later, I read Dickey's biography and discovered that he was something of a fraud; nearly all of his accomplishments other than his writing were exaggerated and some were confabulated. Thus, a second Southern writer in addition to Eudora Welty played a role – though a decidedly secondary one to my own credulousness and lack of self-knowledge – in luring me down South and subsequently leading me astray.

From another notebook preserved from that time, I find this notation:

Schedule:

Get to bed by 10:00 to 10:30

Wake up at 3:00 a.m.

7:00 -- registration

8:00 – sales school

If sales school didn't start until 8:00 a.m., why did I wake up at 3:00 a.m. every day that week? Because like nearly all of the attendees, I was participating in a demented competition to be first in line at the auditorium, and therefore eligible to sit in the front row for the day's lessons. ***"ENTHUSIASM,"*** reads a large, block-printed notation in the notebook I used during sales school. The note continues, *"Emerson: nothing great is ever accomplished without enthusiasm."* Accordingly, and perhaps not understanding to the same degree that Emerson did that this was a necessary but not sufficient condition for success, John and Larry and I and a few others from our group would curl up on the concrete landing in front of the great green locked metal doors and talk or snooze for hours until the doors opened and we and several hundred others raced down the aisles to be the first. Then we would sit for another half hour or so until the day's lessons started. The real lesson, though we did not understand this at the time, was that we were as susceptible as anyone else to groupthink and the pointless, rah-rah ritualisms of corporate life.

We received even more basic pedagogy that week, instructions in how to find a place to live once we'd received our city assignments, in how to brush our teeth (quickly) and how to shower (rapidly) and how to eat (hardly at all.) The living arrangements were the most important. Not surprisingly, given the company's way of doing business, none of us were to be told where we'd be selling that summer until the morning we were scheduled to drive to wherever it was. And upon arriving, it was our responsibility to find our own places to live and, until such time, to "sleep rough," which meant doing, um, roughly what we did when we curled up in the doorway of the auditorium. The way to find a real place, we were told, was to "work" the churches, looking for parishioners who had a spare room, or who liked the fact that we were selling Bible reference books, or who just felt sorry for our bedraggled asses.

Shortly before sales school ended, Rick took me aside and asked me how I "wanted to be motivated" – did I want to get lots of praise and encouragement, or was I the kind of guy "that liked to be pushed really hard?" We were standing at the bottom of some stairs emptying into the Alamo's parking lot, and I was gripping the slightly rusty handrail with one hand because I was nervous. I calculated the effectiveness of various responses, skidding right past the obvious one, the truth – that, like most people other than Parrish Island drill instructors in training, I would generally prefer praise and encouragement. But the nature of sales training school and all of the pushups and cold showers suggested to me that I needed to be a hard guy, so I told Rick that I wanted to be pushed, and he shrugged and said he'd be happy to comply. But though I regretted this blatant insincerity a short while later, and braced myself for a regimen of maximum chastisement, he rarely contacted me again, except to assign me to new territories.

At the end of the week, I was billed $25.00 for my sales case, $6.08 in sales tax, $8.25 for group insurance, $10.41 for sales kits, and $20.00 for bonds, permits and licenses. Since I didn't have the money, I would, as Rick had warned, be liable to pay it back to the company at the end of the summer, or whenever I quit, whichever came first. My food budget for the week in Nashville was $30 – *"try to keep this lower than 30"* reads a note from one of my notebook pages, presumably because I'd spent the other $7 of the $37 I had remaining from my monthly budget on the road to Nashville – but I have no record of how much money I had left when, on our final morning at the Alamo Plaza Motel, my roommates John and Larry and I found a slip of paper under our door that bore the words *Houston Area/Port Arthur*.

I remember an idiotic conversation some of us had while hanging around the parking lot of the Alamo Plaza, drinking Cokes and waiting to get our city assignments. One of the salesmen asked, "Why do you think it's called Alamo Plaza?" and a second one answered, "why not? They want you to think it's really well air-conditioned."

"What?"

"You know, cold like the Alamo," the second salesman said.

"You idiot, that's cold like an igloo."

"Or like an Eskimo," a third salesman said. "Not an Alamo."

“So what’s an Alamo?”

“That place in Texas, you know, where the Mexicans killed Davy Crockett. It’s hot there, not cold.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot – that’s the place where they say ‘remember the Alamo.’ So why do they call this place that if we’re in Tennessee?”

“Who knows? Maybe it’s a sign we’ll be going to Texas.”

He was right. We were headed to Texas.

Once again, John and Larry and I drove all night, this time with cartons of books in the back seat. This was when I discovered John’s sleep apnea, or rather its consequences. Exhausted by sales training school and by his interrupted sleep, he nodded off at the wheel somewhere on the road to Texas, and spun off the road, sending several heavy cartons of books crashing down onto Larry’s head. We pulled over, I re-stacked the books, and Larry went back to sleep.

At some point in the middle of the night, I took over the wheel and my own exhaustion kicked in; in the early morning hours, a car pulled out in front of me and immediately slowed down, forcing me to swerve to the right hand lane to avoid clipping its rear bumper. Our car spun completely around and ended up facing the same way we’d been going and, after we watched the other car putter away unaware, we turned around to discover that the same three cartons of books had once again crashed onto Larry’s head. Later, at a gas stop, Larry staggered out of the car and seemed to have trouble understanding where he was.

Our first stop in the morning when we arrived at Port Arthur was a gas station, where we inquired about free or nearly free places to live. The attendant, a young white man with a frat-boy look about him, took an immediate interest in us, and ushered us into a dark back room crowded with timing belts that hung from hooks on the walls like snake skins, cartons of oil cans, glass jars filled with spark plugs and bolts, and an immense, dented metal desk. Above the desk was a map of Port Arthur, with portions of the map shaded in using a black ballpoint pen. “This,” he told us, using a spark plug held in his hand like a laser pointer, “is a Negro area. Just stay away from it, okay? And this here? Negro. Stay away. Over here, too. Negro. And this…” “We get it,” one of us said. “Stay away from the black neighborhoods.” “No, listen, guys, you gotta pay attention.” And like the respectful young man I was, I did. I didn’t approve of his racism, but I appreciated the fact that he was trying to be helpful in his own way and I didn’t want to hurt his feelings by questioning his proscriptions. And besides, maybe he knew what he was talking about. I still have the little sheet of notebook paper on which I made a crude copy of his map – *“Port Arthur (No – black” “Lakeview O.K.”* But we ended up selling everywhere.

Much later, I picked up another map and saw Port Arthur in its geographic context – a swampy spit of land, squeezed between several huge oil refineries, that dribbled down the Sabine Pass to the Gulf of Mexico – this proximity to the Gulf being the primary reason both for its founding, and, both before and after it was built, for any number of tragic founderings. In 1543, for instance, the remnants of the Hernando de Soto expedition had come aground nearby, although de Soto himself had died the previous year. We had come aground as well, though for now we were still among the living.

We discovered upon calling the company headquarters a little later that morning that one of the other cars in the Texas convoy – other cars had headed out from Nashville all across the Southern United States – had blown a tire along the road and been totaled. Larry, worryingly, was still woozy from the two clobberings from the cartons and lack of sleep, and now I wonder if he came to Texas with the nickname ‘Diz’ or whether we gave it to him. And, just a few blocks into the city, our car overheated. We pulled over to the side of the road and we were suddenly surrounded by the burnt-chocolate smell of burning oil from the car, and, overwhelming it, the heavy, sour odor of petroleum and chemicals that was everywhere in Port Arthur, a smell that was omnipresent and oppressive; it didn’t, like other bad smells, merely curl into the nostrils, but seemed to aggressively attack them. (I later learned that Port Arthur had a law on the books banning the emitting of “obnoxious odors” in an elevator, a crime that I cannot imagine anyone in the city would have been able to detect.)

I wasn’t off to a good start. No longer ENTHUSIASTIC, I was by this point in a somewhat lower-case frame of mind. But I’d signed my contract, made my commitment, and now was thousands of miles away from college and from home. Besides, I was just days away from making big money selling Bible storybooks.

After the car cooled down and Larry and John added oil and water, we spent the rest of the day driving around, picking up a Port Arthur rental guide, and visiting the YMCA, and the First Baptist Church, and Park Place Baptist, and 4th Avenue Baptist, and United Methodist Temple, and “bachelor efficiencies” with hotplates and “refrigerator privileges,” and trailer parks, and boarding houses, and garage apartments, and squalid apartments that rented for $120 a month including water. We were invited in to some kind of social event at one of the churches, where we hungrily eyed the pretty, well-dressed daughters of the church elders. They responded to our hunger by smiling prettily and inviting us to dinner at their family homes, as if that were what we were hoping for.

We were treated kindly, like the charity cases we essentially were. It helped that it was the farthest thing from my mind to mock them, even though my beliefs rested somewhere on the scale between Deist and agnostic; I was filled, instead, with gratitude for every little act of kindness they showed me. Indeed, after one church service everybody walked out to the parking lot to

discover that their tires were flat; some kids, apparently, had let all of the air out. I felt, I think, even more outraged about this than the car owners did, who sighed and explained that this was a constant problem in their neighborhood.

The parishioners, in turn, seemed moderately pleased and reassured that we were Bible salesmen, though when we talked in greater detail, it was clear that they were puzzled by our utter lack of religiosity, John's Catholicism, my Judaism, and Larry's wooziness, and our accents, our grime and our odd, hollow-eyed demeanors.

After a long and fruitless evening of room-hunting, we remembered that, in sales school, we had been strongly advised to check in at the local police station, since the police in many cities were known for harassing and sometimes arresting the company's salespeople. So, some time near 11:00 p.m., we found the small station and explained our mission at the front desk.

Having been treated with hospitality all day, we weren't concerned about our reception, but after a few minutes, a bantam-weight policeman who looked like a younger Robert Blake singled me out – probably for my height – and lowered his forehead into my solar plexus, not terribly hard, but just enough to drive me against the wall in the station's lobby, most likely so that he could plausibly claim that he'd never laid a hand on me. Once I was backed up, he said, with great firmness and surprising anger, "Boys, what you're doing is technically legal, and so as long as you don't violate any of our laws I can't pick you up. But I'll be watching you every day, and so will everyone else on the force. You litter, you harass someone, you piss on a lawn some-where, you make a nuisance out of yourselves like all of you goddamn salespeople do, and we'll bring you in, you hear?" We heard; I was impressed by his forthrightness and concision, flattered that he'd taken me seriously enough to single me out, and determined to hew the line. Nonetheless, John was picked up by patrol cars two or three times during his tenure in Port Arthur; he was just too damned conspicuous. He was luckier, though, than another salesman of our acquaintance, who claimed to have been caught and released, like some spectacularly unlucky speckled trout, 17 times in a single week.

By the time we left the police station it was very late, and we'd driven all night the previous night. So abandoning our deter-mination to find a permanent room our first day, we gave up and checked into the Seagull Motel. I had no money left, and no source of income unless I started selling Bibles reference books and storybooks fast.

The next morning, John, who was far more sociable than Larry or me, met a Baptist minister in a church parking lot and brought him back to Larry's car, which again was overheating. He introduced himself, in a high, piping, girlish voice, as the Rev. Terry Alvin, an assistant pastor. He was delighted, he said, to have the three of us stay with him; his wife had moved to Okla-homa to be with her sick mother and he was lonely. We wouldn't even have to pay our room and board until we'd earned some money selling books. The Reverend had stiff, straw-colored hair and a long, mournful face that formed deep creases when he smiled; he seemed very happy to have met the three of us. After we said our goodbyes, Larry pulled into the wrong lane and had to swerve to avoid the oncoming traffic. There was something wrong with him, but we were too excited about having found a place to live to worry about it.

So the next day we moved into Terry Alvin's house; John took one of the upstairs bedrooms and Terry stayed in the master bedroom, where there was a picture of his wife, a pretty young Mexican-looking woman. Larry and I slept on cots in a guest bedroom downstairs, but even down there, we could hear John's raucous snoring. The Reverend didn't seem to have any par-ticular interest in the fact that we were about to begin selling Bible reference books door to door, but seemed fascinated by our odd religious beliefs. He told me, as he was helping me set up the cots, "you seem more conservative than most Jewish people." I wasn't sure what he meant by this, but took it as a positive indication, as I did any time someone said "Jewish people" rather than "you Jews." But I didn't dwell long upon this; generally speaking, it hardly even occurred to me that there was anything incongruous about my being a Jewish Bible salesman in the deep South.

We began the next morning by doing 30 pushups, as we'd been instructed in sales training school; they'd even given us guidance in taking vitamins and rapid shaving techniques, and how to save time by pre-ordering our breakfasts at a local diner the night before, which we never actually did. Then we loaded Larry's car with our heavy plastic sample cases, light blue with a thick black handle, containing copies of *Bible Stories That Live*, 3.0 pounds; *Treasured Tales of Childhood*, 6.5 pounds; *Layman's Bible Encyclopedia*, 5.0 pounds; *Concise Dictionary*, 4.5 pounds; *and Young People's Dictionary*, 4.4 pounds. Unlike publish-ers, editors, writers, and readers of books, to us the page count, year of publication or author – or indeed the actual content of the books – didn't matter. What mattered was the price, and, most especially, the weight. The sheet of paper I still own, *"1976 Price Chart and Weight Chart,"* does not tell me the weight of my sales case, but altogether, with the case, a bottle of mosquito repellent and a small packet of tissues, I carried about 26 pounds in my left hand. (The *Bible Concordance*, which weighed about 15 pounds all by itself, was available only by special order, so we didn't have to carry it.) Anyway, it wasn't that bad; I was strong; but as I would learn in the coming days, the mosquito repellent would run down my arms and make my hands slippery, so all day long I'd struggle to maintain my grip on the case, especially when I was dodging one of the many stray dogs that I encountered on my sales routes.

On our first day of selling, Larry dropped off John and me in separate neighborhoods, then drove to his own territory. We all were scared that morning, not so much about the prospect of rejection, but because we felt like actors about to step onto the stage without having memorized all of our lines. We had rehearsed very specific scripts for every situation, and were very serious about employing them, even though we knew that they were stilted, contrived and deeply stupid. "Hi!" I'd chirp. (At this point, as the sale manual instructed, I was to pause for a moment, to let the emotional impact of my greeting sink in.) "Mary Jones?" (Another dramatic pause; "Mary Jones," incidentally, was the default name the sales manual used for all female pros-pects, and "Johnny" and "Susie" were the standard names for children, though here in East Texas, a prospect's name was more likely to be Mary Levasseur, and her children's names likely to be something along the lines of Jefferson and Delilah.)

"My name is Mike, and you know, I've sure been meeting a lot of interesting folks in this neighborhood, and everybody's been so nice and friendly!" (Of all the humiliations I experienced that summer, saying this sentence was undoubtedly the worst.) "Anyway, I'm stopping by today because I'm talking with all the folks who have pre-school and school-age children." (In blue felt-tip on my sales script, I have made the marginal notation *"Establish a purpose for being there.")*

At this point, the prospect was staring goggle-eyed at this robotic Yankee apparition on her doorstep. "You *are* Billy and Susie's mom, aren't you?" (In blue ink, I've written the words of one of our instructors: *"Soft. Treat name with respect.")*

(Pause for an answer. Feel a trickle of sweat picking its way deliberately down the back of your left knee.)

"Do you have a place where we can sit down?" (In blue ink, I've written *"assumptive close" and "everybody has a place to sit down!")*

"No? You don't?" (My notes say, *"Either do the sale right there on the porch, or just walk in! You simultaneously: 1.Relax, lower voice 2.Break eye contact and reach for your case 3.Step forward 4.Pick up your case as you complete your step and reach for the door.")* We were to break eye contact, incidentally, because it was supposed to be difficult for people to say no to the top of someone's head.

It wasn't.

And then there was the (unwritten and unanticipated but frequently performed) fifth step: Pick up your sales case, walk down the six steps from the door, head down the short walkway and onto the sidewalk, turn right, and then walk up the five steps to the house next door, all the while feeling the eyes of the woman who'd just said 'no' and who was not named "Mary Jones" following you all the way.

We'd learned all sorts of tricks in sales school. If no one was home, or even if they were but didn't answer the doorbell right away, we were to peek in their mailbox, thereby learning, and insincerely using, their names – "Mrs. *Portis!* How *are* you!" – and, from the return addresses on the envelopes, their affiliations – "Mrs. *Portis!* How *are* you? You know, I was just talking to some of your friends at the Embroidery Club!" (Sometimes, the response would be, "The *embroidery* club? Oh, honey, that's just a piece of junk mail!") If there was no mail in the mailbox, we'd collect names by walking – carefully – up to dogs and reading their name tags, or interviewing mailmen or deliverymen, or copying names off of welcome mats or the little redwood signs that some families planted in their front lawns. We never used the words "buy" or "buying," but rather "get" or "getting," thereby, in theory but not in actuality, diverting the emphasis from the spending of money. It was never "sign here," but rather "put your John Hancock here," because signing contracts made people (people other than me, that is) nervous.

If we were greeted at the door by a German Shepherd, we were to say, in a complexly ironic tone that suggested to the homeowner that we weren't really frightened but rather only pretending to be frightened, but underneath were frightened nonetheless, "uh oh, he doesn't bite, does he?", on the assumption that the homeowner would defend her dog's peaceable reputation by allowing us in. The one time I tried this technique, the woman at the door said, "it's a she, and she does."

If we saw a woman pulling her car into the driveway with her car loaded with groceries, we were to say, "I'm glad we caught you, Mrs. Name I Wormed Out of Your Neighbor! Can I help you carry something into the house?" If we saw a child playing alone in the yard, we were instructed to start playing with them and, if the mother came out to investigate, to say, "aren't kids great?" I don't have a record of how many women invited me into the house that summer after seeing me crouched down next to her three-year-old in the front yard, but it couldn't have been very many.

And if we encountered a housewife with a squalling baby in one arm and a pot in the other, we weren't instructed, as human decency would seem to indicate, to walk away, but rather to say, "Ma'am, you sure are working hard. Did you cook that for me? Ha ha! Seriously, I think you need a break."

Seriously, if I had ever tried that one – I'm proud to say that I did not – I probably would have had my head caved in with one of those steaming pots.

We were instructed to lull people, as if we were hypnotists, into saying 'yes.' "This address is 1564 Rose, isn't it?" "Yes." And this is the address where you receive mail, right?" "Yes." (Suppress intestinal cramps from stress and bolted-down breakfast and keep on grinning madly.) "And if you were to decide to purchase the Bible Concordance, this is the address you'd want it delivered to, right?" "Um, I suppose so, yes." "So can I put you down for a Bible Concordance and two copies of Bible Stories That Live?" "Um, no."

We were taught to write down the names of the people we'd garnered from the mailboxes and dog tags, and to use it with neighbors down the block, but never to use poor people's names with rich people, nor rich people's names with poor people, nor black with white, nor white with black. We asked friendly people the names of their neighbors, and of their neighbor's children, and the schools these children went to. It was astonishing, what some people would tell us about their neighbors, and it wasn't always about what school the kids down the block went to; one woman told me that her neighbor was "getting busy with her husband's brother" while the husband was in the Navy. "Getting busy with?" I said. "Do you mean…" "Getting *busy* with," she snapped, as if she'd realized I wasn't a worthy partner for gossip.

Most of the tricks we used were intended to get us into the door, on the theory that getting inside was 90 percent of the challenge. We could, for example, look faint or waver a bit on the front steps, leaning against a stair rail for support, hoping to be invited in, though I don't recall ever doing this. Larry, I assume, did this frequently, and without pretense. Or we would thrust one of the books into the hands of a reluctant sales prospect, on the assumption that, once they'd touched its pebbly cover and silky inside pages, they would never want to let go again. We also were instructed to dangle the book upside down, with a single page held between thumb and forefinger, to demonstrate the strength of the pages and the binding. Though the pages never once tore, the sales prospects were never once impressed.

If, upon being invited in, the television was blaring, we could ask politely if we could turn the volume down "just a bit," and then "accidentally" shut it off completely, knowing that no one would be impolite enough to snap it on again. I carefully affixed an American flag and a smiley-face decal to my sales case, thereby ingeniously appealing to every conceivable ideological and theological constituency.

Even 30 years ago, it was an antiquated business, with deeply anachronistic dialogue. "You know, Mrs. Jones, in talking with most of the folks in the neighborhood, it seems they all have the same problems with Bible study. Like Mrs. Jackson and Mr. Delacorte both said, the biggest problem is having enough time to study the Bible. I guess we're all like that, aren't we? But Mrs. Jackson said even if she found time to study she still had trouble *finding* things in the Bible. And Mr. Delacorte said, even after he found things, he still had trouble *understanding* them. Well, Mrs. Jones, that's why everyone has been so excited about the *Layman's Bible Encyclopedia."*

"You know, the Bible certainly has some interesting characters, doesn't it? Mr. Delacorte was really impressed with how much easier it is to study Bible characters with this volume. Who is your favorite character? Do you have a favorite? Most people seem to like Paul real well. *(To myself, I muttered, yeah, he's the cute one.)* Let's just look up Paul."

"You see, Mrs. Jones, first of all it gives you the definition of the word the way it is used in the Bible. For example, there are four different Biblical definitions of the word heaven. Then it gives you the verses in the Bible pertaining to heaven. That really makes it easy, doesn't it? Then it breaks each subject down into sub-topics. Such as #1 the firmament as heaven; #2 God's dwelling place; #3 happiness in heaven; #4 those who enter heaven; #5 those who enter not; and #6 heaven's secure abode. That would sure save a lot of time, wouldn't it, Mrs. Jones?"

By and large, I was one of those who entered not.

If told, "I'm not interested," I would say, "I know what you mean. I know your time is valuable. As a matter of fact, I have to see 30 more people today, so I can only spend a few minutes with you. Have you got a place where we can sit down?"

If asked, "are you a salesman?" I'd say, "Mrs. Jones, you don't shoot salesmen, do you?" (Smile real big, suppress shooting pain in intestinal tract.) "Seriously, what I have been doing is talking to all the families with children. Do you have a place where we can sit down?"

If she hesitated, I'd say, "Mrs. Jones, let me ask you a question. Have you had a chance to see what everybody has been so excited about?" while simultaneously bending down and extracting one of the volumes from the sales case.

And finally, if even that expedient failed, I would pull out all of the stops: "You know, Mrs. Jones, it sure is warm out here. Do you have a place where we could sit down?"

Sitting down was the thing.

My first successful sale was to that rarest of audiences, a young married couple with children; even on those occasions when I managed to find the whole family at home, the father would usually be dispatched to get rid of me, or, if there was any interest in my wares, would disappear upstairs while his wife talked to me. It was mid-morning on my first day of selling, and I had long since overcome my stage-fright, but also had begun to interpolate personal, shame-faced comments into my spiel. When the Mom, her right arm clamped protectively over her little daughter's chest, asked me in the middle of my presentation how much the storybook cost, I said, as my sales script dictated that I must, "well, gosh, that's my punchline." Gosh? Who was I supposed to be, Ronald Reagan in Knute Rockne, All American? And what was that line supposed to mean, anyway? So I quickly added, "actually, that's just the kind of crap they make me say. I'm not supposed to tell you the cost until you're almost ready to buy." But the woman just held her daughter tighter; "crap" hadn't gone over any better than "gosh," and I had the impression she thought I might be schizophrenic.

"Anyway," I continued lamely, "it's like fifteen bucks or something. I know that's kind of expensive, but…"

"We'll take one," the husband said. "What else you got in there?"

Once again, my enthusiasm surged. I was a salesman! I would make money! I would be successful, as a businessman, as a poet, as anything I set my mind to! It was hard work, sure, but I had a gift, a rare insight into other human beings, a knack for success! But when the husband hesitated for a moment over the signature line, his pen wavering abstractedly about like a gnat circling down to die, I instantly felt like a fool; there was no way he, or anyone else, would ever buy anything from me.

This internal psychodrama would play out at every house I'd visit.

After every house, I was required to note what happened. An approach was a knock on the door, answered or otherwise. A demo meant I'd gotten in and showed the books, and, as well, meant a few minutes in an air conditioned interior, and sometimes an iced tea or a Coke. Sales were what was contractually agreed to, and money was what I'd actually collected in deposits, some of which I lived on, and some of which had to be remitted back to the company every week. Most of the books would be delivered by us at the end of the summer, and the balances collected at that time, which would also allow me to repay the company for the items they'd sold me in Nashville, that $70.00 that hung over my head like a storm cloud. I wrote the sales information on yellow legal pads or, sometimes, scraps of paper, which I then transferred, while eating dinner, to an index card. One night, Rick drove in from wherever he was selling in Texas and joined John and me for dinner at a Sambo's; after the meal, he collected jelly and ketchup packets just like someone's grandfather, and popped a couple of sugar cubes into his mouth for dessert. This, I remember thinking, is what being a salesman does to you.

Port Arthur and environs were known for an aggressive, mean-spirited, vicious kind of heat that felt and smelled – because the city was so close to the Gulf – like several layers of wet woolen blankets that had been dipped in dirty oil, liquefied manure, molten tar, and mosquito spray. The heat always seemed at its worst when the dogs were loose. I was grimy, sweaty and hungry all the time. In sales training school, we had been advised to get a candy bar and a Coca Cola for lunch, so we could eat while selling, and to avoid malnutrition, were instructed in a cheery and cavalier way to "pop a few vitamins" when we could. One time after I'd been selling for a while, starved for something more substantial, I bolted down a packet of cream cheese in addition to my Moon Pie and RC Cola, and began to understand why Rick fueled up for free when he could. All summer long, I was haunted by the sight and smell of a seafood shack that offered fried clams and crawfish that had been caught locally.

Walking my sales route at night, I was haunted in a different way by the sight of a Christian Science Church that was beautifully illuminated and seemed as if it would be an inviting place in the daytime, when I never managed to come across it; maybe there was more than one Christian Science Church in Port Arthur, but I kept on running into it, or them, and feeling lonely and lustful in a way that accentuated, rather than obscured, my physical hunger, because I had dated a pretty young woman the previous autumn who had been a Christian Scientist, and I was helplessly reminded of her every time. It would take me another block or two of walking, every time I passed the church, to shake off the wonderful way her hair had smelled and come back to my petroleum-soaked senses.

But after that first day, I was elated. I'd worked 12 hours and 50 minutes, made $132.40 in sales and collected $87.25, some of which I could keep. I'd visited 45 houses, performed my sales spiel in front of 12 families, sold to three of them, had several interesting conversations about Paul and other Biblical characters, and delivered books to one of the three families. If the number of houses visited and number of sales spiels performed seems low for a nearly thirteen hour day, this is because I spent so much time crouched on the sidewalk, or standing, hands on hips, in driveways, saying my lines out loud to myself. I also took some time to eat; my expenses for that day were $4.50. Later in that week, my house visits rose to 80 and sales presentations to 20, even as my meal expenses dropped to $1.20.

As I walked the neighborhoods, I created elaborate maps, as we were instructed in sales training school, of all of the houses on the blocks and their inhabitants. We did this first in advance of knocking on any doors, by surveying the street and gathering as many names as we could. Then, after we'd finished with the street, we filled the map in with everything we'd learned, including (especially) the names of the children, those who'd said no ("I surely don't," "I'm sure not interested," "get the fuck off of my property") and those who'd said yes or asked us to come back later. Especially important was recording the locations of those who'd purchased books, so we'd know where to deliver them at the end of the summer. These maps were tremendously time consuming; I still remember one early-morning moment, crouching on one knee and drawing one of these diagrams on a sheet of paper resting on the side of my sample case while bolting down a hard-boiled egg I'd gotten from God knows where.

From another old notebook page, here's the text of a typical map; each of these names was flanked by a little square to indicate a house, and some squares had x's through them to indicate dwellings where I'd been warned not to go or been chased away:

Ariandos Maria

Liz Lucino next

Bremmer 3rd from Corner

Black Door

NO

1541 Stilwell

Cansulon?

Willis

Knock Hard

White House

Bakker

Pitts

Mrs. Burks Schoolkids

Lakeview, off Monterye House

And another:

Romeros Son Brad
Skip
Oklahoma Nazworth
Broussard
Son in Junior Hi
Murrow
Red Panels
White
16-month child/De Rouens
Mrs. Wright
Hughes Kids Mention De Rouens

Why does it say "*Mention De Rouens*?" Because, as sales training school instructed me, this was an essential conversation-starter, a way of assuring homeowners that, despite my harsh Chicago accent, 6'3" inch height, big glasses and utterly foreign mien, I was, somehow, one of them. I would say to Mrs. Hughes, whom I already knew had kids – perhaps because I'd seen overturned bikes in the yard, or because I'd seen a child through the picture window, or because I'd peeked in the mailbox and seen a report card from school – that I had just been to the De Rouens' house. If that elicited no response, I might say, "their baby is so cute, don't you think?" and hope the baby (whom I hadn't actually seen) was not severely deformed or otherwise not to be mentioned. Eventually, Mrs. Hughes might mention her own kids, and I would venture that it was great for kids to read, and at that point, I would be in.

And from one more old sheet of notebook paper:

5:00 – at end of 5th – across from ice cream shack
Trailer 6:00 – end of 5th
Perry's Pre-schoolkids
Trailer across from Satan's – at end of 5th st. Andrepont – yellow flower pots in front.

Though I can picture many of these streets even thirty years later, I cannot imagine what I must have meant by "trailer across from Satan's." Was this the name of a bar? An actual Church of the Antichrist that existed in plain sight? Or had I dubbed some especially nasty neighbor "Satan"? I only know that if I lived in a trailer across the street from any sort of Satan at all, I too would screen that view by putting "yellow flower pots in front."

The vast majority of people I spoke to in their homes were polite but cool. They greeted me warily and would seldom, after my initial spiel, warm up. We had been taught to address everyone as "folks" – "we've been talking to a lot of folks like you about this new book." One afternoon, a hard-bitten middle-aged woman said, "you know, I had another one of you boys from the North at my door last year, and he called us 'folks,' too. I don't get it – none of us ever say 'folks' around here."

The shrimp-boat widows were much warmer, however; their husbands pulled six-week shifts in the Gulf, and they were happy for the company. Most of them were young and pretty, and often, even in the middle of the morning, were still wearing robes or nightgowns. It was a matter of common knowledge among John and Larry and myself, and all of the salespeople, that they were looking for sex, and this was something that we eagerly anticipated and speculated about all summer long, and indeed on many occasions young women invited me into their cool living rooms, and brought me a Coke with ice, and patted the couch next to where they were sitting, and smiled invitingly, and, after taking a deep but fluttery breath, asked me, "have you been saved?" This was followed by an earnest lecture on Jesus Christ and a theological discussion, because I didn't want to seem ungrateful for the drink and the air conditioning, and because, despite my disappointment, talking to a pretty young woman about my salvation was infinitely preferable to trudging through the heat, a thin sheen of oil, sweat and grit collecting on the back of my neck.

Once, three cute teenage girls, clearly bored beyond reason, came flocking to the door when I rang the bell and excitedly invited me in. All of us had been warned in sales training school not to go into a house when adults weren't present, and I took this seriously. A company that made me sign a blank contract, and I took them seriously!

"C'mon," one of them said. "We're lonely."

"I'm sorry," I said officiously, "but if you're underage and your parents aren't home, I can't come in. Someone might see me and you'll get into trouble."

"Don't worry about us."

"And I'll get into trouble. I might get fired."

One of the girls smiled at me as if she understood the absurdity of my being concerned about being fired from a door-to-door Bible-selling job. Nonetheless, I moved on, and felt very noble about it for a minute or two.

I had a shotgun stuck in my face on two occasions, once by an unshaven, terribly pale young man who claimed not to have left the house for five years, and he "damn well wasn't about to let anyone in, either." The other person, whose face I cannot recall, asked me if I were Jewish, and, puzzlingly, when I said I was, lowered his shotgun. I did some selling in a swampy, unincorporated area that was populated by Cajuns, most of whom had no interest in my books, but some of whom found me fascinating. One young man wanted to discuss God with me, and upon learning I was Jewish, asked if he could see my tail.

We had to sell in surrounding towns as well, among them Nederland and Port Neches. One night, my regional manager called and asked me to pick up a seller from a nearby town so that the two of us could spend the day selling in a town called China, Texas. I worried half the night about this assignment, because I knew that the gas tank in Larry's car was empty, and I had no money to fill it up, not even at the then-current price of 60 cents a gallon, nor any money for lunch in China. And I wasn't even sure how to get there. But the Reverend lent me five bucks, and, once I'd filled up the car and picked up the other salesman, I was so pleased with myself that I drove Larry's old beater at 95 miles an hour down a long country straightaway, and when we passed another car, I whipped my car back into my lane just a second or so before an oncoming vehicle swept past. The frame of Larry's car was shuddering and there was a high-pitched sound coming from the wheels. When I glanced over to the passenger side and saw how scared the other salesman was, I was delighted.

Thirty years ago, China was a tiny hamlet where, on the "black" side – for some reason I don't recall, we never visited the "white" side – chickens ran free in the yards, fluttering up through the holes in the porches and then back down again as if they were looking for something valuable they'd dropped, and sometimes even strutting around inside the ramshackle homes as if they owned them. I think of these homes as "tarpaper," but cannot remember if that was actually the construction material, only that many of the homes leaned in one direction or another like my trailer, and looked as if they could have been knocked over by a determined butt from one of the goats that loitered in the dirt. Some of the houses had expensive cars parked out front, and everyone had a nice color TV; one woman had only a single tooth in her mouth, but it was gold. As we walked from door to door, we'd sometimes glimpse two other white men wearing suits, who nodded in acknowledgment of us as fellow professionals; we later learned that they were "dollar-a-day" insurance salesman who came to this east Texas favela once a week to collect cash policy payments.

The people of China were friendly, though several asked us, before letting us in, if we were from "the welfare." Once inside, they offered us iced tea and talked about their sons in the Navy or the older sons who had served, or had been killed, in Vietnam. One woman showed us a framed picture of a son she said was in the NFL, and I wondered why he hadn't yet bought her a better house. Later in the day, it started to rain heavily, and we got soaked; the other salesman and I found the town's only eating place, a little shack where we bought bottles of Coke and sandwiches. While we waited out the rain, he bragged about his girlfriend back home, who "looked like Olivia Newton-John, except prettier," and I felt envious and foolish and lonely in my damp clothes and flat, slicked-down hair. When I opened my Coke, I discovered a minuscule disc of green mold floating on the top, but it was too hot and I was too thirsty to let it go to waste and drank it anyway: I was disgusted but refreshed.

After I dropped off the other salesperson, I collected John and Larry and we went out for the evening, since we all had a few bucks in our pockets. We had dinner at a hamburger place and went to hear country music, and afterwards, Larry pulled out of the parking lot and once again drove directly into the oncoming traffic, earning us a ticket from a lurking squad car. The next day, he told us that his headaches had been getting steadily worse, and he'd been suffering as well from blind spells, nausea and "the drizzly shits," which he variously blamed on the heat and humidity, allergies, chemical sensitivities and, well, being hit on the head two times by several heavy cartons of books.

Over dinner a few nights later, Terry Alvin announced that he was leaving. He was selling his house and, in order to show it to buyers, he would have to ask us to leave as well. He tried to soften the blow by making us biscuits along with the usual ham steaks and green beans and sweet tea. He had a maternal side, and had told us previously that his wife's first husband had beaten her all the time, and that she'd married Terry because he was gentle with her. I could see this quality in him when he made up our cots and his own bed, and tucked the sheets in carefully and then smoothed them lovingly with his palms. Now, he was going to move to Oklahoma so he could be with his wife, because, he told us, her mother was dying.

I have no memory of how a day or two later we came to meet Jasper Stultz, who owned the gas station, and who claimed, though we later found this to be untrue, to own the trailers as well. I remember, only, after another hitchhiked ride, talking to Jasper in the parking lot of the station. I don't remember much about the station itself, only the three tall, stoop-shouldered gas pumps, two with the round glass Texaco logos on top, the one in the center advertising Sky Chief, all of them standing there as solemn and silent as red-robed monks. I probably can picture them now because Jasper was parked right in front of them. John and I leaned over so we could hear Jasper, who had a distressed, raspy voice and spoke with a bitter kind of intensity as he lectured us from the driver's seat, the smoke from his Camel drifting irritatingly into our faces.

"I don't know why I should trust you sumbitches. I've trusted people all my life and all they've done is turn around and kick me in the fucking nuts. In Korea, got it in the nuts. Here, in the nuts. My girlfriend, once, she needed a eye operation 'cause she was going blind so I lent her $15,000 for it. She got better, she sees me in the hospital, she says, 'oh, Jasper, oh my God, you are the best, I will never forget you.' 'Never *forget* me?' Right there, I knew that was exactly what she was gonna do, cause that's what you say to someone when you're leaving! Sure enough, she leaves the hospital and I never see her again and I never get my $15,000 back. Now you sumbitches want to live in one a my trailers and I'm supposed to expect to get paid?" Nonetheless, he produced a handwritten lease obligating us to live in the trailer through September, for $125 a month – the first month payable upfront – and by pooling all of our book deposits and whatever else we could scrape up, we were in.

Jasper was a thin, ropy Bogartian type who pulled on his cigarettes so hard that the tobacco leaves would make a distinct crackling sound. He had business interests all over Port Arthur and Beaumont, and seemed to like the idea that we were there along with Blackie to keep an eye on the Texaco station, which he was planning to re-open under a new name (it had been called "Jap's Service Station," after his nickname.) Or maybe he wanted us to keep an eye on Blackie, who didn't seem to do anything in particular during the day.

I have, in one of my notebooks, the notation "*Approved Greasing Palace*." Did it actually say this, somewhere above one of the station's car bays, or was this cryptic rune merely my imagining? But I did know that Jasper talked vaguely to John and me about helping him to renovate Jap's "for good bucks," and this was something for us to look forward to, though he said, not for the first time, and often with what appeared to be tears in his eyes, "you sumbitches better damn well not betray me, you hear? I've had enough of that in my life. Kick me in the goddamn balls. I'll be *damned* if I ever let someone else do that to me again." His hands shook when he spoke, but there were terra-cotta flowerpots on the little raised platforms that the gas pumps rested on, and though the pots were empty, we took this as a sign that he was serious about improving the station.

Before we decided whether or not we could work for Jasper, however, we had books to sell, and rent money to earn, and long days to get through.

Most mornings, it was already in the low eighties by 6:15 a.m., when John and I did our 30 push-ups and rolled out of the trailer. We'd put on our shorts and take a shower in the coin-operated carwash across the highway, using bars of hotel soap we'd brought with us, and one quarter's worth of hot water each. From the carwash, our trailers weren't visible, but if we walked a little bit down the road, we could see them, tilted at all angles like an embattled armada.

After our showers, we shaved in the dark without water, drank a warm V-8, took a piss in the scrubby woods behind the trailer, sprayed ourselves from forehead to ankle with the strongest mosquito repellent on the market, and hoisted our sales cases.

While we were living in the trailer, the selling process seemed more daunting than it had while we were with Terry Alvin, in part because we now had to hike to our sales territory. There was one day, in particular, that I called The Awful Day – the only experience during my Bible-selling period that ever penetrated my carapace of blithe indifference to my physical circumstances and nonexistent prospects. It was drizzling in the morning, as always an oily drizzle, and I ate a hurried breakfast because I needed to make up for some poor sales performances that week. The mosquitoes, despite the intermittent rain, were out in force, and I sprayed my arms and chest repeatedly. I was working in a relatively wealthy neighborhood that day, and when, mid-morning, I came to one house, the woman who answered the door looked horrified when she saw me. I followed her pointing finger and saw deep black mascara-like streaks running down my arm and onto my hand; after a moment, I realized that the chemicals in the bug spray had somehow dissolved the plastic in the handle of my sales case. I asked her if I could come in to wash up; instead, she directed me to a garden hose where I stopped and rinsed myself as the rain began to get stronger. I had stomach cramps as well from the quick breakfast, so I raced across a highway to a shopping center and went to the washroom, where I discovered that, in the darkness of the trailer, I had managed to shave only half of my face. I bought an umbrella I couldn't afford, and walked back to the trailer, where I slept the rest of the day.

By this time, my sales numbers were falling again. One day, I had only 38 approaches and $19.95 in sales, much of which would have to be remitted to company headquarters, and I'd spent $7 in food; the worse I did, the more I wanted to eat.

But the decline in my numbers meant I could no longer earn enough to pay the rent on the trailer and buy food. John, by now, had quit the door-to-door selling business and had already, himself, spent a defeated day in the trailer. I'd left early in the morning with him asleep, and come back at 10:00 p.m. to find him still snoring heavily.

It was at this time that we met Gilbert. Before our night at the roadhouse, Gilbert had invited me out to his house in the countryside; I hitchhiked there with an old man in an old Ford pickup, and when we arrived, I saw a group of six or so young men standing around in a ragged line and drinking. I said, "which one of you is Gilbert Richard?" and immediately, as if on cue, everyone pointed to someone else with their meaty, or crooked, or dirty, fingers and said, "He is." Later, Gilbert told me he thought I was with the police, though why a policeman would be hitchhiking with an old man and why Gilbert wasn't expecting someone he'd invited he didn't explain. As in China, we were always being mistaken for the authorities, which obscurely flattered me; back at school, I didn't even look old enough to be a graduate teaching assistant.

A few days later, John and I had our "interview" at the roadhouse. After the fight between Buck and Gilbert, after Buck had stormed out and the prostitute had asked me nicely to shut up, I did exactly that for a while, and passed the time by pushing the billiard balls in the slot above my head back and forth with my index finger. Then I stopped this too, because the balls clanked a bit when I pushed them, and I was afraid that someone would tell me to shut up again. After a while, in any event, we heard a pickup spraying gravel in the parking lot, and then the gunfire started, though the window at the top of the wall remained unbroken. For a few minutes, we listened to Buck firing outside – perhaps into the air, perhaps against the walls of the roadhouse – until I heard Gilbert say disgustedly, "that's enough of this shit." He got up heavily from the floor, walked through the door, and, a few minutes later, came back in, grasping Buck's shotgun in one hand as if it were his severed arm. A group of us gathered around to congratulate him and to quiz him on how he'd managed to wrest the gun away, but he just snorted and ordered another beer. I imagined him out there in the parking lot, waggling his fat fist back and forth and grinning at Buck, who'd just let the shotgun slip without even realizing what was happening, and then stumbling into his pickup and driving away, grateful at least that there were no witnesses to his humiliation this time.

A couple of weeks later, hitchhiking back on a 90-degree afternoon from the Gulf docks, I saw Buck again. I was standing at the junction of two highways, lonely straightaways in the middle of nowhere that met at right angles with nothing on either side but the back entrance to a refinery, when I saw a pickup truck smoking dust trails in the distance, and it was suddenly upon me as it slowed at the crossing, and I looked into the windshield and there was Buck, his jaws working away on something hard, and for the merest instant, his eyes slid over my face and, with no sign of recognition, he turned back to the road and sped away. I picked up a ride from the very next car I saw, two or three minutes later, but even though this driver was pushing 90 miles per hour, we never caught up with Buck, and I never saw him again.

Buck, at least, belonged on that road. What the hell was I doing there? If I had been asked at the time, or at any point for many years thereafter, I would have said that I needed to earn some money, and that this was a great way of doing so while learning something new at the same time. I would have said, as if it were a quality of the highest importance, that it all was very *interesting*.

But in truth, this explanation for my motivations in going down to Texas didn't make a lick of sense. After all, I wasn't running away from anything back in Chicago, where there were better-paying jobs that would have taught me new things, too. I didn't drink much, I didn't have a drug problem, I had plenty of friends and I wasn't escaping a bad relationship; now that I was out of my parents' house and a college graduate, there was no good reason for me to escape my surroundings. Even if I'd just wanted to travel, it made no sense to do so in a way that ended up depositing me on this desolate straightaway, of all places; while my experiences so far in Texas had been and would continue to be unquestionably *interesting*, they were, as often as not, also fairly bleak.

As I'd written in that marginal notation on one of my sales scripts: *Establish a purpose for being there.*

When I was growing up in Chicago, my parents sometimes would take my brother and sister and me on a ride late at night along a side street called Bowmanville, even if it was out of the way or we had nowhere in particular to go. This was because Bowmanville had a reputation for being "haunted"; in a city of rectilinear streets, Bowman was curved and, better yet, passed in its short length by a cemetery and two auto wrecking yards where pyramids of destroyed cars glinted in the moonlight. We kids would whoop and holler, and our parents would pretend to be scared. Though I never mentioned this to them, or to my brother and sister, I also liked Bowmanville because I imagined that, in its oddness, it was a magical street that would, when traversed, straighten and then re-curl in a new direction like a snake poked with a stick, leading us to an unexpected place rather than to Lincoln Avenue near our home. It was an escape fantasy pure and simple, though if asked I would have stoutly denied that I had anything in particular to escape from. My parents were loving, if not especially competent or good at providing for us, and I felt a sense of loyalty towards them – even, in their ineptitude, felt sorry for them – and knew that wanting to escape my cave-like dwelling place would have seemed a betrayal and a criticism.

Thus, I developed a vision of myself as invulnerable, a little boy smiling in the face of deprivation. I shrugged off disasters; I decided somehow that I didn't need to, but merely *wanted to*, transcend my circumstances. Like Mark, the hopeful young man in Dickens' *Martin Chuzzlewit* who never did anything the easy and sensible way because "there was no credit in it," I wanted to prove that I could succeed while facing the most difficult of challenges, and at the same time pretend that these circumstances were my choice rather than something thrust upon me by my parents or my social class. The alternative – facing my straitened circumstances head on – involved getting angry at my parents, or worse, at myself, and upset and regretful about the experiences and opportunities I'd missed. It was better, if I failed, to blame my immediate predicament, to use it as an excuse rather than face up to the negligence, mine and others, that had led me there. And if I succeeded in spite of my travails, oh what honors would be accorded me!

That's why, I surmise now, the idea appealed to me so greatly of taking a seemingly arbitrary action – signing that contract, for example – that would deposit me, as in some real-life game of Snakes and Ladders, in some wholly unexpected place where I would prove my worth and end up even more of a success than had I taken a conventional route to the top. I wanted, always, to begin twelve inches behind the starting line, and this is no figure of speech; one of my earliest childhood memories is of doing the standing broad jump in gym class and, just before my jump, backing up by a foot or so. Though I was a strong enough athlete, the net result was (of course) that I ended up a foot further back than I should have and out of contention, but it took many decades for me to understand why I thought this might have been a good idea.

So all of my reasons for going down to Texas were merely rationalizations – optimistic and hopeful rationalizations, because they ended, in my fantasies, with my triumph, but rationalizations nonetheless, and weird ones at that. The simple fact of the matter, which I didn't then want to acknowledge, was that if you were born poor and raised poor, you spent the rest of your life playing catch up ball, no matter which way you spun the situation.

Anyway, I understand this now, or at least am somewhat closer to the truth than I was then. But at the time, even had I understood my motivations better, there wouldn't have been much I could do about it, certainly not after I'd been kicked out of the trailer and the district attorney and the police were on my trail. For whatever reason, and with whatever motivation, the fact of the matter was that I'd slid into another, more difficult, mode of existence. The problem was, suddenly I couldn't stop sliding.