

PRAISE FOR MICHAEL BOWKER'S NO ORDINARY DAYS

"Bowker's writing is beautiful. His reporting skills are first-rate, and each story contains a blast of emotion...This is a must read!" – **Martha Smilgis, former editor, Time Magazine.**

"Michael Bowker wrote numerous stories for Reader's Digest and invariably captivated the magazine's global readership. It's wonderful that he is sharing some of his best stories in this volume." – **William Beaman, former editor, Reader's Digest.**

"Michael's versatile writing skills match his real life passions. There is the humanitarian, the criminalist, the athlete, the adventurer, the novelist, the naturalist and the medical researcher. His probing nature opens the reader's mind to the many stories within a story and the life's lessons to be learned within them all. He has woven the best of a career's worth of research here, providing pearls of insight in an enlightening, enjoyable read." – **Carl Stincelli, Author, Educator, former detective on the Golden State Killer case.**

"Bowker writes in a riveting and compelling style...his stories make for gripping reads. He often writes in a classic, muckraking journalistic style. He gives a voice to those who suffer from long-term exposure and abuse, and to the heroes who fight for them." – **Publisher's Weekly.**

"Bowker is a well-known author whose books are a fascination to readers." – **London Books, London England.**

"Bowker's writing is inspirational." – **USA Today.**

"He can write in a chilling style...and he gets to the truth of things." – **Barnes and Noble.**

“Dealing with demons sometimes brings unexpected treasures. Michael Bowker and I bonded during the hunt for the Golden State Killer. As the first female homicide detective on the case, I deeply appreciated Michael’s accurate and highly sensitive handling of the stories of the victims. He is a superb writer.” – **Carol Daly, lead investigator in the Golden State Killer case, Sacramento Sheriff’s Office. ‘International Detective of the Year’ award-winner.**

“Among the many things he writes about, Bowker is a science columnist who offers compelling stories. These are usually about things that governments and lawyers don’t want people to know about, (regarding) toxic killers.” – **Powell Books.**

“There is a meaningful tale for everyone in this book. Each story in this dynamic kaleidoscope of articles is well-researched. This is a wonderful read, indeed!” – **Sunny Chayse, ABC television host.**

“Michael is a fantastic investigative reporter. Through in-depth reporting and brilliant writing, He weaves together sensational narratives that brings his stories alive. They absolutely sizzle.” – **Craig Smith, Professor at Santa Barbara College of Law and author of Craigsmitbsblog.**

Also written by Michael Bowker

Gods of Our Time

Fatal Deception

Playing From the Heart

Beating Long Hauler's Syndrome

The Visionary Leader

The Health Care Solution

Winning the Battle Within

The Whole Systems Approach

MICHAEL BOWKER'S

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MICHAEL BOWKER



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MICHAEL BOWKER JOURNALIST: NO ORDINARY DAYS is a work of non-fiction.

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To Kristine and Michele

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FOREWORD

By

“Officer of the Year” CAROL DALY

Carol was one of the first female homicide detectives in California history. She was a Lead Investigator on the Golden State Killer case. For her ground-breaking career, she given one of the first “Officer of the Year” awards given by the California Women Peace Officers’ Association. She was later honored as “Officer of the Year” by the International Association of Women Peace Officers. The award was presented in Birmingham, England.

“MICHAEL BOWKER and I bonded over the most prominent case of my career – the Golden State Killer. We first met in 2003, when he was writing an article for Sacramento Magazine on the East Area Rapist, a cold-hearted criminal who would later be known around the world as “The Golden State Killer.”

Among all the reporters and media officials I met during this time, I was most comfortable with Michael. I felt an immediate trust with him. He has that effect on people. Still, he doesn’t back down from finding the truth, which in some stories, like this one, can be dark and even brutal.

I still remember Michael’s first story on the GSK, when the killer was still at large. He interviewed one victim, who had been assaulted in her home. Her standout quote was: “Do you believe in evil? I do. It was in my house that night.”

Michael and I stayed in touch and about 15 years later he interviewed me again. The Golden State Killer had finally been caught and Michael was invited by Sacramento

Magazine to write another article, detailing the emotions of the victims, investigators and the community. He did a fantastic job, the story is in this book.

I respect his dedication to accuracy, attentiveness to detail, and ability to tell riveting stories. As I've said before, his wonderful writing and his fierce desire to shed light on injustices are treasures. His reverence for humanity make him a voice worth hearing."

INTRODUCTION

I never meant to be a journalist. When I was six years old, growing up on an isolated farm in Kansas, I saw myself as following in the giant footsteps of John Steinbeck, Harper Lee, and Mark Twain. I even pieced together a raft like Huck Finn and launched it on our local lake. It sank and I had to swim to shore, but I thought it was a fine adventure.

For me, in those early years, there was no seam between literature, love and nature. I loved equally the complexity of leaves on the hickory trees and the challenges facing Chingachgook and Hawkeye in *Last of the Mohicans*. In the afternoons I would often race through the corn rows barefoot to get down to the creek where I wasn't supposed to go. The current raged in the springtime and could be dangerous. That's also when it was the most fun. When I was down there, I'd dream about the characters in the books my dad read to me every night. I often imagined I was the last of the Kansans and like Hawkeye had to jump from waterfalls to save the beautiful Cora from Magua. I ended up in the creek more than once enacting that scene.

As I got older, things changed. Practicality became king. We were miles from any town and when the tractor broke down you had to fix it yourself with whatever parts and tools you had in the barn. Be practical or perish. That was the culture and the echo in my mind growing up in the American Midwest.

I loved my creative writing classes in graduate school, and late at night I dreamed of writing novels. But working for a newspaper came with a salary, being a novelist didn't. By then I had migrated west and I found a job as a reporter on a mid-sized paper in the foothills of northern California. To my joy, I found that every working day, from the morning onward, was nonstop action. There were crimes to investigate, fires, floods and brave rescues of lost

hikers in the mountains, then back down the winding roads to cover city council meetings or perhaps interview a movie star who was in town. There were no ordinary days.

Later, I freelanced for more than 100 newspapers and magazines such as *Reader's Digest*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Popular Science*, *International Wildlife*, *Redbook* and *Outside Magazine* for several years, and then served as the editorial captain of a national business magazine. Along the way I also wrote a number of books, including my first novel.

Breaking the Rules

When I was a young writer, the conventional thought was that to become a successful journalist, (or almost anything else) you should choose a niche and focus solely on that topic. That didn't fit me. Stay on one topic? This book contains a wild diversity of stories because sometimes you just have to break the rules. A major reason I love journalism is the endless variety of topics you can cover. Curiosity drove me to the stories in this book. They range from 'who-done-it' murder mysteries and stories of unbelievable human courage, to tales of outdoor adventure and international romance. They also include stories driven by a passion I've had all my life – our relationship with the natural world.

The book also contains a look at some of the challenging times I had while chasing the stories, including looking down the barrel of a loaded gun and getting too close to the Golden State Killer story. Inside are also brief glimpses of some of the books I've written along the way. They are as diverse as the articles, and they include contributions from famous politicians and top sports figures and health experts. A short clip from my novel is in there, too, an adventure/love story set in Paris in 1925 that was both terrifying and exhilarating to write.

Finally, I wanted to let you know this is a book of living stories. As part of the research, I recently reached out to most of the people who were in the original articles. I wanted to learn what had transpired in their lives since those stories were published. I was shocked by what I found. The stories of 'what happened after', are in some cases more spectacular than the original stories. Some of these portray the dark side of human nature. But mostly, they chronicle the amazing lives of 'ordinary' people doing extraordinary things that are changing the world.

CHAPTER ONE

The Golden State Killer

Sacramento Magazine

September 2003

Me? A Suspect?

During the years I've spent researching, writing and interviewing presidents, governors, movie stars, criminals, medical experts, secret DEA agents, sports hall of famers, artists, ordinary folks doing extraordinary things, environmentalists and business tycoons – one moment stands out above the rest.

It was the moment I became a suspect in the biggest serial killer manhunt in the country.

It was nearly 20 years ago that I knocked on the door at the home of Sacramento Sheriff's Deputy, Carl Stincelli. He opened the inner door, but not the screen door, which was designed to allow him to see me, but I could not see him. Stincelli began an immediate interrogation, asking me where I had lived at certain times and other specific questions. A woman was inside with him and she began peppering me with questions of a more psychological nature – how I felt about murders and murderous motivations.

It didn't take long to realize what was going on. The Golden State Killer, who was the subject of an article I was researching for a story I was doing for *Sacramento Magazine*, had never been caught. Stincelli and his inquisitive colleague wanted to know why I was doing a story on him so many years after his reign of terror had seemingly ended. Was I so clever as to pretend I was a writer to get more grim satisfaction by taunting investigators so many years later?

My first emotion was one of amazement as they continued to grill me through the screen door. So many resources had been spent on trying to catch him, yet law enforcement still had no clue who or where he was. Stincelli and his partner figured they may as well interrogate me, too. I knew immediately this would be part of the story.

With a bit of devilry, I tucked my reporter's notebook under my arm and said, "Well, maybe I am him and maybe you won't know the truth unless you invite me into your house."

I know to most of you that response was a little crazy, and possibly a bit dangerous. But I'd been a reporter for some time at this point, and I knew sometimes you have to push into the darkness – or a detective's house – where unexpected pieces of the story might lie. Besides, by then I had done many true crime stories, including some dicey international drug smuggling pieces, and was comfortable talking to law enforcement officials. I was after a story, and I knew I had to get inside to get it.

The screen door slowly opened. Stincelli, a nice-looking guy of average height, had an honest, open face. I was relieved to see that when he let me inside. He nodded toward a seat at his kitchen table. Even as I sat, he had a can of Dr. Pepper ready for me. "I assume you are thirsty," he said. I just laughed, took a sip and handed the can back to him. "Okay, you have my fingerprints and DNA. Now, can we get to the story?"

He took the can and grinned. He and the woman with him, who turned out to be a Victim's Advocate, questioned me a bit longer, but I could tell they were quickly losing their enthusiasm for me as their fresh new suspect. Our discussion focused on Stincelli's work as one of the first detectives to work on the Golden State Killer case in Sacramento. He had been a rookie then. For nearly two hours we talked about

Stincelli's experiences, and the terrible deeds done by the GSK. Before the interview was over, they asked me to co-write a book with them on a completely different subject.

"Does this mean I'm no longer a suspect?" I asked, with a fake frown.

"Oh, you'll always be a suspect," Stincelli laughed. "Every journalist is up to something."

He was right, of course. We are always up to something. It's why I love this job. In this case, however, I will admit I almost did not do this story. As I got into the research and interviewed some of the victims (he raped dozens of women as well as committed murders up and down California), the pain and suffering I saw in faces and heard in their voices were front and center in my mind. The fact that he hadn't been caught had to delay their healing. Would my story bring pain back to them?

I talked to several law enforcement officials, including Carol Daly, one of the first female homicide detectives in California. I also talked to several of his victims. They reassured me that my story would do more good than harm. Daly's feeling that it was okay to move forward with the story was critically important to me. She is an amazingly sensitive person and a highly skilled detective. She thought a good investigative piece might even help lead to his capture. So, I wrote on.

The Fear He Created

I first heard about the Golden State Killer when I moved to Sacramento from Seattle. I had ideas of playing on the professional golf tour at the time and needed more sunshine than the Northwest provided. I arrived in the California Capital one warm day in the fall. During the first week I spent in my new adopted city, I was struck by the number of helicopters that rattled overhead each night. The odd thing was they were shining huge spotlights all over the east side of the region until well into the morning hours. Curious, I asked around and found out quickly that a man was suspected of committing dozens of **home-invasion** rapes in the area, and law enforcement couldn't catch

him. He had been at it for several months. He was known then, as the East Area Rapist. I found out the apartment I rented was in the general area of his rampage and I felt the fear he generated in my neighbors. It was tangible. It grew into a terror that held the city hostage as he struck repeatedly for the next twelve months.

It was that emotion, this abiding, universal fear – he was all people talked about then – that I remembered when I was asked by Krista Minard, the talented Editor of *Sacramento Magazine*, to do four ‘hard-edged’ stories for her. The management did not want the magazine to be perceived as running only soft pieces on rose bushes and PTA activities. They wanted me to do some tougher pieces. It was up to me to submit ideas.

Since the Golden State Killer had been on the loose for nearly 20 years, at that time, I thought it was a natural story to do. His terrible crime spree symbolized a “right angle” in Sacramento’s history. As he was terrorizing the region, Sacramento was also experiencing a rapid population growth. It was rapidly changing from a small town where no one locked their doors at night into a big city with traffic problems – and a killer on a rampage.

“It’s Too Scary”

When I finished the first article and submitted it, I thought I had done a good job. Almost too good, as it turned out. Krista called me and in a concerned voice told me the owner wasn’t going to run it. “It’s too scary,” she told me. “He thinks it’s going to frighten people so much they will never read the magazine again.”

Although I saw the owner’s reaction as a weird sort of compliment – it was a frightening story and I told it as truly as I could – I was upset that he might not run it. I had worked hard and thought the piece was important. We negotiated all day. In the end, the owner relented. He let the piece run, but hid it in the middle of the magazine. The cover was a story about how to vacation on the beach or something like that. I understood, though, he was simply trying to protect his readers. In the end, he wrote about the story in his Publisher’s Note at

the beginning of the magazine. That took guts. After all, magazines are financial affairs at their hearts.

The story made a big splash locally and law enforcement officials told me it helped motivate detectives to expand their investigations. The Golden State Killer had not only raped many women in the East Bay Area, but in Santa Barbara, Ventura, San Diego and other southern California locales. It was also clear he was a proficient serial killer, leaving bodies up and down the Golden State.

A decade and a half later, I did a second piece on the GSK. You'll find it in the later pages of this book. The first piece follows this paragraph. I didn't want to run them together because I didn't want this dark tale to dominate the book.

An Unsolved Mystery

Sacramento Magazine 2003

Nearly 30 years ago, an infamous series of crimes in Sacramento terrified the entire community for two years. The man responsible has never been caught. The following is a chronicling of these crimes, and an explanation of why the Sacramento County Sheriff's Department has recently reopened the case.

There are still times, even under the bright lights of a Sacramento mall, that Suzanne finds herself suddenly pulled into the darkness and she involuntarily stares at the face of a man walking toward her. Her heart races and her emotions plunge back to the horrifying events of that night long ago. Against her will, her mind calculates: "How tall? How heavy? Is it him? Listen for the voice. I would know the voice. The terrible voice behind the mask."

Suzanne (not her real name) was a victim of one of the most insidious series of crimes in Sacramento history. It was a rampage that rocked the city for more than two years in the mid-1970s and reverberated for

years. Frightened residents bought nearly 6,000 guns in a few short months, turning the peaceful farming and government community into an armed camp. Sacramentans lived behind locked doors for the first time. The fervor was created by one criminal, who became known as the East Area Rapist. His bold invasions of nearly 40 middle- and upper- income households in the Sacramento area shattered the illusion that residents were safe in their homes.

It was a ‘bump in the night’ type of fear and it gripped the entire city,” says Sgt. Carl Stincelli of the Sacramento County Sheriff’s Department, who was a rookie deputy at the time. “It wasn’t unusual for people to shoot holes in their walls because some noise frightened them in the dark. We were lucky family members didn’t actually shoot one another by accident. There was nothing like that before in Sacramento, and there’s been nothing like it since.”

The reign of terror took place nearly 30 years ago, yet it remains so powerfully etched in the psyches of those involved, from cops and politicians to the victims themselves, that it still is being investigated today (see “New Investigation” sidebar). It cast a shadow over the efficiency of law enforcement departments state wide and ultimately led to passage of an important new state law. Yet the crime that cost Sacramento its innocence has never been solved. The East Area Rapist, now wanted as a serial killer, has never been caught or identified. Suzanne and dozens of other victims and law enforcement officers hold out hope that they may yet find answers to questions that have haunted them for so many years.

“He stalked his victims,” says Suzanne, an intelligent, insightful woman who spent two hours talking about her ordeal. She was 30 years old when the East Area Rapist struck her

home in the mid-1970's "I still wonder, why me? Why did he choose me? Did he know me before or was I a random choice? I want to know his identity. He broke into our home, tied up my children, and tormented and terrorized me for hours. He had a knife and a gun. He blindfolded me and left for a long time, saying that if I moved, he would kill me. I was terrified. Just when I thought he was gone, he burst back in and stabbed the knife into the bed an inch from my face. He screamed that he had seen me move. He said he was going to cut body parts off my family and bring them to me. I felt in my heart that my children and I were going to die. Do you believe in evil? I do. It was in my house that night."

In 1974, Sacramento was a quiet, laid-back little city where traffic jams and gang violence were unknown. Despite rising gasoline prices, the economy was strong and the region was growing. The newest "fashionable" part of the region was the East Area, which extended from La Riviera Drive east of the university, through Del Dayo and out to the suburbs of Rancho Cordova, Fair Oaks, Citrus Heights and Orangevale. Back then, this area was drawing the upper middle-income professionals. It was new, upscale and safe.

That year, residents there were shocked by the strange incident where a burglar savagely beat a dog to death in a house before ransacking the place. It would be years before law officials tied that odd event to a twisted and clever psychopath whose crimes would escalate into some of the most horrific ever committed in California. In Sacramento, he would commit nearly 40 home invasions and rapes before moving on and committing several more in Stockton, Modesto, Tracy, and the East Bay Area. Three decades later, new DNA technology would reveal the shocking fact that the East Area Rapist also was one of the most prolific serial murderers in the state's history.

“He attacked me the same way he attacked the others,” recalls Suzanne. “I woke up in the middle of the night and he was over me, a flashlight in my eyes, swearing through clenched teeth and giving orders. All I could see was the handgun pointed at my face. He said if I didn’t do exactly what he said, he would kill my family. He wanted complete control and compliance. Yet, the entire time it felt as though he was simply playing a role he had scripted out. I felt I was injected into this fantasy of his. Whenever I said anything that distracted from it, he would become furious. It was like he was testing me, and I was convinced he would kill me if I didn’t go along with his fantasy. It was crazy. It was as though some deep, deep drive was pushing him. At the same time, he had it all planned out to the last detail.”

Anyone who lived or worked in Sacramento in those days is likely to remember the dread caused by the East Area Rapist. For many, the electric shock of fear he generated was **great it** is still seared into memories like a scar. Even the mention of him can bring back uncomfortable feelings of naked vulnerability and deep frustration.

“It was, by far, the most emotional case I’ve ever worked on,” says Carol Daly, who, in the mid-1970’s, was a young investigator with the Sacramento County Sheriff’s Department. Daly, who now serves as the chairperson of the California Board of Prison Terms, dealt with many of the rape victims. “You can’t imagine how traumatized they were. Terrorizing people was this guy’s thing; the rape act was inconsequential for him. He wanted to control, demean and destroy people psychologically. I’ve investigated hundreds of assaults in my career, but nothing approached this one for sheer terror. I got to the point where I didn’t like being around any man except my husband. The stress was tremendous. To this day, this is the crime I’d most like to see solved.”

Throughout the years, the Sacramento region has had more than its share of sensational crimes, ranging from the mass murders by Juan Corona in 1971 and by Dorothea Puente in 1988 to the attempted assassination in 1975 of President Gerald Ford by Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme and the killings at the Good Guys store in South Sacramento in 1991. But no criminal has ever gripped the city in the same way as the East Area Rapist. The rapes continued for nearly two years as he easily eluded law enforcement officers, despite being the subject of the biggest manhunt in Sacramento history. He struck homes when husbands, boyfriends, and even guard dogs were present. He raped and terrorized at will. Six thousand guns, an entire sheriff’s department, a borrowed surveillance helicopter, and an alarmed and wary populace were not enough to catch him.

To Stincelli, who was a self-described “fuzzy-faced new-comer” to the sheriff’s department at the time, the unsolved case rubs as raw as ever. “I’m in my 29th year in the department now, and I can tell you there isn’t a law enforcement officer from that time who won’t tell you this was the most frustrating case in their career. If there is one thing I want before I retire, it is to find the East Area Rapist. He may be dead or in prison by now, but all of us would like to put an end to that case, one way or another.”

He Rampaged at Will

The East Area Rapist’s first known attack in the Sacramento area occurred at 4 a.m. on June 18, 1976, on Paseo Drive in Rancho Cordova. At the time, it was considered an isolated incident by law enforcement. Rapes certainly weren’t new to the Sacramento area; dozens were reported every year. The only unusual aspect of this one was that the rapist, who wore a ski

mask, struck in a single-family residence rather than an apartment or the proverbial dark alley. The community wasn't immediately alerted to the incident, law enforcement hoped the rapist would soon be caught.

By September 1976, however, rumors began to circulate throughout Sacramento that a brazen serial rapist was at work in the East Area – one who broke into the houses of middle and upper-income single women and raped them in their beds in the middle of the night. The city stirred uneasily, especially the residents on the east side. The odd thing was none of the rumors could be confirmed. There was nothing about the assaults in the newspapers or on the radio or television. It was confusing. What residents didn't know was that the Sacramento County Sheriff's Department had already attributed four brutal rapes in the East Area to one man, but had asked the city's news media to sit on the story until they caught him. The media complied – a move they later admitted was a mistake.

The East Area Rapist continued to strike on Winding Way in Carmichael and near Madison and Manzanita avenues in Citrus Heights. By October 1976, concern in the East Area had grown to such a point that sheriff's deputies held a series of publicized, informal meetings to reassure residents. More than 300 worried people showed up. The overwhelmed deputies admitted to the crowd that seven rapes, all committed by the same man, had been reported in the East Area since June. Residents expressed shock and outrage that they hadn't been told. The media stuck to their pledge not to run the story until the rapist struck in the Del Dayo neighborhood, near the home of an editor of one of the city's newspapers. As a magazine reporter for the now-defunct *New West Magazine* later wrote: "At that point, important people began ringing important phones." Suddenly, the media dam broke and the East Area

Rapist became front-page headlines and the lead story on the 11 o'clock news. Sacramentans responded with near hysteria.

"This was before the huge box superstores, and Sacramento had only locally owned hardware stores," recalls Stincelli. "Every one of them sold out of guns, mercury vapor lights, window and door locks and burglar alarms within a few weeks. I remember Sim's Hardware Store downtown couldn't keep any of those items in stock. I'm not sure there was a gun left to be purchased in the city.

"We started getting calls by the hundreds every night," he continued. "Everybody was reporting prowlers because we knew this guy always cased the houses before he hit them. We had to respond to all of them. One positive result was that regular nighttime crimes plummeted to almost zero because we had patrol cars everywhere. But we were tremendously frustrated, we couldn't catch this guy."

The sheriff's department obtained a search helicopter, and the roar of its rotors and the nightly spotlight shining down from the sky came to define Sacramento nights in 1976 and 1977. Undaunted, the rapist struck again on Nov. 10 on Los Palos Way in Rancho Cordova and twice more in December in Citrus Heights and Fair Oaks. Then twice more in January 1977, once in February and four more times in March and April, all in the East Area. Only once did deputies come close to catching him.

"Late one night during that time, deputies spotted a prowler who fit the general description, right down to the ski mask," says Stincelli. "They went on a foot pursuit after this guy but he outmaneuvered the toughest, most athletic guy we had on the force at the time. I knew then he was going to be very, very difficult to catch."

He Terrorized His Victims

There was evidence he had been inside of the houses prior to the night of his attacks, familiarizing himself with the inside layout. Often, he would unlock a window or door so he could later enter quietly. He usually stole trinkets, pictures, jewelry and driver's licenses during his attacks – in part to continually terrorize his victims. He told them, “I know who you are, I own you, I own you.” After his attacks, he occasionally followed up, sometimes months later, with obscene calls to his victims.

At first, he only invaded homes with one or two women, and sometimes children, present. Spurred, perhaps, by media reports that he was afraid of men, in May 1977 he suddenly began to attack homes in which husbands or boyfriends were present. He would burst in on the sleeping couple, shine a high-powered flashlight in their eyes, then through clenched teeth vow to “kill everyone in the house” if the couple didn't do exactly as he said. He'd force the woman to tie the man with precut pieces of rope. He'd often bring a new pair of shoelaces to tie the man's hands. The rapist would then tie up the woman and retie the man. In what was to become his most infamous trademark, he'd then place dishes on the back of the prone male. “If I hear those dishes rattle, I'll know you're trying to get loose, and I'll kill the whole house,” the rapist would threaten.

After raping the woman, he would often spend hours rummaging through the house, sometimes drinking beer from the refrigerator. Often, he would be quiet for more than an hour, leading the victims to believe he had left the house. Suddenly, he would reappear, swearing and viciously threatening to kill them, and often assaulting the woman again. Then he would be gone, leaving a wake of physical and psychological devastation.

“The women were traumatized, as you might

imagine,” says Daly. “They were so afraid that he would come back some night. He ripped away their security. Here they were sleeping next to their husbands, and yet they still weren’t safe.”

The men involved also suffered great psychological trauma. “It was terrible for them,” says Daly. “He humiliated them, which is exactly what he wanted to do. They couldn’t protect their wives. That harmed these men far more deeply than any physical wound.”

The women victims established support groups, and most attended and went through substantial counseling. There was no similarity between the female victims, except all were younger than 40. Daly helped set up similar counseling sessions for the male victims, but not a single one attended. “They just couldn’t face it,” Daly says. “They were supposed to be the protectors and in control, and they were not. It wasn’t that they were too proud. It was that they were devastated.”

The attacks proved disastrous for relationships. Of the 20 couples that were attacked, 18 split apart within a year. Most had been married.

“The extended families of the victims suffered, too,” says Daly. “I had fathers of the victims come up to me years later and tell me they felt they needed help, that they had never gotten over the feeling of helplessness that they couldn’t protect their daughters. Years later, these men were still in agony.”

“It led to our divorce,” says Suzanne. “My husband felt like he was a failure, that he couldn’t protect his children or me. He nearly lost his job because he lost faith in himself and couldn’t work. It hurt him at a deep, deep level. I would try to reassure him, but I was going through my own troubles. I often couldn’t tolerate things from him, the normal everyday things we usually tolerate about our spouses, and it became impossible for both of us. The anguish that the East Area Rapist caused

lasted for years. It was such a notorious case. Each time he struck, it would be front-page news. I would feel like I was beginning to heal and then wake to see another headline about him. My divorce was hard, and very scary. Suddenly, I was alone and more afraid than ever that he would come back."

In May 1977, the East Area Rapist reached the height of his terror reign, striking five times. Two attacks came within 48 hours of each other. The city was in an uproar. Every available sheriff's deputy volunteered for night patrol. The sheriff's department fielded thousands of calls – everyone seemed to know a suspect. Some 40 psychics volunteered their opinions as to whom and where the rapist was, but none of their information panned out.

The composite description of the East Area Rapist, who always wore a ski mask and rarely left fingerprints, was a man of his early 20s, about 5 feet 9 inches tall, medium to small build, with dark brown or black hair, who may have had a tattoo on one forearm that one child victim said looked like "the Schlitz Malt Liquor Bull." The only other unusual feature victims described was a prominent nose that seemed to jut directly out of his forehead. Because he often invaded houses next to vacant lots, he sometimes left muddy footprints in the house – size 9 or 10, and always tennis shoes.

He derided law enforcement and allegedly even sent the Sacramento City Council a taunting letter, the contents of which have never been revealed. At one community meeting with law enforcement, a male resident stood and criticized the men whose homes had been invaded for not fighting back. He said he would be ready if his home were attacked. Within weeks, the East Area Rapist struck that man's house, tying him up and raping his female partner. It was clear that the rapist had attended the meeting and took the man's comments as a challenge. Later, he crossed up deputies by striking in

the south area of the city – within a few houses of the residence of a man who had organized a citizens’ patrol in effort to catch him.

“Excuse my language, but what he was about was mind–people,” says Suzanne. “He was always a step ahead of the deputies and the city officials. He loved thumbing his nose at them. HE would wander through the houses, making victims think he was gone, just so he could suddenly reappear and watch the horror on their faces. He loved that – the power and control. He called the victims on the phone afterwards, just to remind them he could still get to them. Rape is an incredible, horrible violation, but this went beyond rape of the body. It was rape of the psyche, the family and the soul. In a way, he raped the whole city. He tormented you, taunted you and had total control over whether you and your family were going to live. I think he wanted to stay in your mind forever.”

To this day, there are bitter feelings among some who worked this case. “The detectives liked to talk about how intelligent the East Area Rapist was, but that’s a bunch of baloney,” says a former deputy, who asked not to be identified. “He wasn’t all that smart; he made a lot of mistakes, especially at first. The Sacramento County Sheriff’s Department was more concerned about who was going to catch him than how. Everybody wanted the glory of catching him, so nobody talked to each other. There was no sharing of information or coordination going on. He wasn’t smart; the department just let egos get in the way. It was disgusting, and it still infuriates me when I think about it. Had we caught him, a lot of people would still probably be alive today.”

Daly agrees. “There was so much pressure on us from the community to catch him that it caused a tremendous amount of competition within the various jurisdictions,” she says. “Information wasn’t shared. The investigation never came together.”

The joke among the deputies at the time was that if the East Area Rapist wasn't caught, Sheriff Duane Lowe was going to lose his election. (He was running unopposed.) In the end, Lowe escaped excessive criticism not because of the department's efforts, but because after the East Area Rapist's last rape on Piedmont Drive in Sacramento on April 14, 1978, the rapes in the Sacramento area stopped. Subsequent rapes that year in Stockton, Modesto and Tracy, and in Concord, Danville and San Ramon – all of which had MOs identical to the East Area Rapist's attacks in Sacramento – left no doubt he had moved on.

Gradually, over the next two decades, Suzanne put her life back together. The man who had so drastically changed her life apparently never committed another rape in Sacramento. The city began to relax, Suzanne's own fears lessened, although they never fully disappeared. She went about the everyday tasks of raising her children and settled into a professional career.

"He had disappeared from the community and from the headlines," Suzanne says. "I felt some relief, but I didn't know what it meant. Where had he gone? That was always in the back of my mind. The sheriff's detectives told me they thought he was dead or in prison. I wanted to think that, but how could you ever tell for sure?"

Then, in 2001, Suzanne was stunned to read headlines in the local paper stating that new DNA procedure had just linked the East Area Rapist to at least 10 murders in Southern California. An attractive young couple was killed in their upper middle-class home on Oct. 1, 1979, in Goleta, then another similar couple in Ventura on March 16, 1980. A third couple was found dead in their home on Aug. 19, 1980. In each case, the victims were found in their beds, bound with pre-cut

rope and new shoelaces. The women were raped in each case, and the couples were then bludgeoned to death, sometimes with logs from their fireplaces.

“Reading about these terrible murders and knowing that he did them was horrible,” Suzanne says. “After all those years, that terrible feeling came cascading over me again. I was furious at the sheriff’s department for not telling me before I read about it in the newspapers. More than anything, though, I realized how lucky we were to be alive. He was so angry and so intense, it was clear to me that he was close to killing when he was here in Sacramento.”

According to investigator Larry Pool of the Orange County Sheriff’s Department, additional homicides in Irvine and Goleta also are linked directly to the East Area Rapist. “He followed a classic evolution, from a prowler, wandering the neighborhoods, to working up the nerve to break into houses, and then to raping and terrorizing,” Pool says. “But, somewhere along the way, that still wasn’t enough. Ultimately, he needed to murder to exercise the final control over his victims.”

Pool, a criminologist with expertise in serial murderers, believes the East Area Rapist was ritually killing the primary female in his life, either a mother, stepmother or grandmother. “A typical profile would be of a man with a domineering mother who has sexual partners abusive to her and to the killer when he was younger. He hates and wants to kill the men and his mother for bringing them into his life. This guy, though, is one of the worst I’ve ever dealt with. He murdered more people than Jack the Ripper, taunting and tormenting his victims as he went.”

The East Area Rapist’s last known crime was committed on May 5, 1986. He stalked an Irvine woman, finally breaking into her family’s home when

she was alone. She was sexually assaulted, bound and beaten to death. She was 18 years old.

Detectives have since speculated **that the** Sacramento victims attempted to fight back against the East Area Rapist, they, too, would have become murder victims. “He was growing increasingly vicious with his threats when he was here,” says Daly. “There was no doubt he was working up to murder.”

His crimes may have stopped 17 years ago, but the East Area Rapist still is a wanted man. “The history and science of these types of cases tells you that he is either in prison or dead,” says Pool. “These types generally don’t stop committing crimes until they are caught or they die. But, as long as I am breathing, I’ll still be trying to find out his identity and what happened to him. This is a case unlike any other.”

Truly Evil

Stincelli agrees. “I believe he’s either dead, in prison or perhaps moved to a different country,” he says. “But it still bothers me that we don’t know for sure. There are evil people in the world, truly evil. He’s one of them.”

Daly can never forget the fear that gripped Sacramento and the shaken victims she interviewed. “It took a tremendous toll on this city and on me personally,” she says. “I finally asked to be relieved so I could go back to my regular homicide duties. They told me there was stress there too, but I said, ‘Not like this!’ Having stayed in contact with some of the victims, I can say for sure that it would do them all a lot of good if we could at least determine who this guy was.”

Pool believes that the rapist would have kept his souvenirs from his attacks nearby, perhaps in his room. He believes that even if the East Area Rapist has died,

somebody close to him might have seen this unlikely collection. “Hopefully, the article you are doing will jog someone’s memory and they will come forth with information that can lead us to this guy’s identity, even if he is dead,” he says. “If he is in prison, perhaps somebody knows enough about him to be suspicious and give us a tip.”

For the Sacramento area, determining his identity is important. It would finally solve a crime that marked the dubious turning point, when the region changed from an open community of unlocked doors to a metropolis replete with big-city dangers. For Suzanne, and many other victims, it would help put an end to the darkest chapters of their lives.

“I still lock the doors at night, and then I get up and lock them again,” says Suzanne. “I never feel totally safe. I get hang-up calls and it makes me wonder. At weak times, I look at men sometimes and subconsciously think – could that be him? I still have nightmares that somebody is in the house and I can’t get away or that someone is outside looking in and I can’t lock the doors fast enough. I don’t know where he is now or what happened to him. But I feel someone out there knows enough, if they ever put the pieces together, to figure out who he was. ‘Closure’ is a psychobabble term, but I would like answers, even now. Maybe, if I knew who he was, the nightmares would stop.”

What Happened After

In what became one of the longest manhunts in FBI history, the pursuit of the Golden State Killer extended into its 43rd year – until it ended in spectacular fashion in 2018. The rest of that story, which includes my own unsettling and dangerous involvement, concludes near the end of this book.

CHAPTER TWO

A Mother's Story: Eyewitness to Murder

Redbook Magazine

One morning a friend, who worked for the government, called me at my office in the Sierra Nevada foothills, and said he had just learned about a powerful story that might interest me. It involved a single woman with two sons, who lived in a government housing area near San Francisco. I followed up by contacting Police Inspector Arthur Gerrans, who had been involved with the case. He was happy to talk to me. He told me he thought the woman, Mary Cobbs, deserved all the attention possible. "She did one of the most courageous things I've seen," he said. "She saved her sons, there is no doubt about that. In all my years of working for the Department, I've never seen anything more inspiring than what she did."

The public housing complex where Mary lived was ruled by a ruthless gang that typically recruited young boys to do a variety of illegal things, such as carry the drugs for them in public places. Sometimes, the boys were instructed to carry out violence against someone who had angered the gang leaders. If the boys resisted induction into the gangs, their families faced violent reprisals. The leaders were putting increasing pressure on Mary's two young sons to join the gang. Mary continued to

resist, refusing to allow her sons to go outside in the evenings where the gang members hung out. They stayed inside and studied.

Then one night Mary was looking out the window of her apartment and saw the gang leader drag a man out of a car and shoot him in the head, killing him. It was a drug deal gone bad.

“She quickly hid and had the boys lay on the floor, but she felt the killer had seen her in the window,” said Gerrans. “She faced a hell of a choice. If she told us and then testified, she and her boys would have gone to the top of the gang’s hit list. If she didn’t, her boys would be swept into gang life. These were people who didn’t mind committing murder. Some of your readers might wonder why she just didn’t move out, but she had no money or relatives. She had nowhere to go. People living in that area never called the police for help, but she did – to save her sons. She was one of the bravest people I’ve ever met.”

Gerrans arranged a meeting with Mary, who was African American, and me at the police station. She was young and shy, but she didn’t hesitate in telling her story to me in detail. She had a deep sense of integrity – she was an extraordinary person. She seemed so vulnerable, yet so determined and strong at the same time. Her speech reflected the inner city, but her strength of character, to me, was such that she could have been the Queen of England or any other country. I was humbled that she trusted me and allowed me to help her write this story. It was great that Redbook agreed to publish it because the magazine had a large demographic and reached readers who would most appreciate a mother’s dilemma and her fantastic courage.

Eyewitness To Murder

By Mary Cobbs as told by Michael Bowker

Redbook Magazine

In the fall of 1989, I was raising my sons, Willie, then 13, and Samuel, 5, in a peaceful part of a federal housing project in San Francisco. The boys were doing

well in school, and I was training to be a corporate security guard. I was also taking business classes at a community college. As a 28-year-old single mother, I was struggling financially, but our future seemed promising.

Then everything began to go wrong. Our building was closed for remodeling, and we were moved to one of the most dangerous parts of the project. Drug deals and violence raged outside our apartment door almost every night. Once we came home to find a shattered window, and another time to find our kitchen light shot out. The gang of drug dealers who ruled the neighborhood didn't like to be seen, and they fired at any light that annoyed them. Our kitchen was on street level, so we quickly learned to eat dinner in the dark.

The gang members all had guns, so nobody tried to stop them. Mostly young teenagers, they also robbed people, stole cars, vandalized homes. They were so bold that sometimes they kicked in people's front doors and took whatever they wanted. They hadn't invaded our apartment yet, but I felt it was just a matter of time.

I know this sounds like some ghetto nightmare – certainly not a world most women reading this have ever known. But as a mother, I wanted a better life for my kids, and that's something I'm sure any parent can relate to.

The worst part of it all was that people drove in from all over the city to buy cocaine; from our window we saw daily drug deals. Sometimes we even saw the dealers turn on their customers. One night I saw a young man buy some cocaine, and after he paid for it, the gang beat him up in the middle of the street and took the drugs back. I could hear him crying.

Calling the police never did any good; by the time they arrived, everybody had vanished. Besides, no one

would testify against the dealers. Everyone was too afraid that someone would retaliate. I was so worried I hardly slept. Being exhausted made it hard for me to concentrate on my job or in class. I was afraid for my safety, but I was far more afraid for my sons.

Gang ‘Recruited’ Six-Year-Olds

The gang members aggressively recruited the neighborhood boys to help them sell drugs. They especially liked little boys, some only five or six years old, to wave the passing cars of customers down. As a “reward” the dealers sometimes let the youngsters play with their guns.

During our first few months in the new place, Willie and Samuel stayed away from the gang as much as they could. But in time the pressure on them increased, and gang members threatened to beat them with baseball bats if they didn’t join. As it was, the boys sometimes had to fight to get away, and once they got home, they’d be afraid to go back out. I was terrified that if they didn’t give in, they’d be badly hurt or get killed. But I was equally terrified that if they did give in, they’d end up dealing drugs themselves.

I talked to my boys almost every day about staying out of trouble. I warned them about what would happen if they did what the dealers wanted – what it would be like living in the streets, hurting people and running from the police. I told them they knew right from wrong, but I was sick with worry about them. Both began having nightmares.

I used to be concerned about things like whether my sons were learning good study habits. Now I prayed they would get home from school unharmed.

By late spring, I didn’t know how much longer any of us could go on living with all this fear. I’d begun

working full-time, but I wasn't earning enough yet to move out. I helped organize tenants' meetings where we all shared our concerns, but no one knew what to do. Nobody wanted to stand up to the dealers.

Then, very early on the morning of June 30, 1990, something happened that forced my hand and changed our lives. I was startled out of a deep sleep by shouting outside. It sounded even more vicious than normal, and I cautiously moved to the window. A gang leader was standing in the street with a shotgun in his hand, yelling at two men in a nearby car. I had seen him threaten people with weapons before, but this time I saw him lift the gun – and shoot the passenger. He emptied his gun into the car, also wounding the driver.

Even his cronies couldn't believe it. They were screaming at him: "Come on! You just killed a man!" But the gunman just stood there, cursing at the men in the car. The driver must have been able to jam down the accelerator, because the car screeched away as the killer kept standing there, yelling.

I knelt on the floor by the window, stunned, until the police sirens woke up Willie. He jumped up and came into my room. I grabbed him away from the window and whispered to him what I'd just seen. Then we were both quiet.

For two weeks I struggled with my feelings. I knew I should go to the police, but I was almost paralyzed with fear. It was obvious now that these drug dealers were capable of anything. I kept trying to block it all out, but whenever I closed my eyes, I'd see that lifeless body. I couldn't eat or sleep, and the pressure inside me grew. I tried to think rationally: If I went to the police and the killer found out, my sons and I would be in grave danger.

Could I Let a Killer Go Free?

But I forced myself to think about what would happen if I didn't come forward. How could I tell my sons to stand up for what's right if I let a killer go free? And free he was – soon after the shooting, I spotted him on the street, just hanging out. How much bolder would he be now, I wondered, thinking that he'd gotten away with murder?

I also thought about the values I had been taught. My mother had been very strict with my brothers and sisters and me; she insisted that we always tell the truth, no matter what. "You can overcome any fear with the truth and with prayer," she told us. We believed her because she lived every day by those principles.

I realized that my inner torment would not end unless I acted – and then the opportunity literally knocked on my door. The man on the other side announced that he was Police Inspector Arthur Gerrans of the homicide division. He was investigating the murder, asking each of the building's residents if they'd seen anything. Had I?

I was afraid to open the door because I saw that some gang members were outside, watching the policeman. But then I said to myself, *If I don't talk now, I'll never get any braver.* I invited him in.

I told Inspector Gerrans everything. He was shocked; apparently everybody else he'd talked to claimed they hadn't seen or heard a thing. He thanked me and asked if I'd come down to the police station another time to look at some mugshots. Several days later, I went there and picked out the gunman's picture. A few weeks after that, I also identified him in a police lineup – and agreed to testify at a trial. Inspector Gerrans assured me the police would do all they could to protect me.

I was still scared – with good reason. When I first went down to the police station to identify the gunman, one of the gang members followed me to the bus stop. The next day, Willie and Samuel were threatened. “Your mama better not talk,” said a friend of the killer. “Somethin’ bad’s gonna happen if she does.” He told them he’d “play baseball” with their heads. The boys were terrified.

After that, my sons slept in my room – Willie in a sleeping bag, Samuel in my bed. But I knew no room was safe.

They Could Shoot Us All

If the gang wanted to, they would just break down the door and shoot us all.

Inspector Gerrans also took the threats seriously –and made plans to move us to a new apartment in a secret location before the gunman was arrested. I had hoped that the gang still wasn’t sure whether I had talked to the police, but when I went to the housing manager’s office to say that I’d be leaving, I got a big shock. The manager asked me, “Why didn’t you tell me you were working with the police?” I nearly died on the spot. Somehow she’d found out. There were other people in the office, including one girl who I knew was friendly with the gang.

I believe that’s how word got around that I had talked. After that, whenever the boys or I went outside, the neighbors stared at us – they didn’t even say hello. Rather than being supportive, they acted as if I had somehow betrayed them. And that made my sons mad.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” Willie told me firmly. “*They’re* the ones who are wrong.” I needed that support; my trusted friends and neighbors from the old

apartment complex were all scattered now. I talked a little about my situation to my mom, but I didn't want to worry her too much.

A few weeks later, the police moved us to a neighborhood a little better than where we'd been. I was still frightened, but we were safer than we'd been for a long time. At least we didn't have to hit the floor every time we heard a loud noise.

The trial began in the spring. It came out that the shooting was the result of a drug deal gone sour, and the gunman had turned on his customer.

As I waited to be called into the courtroom, I was sitting in the hallway with Inspector Gerrans. One of the killer's girlfriends walked by, and suddenly she turned in my direction and yelled, "They're paying that bitch to testify!" I wanted to shout back, "Wait a minute! Nobody has to be paid for telling the truth!" But I kept quiet. I learned later that she and two other women testified on behalf of the gunman – they all said he was in bed with them at the time of the shooting!

When the time came for me to be sworn in, I had to state my name, and I saw the killer's friends glowering at me from their seats. I got scared all over again that the gang might try to kill me outside the court. The police escorted me to and from the trial. My boys, thank God, were safe at their new school.

The trial lasted nine days. The jury returned its verdict: guilty! The driver of the car had also identified the defendant as the killer, but Inspector Gerrans told me my testimony had made the case because I was an uninvolved bystander. The killer was sentenced to life without possibility of parole.

After the trial, reporters asked me where I'd gotten the courage to come forward. I thought again about how

my mother had taught us to live by our principles; I felt that testifying was a way of doing the same for my children. The verdict also taught my boys firsthand that crime doesn't pay – a lesson they might not have learned so clearly otherwise. I would have kept telling them to work hard and live a good life, but they would have kept seeing a murderer free on the streets, making big money selling drugs. It wouldn't have been long before they stopped listening to me.

Today, we are just trying to get on with our lives. There are no drug deals outside our door – my boys can go ride their bikes and not worry about getting beaten up. And when they come home and gripe about a tough test or a strict teacher, I just smile. It's so wonderful that they can have normal concerns.

For having come forward I received recognition from the mayor, the chamber of commerce and the local community. I was honored by these gestures. But my greatest reward came a few days after the trial, when Willie and I were talking in his room. He reached for my hand and said "Mom, I'm proud of you."

What Happened After

After the piece came out in the magazine, I called the office of the Mayor of San Francisco and asked if there was any fund the city set aside for extraordinary cases like Mary's. His staff went to work and found a significant cash award to provide to Mary and her family. I had talked to Mary's sons and they told me they had always dreamed of going to Disneyland. Mary told me that because of her limited budget, the boys rarely left their neighborhood.

The folks at Disneyland, once they heard Mary's story, quickly responded by providing the entire family free tickets and three free nights in the Disneyland Hotel. One of the airlines also provided

free roundtrip tickets for the family. I received a message from Mary later. She told me they had had a wonderful time in the Magic Kingdom and the boys hadn't wanted to leave.

Mary was at Peace

Some years after I wrote this story, I received a communication from one of Mary's sons. Mary had passed away from natural causes. He thought I would want to know. He also thanked me for the story and the rest. "It made a big difference to my mother," he said. "The story reassured her that she wasn't alone in this, and that people cared, and that she had done the right thing. She was at peace with the decisions of her life."

CHAPTER THREE

“Let Me Die”

Reader's Digest

This story remains one of the toughest and darkest I have covered. It also contains one of the most courageous acts I could ever imagine. In some ways it feels unfinished, yet four people have already died, at least three of them murdered.

In the end, the title of this story turned out to be ominously ironic. No one could have possibly predicted the terrible twists this story would take. Yet, the original act of bravery that inspired me to write it in the first place remains intact, like a light in that darkness.

I chose to pursue it after seeing a paragraph-long story about the initial incident in a San Francisco newspaper. In this case, there was just a short clip of a story about a man who risked his life to save another on a busy four-lane overpass in Fremont, California, in the East Bay. I felt there was more to that story so I made some phone calls. By the time I was finished with these preliminary interviews, I knew I had enough for a good story. But I had no way of knowing how much more there would be to this deadly tale, or how long the reverberations from it would linger for all of us.

The hero was named Rajon Begin, a young Californian who, in one of the most sensational ways possible, put his life on the line to help someone he didn't know. As you will see in the Digest story, this part of the story had a tremendously positive ending. In all the stories I've done, I've never come across anyone who was willing to do what he did to save a stranger. In researching this piece, I walked out on the tiny ledge where the original drama of this story took place. It was terrifying. The courage it took to venture out there trying to save someone who didn't want to be saved, was almost unimaginable. What I was to learn less than a year after the article ran worldwide, though, was the story hadn't ended there. Not by a long shot. This is the original article.

“Let Me Die!”

Reader's Digest

As he was crossing an overpass on the Auto Mall Parkway outside San Jose, Calif., Rajon Begin couldn't believe what he was seeing. A muscular young man, dressed only in gym shorts and tennis shoes, slipped around an eight-foot-high, chain-link safety fence that bordered the overpass and started inching his way onto the narrow outside ledge.

That's foolish, Begin thought, frowning. What in the world is he doing? Is he some kind of daredevil? One slip and he's a goner.

Begin glanced into his truck's rearview mirror in an effort to see what was happening. But the road dipped, and he lost sight of the man. A moment or so later he turned onto a ramp leading to U.S. 680 and home. It was a warm September afternoon in 1994, and Begin had promised his three-year-old daughter, Monet, that he'd take her to the park. From the looks of the thickening rush-hour traffic,

he was going to be late. Checking back as he swung onto 680, he could see the man still on the overpass.

Something about his posture – the slumped shoulders, the bowed head – brought Begin to a sickening realization.

“My God!” he said out loud. “He’s going to jump!”

Begin knew exactly what the man must be going through. When he was a boy, his father was seldom around, forcing his mother to work long hours as a secretary to support him and his sister. When his mother remarried, Begin and his stepfather did not get along. Begin ran away at 15, living with whatever family would take him in. More than once he contemplated taking his own life. But even in the darkest times he thought of how his mother had struggled against great odds and survived. If she hadn’t given up, how could he?

Now, at the age of 27, Begin had everything he’d ever dreamed of – a wonderful family, a good job as a sales executive with a commercial printing company and a comfortable home.

I’ve got to go back! Begin suddenly thought. He realized that he had no choice. It was his responsibility to share what he knew – that life gets better if you give it a chance. He owed to others the sort of kindness that he had been shown in those earlier difficult times.

Veering off the highway at the next exit, he bogged down almost at once in heavy traffic. “I can’t get stuck here!” he said out loud, and drove up over the curb, down an empty sidewalk and through a shopping-center parking lot. Within minutes he was back on the Auto Mall Parkway. At the overpass he slammed on his brakes and parked his truck on the wide concrete divider. The guy was still there.

“Hey!” Begin yelled as he ran across the highway,

dodging traffic. “Don’t do that. Let’s go have a beer and talk it over.”

For a moment, the eyes of the would-be jumper and the rescuer met. Then the jumper turned his head, staring down at the train tracks 50 feet below.

“Hold on,” Begin called. “I’m coming out there.”

“Stay away,” the jumper warned. “Nobody cares what I do.”

“I care,” Begin said, encouraged that he’d gotten a response. “I almost killed myself racing my truck here to talk to you.”

Adrenalin pumping, Begin climbed onto the narrow ledge and edged his way, step by step, toward the man. Begin realized that he was the smaller of the two. He estimated the other man to be about six feet tall, weighing more than 200 pounds. The guy was facing the wire-mesh fence, clinging to it with both hands. His back was to the tracks below, and he was staring at them over his shoulder. As Begin got near, he noted the man was shaking violently.

“Can I get to him in time?” he thought, inching closer and closer. He had begun to formulate a plan. But if he made one tiny miscalculation or the big man lunged at him, Begin realized he, too, could plummet to his death. Still he acted without a second’s hesitation. Gripping the fence tightly with his left hand, he swung his right foot out and around the jumper, planting it firmly on the ledge on the other side of the bigger man. Then he grabbed hold of the chain mesh with his right hand. With his body now spread-eagled behind the jumper, Begin had him pinned to the fence. The man couldn’t jump without taking Begin with him.

“Let me go, damn you,” the jumper pleaded. “Let me go. I want to die.”

“It’s okay, man,” Begin said. “It’s okay. Everything is going to be just fine.” And for a moment the bigger man seemed to relax back against Begin’s chest. *I’ve bought some time*, Begin thought. *But if I don’t get help soon, we’ll both die.*

Risking His Own Life

Brian Gundy, 41, a manufacturing manager at an engineering firm, usually worked late. But feeling restless and unable to concentrate, he had left work early that afternoon. Obeying a sudden urge, he swung onto the Auto Mall Parkway, a route he hadn’t traveled for nearly two years. He was daydreaming when he reached the overpass and noticed someone clinging to the outside of the fence. No one else was stopping, but Gundy, a devout Christian and a member of his company’s emergency-response team, knew he had to act.

His first impulse was to call the police, but he could find no phone nearby. Pulling off the road, he ran toward the fence. Sizing up the situation as he approached, Gundy felt a surge of admiration for the man who evidently was risking his own life to save the jumper. It was, he thought, a remarkably brave thing to do.

“What’s your name?” Gundy asked the big man gently when he reached the fence. It was the only thing he could think to do at the moment, hoping to distract and calm the man. To his surprise he got an answer.

“Charles. Charles Crawford.”

“Charles, I’m Brian. What’s wrong? Can we talk about this?”

Crawford was crying and barely coherent as he moaned, “I want to jump!” He began to push away from

the fence. Realizing there was no way he could help the rescuer maintained his grip, Gundy prayed aloud: "Please God, keep them alive. Give Charles the will to live."

Meanwhile, Chris Eyre, a 47-year-old money manager who was battling his way westbound in the heavy traffic, had also caught sight of the men clinging to the overpass fencing. As a Mormon lay minister, he had often counseled distraught people. He called the police on his cellular phone, then pulled onto the shoulder and ran to the scene.

At six feet, five inches, Eyre was ten inches taller than Gundy. With his height advantage Eyre was able to reach up the fence and wrap his fingers around Crawford's. He knew he couldn't prevent the man from jumping. It was simply a gesture of caring, of trying to calm him until police arrived. A powerful struggle began to play itself out, with one man begging to die and three others pleading with him to live.

By now Begin had been clinging desperately to the fence for almost 30 minutes, his chest against Crawford's back. Pressing close enabled him to keep a tighter grip, but he also wanted Crawford to feel in touch with another human being.

"Do you have a family?" Gundy asked.

"Three half-sisters," Crawford answered, his voice barely audible. "My birthday was two days ago. They didn't call. Neither did my mother."

The three continued to probe gently, hoping to keep Crawford's mind off his problems. In short, choppy replies he told them his age and that he lived nearby with his grandparents. Not much, but at least he was talking. The pressure on Begin's fingers grew intense. Crawford turned and looked over his shoulder at Begin.

“Get out of my way,” he demanded. “I don’t want to hurt you. I just want to die.”

Begin wondered how much longer he could hold on. Looking up, he notice that four police cars and a firetruck had arrived on the scene. An officer approached slowly.

“Don’t worry about my uniform,” he said to Crawford. “We’re all just men here. We want to help. Do you want to get off the ledge now?”

Crawford shook his head no. Eyre had hoped that a police crisis negotiator would take over. But the police thought the three men had forged a bond, however tenuous, with Crawford and had a better chance than strangers to talk him down.

Noticing Crawford’s powerful build, Eyre had a hunch. “Did you play football in high school?” he asked.

Crawford nodded. “Yeah, I was a linebacker at Irvington High.”

Eyre thought quickly. Eric Widmar, a young man in his church, had also played football at the same school. He asked if Crawford knew him.

“Oh, yeah!” Crawford said, visibly brightening. “We played together.”

A Voice Urging Him to Jump

At last, Eyre thought. Some common ground. For what seemed a very long time, the men talked – about football, the San Francisco 49ers, fishing. Slowly Eyre began to realize that an inexplicable bond was growing among the four men. And soon the painful story that had compelled Charles Crawford to want to take his life came tumbling out. It was eerily similar to Begin’s. Difficulties with his stepfather had driven Crawford

from his mother's home at an early age. He struggled in school, got into frequent fights and ended up in a juvenile detention center. Still he seemed to be turning his life around – until that September day when his fiancée announced she was breaking off their relationship. It was then that he had heard a voice urging him to jump. It's the best thing, the voice said. Nobody wants you.

"Charles," Gundy said finally, "if you come over to this side of the fence, we're not going to forget you. A friend of mine has a boat. We can all go deep-sea fishing together."

"Just get out of my way and let me die!" Crawford cried. "Nobody cares."

"Look behind you!" Gundy responded. "There's a guy risking his life to save yours. Please don't do this." Crawford turned and stared at Begin. Sobbing, he said, "Let me go!"

"No way," Begin answered, his face ashen but resolute. "If you go, I go! I'm not moving."

Crawford stared at Begin and then at the two others. He shut his eyes and stopped pushing. Finally he said softly, "I don't want to be out here anymore."

After the two exhausted men were pulled to safety, Crawford was whisked away by ambulance. Begin gave his story to the police, then drove slowly home, his mind spinning. He opened the front door with a shaking hand as Monet raced across the living room.

"Daddy!" she cried. "Where have you been? Are we going to the park?"

Kneeling, he hugged and kissed her. "We'll go tomorrow," he promised. "Today I had to help a friend."

In the days and weeks that followed the incident, all three men kept in touch with Charles Crawford. True

to his word, Gundy has arranged a deep-sea fishing trip for the four. Crawford has become friends again with his former fiancée and is trying to deal with his painful past. He feels that he's been given a second chance to live. "I have gained strength from what these men taught me, that people do care about me."

What Happened After

I was happy with the story and the outcome. We received thousands of letters from around the world commenting on Rajon's bravery and cheers for Charles' recovery. I was on to other projects months later when I received an unexpected call from Brian Gundy, one of the heroes who helped talk Charles off the ledge.

"Did you hear about Charles?" Brian asked.

"No, did he get a promotion?" I asked, trying to be light, but knowing in my gut this was not going to be good news. However, even my instincts didn't prepare me for what Brian said next.

"Charles allegedly just killed two teenagers in a drug deal," Brian said slowly.

I sank down in my chair. I knew Brian had carefully used the word "allegedly," but that didn't do much for the feeling that I had just been punched in the stomach.

"What happened?"

"The police arrested him after they found a teenage male and female dead of shotgun blasts," Brian said. "They were acquaintances of Charles' and only his fingerprints were on the shotgun that was used. He also had their DNA on his clothes."

My thoughts went immediately to the victims and to Rajon. From the time we spent together when I interviewed him and Charles together in the San Francisco Bay Area, I knew Rajon to be a highly intelligent, sensitive man. He had saved Charles out of a sense of loyalty to his own past and to what he felt was his moral

duty. His incredible generosity of time and effort with Charles, and just the way he talked and thought about things, made it clear to me that he was someone who felt things deeply.

“Have you spoken to Rajon?” I asked.

“I tried, but I can’t reach him,” Brian said. “No one can. My guess is he feels guilty about saving Charles in the first place.”

I knew Brian was probably right. It would be like Rajon to take this on himself. I knew he had also befriended Charles and something like this had to come as an enormous blow.

During the months that followed, none of us were able to reach Rajon. Charles was found guilty of first-degree murder. To make things sink to the lowest hell of all, the 16-year-old girl he was convicted of killing had been pregnant.

The darkness was complete.

Twenty-five years went by.

Then I started the research for this book. I wasn’t overly hopeful that I would learn anything new. I sifted through my old notes and found Brian’s phone number. I called and to my surprise, he answered, citing his new company’s name, “For Goodness Snakes.” I remembered Brian always loved reptiles, and now he had turned his hobby into a business, raising and selling reptiles. He always had a good heart, and he still spends a lot of his time visiting schools, teaching kids about the slithery critters that most of them grew up fearing. Brian’s good humor and the ability to allow them to see a gorgeous gecko up-close, helps students get over that fear.

Brian was at home when I reached him. He was surprised to hear from me after such a long time, but we started talking immediately. We first talked about Charles. Brian said that at first, everything seemed to be going well. The story in the *Digest* ignited great interest. The media reacted and all of those on the bridge that day were asked to be in a rendition of the events on the Los Angeles-based television show, “Rescue 911.”

“Everything was great, then,” Brian said. “We had fun going down to Los Angeles and doing the show. We all made sure they paid Charles for his part, and he seemed happy. It was funny, when we were re-enacting the show, Rajon couldn’t hold onto the fence for more than two minutes at a time because his hands grew sore. Yet, when it happened in real life, he held on for nearly 45 minutes without letting go.”

“We Can’t Always See Inside Another Person’s Heart.”

It was only after the excitement died down, after the camera lights dimmed and real life began again that Charles’ life began to fall apart. Even though Rajon helped him find a job, Charles started hanging out with a drug gang that was dealing heavily. Some of them were also users. They broke into people’s houses and stole valuables to pay for their habits. Charles was allegedly one of them. The story that came out just before Charles’ trial was that he believed someone in the gang was going to rat on him, and the rest of the gang, to the police. He allegedly believed it was the boy and girl who were killed. Later, evidence indicated that he was wrong, according to Brian. Fingerprints and DNA pointed to Charles as the killer. He was convicted and sent to San Quentin State Prison. He received the maximum penalty, the death sentence. Although the death penalty still exists in California, it has not been used since 2007.

On That Day on the Bridge

On the day Charles wanted to commit suicide on the Fremont Bridge, Brian became involved only because he took an unusual turn on his way home from work. “I had never taken that turnoff before, but something came over me that day and I found myself on the Fremont Overpass,” he said. “It was like someone took over my steering wheel. Then I saw Charles and I knew I had to stop and try to help.”

Brian told me he feared Rajon had suffered great guilt in saving Charles, only then to have Charles go on a murdering rampage. I

asked Brian if he felt guilt like that for his part in saving Charles' life on the bridge. "No," Brian said. "We did – and I hope someday to share this with Rajon – everything people should do when they see someone in such peril as Charles was. We helped. In Rajon's case, his actions were incredibly heroic. Looking at Charles that day and then being with him afterwards, there was no way to predict what he ultimately did. *"Saving him on that bridge that day was the right thing to do. We can't always see inside another person's heart."*

The following day, after talking to Brian, I researched the whereabouts of Charles. I called the prison and was surprised to hear he had died there in the spring of 2021. There would be no getting his side of the story. The cause of his death was listed as "undisclosed." That mystery may never be revealed.

Finding the Hero

One mystery remained, however. Where was Rajon? I remembered trying to contact him years before, and I thought he had a little-used social media connection. I covered all the usual sites, leaving messages everywhere I could think of that I was trying to reach the "Rajon Begin I wrote about in *Reader's Digest*."

Several days went by and I worried about what might have happened to him. Then I received a text which read, "This is Rajon from that story." I was amazed. Was it real? Then I remembered Rajon as a man who was economical with words and the response suddenly felt authentic. In fact, I knew it was him and I was elated.

Shortly after, we talked on the phone. We caught up on a few things and then talked about Charles. "What happened after the story ran was great, at first," he said. "But then the news came about the murders and it got very tough for a long time," Rajon said. "I faced a lot of guilt. He was supposed to come to a party at my house that night, but he never showed up. I tried reaching him but couldn't. The police contacted me a couple of days later. When they told me two young people had been murdered that night, I was stunned. I thought one of them was Charles and that's why they

were calling. I was completely shocked when they said they believed Charles had killed them.”

Charles was living with his grandparents, not far from where Rajon and his family lived. Rajon had truly taken Charles under his wing after the incident on the bridge. They had gone fishing, camping and to the horse races together. They often had dinner and Charles had become close to Rajon’s family.

“After he was arrested, I talked to him and he denied doing it,” Rajon said. “He said he was framed for the murder. I didn’t ask him a lot about it, I didn’t want to believe he did it. I wanted to believe what he was telling me.” At the same time, the details of the murders were gruesome and Rajon was devastated. “After your article came out, I was asked to be on several television shows,” he said. “I even won the Carnegie Medal of Honor for bravery, but after I heard about the murders I wanted to throw that medal into the ocean.”

He was quiet for a long moment, then added, “After he went to prison, Charles and I stayed in touch for years, primarily through letters, but our communication gradually dropped off.”

That’s when I realized Rajon didn’t know about Charles. I took a deep breath and carefully told him I had just learned that Charles had died, still on Death Row, of undisclosed causes. The phone went silent. I knew the news hit Rajon hard. “I always thought we’d talk more about it and somehow get it resolved,” he said slowly. After another long silence, I stepped out of my journalist’s role. “Brian and I hope you don’t harbor any guilt about saving Charles,” I said. “Because in all my years of covering stories, I’ve never seen anything more immediately heroic than what you did. There is no way you could have predicted how it would ultimately turn out.”

“I don’t know what I feel,” he said. I could feel how much he was struggling emotionally. His voice was low and distant as we agreed to talk the following week. I called and texted Rajon a few times that following week, but he did not respond. I chose not to bother him again. Maybe there was nothing left to say. The story ends here, although I know I will still think about it, from time to time.

CHAPTER FOUR

The next two chapters, along with *Eyewitness to Murder*, are fantastic examples of what is often referred to in psychology as the ‘ripple effect’. These are stories of people who started out by doing one good thing – one good deed – and like most positive human actions, they rippled into something much larger.

I looked this up not long ago and I found a Harvard University study that showed that in a survey of thousands of people, the ripple effect was not a theory, but a fact. The study showed, for example, that receiving something as simple as a compliment often inspires the recipient to do or say something positive to the next person they meet. The initial compliment is often ‘rippled’ through as many as 100 more people.

In these stories, there is much more than a compliment involved and the ‘ripple’ effect’, in one case, has saved the lives of nearly one million lives worldwide.

Ken Benedict’s Second Chance

Reader’s Digest

Malibu California is home to movie stars and others who love the incredible views of the Pacific Ocean and the relatively wild environment. It’s a ruggedly beautiful place. But like much of the rest of California, it is also prone to raging wildfires.

After one such blaze roared through Malibu Canyon, I became aware of an unlikely story of heroism that took place during the fire. This time it involved an inmate from a Northern California prison. He had worked on the front lines with an inmate fire suppression squad, fighting the inferno near Malibu.

I contacted my editors at *Reader's Digest* and they immediately gave me the assignment to investigate and write the story. I liked the assignment for a few reasons. It always made me happy that the *Digest* often turned to me to write positive features. These were hard to write well and it meant the magazine had some faith I could pull it off. It also meant I got to shine a light on events for the magazine's tens of millions of reader that might otherwise go unnoticed – as positive events often do.

Oh, and one more thing. The *Digest* was one of the highest paying magazines in the country. If I had to go to Malibu and hang out by the beach while being paid nicely to write a good story, I would bravely volunteer.

I made the five-hour drive south to Los Angeles, then cruised up the Pacific Coast Highway to Malibu. I conducted most of the interviews first, then drove through the area where the deadly blaze burned a number of homes. I've covered many wildfires over the years and I'm always amazed that firefighters can stop these blazes, even with the air drops. The terrain is often rough and steep. Fire-driven winds can rip across the slopes at more than 70 miles per hour. It takes heroes to battle these fires.

The firefighter at the center of this story was a man named Ken Benedict. After I visited the fire area and interviewed some people involved, I interviewed Benedict via telephone. There was a reason for that. By **that** time we talked, he was back in a northern California prison, serving the rest of his sentence. He seemed like a nice guy on the phone, and we had a pleasant conversation. I liked him. We were both young men when I first wrote this story, but I was living as wild and as free as you could while still making a living, and he was behind bars. But somehow I felt we had common ground – maybe, I thought, it will just take him a little more time to find direction

in his life. I had a strong feeling he would. After the article was published in the *Digest*, though, Benedict and I lost touch.

Years later, as I began research on this book, I knew I needed to catch up with him and find out what had happened in his life since those days. I tracked him down through social media and after an email exchange in the spring of 2022, we agreed to a phone call. It turned out to be one of the most unexpected and amazing conversations I've ever had. Here's the original story.

Ken Benedict's Second Chance

Reader's Digest

As Cynthia Salisbury walked across her lawn, she could see the Pacific shimmering far below. Mornings were normally tranquil at her Malibu, Calif., house. The air was usually filled with the sounds of songbirds, but today the 50-year-old property manager noticed something different. A strong, hot breeze bent the trees, and the birds were strangely silent.

Cynthia felt uneasy. News reports that morning had mentioned brush fires to the north and east, but she'd assumed they were miles away from her home, situated on top of a mesa. Now, though, she could see puffs of hazy black smoke in the distance. In the 16 years the divorced mother of three had lived on Las Flores Mesa Drive, wildfires had been common in the surrounding area. However, the mesa had always slowed the advance of any potentially threatening flames.

Turning back to the house, Cynthia gazed through the window at her 25-year-old son Teddy. He usually worked mornings at a fast-food restaurant. But, worried about the fires, he'd returned home early to be with his mother.

Cynthia thought back to the day she learned that Teddy suffered from Down Syndrome. Her physician had been sympathetic, but a less compassionate doctor later suggested she put Teddy in a home. Cynthia was horrified. She loved Teddy, and she knew that she would always be by his side.

Teddy was waiting for her when she walked into the house. The noisy vibrations from low-flying helicopters, out spotting the fires, had frightened him. “The fire isn’t going to hurt the dogs, is it?” he asked.

Cynthia knew Teddy’s concern for the family pets masked his own fears. “It’s going to be okay,” she said. When Teddy resumed watching TV, Cynthia walked back outside with her 22-year-old daughter Elizabeth and Elizabeth’s friend Jason.

“Maybe Jason and I should check out the fire from the hill,” suggested Elizabeth. Across the street, “the hill” was one of the highest points on the mesa, and would offer the best vantage of the fire’s progress.

“That’s a good idea,” said Cynthia. As she watched her daughter walk away, she smiled. Elizabeth was so calm and self-assured. Cynthia was proud of her children. Over the years, they had learned to depend on themselves and to care for one another – most of all, Teddy. Cynthia felt there was little her family couldn’t handle. Anyway, there evidently was nothing to worry about. She had heard no official evacuation order.

Less than a mile away, Ken Benedict sat in the back of a California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection bus, restlessly watching plumes of smoke rise in the east and to the north. Traffic on the Pacific Coast Highway had come to a standstill, so Benedict and the rest of the crew had pulled over and parked beneath a steep, chaparral-covered bluff.

It was hot in Benedict's orange firefighting suit. He ran a sweaty palm through his blond hair. There was nothing to do but sit and think.

He was 23 and should have been entering the prime of his life. But he had spent the past 16 months in California prisons for something he'd done when he was barely 22, and he knew it was stupid.

Benedict's parents divorced when he was nine. Shuttled between a preoccupied father and a demanding step-grandfather, he grew up doing whatever pleased him. That included smoking his first joint at age 15 and getting into the drug scene. Then, after he purchased drug-making paraphernalia from an undercover cop, he was arrested and sentenced to five years in prison. He would serve at least half of this time as a minimum term under California law.

During his first months in prison, Benedict fell into a deep depression. *What am I doing?* he wondered. *Where am I going in life?* Gradually, he became determined to make the best of things. He began attending services at the prison church and was assigned to work on the institution's computers.

For good behavior, he was transferred to the Delta Conservation Camp, a minimum-security prison outside of San Francisco. Delta Camp was part of a state program that allowed nonviolent prisoners a chance to learn firefighting skills. Benedict worked on an inmate crew headed by forestry department fire captain Bob Martinez, who often worked with fellow captain Tom Mansur.

Benedict respected the veteran fire captains, and he felt he was doing something worthwhile. Yet he was still depressed about putting himself in a position where he was wasting almost three years of his life in prison. If he was to start a new life, Benedict knew he'd have to come to grips with the mistakes he'd made and the price he'd paid for them.

A Massive Fire Front

Now his thoughts abruptly turned back to the present. Looking up, Benedict saw a massive fire front moving toward a ridge covered with dozens of houses.

"We should be helping somewhere," he said to Martinez.

"The fire's overrun the highway to the north," the captain answered. "We can't go anywhere."

Cynthia Salisbury couldn't shake the feeling that this fire was closer than any she'd witnessed before. More and more, Teddy glanced nervously at her. Each time she'd tell him, "It will be all right."

As the skies darkened with ash, Cynthia began turning on house lights. Just after 3 p.m., while they were watching the news, the TV screen went blank and the lights blinked out.

A chill shot through Cynthia as she glanced at Teddy. Suddenly Elizabeth and Jason burst through the back door. "Mom, the fire is across the street," shouted Elizabeth. "We've got to get out now!"

Ken Benedict felt useless on the steps of the bus, waiting for orders. A static stream of commands spewed from Captain Martinez's radio.

"Any word yet?" Martinez asked over his radio.

"We still can't move," a voice replied.

The truck had been idle for more than an hour. Like the rest of the crew, Benedict was itching to help. He was young and strong, and fighting fires gave him a chance to be outside and do some physical work. But far more than that, fighting fires made him feel he was doing something positive and helping in some way. For a while, at least, this quieted his bitter self-criticism about wasting his life.

Cynthia ran outside and watched in horror as flames shot over the ridge. "Hurry!" she urged as Teddy scrambled into her car, and Elizabeth and Jason hopped into another. The trees and bushes around neighboring houses were already catching fire. With Cynthia leading the way, the two cars sped down Las Flores Mesa Drive, the only road off the mesa.

"We'll be okay when we make it to the highway," Cynthia told Teddy. Suddenly she slammed on the brakes.

"We're Trapped!"

One of her neighbors was driving toward them, and the woman's car was veering wildly. The driver, her face white with fear, slowed her car and shouted out her window. "The fire is in the canyon, and it's blocking the road! We're trapped!"

Cynthia braced her hands on the steering wheel to stop them from shaking. Behind her, smoke was roiling up from houses that had started to **bum**. Turning the car sharply, she gunned the engine. Wheels screeched on asphalt as she and her daughter raced their cars southward into a small cul-de-sac. The sky was now black with smoke, and small flying cinders filled the air.

Cynthia felt a momentary panic. This can't be happening! But she knew she had to stay calm and think. They were at the southern tip of the mesa. Cynthia could see the Pacific Coast Highway and the ocean 200 feet below. *Can we get down the steep slope?* she wondered.

Elizabeth seemed to read her mother's mind. "I used to climb down there when I was a kid," she said. "I think we can make it." *But can Teddy?* Cynthia wondered.

Behind them, a house burst into flames. "Let's go!" Cynthia shouted. With Teddy at her side, she followed

Elizabeth and Jason into the tall brush. The wind was so strong they had to lean into it.

“Stay close!” Cynthia yelled. Between the thick smoke and tangle of chaparral, it was almost impossible to see where they were going. They were forced to slide down on their backs, fighting through thickets of wiry brush.

Suddenly Cynthia lost her balance and slid into a snarl of vines and brush. She kicked and pulled at the branches, cutting her arms and legs. At last, the brush gave way and she fell through, catching herself on a thick vine. Then she gasped. She was crouched at the edge of a 150-foot cliff.

Far below, Captain Mansur was on the side of the highway helping two men who were wetting the roof of their house, when one shouted down at him.

“Somebody’s trapped up there. I see people on that cliff!”

Ken Benedict followed Mansur’s gaze up the high bluff. He saw people struggling through the brush. The fire was right behind them. “Oh, my God!” Benedict whispered.

Mansur raced back to his crew; one man handed him a rope from the truck. As Mansur ran toward the cliff, Martinez yelled, “Come on! Let’s go!”

Benedict and Mansur headed for a small shelf in the cliff. The first ten feet were vertical, but Mansur calculated this was the best way up the slope. Grasping tiny ledges with their fingertips, they gained a hold and forced themselves up the wall. The other crew members joined them.

A few feet ahead, the terrain cut steeply upward again. But Mansur spotted a crease in the cliff where

erosion had carved a three-foot swath through the chaparral. The narrow opening was the only way up, but it would also act as a natural chimney. He knew the men wouldn't stand a chance if the fire caught them in the crease. But he also knew this was the only chance to save the people above them.

Benedict and the rest of the crew realized Mansur was making a tough decision. They were all going to be at risk. Not a man hesitated as they moved up the hill.

Tying the nylon rope around his waist, Mansur climbed steadily until he was 20 feet from the top of the cliff. Then he heard Martinez yell, "You're out of rope!" Mansur looked up. The final 20 feet would have to be scaled if those people on top were to be rescued. Before Mansur could ask for volunteers, Benedict scrambled past. A few more inmates climbed up behind him.

Looking down, Benedict saw that Martinez had spaced men five feet apart along the rope. If he and the others could find the victims in time, they could pass them down the human chain. Benedict had no more time to think about it, though. He could already feel the fierce heat from the fire. When Elizabeth and Jason appeared at the edge of the cliff, one of the crew shouted, "Is that all?"

"No! My mother and brother are up there!" Elizabeth screamed. "Please help them!"

The fire was now raging down the hill, swirling in huge rolls more than 70 feet high. Burning embers the size of large snowflakes were falling around the men. Benedict knew they had only a minute before Mansur had to call the crew off the hillside. Once the crew were evacuated, the woman and her son had little chance. Benedict continued to move quickly up the hill. *We have to find them!*

Cynthia turned to where Teddy had been moments before, but the smoke was so thick she couldn't see more than five feet.

"Teddy!" she screamed against the roar of the fire. Her eyes searched frantically through the brush. *Have faith*, she told herself, gasping for breath. *God wouldn't lead us halfway down and then abandon us.*

Suddenly a man burst through the brush in front of her. Cynthia looked at him with fear in her eyes. "My son is back there," she said. "He's handicapped. Please, we have to find him."

Ken Benedict nodded grimly as she moved toward the ledge.

"Come down now!" Mansur screamed when he saw Benedict. "The fire is on us!"

"There's one more," Benedict yelled back. The fire was only yards away, and the brush was exploding from the blistering heat. This might be his last chance to save himself. But there was no choice to be made. He had to try to save the woman's son.

"Don't worry," Benedict shouted to her. "I won't come back without your son!" Then he turned and headed back into the fire and smoke.

Below, Mansur reached out to help the woman, but she kept her eyes on the cliff. Moments went by and the fire roared up like a fiery hurricane. Cynthia felt panic flooding over her. Suddenly Ken Benedict burst through the flames, his face blackened, his clothes smoking. Teddy was by his side.

Mansur waited until Cynthia and Teddy were moving down the rope, then yelled "Go! Go! Go!" Mansur, Benedict and the other crew members scrambled off the hill, dodging flying embers. As they arrived at the foot of the hill, the entire slope exploded into a mass of flames.

Benedict reached the bus, breathing hard. Turning, he watched the fire in awe, then looked over to see the woman and her son whisked away to safety by a police car. He knew fate had just played all of them a generous hand.

Five months later, Cynthia, Elizabeth and Teddy Salisbury traveled to the Delta Conservation Camp to attend a ceremony honoring the men who had saved them. Before the ceremony, Cynthia was introduced to a shy young inmate whom she recognized immediately. Her eyes welled up with tears, and she hugged Ken Benedict. “You saved my son,” she said. “You were the answer to my prayers.”

His lingering doubts about his future began to lift. For the first time, Benedict could look ahead with hope. *If things hadn't gone the way they did, I wouldn't have been in a position to save Teddy's life, he thought. Now maybe I can get on with my own.*”

What Happened After

When I called Benedict in the spring of 2022, I introduced myself and he sighed deeply, then gave a short laugh. “Man, I am so happy you called,” he said. “I’ve felt guilty about not contacting you for years. Now I can finally tell you what happened after you wrote that story about the Malibu fire for the *Digest*.” He hesitated for a second and then his voice filled with emotion. “I’ve been waiting to do this for a long time.”

I figured he was going to tell me how much his mother and father appreciated the article. I wasn’t ready for what he said next. “I was shocked at how many people read that story,” he said. “Everybody loved what had happened, including the Governor of California. He liked it so much he gave me a pardon and I was released immediately.”

I was stunned, I knew nothing about any of that. “Not only that, but when I got out of prison, I found it was hard to find a job,” he

added. “But the executives at a large company called the California Vision Services Plan (VSP), were impressed by the story and hired me. I’ve been there for 25 years now. I am the Infrastructure Architect for the company. I oversee the operation of nearly 7,000 of the VSP computers worldwide.”

For one of the few times in my life, I was speechless. We both were quiet for a second, then we started to laugh. I told him he deserved all of it. It was awesome. We chatted on for a long time. He lives in a beautiful golf course resort area near Sacramento. “I have a retirement plan and a nice house,” he said. “I get up early every morning and I truly look forward to every day. I keep the drama in my life to a minimum and focus on the positive. I found if you focus on the good things that could happen, they usually do happen.”

Most touching for me was the delight in his voice when he told me that for the past two decades, he has spent a great deal of time working with junior achievement programs involving elementary school age kids. “I am one of the luckiest people in the world,” he said. “I will always be looking for ways to give back. I tell the kids I talk to at the schools that they can have a beautiful life, no matter how it starts.”

It seems like most of us need a second chance, at one time or another. Benedict is a good man whose courage didn’t stop after he saved the mother and her child in the Malibu fire. He then saved himself, which is sometimes the hardest thing to do.

CHAPTER FIVE

One Inch From Death

Reader's Digest

This story rocks on a worldwide scale, perhaps more than any other in this book. Ironically, I wasn't sure about even doing this story, at first. I heard a radio account that lasted about 20 seconds and I didn't know if it had all the elements we usually needed for a *Digest* piece. But it took place in one of my favorite places in the world, Yosemite National Park, so I followed up on it. Thinking about it today, it seems to make some kind of karmic sense that Yosemite would be the setting for the beginning of one of the most magical stories I've ever covered.

The short news account was about an unusual rescue, conducted by the park's emergency crew. When I called the Park's headquarters to learn more, I was connected with a rescue crew leader, Graham Pierce. Pierce had a wonderful Irish accent and we talked for a relatively long time on the phone. By the time we were done, I knew the story was worth the four-hour drive down the spine of the Sierra Nevada to talk with Pierce.

I met with him at the park headquarters in Yosemite Valley. We talked for a long time about the rescue, which involved 13-year-old

Dana Bienenfeld, from Napa, California, who was on a school outing. Pierce had been called because Bienenfeld had become trapped beneath a 10-ton boulder that had rolled on top of her while she was hiking. He told me the story in a matter-of-fact way, but I could tell the event was filled with great moments of hope and despair.

We talked the afternoon away and then visited the site where the events of the story took place. Later that evening, we drove to the lodge where he was staying and over a bit of Irish whiskey, we discussed his upbringing in Northern Ireland. It had been a tough time to grow up there because of the violent hostilities between the British and the Irish Republican Army. Much about what Pierce learned about ‘crush victims’, which became life-saving information when he was dealing with Bienenfeld under the rock, came from pulling friends and neighbors out from under bombed buildings around Belfast. The stories were fascinating. We talked long into the night as the stars and moon came out above the ghostly vertical form of El Capitan in the Yosemite Valley. Later, I talked to Dana and other rescue team members and this story emerged from those conversations.

One Inch From Death

Reader's Digest

Thirteen-year-old Dana Bienenfeld sat dejectedly on a rock, frowning as she stared across the boulder-strewn mountainside. None of her classmates or teachers from the River Middle School in Napa, Calif., were in sight. The steep slope below was a menacing jumble of jagged rocks. In the pine groves beyond that, darkness was already gathering. She felt frustrated and alone.

“Hello!” the dark-haired seventh grader shouted. “Can anybody hear me?” No answer. It was June 2, 1997, and Dana’s class had just arrived in Yosemite National

Park on a year-end outdoor education trip. After dinner they had hiked up the wooded mountainside.

As Dana's classmates fanned out into the forest, she had picked her way up the rugged slope. She climbed steadily for nearly half an hour before realizing she was alone.

"Help!" she yelled again. "Is anybody around?" Hearing nothing, Dana's face tightened with anger. *Nobody cares about me*, she thought. Then she caught herself. Throughout sixth grade she had been convinced her classmates disliked her, and spent most of her time alone and depressed. As she entered seventh grade, she vowed to become more outgoing and independent. *I'll just get down on my own*, she told herself.

Dana stepped carefully from rock to rock. The late spring rains had softened the ground in places. After a few minutes she came to a boulder-strewn ledge, 15 feet across, that tilted back toward the mountain. Dana hopped onto the ledge, landing on a melon-size rock. The rock skidded, and she fell face down in a shallow depression.

Unhurt, Dana started to get up, but something pushed her back down. An instant later she felt an intense, painful pressure on her legs and back that took her breath away.

Fearing she would suffocate, she fought wildly, gasping for air. As she worked her head around, she was horrified to see that a granite boulder had rolled on top of her. She must have jostled a rock that was holding the boulder in place. Now she was pinned to the earth, able to move only her head, left foot and right hand. Panic-stricken, she tried to yell but managed little more than a whisper.

The boulder, nearly the size of a small car, continued to settle, pushing Dana even deeper into the dirt. She wriggled frantically, pushing up against the great

stone, then slowly gave up and lay still. The pain was unbearable. *Maybe, she thought, death won't be so bad.*

Suddenly the pressure leveled off. The boulder had come to rest – now at least she could breathe. Fear gave way to determination: *Stop thinking about dying and start screaming.* She did, and this time her voice carried up the mountainside.

Less than 20 minutes later, Graham Pierce, administrator of the park's medical clinic, received a signal on his emergency radio. A teacher had heard Dana's cries and alerted a park ranger, who made the call. The 34-year-old Pierce quickly gathered his gear, then, with two members of his medical team, jumped into an ambulance.

As they raced through Yosemite Valley, Pierce grew unusually tense. The report of a possible crush victim brought back a searing memory. Only a few months before, he had been called to a traffic accident. A young man in his 20s, conscious but in severe pain, was trapped under a heavy trailer. Pierce comforted him for more than an hour while they waited for equipment to free him. His vital signs appeared strong, but seconds after the trailer was lifted, he suffered heart failure and died in Pierce's arms.

The experience was still on Pierce's mind when the ambulance reached the base of the mountain where Dana lay trapped. It took him and his team 20 minutes of hard climbing to reach her.

Pierce grimaced when he saw Dana. She lay headfirst on the downhill slope of the ledge, with the boulder covering everything but her legs and head. The five-ton rock teetered over her at an alarming slant. If it rolled even slightly, it would crush her skull. Only the fact that she had fallen into the small depression had saved her.

"This is bad," Pierce said softly to paramedic Kim Ednor as they hurried to Dana's side. Trapped for

almost an hour, she was near hysteria. "Please get me out!" she shouted.

"We're going to get this rock off you as quickly as we can," Pierce said calmly, checking her pulse. "It's going to take some time, though. You have to be extremely brave. Can you do that?"

She nodded, but Pierce saw fear in her eyes. Keith Lober, director of the park's search-and-rescue team, waved him over. Ednor stayed with Dana.

"We've got a real problem," Lober said. "If we move that boulder just an inch or two the wrong way, it could roll and kill her and anybody near her."

Both men knew Dana's chances of survival were poor. Even if they got her safely from under the rock, she might have already suffered internal injuries.

Pierce cut away Dana's jeans, nearly recoiling at the blue-black color of her legs. He could find no pulse in either of them. The rock was cutting off the blood supply at her waist. *If she survives*, he thought, *she may lose both legs*. His breath caught short as he imagined his own daughter in this situation.

Life or Death

Dana cried out as waves of nausea and pain washed over her. Pierce had morphine in his medical kit, but he knew the painkiller would lower her blood pressure. Keeping an even fluid pressure in her body was critical. Pierce had learned a great deal about crush victims since the death of the man pinned under the trailer. When human cells are torn or crushed, they release large amounts of potassium into the bloodstream. If a heavy weight blocking the blood flow is suddenly lifted, the flood of potassium can cause cardiac arrest. To help prevent this, the blood pressure must be stabilized

through the injection of fluids, which Pierce began administering intravenously. But he had no blood or plasma, so he immediately radioed for the Air Med helicopter, stationed at the Doctors Medical Center of Modesto, more than 100 miles away.

By now, the girl had been under the boulder for nearly two hours. Pierce talked to her continuously in a confident, reassuring voice. As she listened, Dana shut her eyes and squeezed his hand.

Floodlights illuminated the flank of the mountain where more than 30 rescue workers now labored to free Dana. The surrounding forest was pitch-black. Under Lober's watchful eye, a team carefully drilled holes and attached anchor bolts in the top of the boulder. They then clipped ropes onto the bolts and tied them to trees uphill. Lober hoped these lines would keep the boulder from slipping, while they attempted to lift it off Dana. Another team worked to position the Jaws of Life, a hydraulic tool often used in car accidents. Lober planned to use it like a powerful jack to help lift the rock. Meanwhile, a third team was placing air bags under the boulder. Everything had to be done with absolute precision or the boulder would roll.

Pierce watched Dana's vital signs closely. Her heart seemed strong, but there was still no pulse from her legs. "We'll have you out of here before long," he told her, smiling. *He was glad she didn't know the truth.*

Just then, a member of the search-and-rescue team approached Pierce with a worried look. They had found an unstable boulder the size of a bus about 75 feet up the mountain, directly above them. *All this activity could cause it to roll,* Pierce thought. *We've got to get her out of here now.*

In a few minutes, everything was in place. At Lober's command, a small amount of air was pumped into the

air bags. The boulder rose about a quarter inch, then began to wobble.

“Hold it!” Lober shouted as the team jammed pieces of wood under the airbags. The rock steadied.

“It’s okay,” Pierce reassured Dana. “We’re getting close to having this thing off you.” He stayed by her side, knowing he could not move in time if the boulder rolled.

The operation continued with agonizing slowness. Each time the rock was moved, it teetered on the verge of rolling. “Hold it! Hold it!” Dana heard the men say over and over. She fought her fear by concentrating on Pierce’s voice. “There sure are a lot of people up here who care about you,” he told her.

It took nearly an hour to raise the rock one inch. Dana was still wedged tight. Pierce and Lober tried not to think about the unstable boulder up the mountain. It was a cool night, but Pierce’s shirt was soaked with sweat.

A short time later, a team arrived with the blood and plasma, which Pierce injected into Dana’s arm.

Just before 10:30 p.m., 3½ hours after Dana became trapped, Pierce felt a little give when he gently tugged on her leg. “I think we’re close,” he told Lober. It was time to go for broke.

Pierce knelt by Dana’s side. “We’re going to lift the rock now,” he said. “Be brave for a few more minutes and we’ll have you out of here.”

Pierce and Lober stationed themselves by her legs. Slowly the crew inflated the air bags. The rock wobbled and began to rise. When it had risen a full inch, the two men looked at each other and nodded. “Now!” Lober yelled, and they pulled.

“She’s moving!” Lober shouted. “She’s out!”

Crew members whooped and helped Pierce and Lober lift her away from the boulder. Exhausted, Dana could manage only a smile. She was strapped onto a spine board – used for victims with back and neck injuries – then placed in a Stokes Rescue Basket. The rescue crew had to rope the long metal cage down the steeper parts of the mountain.

Dana watched the stars overhead and was vaguely aware that people were walking beside her. “Aren’t you lucky?” she heard a gentle voice beside her ask. “You get a free ride.”

It was almost midnight when they reached the foot of the mountain. An ambulance sped them to Crane Flat, where the Air Med helicopter waited. There was no room on board for Pierce. “I’ll see you first thing in the morning,” he promised Dana. “You’re doing fine.” As the helicopter roared off, Pierce prayed that he was right.

The next morning, Pierce raced up to the second floor of Doctors Medical Center of Modesto. Bracing himself, he opened the door to Dana’s room and found her sitting up in bed. She broke into a huge smile. “You saved my life,” she told him. “Thank you.” She opened her arms, and the two hugged each other.

Almost miraculously, Dana suffered no broken bones or internal injuries in the ordeal. Her worst injury was a severely bruised and twisted right knee, which took nearly three months to heal.

During her recovery, Dana was visited by dozens of classmates. She also received a huge get-well card signed by the entire school. Two months after the accident, Dana sent Pierce a thank-you card. “I feel I can face almost anything now,” she wrote. “Because nothing under 10,000 pounds scares me anymore.”

What Happened After

After my article came out in *Reader's Digest*, I continued to think about Pierce's stories of growing up in Ireland. Inspired by his stories of those days in Belfast and Dublin, I outlined a novel loosely based on events of that time. I also wanted to interview him for this book, so I was doubly anxious to catch up with Pierce to see what had transpired in his life. I tracked him down in May of 2022 at his new ranch in Texas.

We found a mutual time to talk and I called him. We chatted about our families for a moment, then I dug deeper. He was as good-natured as before, and over the next hour he told me the following story. It was inspiring on a global scale.

Changing the World One Heart at a Time

Pierce explained that a few years after he rescued Dana and my story ran in the *Digest*, he was hired by PHI Air Medical, an international company that provides medical helicopter services. He was soon placed in charge of air medical programs throughout California. Ultimately, he became its National Director, during which time he was contacted by several medical centers worldwide.

I was impressed by this, but I was stunned by what he told me next. "I was also teaching a paramedic class in Sacramento and one of my students, who had been in the Peace Corps in Eastern Asia, came to me after class with a question that changed everything."

The student explained that while he was in the city of Vladivostok, on the isolated coast of the Sea of Japan (East Sea), he witnessed a deadly shortage of medical equipment, such as heart monitors. He returned to the US, and happened across the *Digest* article I had just done. After reading about Pierce's courageous actions in saving Dana's life, the student wondered if Pierce might still be willing to take a risk to help others.

"He told me that Vladivostok's one million inhabitants were cut off from much of the world due to the fall of the Soviet Union,"

Pierce said. Without modern medical systems, people who could have otherwise been saved, were dying by the thousands every year.

“I was shocked by that,” Pierce said. “I agreed to visit and see if I could help. But, when I got there, it was like being transported back in time.” The region’s 20 hospitals had no machinery or technology to serve heart patients, among others. “It was hard to believe that there was not a single defibrillator in the entire region.”

Pierce felt completely overwhelmed, for the first time in his life. “I could see they had a great need, but I had to tell them I had no idea how I could help,” he said. “I told them they had the wrong guy.”

But the physicians in Vladivostok believed he would ultimately find a way to help, and asked him to please stay in touch. Thousands of lives – each year – were at stake.

After he flew back home, Pierce could not stop thinking about it. “It never left my mind,” he said. “I thought about it every day, but I couldn’t find an answer.”

Then, less than three months later, a solution presented itself in the most unlikely way. He was driving to a meeting at a medical center when he noticed members of a hospital staff unloading medical equipment into a garbage dumpster in the parking lot. A familiar white box tumbled out. Pierce raced over and asked the driver of the truck what was being dumped.

“Used heart monitors,” he was told. “They still work, but the hospital just got new ones and doesn’t need these anymore.” Pierce grew excited. “Can I have these? Aren’t they going to just be recycled anyway?” The surprised hospital staff members just shrugged and told Pierce to help himself. He rescued the monitors, many of which still worked, and stored them in a safe place. He then contacted the doctors in Vladivostok, who were ecstatic. The problem now, though, was how to get all the equipment shipped halfway across the world. It was expensive.

Pierce went to work creating a nonprofit organization that could raise money for the task. “Word got out about what we

were doing, and we started getting offers from all over,” he said. “We were able to buy some shipping materials. My wife and kids and several volunteers packed the monitors, and all kinds of other medical equipment, and we got them shipped.”

Meanwhile, he and others continued to collect older equipment from medical centers throughout the US. The medical crew in Vladivostok was so thrilled they ultimately raised money to send 15 of their top doctors to the United States to learn how to best operate the equipment and become updated on all new heart procedures. A few years later an American team of 30 surgeons, cardiologists, nurses and other medical team members flew to Vladivostok. They operated on 20 heart patients – the first such operations ever performed in that region.

“The entire program turned out to be a major success,” Pierce said. Thousands of people have been saved every year as a result.

Saving Lives Around the Globe

Pierce’s amazing life-saving efforts didn’t stop there. The President of Nicaragua heard about what had happened in Vladivostok and asked for help. “The President himself called me and asked if I would visit his country,” Pierce said. “I was honored. I wasn’t going to turn him down.” Pierce and a medical team flew down. The First Lady of Nicaragua took a special interest in the health issues and Pierce was asked to help build the country’s first emergency medical systems. Over time, Pierce and his team performed the first heart surgeries in Nicaragua and established a modern heart facility. They also founded the first woman’s health center and built the country’s first ambulance team from ambulances donated by US donors. “We even refurbished a large school bus to go out into the more rural areas and provide medical help,” he said.

Still not finished, Pierce was next asked to travel to Tanzania and help establish medical centers there. His team built the first mobile unit that serves the outlying Masai villages. There is now

a full-sized hospital on the edge of the Serengeti. “These facilities worldwide always need money to operate so we are still working to help,” he said.

Have You Heard of These Efforts?

Hundreds of thousands of lives are being saved and families reunited each year by these programs, yet this entire story goes unnoticed. Journalists worldwide have a habit of ignoring positive international projects like this. At the same time, conflicts and fighting among nations typically generate tens of thousands of stories, headlines, broadcasts and online discussions.

WAR! Death! Destruction! Hate! You can practically see the editors and owners of the media outlets drooling and jumping off their soft chairs and couches, falling over themselves to cover the bombs, fire, chaos and noise. Now, that’s news baby!

Okay, maybe I’m overreacting – maybe this is a ‘get off my lawn’ moment for me – but I think I’m right, here. It isn’t that the coverage of war isn’t important, it is. I’m not saying, “Don’t cover the negative things people do.” My point is that today’s media nearly obliterates coverage of almost anything else, as long as the stories serve the goals of those who own the outlets. Stories about people like Pierce are out there, it’s just that few modern journalists are looking for them. More should be.

If You Want to Help

I rarely do this in any book, but if you want to help in some of the efforts going on through Pierce’s organizations, which are truly helping change the world, you can contact Graham Pierce at: grahamwpierce@gmail.com.

I have no financial affiliation with any of these organizations. I just think what they are doing is amazing and worth supporting.

CHAPTER SIX

Missing Henry

(This story won the “Best Investigative Story of the Year Award,”
from the Western States Magazine Association.)

Sacramento Magazine

This story involved a large silver pistol. I know because I found myself looking right down the barrel of it while researching this one. It was almost called, ‘Missing Michael’. I don’t mean to make light of this, though, because this is still an unsolved case, and it involves a grieving family that has been left without answers. This was one of the four ‘hard-edged’ stories that Krista Minard, the editor of *Sacramento Magazine*, asked me to write. The first one, of course, was the Golden State Killer. I had no idea how “exciting” researching either one of these two stories would be.

The Gun and the Apple Tree

The disappearance of Henry Moreno was one of the more riveting articles I’ve done. I met with his family and friends several times and the heartbreak and anger they expressed over his disappearance is something I can never forget.

An example of it came up my driveway on a motorcycle one day. I had already started researching the story, talking to the police, the family and many others. That day I had taken a break and I was up on a ladder trimming an apple tree in my yard when a motorcycle roared up and a man jumped off and walked quickly, and with serious purpose, towards me. I lived in a fairly isolated part of the Sierra Nevada foothills at the time, so I had no idea who he might be. Before I could climb down the ladder, he produced a large pistol and I was looking down into the blackness of the barrel. He waved the gun in my face and growled a threat. That's when I realized the man was a close relation of Henry's. He was afraid I was going to write something bad about Henry. I told him, without politeness I'm afraid, to "Put the f---ing gun down!" I explained that Henry's parents were glad I was doing the story because they thought his disappearance was a result of foul play.

"I have no reason to write anything negative about Henry," I said. "We're trying to find out what happened to him." The man took a deep breath, (I was still holding mine), and lowered the gun. It was a moment I won't forget anytime soon. As many threats that have come my way during my career, it seemed ironic that one of the most dangerous came from someone whose family I was trying to help. I guess it was journalism's version of friendly fire.

Like Henry's family and friends, I wanted to find out what happened to him – why had he disappeared even as his high-end restaurant was opening in Sacramento? My feeling from the beginning was it was not voluntary on Henry's part. I climbed down out of the apple tree and the man put the gun away. We then talked for a long time. He understood what I was trying to do and as he got back on his motorcycle, he wished me good luck. We stayed in touch for a few years after that, both of us seeking any new information about what happened to Henry – information that has unfortunately, never surfaced.

My heartfelt prayers are still with Henry's family and friends.

Missing Henry

Sacramento Magazine

It was supposed to be a party. Wine corks popped like gunfire as fabulous arrays of gourmet Mexican hors d'oeuvres of shrimp, salmon and stuffed chicken empanadas were served up on great China platters. A monstrous buffet overflowed with chicken carnitas, cosalitas, Mexican penne pasta and fruit salad. The well-dressed crowd, many of whom arrived in limousines on the warm summer afternoon, promenaded through the restored 5,000-square-foot restaurant in North Natomas. Included were a fair number of people from Sacramento's upper-crust doctors, lawyers, politicians – who nodded in approval at the fine view of the Sacramento River from the spectacular stone patio. Off to the side, a mariachi band played with festive abandon, as though there was no tomorrow.

It was a party Terry Flynn will never forget. His best friend, Henry Moreno, 46, had toiled for nearly four years to rebuild the once-dilapidated estate at 2125 Garden Highway into what he envisioned would be one of the finest restaurants in Sacramento. In grandiose fashion, he had named it La Mansion del Rio. The restaurant was Henry's dream, an obsession that dominated his every waking moment.

Flynn, an officer at a Sacramento bank, knew it should have been a day of high celebration. After struggling with myriad problems that drove Henry deep into financial difficulties, he had told Flynn he finally felt on the verge of success. In fact, the party was being held to advertise the future opening of the restaurant. But, even as Flynn watched the smiling faces of the partygoers, a growing knot of fear for his friend

tightened in his stomach. Unbeknownst to most of the guests, it was also the day the Moreno family searched the Sacramento River for Henry's body.

Two days before the gala open house at La Mansion, Henry Arthur Moreno simply disappeared. Those closest to him knew immediately that something was wrong. He had worked too long and hard to make his dream of opening the restaurant come true to leave now. Plus, he had made no phone calls, left no notes and had not signaled in any overt way that he was leaving. The gregarious, lifelong Sacramentan and former teacher at Luther Burbank High School just seemed to vanish into thin air.

Although members of the Moreno family – most of whom reside in Sacramento – harbor dark suspicions that Henry was murdered, today, more than a year later, there are still few clues about what happened. His sudden disappearance remains a perplexing mystery. There are still far more questions than answers. Did he accidentally drive off one of the Delta roads he drove so often and end up in the river? Was he the victim of a violent crime, either planned or unplanned? Or, as many around town still believe, did the pressure of opening the restaurant grow too great, causing Henry to take a secret stash of money and run away from his responsibilities and his family, which includes a 17-year-old daughter?

For three months last summer, *Sacramento Magazine* investigated the strange disappearance of Henry Moreno. What revealed itself was a viper's pit of accusations, rumors, half-truths, innuendo and precious few facts. The story involves a cast of dubious characters, innocent victims and many who fall in between. Like a pot-boiling summer paperback, it encompasses a blood feud; betrayal; the loss of a million-dollar fortune;

perhaps a cold-blooded murder; and the bitter grief of a mother and father who still wonder what became of their beloved son.

It is a story that jumps wildly from one possibility to the next, from rumor to fact and back again. It has baffled the Sacramento City Police Department, which continues to consider it a missing persons case. And, the most popular version of the story – that Henry walked away with a stash of cash in his pocket – now seems the least likely of the possibilities. Yet, other scenarios – and there are many, including a much darker and more sinister plotline that involves a carefully prepared scheme to kill Henry and hide his body – are, as yet, unprovable.

What follows is a look at the facts and myths surrounding the strange disappearance of Henry Moreno.

On the wall of Rosa and Rosendo Moreno's modest Sacramento home is a picture of their son, Henry. It shows a handsome, dark-eyed, mustachioed man with a warm smile and an open face. It is a picture of the Henry they knew best: the affable Henry with the quick wit and charming ways, the Henry who always seemed to be the glue of the family – the peacemaker among his 11 siblings. It was the Henry who loved leisurely pursuits, especially softball and water skiing, and above all, the Henry who always had big dreams and the optimism to believe he could fulfill them.

Rosa and Rosendo, immigrants from Mexico, fought hard to make a decent, blue-collar living, providing for their large family. Rosendo, 80, worked his way up on the hard-scrabble ranches of the Valley, finally achieving the rank of foreman. He appears amazingly fit, as if he could still go 12 rounds in a prize fight, but looks can be deceiving. His health has deteriorated

rapidly under the strain of Henry's disappearance. He has been hospitalized for heart problems several times in the past year.

At first, Rosa and Rosendo are suspicious of the reporter who has come to talk to them about their missing son. They wonder if they are being set up by someone they feel has long been an archenemy of the Moreno family, someone **whom** they believe wields considerable power in Sacramento. They relax only when their oldest daughter, Rose, convinces them that the reporter is not a saboteur.

Still, they have difficulty, at first, talking about their son. "They say my son walked away with the money," Rosendo finally says, angrily stroking a long gray beard he vowed to grow until Henry is found. "But he would not do this to his family. Our Henry would not make his mother and his family suffer. Do you think he would do this? No! Henry is a good man. He loved his family. He did not leave; someone took him from us."

At this, Rosa, a small, pretty woman of 75 years, begins to cry silently. She has none of Rosendo's anger, only a deep sense of loss and confusion. With a logic supported only by a mother's love, she clings to the belief Henry has been kidnapped and could be set free, at any minute, to come back to them. Rosendo shakes his head at this but does not argue. "God does make miracles sometimes," he says.

Rose shares her brother's dark, good looks. Although she was the first-born of the children, and Henry fifth, they were exceptionally close. It was Rose, a well-known community activist and socialite within Sacramento's Mexican community, who purchased the property at 2125 Garden Highway for \$400,000 about five years ago. She lived in it for a time until the idea of converting it into a restaurant began to emerge. She shared her vision

with Henry, who soon accepted it as his own. Although seven years younger, it was Henry who had always been Rose's champion. It was the ever-optimistic Henry who understood her best, to whom she would go to discuss her problems. He always seemed to know what to say and cheered her up with his jokes and upbeat outlook. And it was Henry who stood up to Rose's formidable ex-husband, Sacramento bounty hunter Leonard Padilla, when the marriage turned toxic.

Most of the Moreno family members will tell you quietly that they believe Henry's support of Rose during her stormy marriage, and even more turbulent divorce, may be linked to his disappearance.

Rose and Padilla married young and struggled through a series of unsuccessful businesses. These included an ill-fated Mexican Restaurant. Padilla finally found his niche a decade later when they founded Allied Bail Bonds in downtown Sacramento. Flamboyant in his ubiquitous black hat and coat, Leonard turned out to be a natural-born bounty hunter. The company quickly became highly profitable. But while the business thrived, their relationship did not. It slowly disintegrated into an abyss of distrust, acrimony and separation. It reached rock bottom when Rose pulled a gun on Padilla for allegedly violating a restraining order. No shots were fired and no one was hurt, but the mutual animosity was clear.

When Padilla and Rose finally called an end to the marriage, it was Henry who urged Rose to fight for her share of their estate. A number of bitter lawsuits and settlements followed over the next 15 years, including one legal battle over a final piece of property that continues today. Early court rulings gave Rose ownership of Allied Bail Bonds and more than \$1 million in property. According to Rose, an infuriated

Padilla swore he would regain everything he felt he had lost in the divorce. It was the money from the sale of these properties that Henry ultimately spent trying to refurbish La Mansion.

The restaurant itself, which lies a short distance west of Interstate 5 off the Garden Highway, is surprisingly modest. Once a large two-story home, it features sweeping front windows that face the Sacramento River, only a stone's throw away. Yet, somehow, the conventional look of the building only seems to add to the strange, other-worldly look and feel of the rest of the estate. Huge, exotic trees drape the grounds, giving it a lush, tropical, plantation look. The siren's song of the property, though, is a stunningly beautiful terra-cotta patio and terrace, hemmed by elaborate brickwork and wrought-iron fencing, that overlooks a marvelous curve in the river itself. It is easy to see how Rose and Henry fell under the spell of the place.

When Henry first saw it five years ago, he was, by all accounts, a man in search of a mission. After graduating from Sacramento High School Henry had tried a number of different jobs and had been married and divorced twice. He graduated from Sacramento City College, joined the Air Force Reserves, then worked driving a delivery truck for Capitol Parcel Delivery for several years.

Henry grew restless to do something more with his life. Running a high-profile restaurant appealed to his extroverted nature; it was his chance to make a mark in the community. He struggled for more than a year to get the property rezoned, then began the conversion from house to restaurant. Rose loaned Henry \$86,000 to get started. He did much of the carpentry and other work himself to save money. "Henry's passion for it was obvious," says Janice Moreno, Henry's second wife

and a 24-year deputy with the Sacramento Sheriff's Department. "He worked day and night on it. He was a man who always dreamed big."

From the beginning, Henry insisted on buying the best of everything. "He overspent on almost every aspect of the project," says one of his employees, who asked not to be identified in this story. "For example, he could have gotten good, custom-fit used kitchen appliances for half of what he spent on the new equipment, but Henry always wanted the best. That's just the way he was."

Within the first 24 months, the costs skyrocketed and Henry had to return to Rose for more money. Rose loaned Henry about \$160,000 (according to an unsuccessful lawsuit she filed after the restaurant went into bankruptcy). It was to be repaid upon the reopening of the restaurant. But the struggles and delays in gaining the required government and utility permits ate into Henry's ambitious schedule. Before long, the restaurant required another large influx of cash to handle the loan and equipment payments.

After Henry cast fruitlessly around the community for potential investors, Rose sold a building she owned on the 800 block of H Street for \$850,000 and says she loaned much of that money to Henry.

It was the long hours at La Mansion and Henry's over-the-edge cash situation that ended his marriage to Janice. "Henry was comfortable taking large risks, and I wasn't," says Janice. "It finally got to the point where we had to let each other go."

After that, time and loan costs were adding up faster than Henry could manage. To make matters worse, Henry hired an entire staff, including a manager, high-priced chefs, and waiters. Trying desperately to keep the restaurant from folding even before it opened, Rose

allowed Henry to take out a mortgage for \$160,000 on three acres she owned elsewhere on Garden Highway. When even that wasn't enough, she made one last desperate move. She sold the restaurant and the property to Henry, who needed to own the property to qualify for a \$175,000 Small Business Administration loan. She took back a second deed of trust behind Zion Bank, placing herself on a highly vulnerable financial ledge. It would later prove a disastrous move.

"I believed in my brother," Rose says now. "I would have given my life for him; I loved and trusted him that much. The restaurant was a dream he wanted more than anything, and I would have done anything to help him make it come true."

Despite Rose's continual influx of cash, the problems at La Mansion, and the pressure on Henry kept mounting. He learned he needed to provide an entire on-site sewage treatment facility, and SMUD informed him that the restaurant lacked the proper amperage for its power line. Moreover, the restaurant didn't have adequate parking. He faced huge costs, but even worse, the problems delayed the opening of the restaurant, and time was Henry's worst enemy.

"He was worried, but I never saw him panic," says Janice, who talked with Henry on a weekly basis. "He had the attitude of, 'If it's meant to be, it will happen.' That was part of his Eckankar religion, which was a major part of Henry's life."

It was through Eckankar, a New Age religion that embraces reincarnation and ancient soul travel, among other things, that Henry first met Sam Griffin, whom he ultimately hired as the general manager of La Mansion. The role that Griffin, who now sells cars at a dealership in Roseville, would play in the events to come is still not clear. But one thing is certain: Although Griffin

had some experience in the restaurant business, he wasn't able to help right the listing ship. Henry needed still more money.

In the late spring of that year, one of the chefs Henry hired, David Arbuckle, fell into a conversation with his next-door neighbor, Sylvester York. Arbuckle told York about the troubles at La Mansion, and York repeated the story to an acquaintance, Wayne Young. Young expressed interest in investing in the project, and York and Arbuckle arranged a meeting with Henry. In late July 1998, York and Young agreed to invest \$200,000 in the restaurant. Articles of incorporation were hastily drawn up and Henry had new partners. Curiously, while Henry was listed as president of the new company, Young's mother, Ruby Young, was listed as the vice president. But even their \$200,000 wasn't enough. The on-site sewer treatment plant and the extra power amperage required by SMUD continued to delay the project. A week before Henry disappeared, the pressure became so intense that he suffered what could have been a mild heart attack, according to Griffin. "We were talking together and suddenly Henry just clutched his heart, then slid down the wall and stayed there," Griffin claims. "I asked if he was okay and he just nodded. He never went to the doctor about it. He had literally built that restaurant, brick by brick, with his own hands. He just didn't want to give up." Henry never mentioned the episode to any of his family or friends.

Even with no guarantee they could get the restaurant open, Henry and Sam decided to hold the private party to advertise it to the community. Because Henry still didn't have all of the required governmental permits to allow a public grand opening, it was officially called a private open house instead. Henry, Sam and the crew worked feverishly to handle the seemingly endless

logistics of serving what was later estimated to be a crowd of about 1,500 people. On Aug. 6, two days before the open house, Henry woke and drove to Courtland to check on the availability of a septic tank lid.

Afterward, he drove to the Northgate area of North Natomas and had lunch at the 524 Restaurant. He arrived at the restaurant, which is only a few miles from La Mansion, about 11:20 a.m. He had eaten there dozens of times before and was acquainted with most of the waitresses, including Maria Gomez, who spoke to him that morning. "Henry was always in a good mood, and he was smiling, as usual," Gomez says. "He was talking and gave us invitations to the open house. He didn't seem depressed at all. There was only one strange thing about Henry that day. He always had lunch with at least one other person. But that day he was by himself. It was the only time in four years I saw him have lunch alone."

Henry was wearing shorts and a white pull-over shirt, Gomez remembers. He left the restaurant just before noon. It was the last time anybody officially saw Henry. At noon, Aug. 6, he simply disappeared.

Janice Moreno cannot stop the tears, even a year after Henry's disappearance. Sitting at her dining room table, she holds a picture of the two of them on their wedding day. "We were divorced, but he was my best friend," she says. "This has been a living nightmare. Having him gone is so hard, but having the media and people in Sacramento who didn't know him believe he walked away with some money, makes it even worse."

One man who believes Henry did indeed skip town with the cash is Padilla, who isn't shy about sharing his opinion on the subject. "Henry is a con man; he always was," says Padilla, who is hardly a choir boy himself, having spent a year in federal prison for tax evasion.

“You can bet Henry’s down on some Mexican beach right now, enjoying his money.” Padilla doesn’t try to mask his bitter feelings toward Rose and Henry. “It’s a beautiful scam,” he insists. “Henry stole six or seven hundred thousand dollars and ran. Now all they have to do is figure out how to get him back into the community. Maybe he can claim amnesia.”

Padilla’s constant statements to the press infuriate the Moreno family. “I wish I could describe to you the long-standing hate between Padilla and the family,” says Janice. “It runs far deeper than you could ever know.”

For whatever reason, the idea that Henry skipped town with the money remains the most popular theory among those who did not know Henry. It is, though, the least likely of the scenarios. Although Rose says she sank more than \$1 million into the restaurant, and investors put in an additional \$200,000, it does not appear there was any money left to embezzle.

“He spent every nickel on refurbishing the interior, the new kitchen, all the permits and environmental work, the new sewer facility, the staff he hired, and on loan costs,” says Don Fogelman, a cabinet maker who worked extensively on the inside of the restaurant. “It was real easy to see where all the money went.”

Flynn, who has extensive experience in real estate projects, agrees. “I saw the old house when he first started and I saw it again a month before he disappeared. Absolutely, there were hundreds of thousands of dollars in improvements there.”

Jim Skow, the Sacramento attorney who drew up the incorporation agreement between Henry, York and Young, says that it made no sense economically for Henry to walk away. “When the restaurant opened, it would have returned him a much greater income than

anything he could have walked away with,” Skow says. “Besides, if you knew Henry, you knew the restaurant was his baby. He wouldn’t have abandoned it.”

The Sacramento Police Department backs up these claims, according to spokeswoman Michelle Quattrin. An investigation by the department concluded there were no substantial amounts of cash missing from the restaurant. Moreover, a week before he disappeared, Henry paid out nearly \$100,000 to vendors and suppliers, whom he could easily have put off for another week. “Henry did not take the money and run,” says Flynn. “I’d stake my life on it.”

Then what did happen to Henry?

Did he have an unfortunate accident and drive off into the river? Janice doesn’t think so. “How many times have you ever heard of someone getting in an accident and vanishing completely?” she asked. “Hundreds of people, including the police, searched the river and turned up no trace.”

Could he have been the victim of a random crime, such as a carjacking? Oddly, two psychics, hired by the family in a desperate ploy to unravel the mystery, independently said they saw Henry being car-jacked at knifepoint. Both believed Henry fought his assailant or assailants, causing his Nissan Pathfinder to veer off into the river, where they all perished. They could not, however, determine the site of the alleged crash. Investigators, though, are dubious of the psychics’ findings because of the complete lack of evidence in the case. They point out that people who commit random crimes are rarely so careful as to leave no clues.

The Moreno family is united in what they believe happened to their brother. “I’m telling you for a fact that our brother was taken from us,” says George Moreno, the oldest of Henry’s brothers, a truck driver living in Shingle Springs.

Janice agrees. "There has never been a moment's doubt in my mind but that Henry met with foul play," she says angrily. "He was murdered by someone who had a motive for hiding his body. Whoever did this knew exactly what they were doing. This is all too neat to have been random."

Although they have been reluctant to share their suspicion in public until now, the Moreno family believes strongly that they know who was involved with Henry's disappearance and why. Henry's brother, Joe Moreno, a bail bondsman in Sacramento, echoes the feelings of most of the family when he says they are angry that the feud between Padilla and Henry was not investigated by police. "This vendetta has never come out in the police reports or in any news articles," Joe says. "Yet, everybody in the community has known about it for years. But Leonard has connections everywhere."

The scenario that Joe, Rose, and the family paint is of a vindictive, angry man bent on a 15-year mission of revenge, obsessed with taking back everything he felt he had lost in the divorce.

"If you look at it that way, it's perfect," says Janice. "Once Henry is gone, the restaurant venture collapses. Rose loses the person in the world most dear to her, as well as all the money she got from Padilla in the divorce. The revenge is complete."

The Moreno family points to the \$750,000 life insurance policy Henry took out that could have paid off the mortgage on La Mansion, if there had been proof that Henry was the victim of a fatal accident or a homicide. But, since his body has not been found and it remains officially a missing person case, there was no insurance pay-off and Zion Bank foreclosed on the property. The bank then sold La Mansion at auction in January this year for just under \$700,000. This covered

most of the bank lien but left Rose, who was in the second trust position, without a penny.

Padilla scoffs at the Morenos' suspicions that he was involved, saying he was never even asked by police detectives for his alibi on the day of Henry's disappearance. "Why would I do anything to a little weasel like Henry and get me in trouble?" Padilla asks. "I'd rather have watched him fail at that restaurant and humiliate himself. . . . I didn't kill Henry and I didn't have anybody do it. That's not my style. Besides, Henry's alive."

Padilla has his own scenario as to what happened to Henry. In fact, he has several of them. At first, he said he believed Henry ran away to Germany with the money and linked up with a woman named Helga, whom Henry had met through Eckankar. However, the lead was investigated by German police, who found it to be baseless. Padilla later pointed out that Rose, under scrutiny from the IRS for a possible capital gains problem, had ample motivation to smuggle money out of the country via Henry, then declare insolvency due to the huge loss on her investment in La Mansion. Rose ridiculed her ex-husband's theory as being "ridiculous and vindictive."

Earlier police investigations focused not on Padilla or Rose, but on the source of the \$200,000 put up by investors, York and Young. Although Young could not be reached for an interview, York spoke at length, expressing his irritation at being considered a suspect.

"Everybody wanted to know where we got that kind of money to invest, and why we were both driving new Corvette roadsters," says York, who claims to have an extensive background in business marketing. At the time he and Young invested the \$200,000 in La Mansion, Young was working as a garbage collector in

North Highlands, York says. He added that most of the money for the investment came from an inheritance from Young's grandfather.

"People are pointing fingers at us because we're young, we're black and we're not supposed to have this kind of money," says York, who went to work with a bail bonds company run by Padilla's son, Alex, after La Mansion went into foreclosure. "Wayne Young and I were victims in all this. We didn't get so much as a fork back from our investment when Henry disappeared."

Kevin Elmendorf, York and Young's Sacramento-based attorney, supports York's claim. "Henry was the deal, he was the man in all this. When he disappeared, it all fell apart, and York and Young got screwed. They had no motive whatsoever to get rid of him."

However, it is clear that York and Young were frustrated to learn – after they had invested in La Mansion – that Henry was two months behind on his bills, and nowhere near as close to opening the restaurant as they had believed. Griffin insists the restaurant could have opened within a week of Henry's disappearance, but the sewer and power issues were far from resolved. Perhaps most telling is the fact that the current owner of La Mansion, Fred Cullincini, a well-financed Sacramento businessman with a background in the restaurant industry, tried unsuccessfully to open the restaurant for months last spring. As of August this year, 12 months after Henry's disappearance, the doors of La Mansion still remain closed to the public. One potential buyer, who says he may look at the possibility of turning it into a private club, is Leonard Padilla.

It is hard to shake the image that in early summer, Henry, desperate for money to keep his dream afloat, was swimming in a pool of sharks. Just a month before he disappeared, he told Janice he had been approached

by potential investors who offered to finance the project, but wanted eventual control of La Mansion in return. Henry did not identify them, other than to say he feared they may have underworld connections. He turned them down, but the meeting left him shaken. "It really scared him," says Janice. "He told me he wouldn't make a deal with the devil, even to open his restaurant."

The confrontation gave an eerie twist to a peculiar conversation Henry had two days before his disappearance, with Merwin Rose, an engineer hired to help with the sewer project at La Mansion. "We had been working together outside all morning," the engineer recounts. "Henry seemed tense, with the open house just a few days away. At one point, he became very quiet, then he turned to me with tears in his eyes and said, 'I've got to get this thing going. If I don't open by the eighth, I'll be gone.'"

Henry's statement is as enigmatic as the case itself. Did he simply mean he would go broke if he didn't open in time? Or had his life been threatened and he had foreseen his own grim fate? Or did he mean he was going to flee, not with embezzled money, but to save his life or the lives of those close to him? For the Moreno family, it may be yet another cruel twist in the story, one that seems to give hope where there is none.

The only indubitable aspect of Henry's disappearance is the pain and grief of his friends and family. Rosendo and Rosa struggle with the absence of their son and the fact that some people still believe he may have abandoned them. Flynn has spent a tough year wondering about the fate of his best friend. Janice, always fierce in her defense of Henry, yearns for the day his family and friends will be able to put speculation behind them and honor him as the compassionate man she knew. Rose faces life without her champion, the

brother who was always there for her. “This hurt me in my heart of hearts,” she says. “I miss Henry every single day.”

Finally, Kerryn wonders what the future holds without her father. “I still hear him in my head and heart,” she says. “We were so close I could even talk to him about guys. I got really sad around his birthday. I weakened and wanted to believe he is still alive. But I know deep down that he won’t be there to walk me down the aisle or to see my first baby.”

It may be that the disappearance of Henry Moreno will never be solved. The odds are great, however, that someone knows what happened to him and why. For now, perhaps the only certainty in the case was reflected in a large, splintered, wooden sign jammed upside down in a garbage heap at 2125 Garden Highway. LA MANSION DEL RIO, it reads. Once, it welcomed future patrons to a beautiful place on the river. Now, like Henry’s dream, it lies cast aside, in ruins.

What Happened After

For many years, Henry’s brothers, Mario and Jose Moreno, and some of Henry’s friends, would meet on the anniversary of his disappearance at a Sacramento area park. There, they placed a plaque in his memory and each year they hung a yellow ribbon on a nearby oak tree. The event – and the fading hope it represented – ultimately proved too upsetting for Henry’s parents and everyone found separate ways to remember him.

“We hired private detectives and even mediums to help find him, but more than twenty years have gone by and nobody knows anything,” Jose told a local television reporter. “What we do know is my brother was a good guy.” Sacramento police investigators say they have kept the case “open,” hoping that at some point, someone will feel comfortable talking.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Don’t Move, I’ve Got a Bomb!”

Reader’s Digest

Once in a while, like nearly everyone I suppose, I suffer a bit of burnout from working too long without taking a break. Usually, that means I have to force myself to go a week or so without digging into a story. I find that trips to places like Yosemite National Park, Lake Tahoe, Hawaii or (especially) Paris, **revived** me to a point where I **was** anxious to get back to work again.

But while researching this story, I suffered a different kind of burnout. It doesn’t have an official name, as far as I know, but I call it, “Journalistic zappo PTSD.” I was asked to cover an unusual event in Salt Lake City, Utah, where a deranged man entered a bank with a bomb. As police moved in, he forced many hostages into a small room where they were controlled by an angry, crazed man with a bomb, for several hours.

I interviewed many of these folks afterwards and for whatever reason, I somehow internalized the terror they had felt during those hours. I thought it would help me write a story that was true, but I realized afterwards that you have to leave a little emotional space between you and the events if you are going to be successful as a journalist. The horror they suffered got inside me and I was pretty shaken up for

about three weeks. I remember the plane ride back to California was incredibly bumpy and I white-knuckled it all the way. That was not a happy time. I think I was far more nervous **than I** was looking down the barrel of that gun. Chasing stories has kept me flying the friendly skies for years, but I have never really liked not having my feet on the ground. In this case, though, it wasn't so much the turbulence in the sky that was getting to me, it was the turbulence in my head and nerves.

Even though I've done stories with far darker endings, this one snuck into my brain and left a little note that said, "Never to get this close and assimilate these kinds of emotions so fully again." When I got home I didn't sleep well for a few weeks and I could not watch anything on television that contained anything but light comedy. It even took me a few days before I could outline my notes and start the story. Journalistic zappo PTSD. I don't recommend it. I got over it and didn't miss my deadline, but it is something I never want to experience again. This story is a great reminder for me.

"Don't Move! I've Got a Bomb!"

Reader's Digest

Gwen Page hurried as she helped a borrower navigate the labyrinth of books on the second floor of the Salt Lake City Public Library. Usually, she took time to chat, but on that March Saturday in 1994, the 40-year-old librarian wanted to watch a group of Tibetan monks conduct a small serenity ceremony in the main room next door. She handed the man his book and excused herself. Page headed past the escalator to the exhibition room. A librarian's desk sat in the middle. A conference room was off to the right. About 100 people had gathered for the ceremony.

Page, barely five feet tall and weighing less than 110 pounds, had trouble getting more than a glimpse of the monks. She turned to go back to her office, then

stopped and stared in disbelief. A thin, red-haired man dressed in combat fatigues had leapt onto the librarian's desk, not four feet from Page. Clenched in his right fist was a handgun.

"Don't move! I've got a bomb!" he screamed, brandishing his weapon and pointing to an athletic bag over his shoulder. "I want hostages. Do exactly as I say – or everybody dies!"

People gasped and drew back, trying to find someplace to hide. Page's heart pounded. As she looked up, she was shocked to find the gunman staring at her. Despite a scraggly goatee, he had a youthful face. *He's barely more than a boy!* Page thought. But his eyes radiated a crazed, chilling intensity.

"You," he said, spying Page's librarian's badge, "get those doors open." He had strapped the gun to his wrist, and now he waved the weapon toward the conference room. "That's where I'm taking my hostages."

Summoning her courage, Page strode the 40 feet toward the conference-room door and opened it. As she did, the gunman turned to the others and told them to pass a sealed envelope, containing his demands, to one of the Tibetan monks. He wanted it sent to a local newspaper. The monk did not understand English, so a man standing nearby, Carl Robinson, took the letter and said he would deliver it.

Page was now well away from the gunman. A corridor of books would shield her from view if she moved toward the staircase. But she thought, *I can't run away. It could make him angry, and he might hurt the other hostages.*

At gunpoint, the man ushered his hostages – four men and five women, including Page – into the 25-by-60-foot conference room. "Push that table up here,"

he ordered. The hostages moved a large oak table perpendicular to the wall between the floor-to-ceiling windows.

The gunman took something out of his bag and placed it on the table. Page observed a rectangular metal canister, slightly larger than an old-fashioned whiskey flask. Wires protruding from it were attached to a curling iron that the gunman held in his left hand. "My God," Page whispered, "he *does* have a bomb."

"Now, all of you pull chairs around the table, but sit facing out from it," he continued, taking a seat at the end of the table with his back to the wall. "That way you won't see the bomb go off."

Page and the other hostages had just taken their seats when a man wearing jeans and a windbreaker wandered through the door, looking bewildered. Page held her breath as the startled gunman whirled and aimed.

The newcomer put his hands out in a submissive gesture. "I don't know what's going on, but you're scaring me with that gun."

The gunman's eyes narrowed. "I'm in control here!" he said, keeping the weapon aimed at his new hostage. "Now sit down and be quiet. Who are you?"

"Lloyd Prescott," the man replied.

"Well, Mr. Prescott, if the police come into this room, I'll shoot you first!"

Page prayed Prescott wouldn't panic. What she didn't know was that Lloyd Prescott was exactly where he planned to be.

At age 45, Lt. Lloyd Prescott was a veteran of the Salt Lake County Sheriff's Office. Dressed in civilian clothes and acting scared, however, he looked nothing like a streetwise cop. Often on Saturdays, he fished or

hiked with his two sons. That morning, though, he had been catching up on work in his office half a block from the library.

Just before 10 a.m., Prescott heard someone shout in the outer room of the otherwise empty office: “A man with a gun just stormed the library! On the first floor he weaved through a stream of frightened people trying to get outside and made his way up the escalator to the second floor. At the top, Robinson ran toward Prescott with his hands in the air. “Get out of here!” he yelled. “We have a hostage situation. The guy’s got a gun and a bomb!”

“It’s all right,” Prescott said softly, showing his badge. “I’m a sheriff’s officer. Where is he?”

“In the conference room,” Robinson replied, pointing at the door. Prescott walked quickly toward the door. *I can’t go in shooting, he thought. The bomb could still go off. My only chance to protect the hostages is from the inside – by becoming a hostage myself.*

As Prescott took a seat, some of the hostages began asking what the gunman wanted. “These are copies of my demand letter,” he said as he handed Page a stack of photocopies to pass around to the others.

Scanning her copy of the ten-page handwritten document, she recognized the ramblings of an angry, disturbed mind:

“To: Senior Police Official

“From: Clifford Lynn Draper, Hostage Taker

“...The necessity for sleep may force me to shoot the hostages and detonate the bomb if my demands are not met within about 72 hours.”

Most of the letter raged against police, minority groups and gay people. “I am also fighting for my morality, my beliefs, my race and my heritage,” Draper concluded. “I will live free or die.”

Page looked up from the letter to see Draper pointing the gun at her head. "Library Lady," he said in the exaggeratedly polite tone he used with her, "look out and tell me if you see the SWAT team in the outside room yet."

Page walked to one of the windows and, separating the blinds, peered out. She saw the head of one uniformed officer and the silhouette of another by the escalator.

I'd better tell Draper the truth, she thought. He might shoot someone if he thinks I'm lying. "I can see them," she said.

"I knew it!" Draper screamed. "Those incompetent punks better get out of there, or I'll blow us all to hell!"

Page held her breath until Draper's rantings diminished. Looking around, she saw the faces of the other hostages were tight but calm.

Draper told one of the hostages to take a small radio from his bag and tune in a rock 'n' roll station. For the next half-hour he said little, content to listen to the music. But near 11 a.m., one hour after the drama began, he began to grow restless again. "You," he ordered Page, "look through the blinds and tell me if those cops are still there."

Page was determined not to provoke Draper. Growing up the smallest child in a rough rural school, a "no fear" attitude had helped her overcome her lack of size. She even made the girls' soccer and basketball teams in school. Now, though, the stakes were far higher.

Walking calmly to the window, Page parted the blinds. She could see only the reflection of a helmeted officer on the shiny metal facing of the escalator. The SWAT team was there all right. *But what should I say to Draper?* she wondered. *Telling him there were officers out there got him very angry last time.*

Page looked back at him. He had the gun trained on her. “I don’t see *anybody*,” she said, her heart pounding. Draper stared hard at her, then waved her back to her seat with the gun.

“Good,” he said, smiling. “That’s more like it.”

Page sat down, relieved that the gamble had worked.

While Draper was distracted by Page, Prescott looked over his shoulder at the bomb, grimacing. The gunman had devised a deadman’s trigger by running bare wires from the canister to two electrical contact points on the curling iron – one on the flange and another on the heating bar. When squeezed, the iron’s spring-loaded handle kept the two apart. *If he ever releases the handle, allowing those contact points to touch, the bomb will detonate*, Prescott realized.

The bomb was obviously homemade, the wires held with tape and rubber bands. Dozens of lead balls glued to the outside of the can were designed to shatter with the explosion, becoming lethal shrapnel. Prescott knew this could be deadly.

Just then, Draper caught Prescott looking over his shoulder at the bomb. “It’s likely,” the enraged **gun man** said, “none of us will get out of here alive.”

In his command post near the scene, Salt Lake County sheriff Aaron Kennard had conferred with several escapees from the library. Carl Robinson was able to identify Prescott from photographs, so Kennard knew his first lieutenant was a hostage. He did not know whether Prescott was armed or whether Draper knew Prescott was a law officer.

Kennard worried most about the irrational hatred for police that Draper had expressed. *He’ll kill Prescott immediately if he finds out he’s a cop*, Kennard thought. There was little Kennard could do as long as Draper

had the bomb. “We can’t storm in there or he’ll blow everything sky-high,” he told a colleague in frustration. “We have to hope the bomb is fake.”

Officers got a break with Draper’s name in the letter. Within minutes, the name was being processed in law-enforcement computers, and it was learned that Draper was staying at a local hotel. When officers searched his room, they found bomb paraphernalia and literature on explosives. “There’s no doubt then,” Kennard said to his team. “The bomb is real.”

Inside the hostage room, Draper was frowning. The wires connecting the bomb were coming loose from the curling iron. “Get some duct tape out of my bag and cut it into strips. You can use this knife if you need to,” he told Michael Greer, a bearded 46-year-old manager for a consulting company. When the hostage was finished, Draper resecured the loose wires.

While Draper was preoccupied, Prescott moved his hand to his gun. *Should I take him out now?* he wondered. *Will I have another chance?* He nearly drew his weapon, but as Draper looked up, Prescott pulled back his hand. *It’s still too risky.* He took stock of the others in the room. So far, they all seemed to be holding up. Page acted relaxed and composed. Prescott felt a surge of admiration for the tiny librarian. He suspected she had tricked Draper about the SWAT team, which he knew would have taken up positions in the main room. *That took guts,* he said to himself. *Especially with a gun aimed right at her.*

For the next hour, Draper listened to the radio and threatened the hostages. He refused to negotiate with police. Instead he had Greer dial the radio station on the conference-room cordless phone. Then Draper complained about his unmet demands. “This is war – don’t they understand that?” he screamed. “The cops are

testing my resolve, and it's coming to the point where I might start drawing straws and executing someone to get results!"

Draper ordered Greer to hang up the phone. Then he trained his gun on Page. "Library Lady, get the knife and cut lengths of rope – one for each hostage," he said in a low monotone. "Whoever gets the shortest rope dies first. The cops have to know I'm serious."

Prescott realized time had run out. Taking a closer look at the bomb, he recognized the black gunpowder as volatile but not especially potent. He calculated that even if the bomb was strong enough to shatter the lead balls and turn them into shrapnel, it probably would not blast downward through the heavy table. *If I can give the hostages enough time to dive under the table before the bomb explodes, they'll have a chance*, he thought.

To do that, he would have to wait until the last possible instant to shoot. That meant he would probably take a round from Draper's gun, shrapnel from the explosion, or both. Prescott thought of his sons, 16-year-old John and 12-year-old Sean. *Will I see them again?* But he had no choice. If he faltered even for a second, the hostages might all die.

On the other side of the table, Page was standing, facing Draper. Prescott slowly slid his hand under his shirttails toward his gun. *If only she can distract him*, he thought.

As if she had read Prescott's mind, Page began to walk away from Draper. "What are you doing?" he demanded.

"I don't know where the knife is," Page answered slowly.

Draper frowned; then, remembering it was nearby, he turned and bent to pick it up.

It was the moment Prescott had been waiting for. Drawing his gun and leaping to his feet, he shouted, "Sheriff's Office! Hit the floor!"

To Page, everything seemed to move in slow motion. She and the other hostages dived for the floor. Draper, seemingly dazed by Prescott's shout, slowly twisted in his chair and swung his gun toward the lieutenant. Using all the willpower he possessed, Prescott waited until he was looking down the barrel of Draper's gun. Certain the hostages were on the floor, he fired several shots at Draper, mortally wounding him, before Draper could get off a shot.

Fearing the bomb would explode, Prescott yelled for the hostages to get out. As they fled through the door, the SWAT team burst through the windows and secured the area.

Later, the bomb squad determined that Draper's explosive was too unstable to be moved. Detonated inside the conference room, it ripped holes in the ceiling and walls, but did not penetrate the heavy table. Prescott had been right – the hostages would have been safe.

But why hadn't the bomb exploded after Draper released the deadman's switch following the shooting? "When Draper rewrapped the wires on the curling iron," Kennard explained to Prescott, "he accidentally applied enough tape so that when he let go of the lever, the tape prevented the flange from touching the bar. That quarter inch of tape saved your life."

The closeness of that brush with death was brought home at a ceremony in the city-council chambers. There, as Salt Lake City Mayor Deedee Corradini cited the extraordinary heroism of Lt. Lloyd Prescott and Gwen Page, the audience remained deathly quiet. Some people

had tears in their eyes. It wasn't until the two stood and walked up to accept their special commendations that the crowd broke into loud cheers and applause.

What Happened After

An examination of the explosion confirmed that the bomb was modeled after a Vietnam-era anti-personnel claymore mine, which hurled deadly fragments everywhere. Lt. Prescott and Page had most likely saved the lives of everyone in the room, except Draper's, of course.

Afterwards, Lt. Prescott was selected as the "Officer of the Year" by the International Association of Chiefs of Police. It was the highest award given to a law enforcement officer worldwide. He and Page were incredibly cool and courageous under enormous, potentially deadly pressure. I am always amazed at the bravery people can show in the most unlikely of circumstances. Lt. Prescott's father was at the event where his son's actions were described and honored by several speakers. The father was smiling proudly the entire time. "That's just him," he said, happily.

"Catch Me if You Can" – The Biggest Con

Over the years I covered dozens of murders and other true crimes. One story, though, stands out in a different way. It still makes me laugh to this day. I was asked to write a long piece for *Sacramento Magazine* on white collar crime.

I researched the various types of non-violent crime that were happening throughout Sacramento County and Northern California. It turned out the list, given to me by detectives and sheriff's officers who were anxious to have some media attention on what they considered an endemic of these crimes, was nearly endless. After finishing the piece it was clear to me that crime does

pay, at least financially. There is still an argument to be made that we all pay for our misdeeds, now or later. In terms of cold hard cash, though, it appeared to me it was easy to break the law in small ways and get away with it.

Sometimes it paid off in ways no one could have imagined. Here's what I mean. I had heard of a man named Frank Abagnale, who had become semi-famous as a voracious con-man. He reportedly hadn't hurt anyone physically, but he claimed to have gotten away with impersonating an airline pilot, a doctor, a lawyer and many other scams. Police chased him all over the world. The amazing part of this was he was in his early twenties when he was finally captured in France and extradited to the **US**. He had committed white collar crimes in multiple states and throughout Europe.

He was described as being friendly and harmless - but these descriptions left out descriptions that were equally true, cunning and utterly devious. That intrigued me so I tracked him down as part of the research for my story. By now he had gotten out of prison, he only served a short time, and was hired as a consultant by the FBI's Bank Fraud Financial Crimes Unit. He was helping law enforcement and some private businesses by revealing his tricks to them so they could hunt down other con-men.

I found his phone number and he answered my call right away. He was cheerful and upbeat and we hit it off. I told him about the story I was researching and we spent quite a bit of time talking about the art of the con.

We talked, I believe, three different times. Once he taught me how to create a phony check. He explained carefully how to obtain a company's logo and then how to brand it onto special 'check' paper so it looked exactly like a company check. Then he gave me a list of all the counties in California that did not bother investigating or prosecuting people who cashed counterfeit checks under a certain amount. It didn't occur to me (until now), to actually try the process out, but it was clear the phony check racket could be lucrative.

Somewhere toward the end of our conversations, I began to get a feeling that something was wrong. Abagnale had carefully explained

the steps of most common cons. I finally realized, after he began dropping heavy hints, that he was playing one on me. He had told me a story about himself that was blatantly untrue. When I called him on it, he laughed. “It’s about time you figured that out,” he said. “I gave you enough hints.”

He sent me a fancy card with his new company’s logo on it and told me he had written a book about his early life and it was being passed around Hollywood. A few years later, I heard that he had sold the film rights to the book to producer, Steven Spielberg.

The following year the film came out and became perhaps the most popular of the year. It was called *Catch Me if You Can* and starred Leonardo DiCaprio, Tom Hanks, Christopher Walken, Martin Sheen and Amy Adams. I remember watching it and laughing the entire time.

The most hilarious part of all of this was it is probable that most of what Abagnale put in his book about his past as a con-man was just that – a major con. Journalists have tried for years to find evidence that might prove what he said about his being a fake was true, and they have mostly failed. That’s what I love about this. Abagnale has never claimed he was anything other than a con-man. Presumably everyone who invested in the popular film made out like bandits, so in the end, does it matter they may have been duped by him like everyone else? Maybe, but I haven’t heard anyone complaining about it.

White collar crime continues to be a multi-billion dollar business and many innocent people are gravely harmed financially by it every year. It is more prevalent in the **US** than ever before. Most of it these days, of course, is committed by online scammers. In Hollywood, though, where fact and fiction are typically indistinguishable, Abagnale found the perfect place to tell his story. It was a case, it seems, of no harm, no foul.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Spy and the Professor

Reader's Digest

This was the first story I wrote for the *Digest* and it was the most unusual. I had been trying to break into the magazine for a couple of years, sending in at least a dozen queries that were all rejected. It wasn't until I met and talked with Clell Bryant, a veteran editor for the *Digest*, at a writer's conference in San Francisco that I finally got an assignment. This was not a typical piece for the *Digest* and I was grateful they gave me the chance. It was a love story, a powerful one set against a backdrop of colliding nations. Again, I just had to figure out the best way to tell it, while sticking to the facts and the correct sequence of events. Scene by scene. My editors were of great help. In my experience, a good editor is a writer's best friend. My editors at the *Digest* included Bill Beaman, Paul Libassi, Gary Sledge, Marcia Rockwood, and Bryant. They taught me a great deal about structure, pace and choices.

I'll admit I was also thrilled to get into the *Digest* because they paid me about the same amount per story as I made in a full year writing for the newspaper – during which time I wrote about 140 stories. Being a journalist is not exactly a sure-fire way to get

into the top tax brackets, but for me, it has been one of the most interesting jobs I could imagine. I think that's worth something – maybe everything.

This story was an exceptional challenge for me because it involved the deep emotions of two exceptional people. I had been trained to write non-fiction: who, what, why, when and where. Now I had to tell an unlikely story of two people from different cultures, who cared so much for each other they overcame the simmering hostilities of two nations. It was my first official love story.

The Spy and the Professor

Reader's Digest

As the jet dropped gently through the blue China skies, Larry Engelmann could see the ancient city of Nanjing shimmering below in the late-summer heat. “This will be the greatest adventure of my life,” Engelmann, a history professor at California’s San Jose State, had written to a friend. He had no idea how prophetic his words were.

Engelmann had been teaching for two decades and often felt that he had fallen into a “tweedy, academic rut.” When Johns Hopkins University offered him a teaching position on an exchange program at Nanjing University, he jumped at the chance.

He could never have suspected that while at Nanjing University he would come under intense scrutiny by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Because of work he was doing for a book on Vietnam, the PLA became convinced that Engelmann was working for the CIA.

Oblivious to the fact that he was being watched, Engelmann spent several days walking around Nanjing, taking hundreds of photographs. Gregarious by

nature, the six-foot, two-inch, 200-pound, curly-haired professor tried to talk to anybody who spoke English. It was unlikely behavior for a spy, but the PLA decided he was a master of deception. Engelmann had also worked as a journalist, confirming their suspicions. (In China, all journalists are expected to gather information for their government.)

One day after class, Engelmann invited one of his students, a bright, attractive woman named Xu Meihong (pronounced Shu May Hong), to walk with him to the post office.

Meihong, he discovered, was highly intelligent, spoke good English and was more than a little inquisitive. She asked him questions on an array of subjects, including military strategy.

In early November, Engelmann and another instructor toured Beijing for a few days with Meihong as their guide. One night in a restaurant, Engelmann saw Meihong in candlelight and “for the first time,” he told friends later, “I saw how beautiful she was.” He was, he realized, starting to care for her deeply. And Meihong seemed to encourage his attention, even though liaisons between Chinese and Americans were forbidden.

Born in 1963, Xu Meihong had grown up in a rural area about 50 miles from Nanjing. An excellent student, she – like many Chinese young people – dreamed of joining the PLA, whose members enjoyed power, privilege and status. She studied international relations and English, and when the PLA began to recruit women for more sensitive jobs, she was one of the first chosen.

She moved to Nanjing and underwent extensive PLA training. She studied Russian and English, military history and aircraft design. She also learned to shoot various weapons. Self-assured and assertive, she rapidly worked her way up.

In the autumn of 1988, Meihong received her first assignment – to spy on Engelmann while a student in his history class.

As the weeks went by that fall, Meihong began to see Engelmann as a warm, gentle man, perhaps even a bit naïve. She watched him helping the poor Chinese students get American textbooks for free and appreciated his generosity. She had been told all her life that all American men were playboys and not to be trusted. Now she saw it was a lie.

Meihong told her superiors she didn't think he was a spy at all. The PLA bugged her room.

A few days later Meihong, distraught, went to Engelmann's apartment. "Larry, I am not a student," she said. "I am a PLA officer, assigned to spy on you. They think you are CIA, but I know you are not. I have to tell you this so it does not destroy our relationship."

Engelmann laughed uproariously. She had played practical jokes on him before.

The next day she returned to his room and disappeared into the bathroom. She reappeared in a green and red military uniform, certain it would convince him.

"This is my PLA uniform," she said. "I am an army lieutenant," and added that his phone was tapped and his mail routinely opened.

To Engelmann, the notion seemed absurd. He thought her uniform was a Halloween costume. Then he did what had become second nature to him in China. He took her picture, a mistake he would soon regret.

Later Engelmann added the film to a couple of other rolls he wanted to develop and took them to a photo shop. Neither he nor any of the U.S. instructors knew that agents examine every photograph taken by foreigners in the city. What PLA officers saw on

Engelmann's film shocked them – one of their own officers, blowing her cover to an American professor they believed was a CIA spy.

Just before midnight on December 2, Meihong was still awake, trying to think of a way to persuade Engelmann of her true identity, when a PLA colleague called, said she badly needed to talk, and would send a jeep over. Meihong got into the jeep and talked amicably with the two men she assumed were taking her to her friend's apartment.

Suddenly the jeep veered off course and stopped in front of a military prison. Meihong was led to a bare room where several men in PLA uniforms waited. They showed her the picture Engelmann had taken and accused her of treason. She was interrogated for several hours, then taken to a small, filthy room.

During the days that followed, she was beaten and interrogated with regularity. She was not allowed blankets or warm clothing. She was told to sleep, then awakened whenever she dozed. Soon her PLA interrogators demanded that she sign a nine-page "confession" that Engelmann had repeatedly raped her – a crime punishable by death in China.

Meihong knew that if she signed the confession, she might never leave the prison. She was determined to hold out for her own sake and for Engelmann's.

For two agonizing months, Meihong lived in the tiny room, not knowing if each day would be her last. She could hear the rifles of a firing squad, and sometimes she was forced to watch executions.

When Meihong did not appear in class or respond to his phone calls, Engelmann questioned the other students until he was finally warned by Chinese authorities to drop the issue. He was joined in his

concerns by American students, who glued Meihong's picture on milk bottles emblazoned with the words "Have you seen this woman?"

Engelmann was told that Meihong had signed a confession charging him with rape. He was now threatened with imprisonment, and friends warned him to leave China. On Sunday, February 19, Engelmann flew to Hong Kong, but not before asking everyone he knew at the school to continue looking for Meihong.

The pressure on Meihong steadily increased. After she was interrogated for hours, former friends from her training days would enter the room and try to get her to confide in them. For her birthday they had baked her a cake and held a small party. During the celebration they told her she could go home if she confessed. She refused, and the party abruptly ended.

In the middle of February, the third month of her captivity, Meihong was exiled without explanation to a small, isolated farming area to be "re-educated through labor." Knowing it might be years before she would be allowed to leave, she had but one choice – escape. Her only hope was to return to Nanjing and find Engelmann.

When the local police were celebrating the Chinese New Year, she slipped away on a boat and floated for two days down the Yangtze River. She longed to go directly to Nanjing to find Engelmann, but knew she had to remain for a time in rural areas where she wouldn't be recognized.

For weeks Meihong moved from one small town to the next. Finally, broke and desperate, she smuggled herself aboard a crowded train for an 18-hour trip to Beijing.

She had been warned never to contact Engelmann, but she called his number immediately. A woman answered and said she had never heard of him. Meihong learned from friends that Engelmann had left the

country months before. She was crushed by the thought that he had deserted her.

In mid-August, Meihong met a Chinese student who was about to attend a student exchange program at the University of Kansas. She gave the student her phone number and Engelmann's at San Jose State.

One afternoon in late August, a secretary stopped Engelmann as he was leaving San Jose State after classes.

"You had a strange call this morning from a Chinese man in Lawrence, Kan., something about 'Mayron,' or something," she said. "He left his number."

Engelmann raced upstairs to his office. He excitedly dialed the number. Nobody answered. Engelmann dialed the number every ten minutes for the next four hours until the Chinese student finally answered and gave him Meihong's number.

It was early in the morning in China when Engelmann was patched through to Beijing.

"Xu Meihong?" he almost shouted.

"Wei, yes," she said.

"I love you!"

She burst into tears.

They wrote and called each other frequently over the next few weeks. Engelmann got her admitted to San Jose State, but months went by and Chinese authorities refused to grant her a student visa.

Frustrated, Engelmann bought a plane ticket to Shanghai, planning to re-enter China secretly and marry Meihong and force Chinese officials to let her leave. His friends pleaded with him not to go. Meihong could still be a PLA agent enticing him back into a trap, they said. To go back to China would be a leap of faith that could land him in prison for the rest of his life.

Engelmann arrived in Shanghai in mid-January. While making his way through the crowd, he saw Meihong, and his heart stopped. Next to her was a man in a military uniform. After all this, he wondered, had she betrayed him?

“Who is the man?” Engelmann asked.

“A friend,” she said. “He is our driver. Please, trust me.”

They had to move quickly. Their plan was to marry and for Engelmann to escape the country that same day with the marriage certificate. If they were caught, they feared authorities would destroy the certificate and imprison them both.

Because they still needed certain documents, Meihong had to return to the town where she was born, which was several hours by train from Shanghai. They spent a week collecting the necessary documents. Eight hours after they were married, Engelmann was in the air with the marriage certificate in his pocket. Both believed that the Chinese would soon be forced to allow Meihong to emigrate now that she was married to an American citizen.

They were wrong. Weeks went by, and Meihong heard nothing about her request to leave. In San Jose, an outraged Engelmann flooded Congress, the State Department, the White House and the Chinese embassy with letters. California Rep. Tom Campbell (R., Palo Alto) and California Sen. Pete Wilson promised to help. Engelmann wrote to Barbara Bush, Pat Nixon, Henry Kissinger and everyone else he could think of who had ever been associated with China.

Months went by and the Chinese gave no sign of letting Meihong go. Desperate, Engelmann began making plans to return to China and smuggle her out. He was putting together the final details in early

December when he received a phone call from the State Department.

“Something is happening with Meihong,” the caller said excitedly. “Just sit tight.”

On a cold, sunny morning a few days later, Engelmann’s phone rang. It was Meihong. Her passport had been approved.

Today, from the window of their modern high-rise apartment, Meihong can see the San Jose State campus. She got her first job last spring, teaching Southeast Asian refugees the basics of American life, such as banking, shopping and looking for work.

Why Chinese authorities released Meihong may never be clear. Engelmann thinks it might be because they did not want the case to become an issue in Washington after the Tiananmen Square massacre. What matters now is their future.

“It hasn’t been easy, especially at first,” Meihong says. “But Larry helped me realize that America is a country of all nationalities, that it belongs to people who love freedom, not to a race of people called Americans.”

What Happened After

Meihong and Larry continued to live in the San Francisco area. In 1999, they wrote a book together about this experience called, *Daughter of China*. It is still visible online. Meihong Xu is credited as being the primary author, with Englemann as the co-author. Her picture is on the front of the book. You can see the strength, character and elegance in her face and I knew from talking to Englemann at length that he appreciated her fully.

Englemann, who gained his PhD in Philosophy at the University of Michigan, remained in academia for more than 40 years. He was a

two-time visiting scholar to the Hoover Institute at Stanford University. He wrote several articles for university magazines and authored five history books. He had also served as a film critic for the *San Jose Mercury* newspaper for 12 years. Everyone I talked to remembered him as a friendly and generous man. He passed away in 2015.

After settling into her new home in America, Meihong quickly gained an MBA and started an extraordinary career as a venture capitalist. She worked for Apple and Sun Systems first, before founding her own venture capitalist firm, in the Silicon Valley. Reportedly, her company directed about \$1.5 billion into emerging technology providers in Asia. She remains a VC consultant. *Daughter of China* was translated into seven languages.

CHAPTER NINE

The Loudest Cheer

Reader's Digest

The next three stories involved professional sports figures and families, including professional baseball player, Curtis Pride, NBA star Hakeem Olajuwon, and the famed Hurley basketball family. Their stories are deeply personal and rise beyond sports. Professional athletics remain a wonderful crucible to tell stories of the human condition – including challenges that are met or remain unmet. I've often said that sports – whether it's basketball, baseball, golf or any other competition – is simply theater without a script. No one knows how the show is going to end. It is the unique element that makes sports so exciting and such fertile ground for dramatic stories.

The story of Curtis Pride is still a powerful one for me. Against all odds, he became only the second deaf baseball player in history to make a Major League Baseball roster. I felt close to the story from the beginning. My mother was deaf for a period of time before an operation restored her hearing, and I remember how hard things were for her during that time. She felt left out and in her words, “stupid,” because she either had to pretend to know what someone said or always be asking them to repeat themselves. My mother was

one of the first women in the American Midwest to gain a Masters Degree in Education and she was a champion golfer, yet deafness made her feel ashamed and apart from everyone else. When I got a chance to do a story on Curtis and talk openly about the issues surrounding deafness, I was ecstatic.

I flew to Washington D.C. and met his family in Silver Spring. His mother, Sallie, and his father, John, were not only highly successful and accomplished they were among the nicest people I've ever met. John, a leading attorney in the area, volunteered to be the first African American Santa Clause to entertain children in the White House.

Curtis has been 95 percent deaf since birth, and he suffered all the prejudices inherent with deafness, such as the ones I saw my mother suffer through – especially people getting angry at her during conversations when she asked them to repeat what they had just said. Most people assumed she hadn't been listening and quickly became hostile. She got so she pretended to hear, but the result was a deep feeling of isolation and loneliness. I talked to her at length about this. I won't spoil the story, but my favorite part is when Curtis wanted to quit baseball. He was then in the minor leagues and struggling. He spent the off-season working with children with different learning skills and physical challenges. One boy, reflecting Curtis's own attitude at the time, told him, "I don't need your help! Stay away from me."

Curtis, who read the boy's lips, could sense the other children were watching. He was being tested. "I'm only here to help show you what you can do," he said, "not tell you what you can't do." The kids loved him after that, crowding around him when he left for spring training. "You're cool, man," they said. "We'll be following you!"

Overall, the Pride family is to me what America and the world should be about. Kindness, toughness, fairness, love and an unyielding belief that wonderful things are possible in life for all of us. As Curtis told me, "If you listen, all the answers are in your own heart."

Curtis played for 23 years, which is by itself amazing. He graduated from the College of William and Mary with a degree in finance and now is the head coach at Gallaudet University in Washington D.C., which is devoted to teaching students American Sign Language and English. He is married with two children. I consider myself incredibly lucky to have known him.

The Loudest Cheer

Reader's Digest

Slumped on the locker-room bench, the young ballplayer was oblivious to the noise of showers and banging lockers of the other players. Curtis Pride was trying to concentrate his thoughts.

The past few weeks had been difficult. He had broken up with his girlfriend, and he missed his family back home in Silver Spring, Md. Now, his minor-league team, the Binghamton (N.Y.) Mets, had lost another game. Pride had struck out, extending a batting slump that summer.

As Pride pulled off his jersey, he felt as low as he could get. Then turning his head suddenly, he caught sight of his teammates. One was gaping stupidly, in mocking fashion. Another held his hand behind his ear as if he were deaf. Others were laughing. When they saw Pride looking, they stopped and turned to their lockers.

Curt fought for breath. *My own teammates!* Anger overwhelmed him, and he stood and faced the taunting players. The locker room grew quiet as Pride, fists clenched, his powerful six-foot frame tensed, walked slowly toward the two men.

They watched warily as Pride stopped just inches away. "I can't hear you, but I can think and I can feel, just like

you,” he said in carefully measured tones. “My handicap is deafness. Yours is intolerance. I’d rather have mine.”

The players were surprised by the eloquent words, so unlike what is usually heard in a locker room. They looked away, embarrassed. As he turned to leave, Pride suddenly wanted to quit. All his progress, the years of effort and sacrifice, seemed to come to nothing. His dream of becoming a Major League baseball player, the first deaf one in nearly 50 years, was fading.

When their robust baby boy Curtis was born in December 1968, Sallie Pride, a registered nurse, and her husband, John, a consulting firm executive, were ecstatic. By the time Curt was five months old, however, Sallie decided that her boy’s vocal sounds, which were often high-pitched screeches, did not seem normal. One morning Sallie and John sat Curt down on a rug and knelt behind him. “Curt,” Sallie called out softly. The boy didn’t respond. Then John called, louder. Curt didn’t move. Finally, desperate, John shouted, “Curtis!” There was no response.

Sallie looked at her husband with tears in her eyes. “Our baby can’t hear us,” she said. Doctors never found the cause. With an irreversible 95-percent hearing loss, Curt attended special classes in his Washington, D.C. suburb. But the studious boy never learned sign language. Instead, Sallie and John chose a program to help their son read lips. They were aware that some children who used sign language would never learn to speak because they could fall back on the signing when they were misunderstood.

“He feels isolated enough already,” John told Sallie. Then he added, “I think sports might help. He can meet other kids and compete on an equal footing.” Sallie agreed, and six-year-old Curt was enrolled in a local Tee-ball league, a youth version of baseball.

Curt came to the plate in his first game with a runner on base. Sallie and John watched from the stands as he hit the ball over the center fielder's head. Curt flew around first and caught up with the other runner before they reached second. Unsure of the rules, Curt hesitated, then darted around the slower boy.

Laughing, Sallie and John shouted, "No! No!" But Curt, his eyes alive with excitement, tore around third and raced home. "I'm going to be a baseball player!" he repeated over and over that night.

In fourth grade, Curt was allowed to take some regular classes with hearing students. "I'm finally going to be with all the other kids," he told his mother excitedly. But the first day, Curt came home vowing never to return. Boys had taunted him in the hallways and on the playground, mocking his different speech.

Sallie wrapped her arms around her son. "There will always be cruel people," she said, holding him for a long moment. "But you can never, ever let them stop you from doing what you want to do."

From that day forward, Curt wore his mother's advice like armor.

In seventh grade, Curt was given the choice of continuing his special classes or attending a nearby junior high. Against the advice of school authorities, Curt chose the neighborhood school. "I know I can do it," he pleaded. His parents agreed.

Curt's teachers tried to remember that he depended on lip-reading, but on occasion they forgot and spoke facing the blackboard. Outside class, Curt struggled futilely to follow the other students' conversations.

By the end of the first week, he knew he needed help. During a Saturday game of catch, he talked it out with his father. "Sometimes," John told him, "you have to be brave enough to trust someone."

The following Monday, when a shy student named Steve Grupe sat down beside him, Curt took that chance. “Hi, I’m Curt Pride, and I’m having a little trouble,” he said. “I wonder if you can help.”

To his relief, the boy smiled. “Sure,” said Steve, who knew Curt’s reputation as an athlete, “if you give me some baseball pointers!”

The boys became inseparable, studying at each other’s houses and playing soccer and baseball in the park. Steve helped Curt take notes, and when teachers turned their backs in class, he mouthed their words. As Curt, excelling in sports, became popular in school, he introduced Steve to everyone he met.

Curt’s athletic gifts became brilliantly apparent in high school, where he won national recognition in soccer and set school records in basketball. But baseball was his first love. After high school, he was drafted by the New York Mets and also accepted a basketball scholarship from the College of William and Mary.

Going to college meant missing much of the season with the Mets’ farm teams each year. Not until he graduated could Pride turn to baseball full time. In 1991 at the Mets’ level-A farm club in the Florida State League, he attended spring training and played a full season for the first time. The year proved disappointing. Though Curt was good enough to get promoted to the Binghamton AA team in 1992, he didn’t feel he was considered a strong Major League prospect. In Binghamton, his play deteriorated. Finally, he was benched. Pride became withdrawn. Then the locker-room taunting occurred, deepening his summer slump.

Feeling despondent, Pride called his parents on his text telephone, a **computer like** machine with a keyboard and small screen. “I think the Mets have lost faith in me,” he typed. “I’m not sure I want to go on.”

That night, John and Sallie drove to Binghamton. The next morning they took Curt to breakfast near the team's hotel. "Honor your commitment to finish the season," his father advised. "Then, if you choose not to play baseball, that's fine. Just make sure it's your decision."

At home in Silver Spring after the season ended, Pride thought seriously about giving up on baseball. In the back of his mind, he began to think that deafness really was too big an obstacle to overcome. Then something changed his mind.

Curt Pride returned to a job he had enjoyed during the previous off-season, helping students with learning and physical disabilities at his old high school. Now he was asked to tutor a class of ninth graders.

On his first day, Pride sat beside a dark-haired boy. "I don't need your help," the boy snapped. "Stay away."

All the students were watching, and Pride knew he was being tested. "I'm only here to help show you what you can do," he responded, "not tell you what you can't."

Within a week, the students were peppering Pride with questions about baseball and being deaf. Then one day, the dark-haired boy asked Pride, "Aren't you afraid people are laughing behind your back?"

"You just have to be tough enough to ignore them," Pride answered. "What matters isn't what they think, but what you think about yourself."

On his last day, the entire class crowded around. "You're cool, man. We'll be following your career," said one boy who later surprised teachers by making the honor roll. Pride scanned their faces. *How could he admit that his own challenge was too great?* "I'd be letting them, and myself, down if I quit now," he later told his mother.

Before baseball season began, Pride got an offer from the Montreal Expos. As a free agent, Pride could sign with any club. When the Expos promised he would play every day, he quickly agreed.

At the team's Harrisburg, Pa., farm club, manager Jim Tracy knew Pride's strengths – and his weaknesses. He persuaded Pride to quit thinking about home runs and concentrate on getting on base, where he could take advantage of his speed.

Pride started the 1993 season brimming with confidence. Hitting to all fields, he tore up the league. In late June, Pride was promoted to the Expos' AAA farm club in Ottawa. He continued his torrid hitting, and by September he was wondering whether he would get a shot at the Majors that season.

On the morning of September 11, Pride was outside the Ottawa locker room when one of the players said manager Mike Quade wanted to see him. Pride and his teammates had been playing good-natured jokes on one another, and Pride figured he was being set up.

He walked cautiously into the locker room and saw Quade, smiling, on the telephone. From across the room, he lip-read Quade's final sentence: "Yeah, I'll tell Curt he's being called up." Pride felt a thrill. He was being called up to the Major Leagues!

Curt Pride was startled when Montreal Expos manager Felipe Alou yelled out his name. The Philadelphia Phillies were leading Montreal 7-4 in the seventh inning. With one out and two runners on base, Pride thought Alou would send in a more experienced pinch hitter. But Alou was calling him.

In his first time at bat a few days before, Pride had driven the ball deep to right. "I can hit Major League pitching!" he told his parents. Now his old friend Steve

Grupe was in the stands to watch him play, and his new team was depending on him.

Bobby Thigpen, the Phillies' flame-throwing relief pitcher, was on the mound. As Pride gripped the bat, Thigpen fired a hard slider. Pride waited; then at the last moment his bat exploded across the plate. The ball shot like a bullet between the outfielders and bounced all the way to the wall.

Racing around first, Pride slid into second in a cloud of dust. Safe! Both runners scored! In the stands, Steve Grupe leapt up, pummeled the air with his fists and whooped.

Excited, Pride looked to third-base coach Jerry Manuel to see if he had the green light to steal on the next pitch. But Manuel was motioning to the stands. Pride looked up. All 45,000 fans were on their feet, stamping and cheering. As Pride stood, frozen, the thunderous ovation continued. Manuel, tears welling in his eyes, motioned for Curt to doff his cap.

Then, as the stamping and cheering reached a crescendo, something incredible happened. It started as a vibrating rumble, then grew more intense until, for the first time in his life, Curt Pride actually heard people cheering for him. The silent curtain that had separated him from his dream had parted.

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Montreal Expo Curtis Pride proved his big-league potential that first season with four hits in nine at bats – a .444 average. In addition to his double, he banged a triple and a home run.

“My message for people with disabilities – or to any person who has been told he can’t do something – is simple,” says Pride. “Ignore it. The answers are inside your own heart.”

What Happened After

I met with Curtis after an Oakland A's baseball game a month or two after the story was published, and he was incredibly kind to my young daughter and her friends. They all played softball and were inspired by watching him play. He is now the head baseball coach at Gallaudet University, a private federally chartered research university in Washington, D. C. The school provides education of the deaf and hard of hearing. He is considered one of the best coaches on the East Coast.

CHAPTER TEN

A Champion's Journey

Reader's Digest

I was asked to write a feature on NBA star, Hakeem Olajuwon by the CEO of the *Digest*. I was happy to do it because I had been a starting guard on two championship high school teams and I loved the sport. Later, I coached high school basketball for nearly 20 years. I didn't know that much about Hakeem at the time, only that he was a star at Houston University and then for the NBA's Houston Rockets.

I was thoroughly surprised by his personal story. A Muslim from Lagos, Nigeria, he was one of the first African-born players in the NBA. He was also raised in Lagos to be a soccer player. At seven feet tall, he was one of the tallest goalies in soccer history. I first met with Hakeem when the Rockets played the Sacramento Kings in Sacramento. He was sitting in a coffee shop in a hotel lobby with teammate Robert Horry when I came over. They both stood up and kept standing up, taller and taller. Horry is about 6'9" and Hakeem is nearly seven feet. Hakeem bowed in my direction and said, "Hello, I am Hakeem."

It was the politest thing ever. I shook hands and saw mine disappear in his grip. I wished immediately we would have had him on my high school team. Horry was quite friendly as well and we had a

laughter-filled afternoon in the lobby. Hakeem's story was much more intense and intriguing than I imagined. He was brutally frank about himself and the emotional issues he had to overcome.

After the season ended, I met him again in Vancouver, British Columbia for a final interview. We had a great time and he again spoke candidly about his life. I then called his parents in Nigeria and had a wonderful talk with them. I found them to be kind, intelligent, unpretentious and friendly. It was one of the warmest interviews I've ever done.

Here is the story of his journey from Lagos to the pinnacles of success in his sport in Houston, Texas. It was far more personal than I expected. What I will never forget about this story was the unlikely juxtaposition of a seven-foot-tall Nigerian basketball star sitting down and completely trusting a six-foot Kansas boy from the corn fields of the USA with his life story. Fortunately for me, trust doesn't depend on your skin color, nationality, height or occupation. We connected on a simple, human level. It's always better when that happens.

A Champion's Journey

Reader's Digest

The crowd roared as Hakeem Olajuwon, the seven-foot star center of the Houston Rockets, grabbed a pass. The score was tied late in the final game of the 1985 National Basketball Association playoffs between the Rockets and the Utah Jazz.

As Olajuwon spun toward the basket, he brushed against Jazz center Billy Paultz, who crashed theatrically to the court. Olajuwon expected Paultz to be called for a foul, but the referee pointed at him.

An offensive foul! Angry, Olajuwon suspected that Paultz had been sent in to provoke him. Olajuwon, a muscular 250-pound rookie, had been known to lose his temper.

The next time Paultz came over to guard Olajuwon, the Rockets center struck the other man's face. None of the referees witnessed the blow, but Paultz and his Jazz teammates were furious. They outplayed the Rockets the rest of the way and won the game, 104-97, eliminating the Houston team from the playoffs.

Afterward, in the silence of the locker room, Olajuwon slumped miserably in a chair. He had traveled so far to reach the NBA – literally a 10,000-mile odyssey – but it would take yet another crucial journey before he could become a true champion. And that journey would lead back to his youth.

Bitter Fights. Hakeem Olajuwon grew up in Lagos, Nigeria, a teeming West African port where blaring cars competed in the streets with cattle herds. His parents, Salam and Abike, operated a small cement business. Young Hakeem's passion for soccer sometimes caused him to neglect his homework. Abike would scold him. "Studying your school-work is more important than playing ball," she would say. "Education is the key to your future."

Even more than education, however, Abike and Salam revered the Islamic faith and were both followers of Muslim principles. "God loveth not aggressors," Abike would say, quoting the Koran, Islam's holy book. Hakeem was taught that people should live in harmony with one another. Respect and compassion for others were at the heart of the Islamic faith.

Hakeem looked forward to Fridays because he got out of school early to attend the mosque. On the way home he would hear The Call, a songlike prayer used to summon people to worship. He loved its high-pitched sound and would stop in his tracks to listen. Lost in its lyrical beauty, he would remain rooted in place until the last haunting tones faded into silence.

By age ten Hakeem was nearly six feet tall and towered over the other children. He would often end up in bitter fights after being taunted about his height. One day Hakeem was sent home from school after he knocked down a boy who had been teasing him. *I'm in for it*, Hakeem thought, looking at his father's stern visage. "I have to fight, or the other boys will think I am weak," he explained.

His father listened carefully and finally said, "It is their weakness until you fight them. Then it becomes yours. A man cannot achieve real strength until he learns patience and humility." The boy vowed to follow his father's counsel.

Raw Talent. In 1980, 17-year-old Olajuwon, now six-foot-eight, was playing handball when a man called over to him. "Hey, Big Man, come with me and I'll teach you a big man's game." He coached basketball, a sport Hakeem had never played. Yet within months, the towering teen-ager was a starter for the Nigerian junior basketball team.

He was sitting in a hotel room after a game when he got a message: an American named Christopher Pond wanted to see him.

Pond coached the basketball team for the Republic of Central Africa. Impressed by Olajuwon's potential, Pond telephoned several American college coaches he knew, all of whom agreed to give Olajuwon a tryout for a scholarship. Hakeem, who had his visa within 24 hours, was stunned; he couldn't believe he was off to the land where basketball was born.

Abike and Salam had been too busy to see their son play basketball, but they knew he was good. Still, neither was ready for the news that he had a visa and potential scholarship offers in America. When they supported his decision, it was one of the proudest moments of his life.

Less than a month later, in October 1980, Hakeem stood in his parents' living room, plane tickets in hand. "This is the opportunity of a lifetime," his mother said, hugging him. "But we will miss you terribly."

His father embraced him. "Be careful, be humble and work hard," Salam said. "You represent your family and your country. People will judge us by how you act."

Hakeem nodded sadly, then walked to the waiting car.

Tough Adjustment. Of the five schools Pond had contacted, he was highest on the University of Houston. "I feel sure Coach Lewis will give you a scholarship," Pond had said.

Tough and hard-nosed, Coach Guy Lewis thought he had seen it all. But neither he nor his players were ready for the sight of Olajuwon clothed in a bright *dashikj*, a cape-like overcoat, on the first day of practice. Although he wore Western clothes in Nigeria, Olajuwon wanted to establish his African identity.

Hakeem shook each player's hand, then bowed his head, a sign of respect in Nigeria. Some of the American players laughed at him, but Olajuwon remained respectful, as his father had taught him.

As Hakeem dressed for practice, the equipment manager asked for his shoe size. The size-13 sneakers he wore – the largest he could find in Nigeria – were too small for him, but he asked for that size anyway. The polite Nigerian didn't want to ask for something they didn't have.

The team's manager looked skeptically at Hakeem's feet and brought him another pair – size 16. Pulling them on, Olajuwon couldn't believe it when they fit perfectly. For the first time he didn't have to curl his toes when he ran.

Desire to Excel. On the suggestion of the Houston coaches, Olajuwon sat out a year to hone his game through intramural competition. When he joined the squad for the 1981 season, he quickly discovered that Coach Lewis's practices were tough. Flying elbows and slamming bodies were commonplace. There was a time when Olajuwon would have tried to avoid the contact. But by now he'd adapted to the American style of play. He'd told himself, *If that's the way Americans play basketball, then that is the way I must play.*

By the next season he'd battled his way into the starting lineup and led the nation in blocked shots. The Cougars breezed their way to the collegiate championship game, but lost to North Carolina State.

Off the court, Olajuwon occasionally struggled with homesickness. It had been more than two years since he had seen his family and friends in Nigeria. And since his arrival in Houston, Olajuwon had noticed that many Americans mistakenly associated traditional Muslims with Middle Eastern terrorists. True followers of the Islamic religion, he knew, abhorred violence. Hakeem had remained religious, but he was unsure of how best to pursue his faith in his new country.

Yet what Olajuwon was certain of was his overwhelming desire to excel. During the 1983-84 season, Olajuwon led the NCAA in rebounding, blocked shots and field-goal percentage, but his team was defeated again in the finals.

A short time later, Olajuwon decided to forgo his senior year of college for the NBA draft. After just a few years of American basketball, he was picked ahead of future stars, including a player named Michael Jordan. He would play for his "hometown" team, the Houston Rockets.

Still a polite person off the court, Olajuwon seemed even more competitive on game day. Other teams discovered how easily they could arouse his anger. The price of his quick temper was steep: Olajuwon gathered technical fouls and was even thrown out of a few games.

At times Hakeem also displayed a selfish attitude, trying to make every big play by himself. Without teamwork, the Rockets failed to reach their potential.

In one post-game interview Olajuwon lashed out at several of his teammates. For days afterward, sportswriters and fans reacted angrily. "It's a free country," responded Rodney McCray, one of Olajuwon's targets, "but I've never been on a team where players talked about other players."

New Attitude. One afternoon the next year, following a disappointing season, a man walked up to Olajuwon and said, "Is it true you're a Muslim?"

"Yes," Olajuwon replied. "How did you know?" Someone told me at the mosque," came the reply. "Would you like to worship with us?"

That Friday the man led him to a modest Houston building. Olajuwon had passed it many times without realizing it was a mosque. The two men left their shoes on a mat by the front door and stepped inside. Olajuwon began to tremble when he heard The Call, the beautiful and haunting sound that had stirred him as a child.

In the months that followed, Olajuwon attended the mosque regularly. He began praying five times a day and observing other Islamic rituals, such as fasting on holy days. Giving himself over to the lessons of Islam, he found himself thinking, *These are principles I should take with me onto the basketball court.*

The 1990-91 season had barely begun when Olajuwon was elbowed in the face by Chicago Bulls center Bill

Cartwright. The blow broke several bones around Olajuwon's eye, keeping him out of action for 25 games. Surprisingly, the Rockets prospered without their star.

As he healed and prepared to play again, the Rockets' coaching staff wondered if Hakeem's return would disrupt the team's success. But assistant coach Carroll Dawson noticed a change in Olajuwon. He was more eager for instruction. During scrimmages he stunned everyone by zipping a pass to a teammate.

The greatest shock of all followed a practice just before Olajuwon's return to regular play. "You don't have to start me," he told his coaches. "I don't want to mess up the team's rhythm."

Now that Olajuwon was a changed man on the court, however, the coaches had no intention of benching their center. Opposing teams were no longer safe putting two defenders on Olajuwon; each time a team tried to gang up on him, he would find an open man. At the same time, opponents found they couldn't rattle him anymore. When defenders tried to shove him, expecting Olajuwon to ignite, he would slip around them for an easy score. The inspired Rockets, with their new team ethic, ran off a 13-game winning streak, only to lose in the NBA playoffs to the Lakers.

Team Effort. In the 1993-94 season Olajuwon was named the league's Most Valuable Player. He was to receive the award just prior to the start of the second game of the Rockets' playoff series with Utah.

Before the ceremony, Olajuwon surprised his teammates. "If not for you," he said, "I would not be MVP. I'd like all of you to accept the trophy with me." The crowd later erupted in cheers as Olajuwon and the Rocket squad hoisted the trophy in the air. Emotionally charged, the Rockets went on to beat Utah, advancing to the NBA finals against the New York Knicks.

After six games the teams each had three victories. Throughout the series the Knicks used trash-talk, trying to throw Olajuwon off stride. But in the championship game, he responded with some of his most selfless play, continually feeding the ball to teammates. The Rockets won, 90–84.

At the final buzzer, ecstatic fans poured onto the court. While his teammates slapped high-fives, Olajuwon stood alone by the sideline, cradling the ball. He was numb, scarcely believing he was at last a world champion. Across town, in Hakeem's home, were Salam and Abike. Hakeem had flown them in for the championship series, and now they watched on television as their son celebrated his victory.

Later that evening, when Hakeem arrived home, Salam clasped his son's hand tightly. "This is God's will. You have brought honor and joy to your family and country," he said. As Hakeem looked into his parents' proud faces, he thought of the long road he had traveled to reach this night. And he realized that the greater gift, his faith, was the one he had received so many years before.

The Houston Rockets, led by Hakeem Olajuwon, followed their first NBA championship by winning the title a second straight time, in 1995, against the Orlando Magic. This past summer Olajuwon – an American citizen since 1993 – played for the United States basketball team in the Olympic Games, earning a gold medal.

What Happened After

Last year Olajuwon was selected as one of the greatest 50 players in NBA history in a ceremony conducted by the league officials. He was also inducted into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall

of Fame. Olajuwon – in a sporting world where so many well-paid athletes end up broke in the years after retirement – has become one of the world's top real estate investors. He is now considered among the top ten wealthiest athletes worldwide. The lessons he learned early in his career seem to have paid off in multiple ways. This story is one I think about when I need a positive lift – for many reasons, but mostly because he placed his trust in me. That rocks.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

To Play Again

Reader's Digest

This story, which covered the intense hardships and near tragedies that pounded basketball's Hurley family, took me to Hoboken, New Jersey for the first time. I liked Hoboken. It was being gentrified at the time, but it still had the feel of the old gangster town it had been for so many years. It was where the 'wise guys' hung out, the Soprano types who 'tawlked like dis' with the Joisey accents and said stuff like: "Fuhget about it!"

I felt like I was on the set of the *Godfather*. Frank Sinatra's old house was there, but the *Digest* had given me an offer I couldn't refuse so I didn't linger on the streets. I went instead to the Hurley household where I met Bob Sr. and his wife, Chris, whom I found to be intelligent, friendly and strong. She had to be to handle the things this family faced.

I spent a week in Hoboken and Jersey City, watching Bob Sr. coach his teams, and visiting the high school where he coached 26 state championship teams. He is an outgoing and personable guy. We loved talking about basketball and 'life'. He was strongly positive in all respects in dealing with his players, which to me, is the number one skill a coach must have. Later, I wrote a book and spent several hours

talking with NFL coaches Pete Carroll and the late Bill Walsh. They both underscored how important that skill is. Igniting passion for the game in your players is the best thing a coach can ever do. Carroll and Walsh were incredibly positive toward their players – it’s a sure way to get the best out of people. I saw the same thing in Bob Sr. But the challenges he and Chris faced, went far beyond basketball.

To Play Again

Reader’s Digest

“I have to tell them,” 13-year-old Melissa Hurley thought as she sat at the dinner table with her parents, Chris and Bob. Earlier that day she had spoken on the phone to her brother Danny, a junior at Seton Hall University. Finally she felt compelled to speak.

“Danny’s quit school,” she said. “He thinks he’s a failure and we’re ashamed of him. He’s locked himself in his dorm room. He hasn’t eaten in three days.”

Chris stifled a gasp. Bob rose quickly, his face whitening. “Hand me the phone, Melissa,” he said.

Three nights earlier, Danny Hurley, 20, had walked onto the basketball court at Madison Square Garden in New York City before almost 13,000 fans. The Seton Hall Pirates were about to play their Big East rival, St. John’s University. That same day, Danny’s older brother, Bobby, a rookie guard with the NBA’s Sacramento Kings, had played on the same court against the New York Knicks. The media had proclaimed it “Hurley Day” in honor of the two brothers. But as Danny took his warm-up shots, his stomach was in knots.

Danny had always played in Bobby’s shadow. He had also struggled to please his father, one of the most successful coaches in the country. In 22 years as

head coach of St. Anthony High School in Jersey City, N.J., Bob had inspired his teams to win 15 parochial-school state championships. His win-loss record was an astonishing 545-61.

Newspapers constantly referred to Danny as “Coach Hurley’s son” or “Bobby’s brother.” As a high-school senior, Danny had led the St. Anthony Friars to a 32-1 record and a No. 2 national ranking. But two years earlier, Bobby’s team had gone 32-0 and was ranked No. 1. Then Bobby helped lead Duke University to two NCAA championships. Danny knew that people expected similar success from him at Seton Hall.

As the players got set for the tip-off, Danny’s chest was so tight he could scarcely breathe. Many of the fans, he knew, had just watched Bobby play and would be comparing him with his brother.

Danny scored just one point in the game. Usually an excellent three-point shooter, he missed the only shot he tried from long range, and his other five shots from the field as well. Seton Hall lost, 72-64. As Danny walked off the court, boos followed him.

When he saw his father and Bobby in the stands, a feeling of anguish knifed through Danny. Since he was in grammar school, the three of them had competed against one another. His father often took them to a local park to play one-on-one. He rarely let his sons win. “Nothing worthwhile comes easy,” he told them.

At the end of the afternoon, Bob would let Danny play against Bobby. Because Bobby was older and bigger, he usually won. On the way home Bob walked ahead holding the basketball, with Bobby trailing behind and Danny bringing up the rear.

Now Danny’s frustrations came crashing down. He returned to his dorm room and locked the door.

After their phone call Bob and Chris were able to persuade Danny to come home to Jersey City. But he spent most of his time hanging around the house, refusing to discuss what was troubling him.

“What are we going to do?” Chris asked Bob one night when they were alone.

“I guess we can’t always keep them from being hurt,” Bob said, taking Chris’s hand. “But we can always be here to help when they decide they need us.”

Less than a week after Danny came home, the phone awakened Bob and Chris at 12:30 a.m. Chris reached over and picked up the receiver.

“Bobby was in a car accident,” said Bobby’s girlfriend. “I’m on my way to the hospital. I don’t think it’s serious, but I’ll call you when I find out.”

Chris hung up and told Bob.

“Sounds like it was a fender-bender,” Bob said.

Then Richard Marder, the Kings’ team doctor, called. “Bobby has been in a serious accident,” he said. “He will be undergoing emergency surgery, and we’re fairly certain he will survive. I need you to get on a plane right away.”

Chris paled and handed the phone to Bob.

The Hurleys took a flight out of Newark early that same morning. When they reached the hospital, they spoke with Dr. Marder again.

“Bobby’s been in the operating room for nearly eight hours,” Marder said. He outlined Bobby’s injuries: a compression fracture in his lower back, a broken bone and torn ligament in his right knee, a fractured left shoulder blade, two collapsed lungs and five fractured ribs. But most serious, his trachea had been severed from his left lung. The injury is fatal in almost all cases. Bobby had been saved because he was rushed to the University

of California, Davis Medical Center by helicopter, where a quick-thinking surgeon diagnosed the problem.

When Bob and Chris reached their son's bedside, they barely recognized him. He couldn't talk or open his eyes, but Chris took his hand. "I love you, Bobby" was all she could say through her tears.

Bob and Chris spent the next day in Bobby's hospital room. They learned he'd been driving home from Sacramento's ARCO Arena when a station wagon broadsided his sport-utility vehicle with such force that Bobby, not wearing a seat belt, was thrown 100 feet into a deep irrigation ditch. He was pulled from the water by a witness.

Bobby left the hospital for his Sacramento apartment some two weeks later, on Christmas Day. The doctors weren't sure if he would fully recover, let alone play basketball again. His fractured shoulder blade would need surgery.

In January, Bobby moved back to New Jersey to be cared for by his grandmother. He had lost more than 20 pounds. He couldn't lift a pencil or walk up a flight of stairs.

Danny often visited his brother, and sometimes he returned home with tears in his eyes. "Looking at him makes me realize how fragile life is," Danny told his mother. "How could I get so messed up over something so insignificant as basketball?"

Relieved that Danny seemed to be working through his problems, Chris gave him a long hug. It was one of the few happy moments she had experienced since Bobby's accident.

A week before Bobby returned to New Jersey, Bob had been hospitalized with severe pneumonia. Once home, he was mostly bedridden. For Chris it was a nightmare.

Bob was worried because his St. Anthony team had some tough games ahead, including one against Christian Brothers Academy, among the top teams in the state. His assistant coach had already led the Friars to significant early season wins, but as the game approached, Bob had an idea.

The Jersey City Armory, where the St. Anthony Friars were playing their home games, was filled with spectators. And Danny was back on a basketball court – only this time he was helping to *coach* the Friars.

“They need you,” Bob had told him. “I can’t be there, and this is a big game.”

It was the first time Danny had been in the public eye since he left school, but he felt good about it. His father’s belief in him bolstered his confidence.

Christian Brothers grabbed a quick lead, but the Friars battled back. Danny came up with some strategy and player changes that proved effective. When the Friars won the game by just three points, the crowd erupted in cheers, and Danny jumped off the bench, his arms raised high in victory.

Danny began to realize how much fun basketball had been “before I started taking it too seriously,” he told his family. “Bobby’s accident put it into perspective.” By the end of January, Danny was practicing with the Seton Hall team again.

It was March before Bobby gained enough strength to attempt a return to basketball. Impatient, he had asked his father to take him to the gym.

“I don’t think you’re ready,” Bob warned.

“I just want to shoot and see how it feels,” Bobby answered.

Bob was skeptical. Bobby’s knee was healing, but his left shoulder remained troublesome. A five-inch metal

plate had been inserted to strengthen the fractured bone, and still he couldn't lift his arm above shoulder height.

Bobby picked up a basketball, dribbled it slowly toward a basket, stopped ten feet away and shoved it awkwardly toward the hoop. Pain knifed through his shoulder as the ball fell a foot short. He tried three more times, with similar results.

"I can't do this," said Bobby.

"Give it time," Bob said softly. Then he took Bobby home.

For the next few months Bobby worked slowly to get into shape. By late June he was playing ball in Jersey summer leagues. But as the summer wore on, he grew frustrated at how far his game had deteriorated. After a college player outclassed him in a game, he called his father.

"I can't make it back," Bobby said. "I'm going to quit."

Bob was silent for a moment. Seven months earlier, Danny had stopped playing. Now Bobby was doing the same. "It's okay with me if you quit," Bob began. "But first come down to the gym, and let's test you. We need to find out if you're just rusty."

When Bobby walked into the gym the next day, he wasn't sure what he would learn about himself. With his father shouting instructions, the drills began.

At first, Bobby fumbled the ball and missed shots. Whenever he turned to his left, pain stabbed his shoulder. His knee ached.

Then he began to repeat the drills – they were the basic passing, shooting and dribbling routines his father had put him through when he was a boy. As he worked, he recalled his father's words from years

before: *Nothing worthwhile comes easy.* He caught a second wind, and his shots started finding the basket.

Maybe I can get it back, Bobby thought. Yet he knew he had a long way to go to get into shape for the NBA.

Bobby continued to push himself to improve. Each night, his body ached so much he could hardly sleep. But each day he became quicker, stronger, more confident. Finally, after a workout in the second week of September, Bob told him, "I think we're done here."

Bobby nodded. While his body was not completely healed, he knew he could play professional basketball again.

Thirteen months after the shattering St. John's game, and Danny was back playing for Seton Hall at Madison Square Garden. He was nervous – some of the St. John's students had already taunted him during warm-ups.

With 10:43 left in the game, Seton Hall had pulled ahead, 63-52, but St. John's stormed back to tie. Then, with only 14 seconds left, St. John's took a 74-71 lead. As the clock wound down, Seton Hall's Adrian Griffin tried a three-pointer to tie the game, but the ball was deflected to Danny. In one motion, he rose and fired at the basket. The ball, arcing high, snapped through the net just before the buzzer sounded. Overtime!

Seton Hall, riding high after Danny's shot, overwhelmed St. John's in the extra period and won, 91-81. Just before the end of the game, Danny left the court to a tremendous ovation. He strode over to the St. John's student section and took a deep, satisfying bow. The Seton Hall fans cheered as Danny headed toward the dressing room. He had won their approval, but more important, he had won his own.

The Friars won their division of the New Jersey parochial school championship last March. It was Bob's 17th parochial

championship. They went on to beat the best of the public schools as well.

Against all odds, Bobby returned to the Kings, a year before doctors said he would fully recover from his injuries.

Danny is co-captain of the Seton Hall team this season.

What Happened After

Today, Bobby and Danny are successful college basketball coaches, Bobby at Arizona State University and Danny at the University of Connecticut. Bob Sr. retired after winning 28 state championships. He was then inducted into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame, only the third high school basketball coach to be so honored. More than 150 of his players went on to play Division 1 collegiate basketball – all received scholarships. Not only did these kids get to play in college – they got to go to college, which was not a typical thing for students from Jersey City. A scholarship could easily change the future for entire families.

After he retired, Bob Sr. launched the Hurley Family Foundation, which offers free summer instructional camps to students in Jersey City.

Chris, in my view, shared equally in all of these triumphs. She went through an incredible number of highs and lows, while dealing successfully with her family's emotional challenges in a highly public setting. She is a hero, no doubt.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Run Rivers Run

Western's World

This story combined some of the most idyllic and enjoyable moments of my career (so far), except for a couple of spooky – and completely unnecessary I might add – moments in a small plane. The piece is about Martin Litton, a fun-loving outdoorsman, river rafter, businessman and environmentalist. Although he never received the attention he deserved for everything he did, he was, in fact, one of the leading figures in the environmental movement in American history. He was the opposite of a narcissist, which is probably why so few people knew anything about what he had done. He was humble and incredibly personable. It was impossible not to feel welcome around a campfire talking with him. It didn't hurt that he looked and smiled a lot like Santa Clause. The beard, the bushy eyebrows, the rollicksome laughter. That was Martin.

He owned a 'rafting' company on the Snake River where it forms the border between Idaho and the state of Washington. He also offered trips on the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon and a few other rivers. The difference was that Martin preferred shooting the rapids in dory-like wooden boats with oarlocks instead of the traditional synthetic rubber rafts that everyone else used.

I received an assignment from an airline magazine to do a story on Martin. Part of the research for the piece involved shooting the rapids with him on a wild stretch of the Snake River. I was excited to do it. Although the airline company offered routes from California directly to Spokane, Washington, which was less than 100 miles from our 'put-in' on the Snake, Martin insisted I ride with him. He had a tiny, 1953 model Cessna that he piloted from the San Francisco Bay Area.

He told me he would pick me up at the Placerville Airport, which launches planes off a 200-foot cliff at the end of the runway. When he got there, photographer Michael Nichols, whom I had asked to go with me on the trip, was in the back seat with his young son. The four of us squeezed into the little Cessna. I didn't like it much, but at least I got the front seat.

It's perhaps important to note here, again, that I am not a fan of heights or flying. I usually have to rely on at least a couple stiff drinks before I can settle down at all, even in a big plane. I realized too late – and with some horror – that I had forgotten my flask. Before I knew it, I was strapped into a contraption that, in my mind, couldn't possibly fly with all of us and our luggage.

I shut my eyes and Martin revved up the engine and we roared down the runway toward the cliff. We were just starting to lift off when a huge 'bang!' came from underneath the plane. The plane wobbled wildly and swung from side to side with Martin slamming on the brakes. We stopped a few yards from the edge.

"Flat tire," he said. "Happens a lot."

Two hours later the tire was fixed and we tried again, this time arcing upward into the blue sky above Placerville. I was not at all happy, but there was nothing left to do but talk as much as possible. The more I talked, the more I could forget that we were a tiny speck in a ruthless sky.

Nichols, who went on to have a fantastic career as a photographer for the *National Geographic*, saw my discomfort immediately. Nick, as we all called him, wasn't about to let my fears go unnoticed.

“Hey Martin,” he would ask when we reached altitude, “where are we now?” Nick would sit back and laugh as Martin looked down and searched for his maps, which were strewn around on the floor. The plane would inevitably go into a terrifying dive. After Nick had done this two or three times, I reached over and grabbed all the maps and sat on them.

“No more you guys!” I said glowering at them both. Nick and his young son laughed all the way to Lewiston, Idaho where we landed, and I jumped out and kissed the ground.

We spent the night on the **riverbank** in tents and cruised out for breakfast cooked over a campfire in the morning. Then we loaded everything into the wooden dories and headed out.

The first rapid was strong enough to rip out an oarlock from my dory. “How powerful is this river?” I wondered, as we tried to navigate with one oar. We made it through without further mishaps and spent two idyllic nights on the **riverbanks**. Martin told stories into the night and we saw mountain goats, bears, eagles, foxes, trout, elk and numerous other creatures on our way. It was a dream trip, but once we climbed out of the dories at the final take-out, I immediately called the airline. I asked for a ticket home to California on the biggest plane they had.

Run Rivers Run

Western's World

When the bow of the wooden dory sliced into the rough tongue of the current and gathered speed, I knew we were in trouble. Ahead was a twenty-foot wall of churning flood water, so big and it was curling back like an ocean wave. The noise of the rapid was deafening, like a freight train passing by at close quarters.

Behind me, sixty-seven-year-old Martin Litton was straining at the oars. From his powerful strokes it was evident that twenty years of dueling rapids on rivers

like the Colorado and the Snake had kept him fit. As the owner of the Grand Canyon Dories, Inc. Litton has made his living for two decades by booking and sometimes leading, commercial boating expeditions down some of the West's most formidable white-water rivers. Squeezing out four days from his crowded May schedule (which included a Colorado River trip and a four-day series of lectures on ecology in Yosemite National Park), Litton agreed to lead a small group of writers, photographers and river enthusiasts through Hell's Canyon, the marvelous sculpture of Idaho's Snake River.

Unusually warm spring weather had assaulted the deep snowpack in the surrounding mountains, and the Snake was raging at eighty thousand cubic feet per second - nearly three times higher than normal summer flows- higher than even the guides had seen it before.

When we hit the base of the swell the boats were roller-coastered upward, toward the dangerous curl at the top. I had seen rubber rafts flip over backward on smaller waves. It appeared that the best we could hope for was a swamp. At the worst we would all go sprawling into the roiling maelstrom. But that was before we learned about the special qualities of the dories. Since dories are fashioned after their oceangoing predecessors - the New England fishing boats - the bow and the stern are bowed upward and the decks contain closed hatches, giving them a remarkable buoyancy. We bobbed harmlessly through the threatening curl and whooped in triumph as we rocked gently down the back of the swell.

Our experience, though heightened by the exceptionally high-water level, was standard fare for Litton's dory passengers. Since he resigned his full-time job as travel editor for *Sunset* magazine and began

offering commercial river trips in the late sixties, Litton has provided the only person-powered alternative to rubber rafts on the Colorado, the Snake, eastern Oregon's Grande Ronde and Owyhee, Idaho's Salmon and Utah's Green River.

In spite of his company's success (it grossed nearly \$400,000 last year), Litton insists he never intended to make river-running his business. "Ester and I kind of fell into it," Litton says. (Ester, Litton's wife of forty-two years, is the secretary/treasurer and integral part of the company.)

Litton now books almost one thousand passengers a year on his trips, the majority of them on the Grand Canyon. "We have people from all walks of life and from every economic stratum," he says. "For example, we might have a clerk with us who has saved for two years for the trip, and in the same boat we might have a corporate president who has gone on five or six trips with us."

The passengers also come in all ages. Litton delights in recounting his experiences with the middle-aged executives who stare dubiously at the pictures of the brightly colored dories on the wall of his Palo Alto, California, office.

"I know just what they are thinking," he says. "I see it all the time. They are wondering how those flimsy dories can hold up down the Grand Canyon and they are thinking they are too old to try. I tell them I've been running the river since 1963 and haven't drowned yet. Then I tell them I'm sixty-seven years old and I'll be rowing one of the boats! It works every time."

Although most passengers are between thirty and fifty years old, ages often range from eight to eighty years. (Ian Nichols, the three-year-old son of photographer Michael Nichols, accompanied us on the

Snake River trip.) About 10 percent of the passengers are from other countries and the rest come from all over the United States.

Bouncing through the white water, his gnarled hands heaving at the oars and his bearded profile conjuring up Hemingwayesque images, Litton cuts a dashing figure on the river. But later, around the evening campfire, the image changes somewhere in the middle of a Litton yarn (which can outlast the embers), the bravado disappears and his cherubic features take on an elfish resemblance to another storyteller, J.R.R. Tolkien.

There are other hidden complexities within this grandfather of three, who would rather explore ancient rivers or other wild places than the paper jungle in his office. For example, Litton claims he has never felt comfortable in the world of commerce, yet he has survived for more than fifteen years in a business that has a savage mortality rate.

“At first you would think he is the world’s worst businessman,” says John Blaustein, a successful San Francisco photographer who once worked as a dory guide for Litton. “He doesn’t charge enough for the trips and he’s much too generous to everybody. Nobody picks up a check when Martin’s around. But then you begin to notice that people keep coming back to ride the dories. A lot of these people have the money to go on any trip anywhere in the world, yet they keep coming back to Martin. Obviously, he must be doing something right.”

And despite a universal feeling among his employees that he is much too generous for his own good – and theirs, too – they are fiercely loyal to him. One guide noted that in spite of the popularity of the dories, Litton not only charges fares below that of most rafting companies, he assigns only four passengers per

dory, although the boats could easily hold two or three more people.

"I'm not out to become a millionaire," Litton insists. "There are a lot of people who wouldn't be able to afford a river trip if I raised my prices, and I think that would be a shame."

One consequence of his fiscal policies has been that his guides are not the highest paid (even though the top guides can still make up to \$5,000 for a summer's work on the river). Yet the seventy or so guides he hires each summer, who are universally considered some of the best in the business, keep coming back to work for him.

Curtis Chang, who now supervises the Lewiston Office for Litton, was asked to explain. "Working for Martin isn't like working for most people. He really looks out for you, sometimes to his own detriment. I remember the first time I went down the Colorado. It was in 1967. Most of us on the trip were under twenty-one and Martin felt responsible for us.

"We had four dories and we had stopped to scout Crystal, a horrible-looking rapid that had been altered by a flash flood that spring. Martin took one look at it and decided he would take the dories down one by one because he didn't want any of us to go through it and possibly get hurt. The first boat he took through flipped and he had to swim to shore. He hiked back up and then flipped the second boat, which was torn to pieces on the rocks. But Martin swam out of it, hiked back up and then flipped a third time. The rocks tore the decking off that dory, too.

"By then we could tell he was almost exhausted, but he swam to shore and was about to hike back up for the fourth boat when I jumped in it. I wasn't going to let him kill himself. If we had had ten boats I think he

would have tried to take all ten by himself, just so we wouldn't get hurt. That's the way he is."

(Chang also flipped in the monstrous rapid, but wasn't injured. Crystal has since been altered by other floods and has become passable.)

Blaustein also recalled his first Colorado River trip with Litton in 1970. "I have never been in a rowboat before, and I ended up breaking the dory in half. It was a disaster. That cost him a lot of money. Most people would have fired me right away, but Martin asked me to try again. As it turned out, his generosity made a major difference in my life."

Blaustein began taking photographs during his Grand Canyon dory trips. In 1977, Penguin Books published them in *The Hidden Canyon*, an oversized paperback that has sold more than fifty thousand copies and launched Blaustein's career. Litton contributed the introduction to the book.

Litton's interest in the Grand Canyon and running the dories began in the early fifties when he was working for the *Los Angeles Times*. "I took a job working as a circulation supervisor for the *Times*, even though salesmanship was – and still is – foreign to me," Litton says. "Being a depression baby, I thought it was bad manners to turn down a job. But I've always liked to write [he has an English degree from UCLA], so every once in a while I would drop off an article on the travel editor's desk. He must have liked them, because they were always published."

Frequent Sunday drives with his family in his father's Willey Knight helped nurture Litton's interest in travel and the outdoors. Most of his early articles and photographs were virtual travelogs of places like the Dinosaur National Monument in Utah, the giant

sequoia groves in California and, of course, the Grand Canyon.

By 1952, his articles in the *Times* had gained a wide audience, which included the editors of *Sunset* magazine and David Brower, then a member of the fledgling Sierra Club. In 1953, Litton accepted an offer to become travel editor at *Sunset*, and moved from his home in Los Angeles to Palo Alto, a community just south of San Francisco.

At the same time, Litton was recruited by Brower to become a director of the Sierra Club, a post he held for nearly twenty years. During that time, Litton became increasingly concerned about various threats to the wilderness areas he had visited. His strident efforts to protect the giant redwoods, Dinosaur National Monument and the Grand Canyon areas were highly effective yet widely unrecognized.

“Some people get the kudos and others, out of inequity, don’t,” wrote Brower, who later quit the Sierra Club to form Friends of the Earth. “Martin Litton is due most of those addressed to me in error. More years than I will ever admit, he has been my conservation conscience.”

As the threats to the wilderness areas became more numerous and serious, Litton became even more adamant in this commitment to protect them. He began to feel restricted in his role at *Sunset*, and when he felt the magazine failed to fully support his drive to protect the remaining redwoods on California’s north coast in 1968, Litton resigned.

Meanwhile, his enthusiasm for running the Colorado, boosted by his first successful trip in a dory in 1962, continued to grow. Litton and a friend, Pat Riley, had been intrigued by the wooden drift boats

they had seen on the McKenzie and Rogue rivers in the Northwest, and had two made to Riley's specifications.

"After leaving *Sunset*, I was casting around for a way to make enough money to pay my bills." Litton remembers. "I was doing some consulting for Time-Life Books on their wilderness book series and I was writing and narrating outdoor films for *Sunset*, but never being much of a businessman, I wasn't sure what else I wanted to do. When we began taking a few commercial passengers down in the dories, I was delighted. There seemed to be a growing interest in the Grand Canyon. Then, of course, the Powell memorial trip in 1969 really snowballed the popularity in the dories."


That year marked the 100th anniversary of the trip down the Colorado by Major Powell, and the Smithsonian Institution, the Sierra Club, the Audubon Society, the U.S. Park Service and several other groups sponsored a two-month extravaganza on the Colorado to commemorate the trip. Litton was chosen to play the part of Major Powell.

"You wouldn't have believed all the hoopla," Litton says with a laugh. "There were speeches by senators and governors, the Boy Scouts were there, and television cameras and scores of newspaper people. At almost every accessible major bend of the river there were bleachers filled with people cheering us on. They stuck a black beard on me and we waved at everybody from the dories. It was quite a sight."

After fifteen years in the business, he insists that the benefits are still there. "The best part about the dories is the easy access to the wilderness. And that escape, most of the time, anyway, more than makes up for the flood of paperwork I have to deal with," he says.

“All in all, few things in this world are really beyond description, but one of them is the feeling of exhilaration on entering and running a big canyon rapid in a small boat. And there is nothing more, with the possible exception of a hot shower now and again, that anyone should ask of life.”

What Happened After

Litton remained a fierce advocate for things wild for two more decades, leading efforts to protect the California redwoods, the Grand Canyon and the Colorado River. His passionate testimony before the  Congress helped convince members to support the Grand Canyon Protection Act. In recognition for his ceaseless efforts, the Grand Canyon Trust awarded him its highest honor, the John Wesley Powell Award. For years, he served as a board member for the Sierra Club when David Brower was its head and famed photographer, Ansel Adams, occupied another board seat.

Litton also helped stop plans that called for logging in parts of California's redwood forests. This would have included cutting down some of the giant sequoias in the Sequoia National Forest. Above all, though, Martin loved rivers. He first rafted the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon in 1955. Nearly 50 years later, he became the oldest person to row the entire length of the Grand Canyon. He was 87 years old. He passed away ten years later. His friends say his legacy will last as long as the rivers run.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Rock Climbing With Royal Robbins and Batso Harding

One would think that after my pulse-rattling little airplane ride with Martin up to the Snake River, I would choose to keep my feet on the ground for a while, but it didn't turn out that way. Some of the magazines I was working for regularly were interested in the emergence of some of the legendary rock climbers of the 1950's and 60's as retail moguls. Yvon Chouinard, Royal Robbins and others were turning their legends into profits through the creation of outdoor apparel companies. Chouinard has become wonderfully wealthy through his wildly successful Patagonia empire and Robbins did well with his Royal Robbins brand.

I interviewed Robbins first and we spent an enjoyable time together. He was a legend among climbers worldwide. Along with a character of a completely different stripe – Warren 'Batso' Harding – Royal set the climbing world on fire when he became the first person known to climb the fabulous face of Half Dome in Yosemite Valley in 1957. At the exact same time, Harding became the first person to climb the formidable face of El Capitan in Yosemite. Harding was nicknamed 'Batso' in part because he was the first climber to attach a covered hammock to a cliff wall so he could stay on the wall and

sleep at night. He looked like a giant bat hanging there. He called it his bat tent. I called it terrifying.

Harding and Robbins were complete opposites in the climbing world and became bitter enemies. Robbins objected vigorously to the fact that Harding used metal pitons (spikes driven into cracks of the cliff face) to use as steps. Batso usually left them poking out of the cliff face. He was also known to sneak into the campsites around Yosemite during the day when no one was around and saw off the bottoms of the Park's potbellied stoves. He used them as his pitons. Batso usually brought multiple bottles of wine into camp and told stories, punctuated with bouts of roaring laughter, long into the night. Legend has it that he decided to climb the Northwest Face of Half Dome, which had never been climbed before. He even plotted a course, which was not like him. It was clear he was taking it seriously. It was, after all, 2,000 feet of pure verticality – like climbing a 200-story building.

After a long night, though, Batso got up late and was shocked to see that Robbins had already started up Half Dome's Northwest Face. There was no way that Batso, a relatively slow climber, could ever catch him. Stories have it that after yelling some choice words at Robbins, Batso grabbed his gear and headed for El Cap, which had never been climbed either. It took Batso much longer and he left his pitons all the way up the cliff, but he made it, and the two climbers found permanent places in climbing history. Later, Robbins, who was straight-laced about his rules for climbing and not harming the environment, re-traced Batso's route on El Capitan and tore out all the pitons. Leaving them in the rock face had become as distasteful to principled climbers as leaving empty beer cans on forest trails are to hikers today. Robbins pulled nearly all of them out, but stopped toward the top. He told his fellow climber that he was so impressed with Harding's route that he wanted to leave a few in place to honor Batso's bravery and talent. He also said he was getting tired of taking all the pitons out. Royal spent decades climbing and kayaking worldwide and then settled down a bit to build his company.

Batso and I go Climbing

I did a story with Batso less than a year later. I don't mind white-water rafting in the worst rapids, or skiing the black diamond runs at Lake Tahoe at breakneck speed, or even literally swimming with sharks, but I don't like heights, not even elevated golf tee boxes. I've gotten better, I think, about my fear of heights, but to this day I do not know how I let Harding talk me into a climb with him up a 90-foot-high vertical cliff near Lake Tahoe. But he did. I have pictures to prove it, otherwise I wouldn't believe it myself.

We strapped on some backpacks – he fixed mine up and put it on my back – then strapped on some minimal climbing gear himself. He connected me to him with a rope and carabiners. “That way if you fall and you're too heavy I can just cut you loose,” he cackled. It was impossible not to like Batso. He was so fun-loving and just shuffled around looking for something mischievous to do. Even Robbins could not stay mad at him for long. This was a good thing, as you'll see later.

We started rather late in the day. Batso promised it wouldn't take us long, but looking straight up to the top of the cliff, it seemed to me it would be days before we got there, if at all. “Come on!” he shouted, running to the base of the wall. “I'll race you!”

That should have been the clue to cut the rope myself and run away while I was still on the ground, but the adventure community in California had begun to accept my nosiness into their affairs. I knew I would become the butt of endless jokes if I bailed and didn't go up with Batso. Still.

I made it to the top by focusing on the wall six inches away from me and nothing else. I refused to talk to Batso, even though he kept up an endless banter, sometimes singing and chanting, all the way up. When we finally got to the top and looked out across the tops of the trees, I have to admit I was exhilarated. He didn't say anything. He just clapped me on the back. It was a moment I'll never forget, the western slope of the Sierra Nevada spreading out green and gold

for miles below our feet. We just seemed an organic part of it all for that moment and it was wonderful.

“Do you want a glass of wine?” Batso asked.

I didn’t answer because I thought he must be talking metaphorically.

“Well?”

“You brought wine up here?” I asked, incredulously.

“Nope,” he said with the biggest grin I’d ever seen. “You did.”

With that, he unzipped my backpack and pulled out a nice bottle of Cabernet, a corkscrew and two crystal wine glasses.

I stared with equal awe and outrage as he popped the cork and gleefully poured us each a perfect glass of wine.

“To you, rookie,” he said, raising the sparkling glass, then taking a satisfied sip. “Fine climb. Of course, we still have to get down.” He then bent over, laughing uproariously. His laughter echoed down the canyon to the trees below. I couldn’t help it, I started laughing, too. We drank and looked out like two kings of the forest. It was glorious for a moment, then I thought about climbing down, which was often more dangerous than climbing up. I don’t remember much about the descent, which is just as well.

Batso died in 2012. I never saw him again after our climb. I wasn’t mad at him. How could you be? A few months after our adventure he sent me a great little book he wrote called, *Downward Bound*. I still treasure it.

Seeking New Summits

When the bespectacled fifty-year-old Modesto, California, businessman sped through the yellow light, he knew he was going to be caught-and he knew he would have to pay for it. But not in the way you might expect. That’s because Royal Robbins, successful businessman

and author, world-renowned mountain climber and accomplished river kayaker, rarely does the expected. In this case the “highway” Robbins was speeding down was the treacherous Tinguiririca River in Chile and the “yellow light” he had ignored was his own inner sense of caution.

“We were kayaking the river for the first time and I had gotten lazy and softened my self-discipline,” Robbins recalls as we sit in the modern confines of his fifteen-thousand-square-foot office-warehouse complex on the outskirts of Modesto. “I allowed myself to be pulled into a stretch of terrible white water. I knew I wasn’t going to make it. The river was going to exact its toll.”

Robbins was right. A sidewinder wave slapped the kayak over and tossed its cargo into the spraying maelstrom. “It was like being caught in a giant washing machine,” he says. “I had no idea which way was up. I just remember trying to fight and fight to get a breath.” Robbins was bounced through the rocks for another hundred yards before the river finally plopped him into an eddy, where he pulled himself to shore. “After I got over being terrified, I became angry that I allowed myself to get in that position,” he says. “Had I listened to my ‘inner voice,’ I would not have gotten into trouble. Typically, I am a very conservative person.”

Conservative? At first this seems an unlikely self-assessment. After all, this is a man who in a few short years has gone from selling boots in a basement to heading a \$7-million-a-year outdoor clothing company; who still spends up to sixty days a year kayaking wild and unexplored rivers, and who gained a permanent place in climbing history as the first person ever to climb the great headwall of Yosemite’s Half Dome. Yet Robbins is like most climbers who have survived their youth. Probe deeply enough and one will find the heart of a true conservative (as Webster’s defines the word: one who

prefers gradual development to abrupt change). It is a lifelong philosophy that has its origins in the thin air of his historic climbs (abrupt changes at those altitudes usually precipitate undesirable results-like falling), and in the fact that despite his passion for climbing and kayaking, he is not a natural athlete.

“He always had to work things out mentally where others could just do it,” says his friend and fellow climber Yvon Chouinard. (Like Robbins, Chouinard has managed to turn his love for the outdoors into a thriving business. He is king of the popular Patagonian line of outdoor products based in Ventura, California.) “Royal won’t get himself into anything unless he is absolutely sure he can do it. That was especially true for climbing, because he had no natural reserve to get out of tight spots. But he was tenacious. He had ponderous proportions of perseverance, as we used to say.”

In the back of Robbins’s office complex is the design room, where literally hundreds of garments are conceptualized, including wool sweaters; canvas shirts; twill bush pants; polypropylene undershirts, shirts, pants and jackets; rag wool caps; corduroy pants; hats; mittens; scarves; outdoor shorts, and cotton shirts. The designs are sent out to manufacturers, most of them in the Far East and England, then shipped to more than one thousand retailers throughout the United States.

“About half are really serious about marketing our line,” says Robbins. Among them are most of the outdoor giants, such as Eddie Bauer, North Face, REI, American Eagle Outfitters and Abercrombie & Fitch. The company also wholesales some outdoor gear and a variety of nature-oriented books, but the clothing makes up about 85 percent of the sales. Robbins has considered and rejected past temptations to open a chain of retail stores (although he has one successful store in Modesto). “Too risky,” he explains.

Although the company employs about thirty-five people including himself, Robbins will tell you that only one of them is indispensable: his wife, Liz. A dynamic and vital part of the company (and a first-rate climber- she was the first woman to scale Half Dome), Liz has designed ever: piece of clothing sold by the Robbins's company.

"But Liz isn't just a designer," insists Robbins. "She is consistently a source of motivation, a source of strength and a source of vision. She's every bit as much a part of this company as I am."

Liz travels extensively throughout Japan and England every year, looking for changing styles. "I don't go to fashion shows," she says. "I look for what is selling on the street. I look for general patterns and sizes, shapes and silhouettes rather than specific styles. For the past few years Japan has been the leader in outdoor garment styles but now many of the leading styles are coming from England and Ireland."

The conservative style seems to run through the entire Robbins family, and Liz has succeeded in weaving it into the fabric and colors of the clothing lines. The fabrics are primarily traditional wool or cotton, and the colors - reds, blues, browns and greens - are attractive, yet muted to blend into the natural environment. "We've coordinated the colors and the styles so that every piece of clothing we sell can be worn with any other piece," says Liz.

The company grew steadily, if unspectacularly, during the seventies and early eighties, when "outdoor chic" was in vogue. Liz and I have spent twenty years absorbing outdoor experiences, and I think those experiences are in the design of our clothes."

For Robbins, those experiences began in an unlikely place - Hollywood, California. "I grew up there," he says. "My father loved to hunt and box and play baseball, so I guess I just fell into the things I did naturally."

Like most climbers, Robbins was a loner, driven by a lack of confidence and a need to prove himself. By the time he was sixteen, he would catch rides to the San Gabriel Mountains, where, by himself, he would practice his climbing techniques.

After high school and a stint in the army, Robbins migrated north to Berkeley, where a remarkable group of climbers were gathering for an assault on the towering monoliths of Yosemite National Park. Many of the names are now legendary among those who follow the sport—Chouinard, Warren Harding, Charles Pratt, Tom Frost and others. But in those days they were just restless and brash young climbers looking for a challenge, with barely enough money between them to buy second hand climbing equipment. Robbins's conquest of Half Dome was the first recorded triumph of this hearty group, but within a year the members had conquered all the great cliffs in Yosemite, including El Capitan.

By 1963 Robbins had met and married Liz. The two lived on the money they could scrape together as ski instructors near Lake Tahoe during the winter and on the proceeds from the RockCraft School of Rock Climbing that Robbins operated from 1967 to 1974. Robbins also authored two top-selling instructional books on rock climbing, *Basic RockCraft* and *Advanced RockCraft* (La Siesta Press, 1971 and 1973).

A typical week may be spent working sixty hours at the office, making policy decisions, monitoring the performance of the various departments and motivating the troops. Robbins's sincerity and concern for his employees are readily apparent. He offers an in-house fitness program, staff barbecues and raft outings and company climbing trips, and, as icing on the cake, he remembers everybody's birthday. "We want to be a company that everyone wants to work for, and do business with," he says.

But a typical week may also find him making the first descent of a remote Sierra Nevada river, like the Upper Kern or the Middle Fork of the Kings, or perhaps hanging by his fingertips off some remote ledge, since he still spends from twenty to thirty days a year climbing.

He took up kayaking seriously about six years ago after an attack of arthritis in his wrist and feet sent him searching for a sport that held the thrill of climbing, but required less dexterity.

“Kayaking and climbing are alike in a lot of ways, although you can afford far fewer mistakes climbing,” he says. “But still, when I am boating big, strong water, I am scared. I like that.”

Kayaking has also allowed him to spend more time with Liz, their daughter, Tamara, thirteen, and son, Damon, four, who can accompany him on the milder rivers.

With a group that often includes veteran California kayakers Reg Lake, Doug Tompkins, Brian Clark and sometimes Chouinard, Robbins has made several first descents of California and South American rivers.

He does not yet consider himself a success in business. His goal is \$25 million in sales, but even then he says he won't be satisfied. “To be a success means you have to be consistent. And to be consistent, you have to always be growing in terms of wisdom, courage and skill, and love for other people. That's what intrigues me the most about business—it requires you to become a complete person.”

Robbins's biggest fear for his company is that it will grow too fast and that somewhere in the process he will again miss the blinking of his inner yellow caution light, as he did on the Tinguiririca. “Business is like kayaking and climbing in one way,” he says. “It isn't the ability to perform that keeps you up, but the ability to

withstand the temptation of trying to overachieve.” It’s a philosophy that has taken him to the summits before and likely will again.

What Happened After

A few years before I wrote this story, Batso was ambushed by an ice storm while climbing one of the big walls. This event happened before I met these two legendary climbers, but I consider it an appropriate addendum to this story. Batso was virtually frozen to the vertical side, one hundred feet above the Yosemite Valley floor. The story goes, and I believe it to be true, there was only one climber in Yosemite with the skills to reach him. Robbins was told of Batso’s dilemma and grabbed his gear immediately. He climbed down from the top of the mountain and cut open Warren’s shirt. He then opened his own and the two hugged for several minutes until Warren’s body warmed to a point his blood-flow reached his extremities. He was able to cling to Robbins while the two old enemies were pulled together up to safety. Their feud reportedly died that day.

I know there have been documentaries about Camp Four and that competition, but this story seems ripe for a major film to me.

The final cap to this story belongs to Liz Robbins, Royal’s wife, who was a wonderful climber in her own right. She was the first woman to climb Half Dome in 1967. I was lucky to meet her during my interviews with Royal. She was impressively intelligent and warm-hearted. She and Royal met when she was a concierge at the Yosemite Hotel. They were one of my favorite couples of all time. She was a real strength behind the success of the Royal Robbins apparel company. They sold it in 2003 for a large profit, and both remained strong voices for the protection of the environment and wild places. Royal died in 2017.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Getting Wet in the California American River

River Runner Magazine

For a time, while I worked as a reporter for the *Placerville Mountain Democrat*, I rented a house on the banks of a whip-turn in the American River. It was a perfect river for rafting. Class Five rapids (the biggest kind), rose up in early spring, but mostly during the summer the rapids were a good, vigorous Class Three, meaning they were raftable, with only a few rafters flying up and tipping over in each rapid.

As much fun as I have playing basketball and golf, and even dancing salsa (I learned on the banks of this river from some great instructors), I would put white-water rafting at the top of my exhilaration list of sports. I also got paid to write about it in dozens of magazines and newspapers.

After several times down, some of the rafting company owners talked me into guiding once in a while, which was a little more work, but not much. During those summers I did stories on some of the leading rafters, some of whom, like Richard Bangs, had done first descents of wild rivers all around the world. We explored most of the rivers in California, Oregon and Idaho. I loved every minute of it. I

flipped over my fair share of times and sometimes I just jumped out (not while guiding) so I could go through the rapids like a fish. Few fish, of course, actually do that because they have far more sense, but it was pure love for me. Commercial rafting, like everything else I learned over time, has its hierarchies, ego battles and internal divisions. I didn't care, that's a wonderful thing about journalism, you don't have to take sides, just report what is happening as honestly as you can. I'm pretty sure you float better when you're not mad at anybody.

Getting Cold Feet on California's American River

River Runner Magazine

The rumble we hear is Meatgrinder. The first rapid. A snarling field of boulders, holes and churning water.

The river quickens as it gathers for the rush. The ripples form white lacy tops. The tops turn ragged, pouring over protruding granite, then swirl and flee into haystacks that arch and roar in front of us like some ancient sea serpent.

"Whooooee!!!!," yells Robin as she grabbed the bowline and pulls herself up, bracing her legs on the gunwales. She looks like a wild, wet, bronco rider trying to harness the River Stallion.

The first big wave slams into us. Right away I realize I am being drenched by water that was snow a few hours ago. Robin falls backwards into the boat. She laughs and gets up quickly as the water pours off her face. We hit a second wave; a third. Bill yanks hard to the right on the oars and we speed by the yawning holes on the left. A last haystack and Meatgrinder is behind us. Only 20 more miles to go.

When we hit the smooth water, I find time to reflect on just who it was that got me on the half-frozen South Fork of the American River in the middle of March. Chief responsibility, I decide, goes to Dave McCourtney, the diabolical editor of *River Runner Magazine*. I had in mind a nice (dry) political piece about the men with the little clipboards who want to dam this part of the river. But my tidy idea got hit by a Meatgrinder of its own. Dave just laughed. "Put on your lifejacket," he basically said. "You're going down the river." Those of you who have rafted in the spring know what that means. Freezing, high water, and monster rapids. It means don't fall out of the raft because the river is especially hungry in the spring.

I figured I still had a chance. I called Bill Center, owner of ARTA of California and California River Trips, who has offered to take me down.

"I think it's probably too dangerous," I ventured.

"Naw," he said, "It'll be cold and the river will be high, but we can do it."

Bill, I decided, was not without fault either.

I'm fitted with a waterproof dry suit, so Bill claims, and a pair of wetsuit booties that have holes in them. Paul Ratcliffe, who is to photograph this adventure, shows up looking like a penguin, stuffed with wetsuits, drysuits, rubber gloves and a crazy red hat. The bill of the hat is bent upward so he looks like a cartoon character. But Paul gets the last laugh, he's the only one that stays warm and dry – a fact he doesn't let us forget.

Robin is a great rafter of her own and Bill's wife. Seven-month-old Charlie needs her services in the afternoon so she only rides from Chili Bar to the Coloma State Park with us.

A few wet-suited rafters are milling around at Chili Bar when we pull up in Bill's truck. A wide beach area just below Pacific Gas and Electric Company's big, gray dam, Chili Bar is about three miles north of Placerville and 40 miles east of Sacramento. Chili Bar is named after a group of gold miners from Chili, who settled at this beautiful bend in the river in the 1850s. They found gold here; unfortunately, they also found smallpox. Gravestones still sit in the hills above the river.

Today, Chili Bar is the launching place for more rafts than anyplace in the West. More than 150,000 boats per year navigate the river to Folsom Lake, making it one of the most popular whitewater rivers in the world.

But on the first day of spring only a few foolhardy souls were around. We shoved off just after 11 am. After Meatgrinder are the slate piles and rock rubble marking old gold mines. Dozens of spring freshlets wander through the ruins and pour in delicate waterfalls over the cliffs.

The water quickened again as we approached one of my favorite little riffles, Racehorse Bend. Here the river makes a great sweep to the left, throwing rafts at breakneck speed to within a thin breath of the jagged rocks on the right.

We make a good pass, the adrenaline is high as we plunge over the last of the haystacks. Two feet of water has found its way into the bottom of the raft. I can no longer feel my feet. Bill and Paul say I should have worn wool socks.

I think about revenge.

After a tricky little disturbance of granite called Rock Garden, we pull over where a bouncing little stream runs off the northern slope. Brilliant orange poppies, yellow silken buttercups and a purple ground clover lay like colors on a green canvas. The sky is a deep blue and a few, puffy, white clouds chug by.

Bill and Robin have named this enchanting place Shooting Star Creek. They **moon** around like newlyweds. Paul and I look for something to eat. Robin sings softly and stands among the flowers, looking herself like a blue-eyed blossom of the Sierra.

We leave Shooting Star Creek with reluctance and turn toward Triple Threat, a rollicksome, noisy rapid below us. The first wave throws us skyward. The crest breaks and knocks me back against the gear box. Just as I get up, we drop quickly, then rise up toward the sky in time to get smacked in the face with another towering wave of icy water. Then another dip, another rise, another dousing. Just like that, Triple Threat is behind us.

As we bail and I try moving my frozen toes, Bill tells me about the pair of golden eagles that nest on the northern cliffs. I spot one of them. It soars a couple thousand feet above us and is joined by its mate. More magic. I forget about revenge and wonder idly about my chances of becoming an eagle.

Before long we approach the biggest rapid of all. The last foaming torrent on the upper river, Troublemaker. Here the river writhes in torment, zigzagging through broken granite pieces in a reverse S before emptying into the still water in front of the Coloma State Park where gold was first discovered in California. Troublemaker is one of two Class IV rapids on the South Fork. We hear it hissing in the distance. Boats tip over here.

We let Paul and his cameras out upstream so he can record our journey.

"I'm taking it to the left!" Bill shouts when Paul is in position on the rocks. Here it comes. Whitewater danger. Why aren't I a photographer?

The current suddenly turns powerful, like a living thing reaching out a powerful hand to grab and take

control of the raft. We all feel it, and love it. We shoot forward with increasing power and speed. It's like being in a floating Ferrari that suddenly shifts into fifth gear. The raft rockets toward the rocks on the left, then tilts, so we are riding on the cutting edge of the curl. The high end of the river curl climbs up the towering rocks on the left and the low-end growls and threatens on our right. The water is a dark green down there. For a shattering moment, I can imagine what it **would like** to be pulled under into that swirling chaos. As I do, the back of the raft slips into it and dips under the water. I am in the front, nearer the rocks, and my side shoots upward. The adrenaline rush is magnificent – I like it up there in the air, holding my paddle heroically, as if I can paddle through the sky.

We come down fast and I bounce off the air-filled gunwale. It is at this moment in the big rapids, when fate is taken out of the hands of the paddlers and the river seizes it, that is like no other. You are simply an organic part of the universe then, moving fast. Pure exhilaration. Like a car on two wheels we careen through the rumbling remains of Troublemaker, bounce high and then glide safely into the calm waters below.

We learn later the boat behind us isn't as lucky. It flipped on the curl, sending all hands sprawling into the icy waters. Everyone reaches shore safely.

After bidding farewell to fair Robin and grabbing grub at Camp Lotus, we fall into conversation about the river and its dangers. As of that time, we know of no rafter who has drown in the South Fork while wearing a life jacket. That includes hundreds of thousands of rafters every year. But the river is not always generous to the reckless. Once, Bill tells me, one man stripped off his life jacket and tried to swim Satan's Cesspool, the river's other Class IV rapid. He didn't make it. I

recall covering the story of two men rafting the lower river in January. According to the survivor, the two were sitting on their life jackets sipping **Bourbon** when the river flicked the rubber boat over, sending one man to his death. Casual, but fatal errors.

As we float through a long quiet stretch, our conversation turns to PG&E's dam above Chili Bar. We talk of Edward Abbey's plan to laser-beam the Glen Canyon Dam into oblivion, but decide against it. Ironically, without the upper dams on the South Fork there would be no rafting. Not enough summer flow. Bill tells us he did the next best thing. He rafted it. The dam has a 300-foot spillway that sends the overflow hurtling down a 50 percent grade. Bill and a friend calculated the angle, waited for high water, then went screaming down the spillway.

"Just like skydiving," Bill says. "First you're looking straight ahead, then straight down."

Paul grins from under his hat. I realize I'm in the clutches of two mad boatmen. I wonder about my chances of making it through Satan's alive. I tighten my life jacket. I dream of wool socks.

What Happened After

That article continues and describes all the rapids on the lower part of the river, but I wanted to take this space to bring up a topic that isn't talked about enough. In those days, we didn't look kindly on dams on the rivers, they were to us, abominations. Yet, looking at the situation today, it is the power from these dams that provides much of the electricity essential not only for our homes, but for the electric cars we seem to value so much. Ironically, it also takes electricity to create solar panels, wind turbines and other sustainable energy components. As Bill and I discussed, without some of these dams regulating the river

flow, there would be far more flooding in spring and water shortages in fall and winter. The commercial rafting seasons would be measured in days, or a few weeks at best, rather than several months per year.

Don't get me wrong, in a perfect world, there would be no dams, and every river would run freely, but this is not yet a perfect world and that is my point. There are compromises to be made until we can move forward with new technologies and new ideas. One thing we lack is open discussion about what the future should look like environmentally and economically. These two cannot be separated. That means we should not wholly sacrifice one for the other. I am still optimistic. I feel if – together – we can talk about these issues often and civilly, and build a vision to work toward, we can figure this out and maximize both worlds.

The years I spent on the banks of the American River working on the newspaper were terrific. I had stressed myself thin playing competitive golf in my early twenties, and this was my time to relax, breathe the wonderful mountain air, and enjoy life.

The freedom I had at this newspaper was exhilarating. I could write about anything I wanted and I did. For a time, I rented an old cabin and wrote in front of a huge picture window that looked out over a river canyon, mountains and then 50 miles down the Sacramento Valley. In the winter, it snowed so much I had to climb out the second story window. The only heat came from an old fireplace. I cut and split two cords of wood a year in those days. I wrote about politics, sports, wildlife, business and people doing extraordinary things.

Fish Pizza and a Nuclear Ban

Once in a while, though, we broke a few rules and just had fun. One of my friends, Carl Borelli, who owned a fish pizza parlor, (not fish and pizza, he put the fish in the pizza), and I decided to liven things up when my editor went out of town on vacation. Carl also happened to be the Mayor of Placerville when we did this.

About this time, the city of Berkeley, which always seems to be on the edges of progress and sanity, declared that it was a nuclear-free

zone in protest to the increasing hostilities between the **US** and the Soviet Union. (This all took place in the mid-1980s.) Carl and I decided to do the same for Placerville, which was a sleepy, foothill village of foresters, miners, retirees and long-range commuters into Sacramento. There was nothing political about Placerville except maybe the ongoing argument about where to put the new firehouse. Which is exactly why we thought it would be great fun to do this.

Carl agreed to give me some juicy quotes about how the city was gravely concerned about the actions in the Kremlin. I upped the ante by designing a front cover that featured a large mushroom cloud coming out of the top of the Placerville City Hall with the word “Nyet!” sprawled across the top in big font. The headline read: “City Bomb Ban Sought” with a kicker that read: “Andropov may hear from City Council.” Yuri Andropov, of course, was the Soviet leader at the time.

As you can imagine, Carl and I got into hot water over this. My editor, not known for a keen sense of humor, was a little annoyed, but nothing like the **vice-mayor** of the city, a Stanford graduate who took everything extremely seriously. She held a special town hall meeting to scold Carl and me for the story. “Whose idea was it?” she demanded. As Carl and I had rehearsed, we stood simultaneously and pointed at each other. The crowd roared with laughter and so did we. We were forgiven over time. Later, the **vice-mayor** and I became good friends. That story and the picture remain in the newspaper’s online archives.

Carl was a combat vet and he worked tirelessly to help vets in a variety of ways. He died a decade ago, but much of his work survives today. He was an everyday, special hero. I’m happy to honor his memory.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Mountain Bikes and a Big Decision in Hawaii

During one part of my free-lance career I caught on with several travel magazines. I usually infused my stories with a bit of adventure, often combining them with things like mountain biking, scuba diving, skiing and climbing. Why I included that last part I don't know since I still don't like heights, but I even did one on climbing frozen waterfalls. It was temporary insanity, I have no other explanation.

Growing up I never had a bicycle. I ran everywhere and thought bikes were for rich people who couldn't run. Then a magazine asked me to do a story on the inventor of the mountain bike, Gary Fisher. He lived about two hours from my home in the Sierra, and I drove down to see him on the flanks of Mt. Tamalpais just north of San Francisco. He had just announced commercial production of the first official fat-tire bikes with a gear shifter that allowed bikers to take on rugged terrain. I met up with one of my best friends, Don Patton, who lived nearby and we met Fisher at his warehouse where a big sign announced: "Fisher Mountain Bikes." We knew even then it was the beginning of a revolution in biking.

He showed us his cool line of bikes and we were hooked. He let us pick out ones to try for the day. I chose a hot red bike with fat, spiky looking tires. We grabbed our backpacks and took off. Yes! We were three young studs riding out for adventure on cool bikes with big tires and nothing could stop us. At least until we reached the first real hill on the wooded flanks of Mt. Tam. The thing I had neglected to tell Gary and Don was that I had never ridden a bike that had 18 gears on it before. In fact, I didn't know how to shift gears on a bike at all. As we hit the uphill slope, they went like jets up the roadway and while I pumped the pedals as hard as I could, I came to a halt and had to hop off.

After a time, they realized they had lost me, and they both looked back. I kind of waved and they turned around and rode back, quizzical looks on their faces. "Are you hurt?" Don asked.

"Yes, my pride – badly bruised," I answered.

They laughed, but they still didn't know what I meant. "Look, guys, I've never ridden a bike with gears before," I said. "I thought I could figure it out, but I don't have a clue." Both men laughed for a longer time than I thought polite. Fisher, still grinning, showed me and in a few minutes I was rolling alongside them. It was a long time before either one of them let me forget about that moment, though – a bicycle writer who didn't know how to ride. Before I went home, Gary sold me the red bike and suggested I practice, especially shifting the gears. I still have it – a Fisher original – and even after all these years it is still a better bike than I am a bike rider.

In the following years, though, we did bicycle trips down Mt. Haleakala in Hawaii, circumvented Maui, and did a beautiful ride down Mt. Lassen in the fall, under the brilliant gold and yellow leaves of the aspen trees. Bicycle Rider did a wonderful spread of my photographs for that one. Lake Tahoe, Yosemite, Washington, Oregon and southern California were all places we explored on the bikes after that. I even pitched over a cliff once and broke my neck in two places. That slowed me for a summer, but I still like to ride.

A Different Kind of Hard Fall

In the middle of all of this, I reached out to the Sierra Club and pitched the idea of writing a guide to mountain bike trails in California. The editor of their magazine loved it, and came back with a concept whereby I would write regional books throughout the **US** and then tour Europe and write about trails there. “We’ll keep you employed for the next seven years,” he said. “We’ll pay all travel expenses.” To a freelance writer that was more than music to my ears, it was a symphony. I submitted an entire outline and waited for the first check to roll in. I waited and waited. Finally, I called the editor. He sadly told me the Sierra Club board of directors had just voted down the project – by one vote. “They are afraid the fat tires of the mountain bikes will tear up the hiking trails,” he said.

Just like that, my next seven years were handed back to me. I shrugged and went golfing with my friends. I knew something else would come along, but that would have been fun.

Fatherly Decision at Mauna Kea

Travel writing took me all over the globe, but one of my favorite haunts was Hawaii. One of my first trips was for *VIA Magazine*, the trade magazine for the Northern California region of AAA. My job was to cover the great golf courses, hotels and restaurants on the Big Island. I thought I could do that. It was five weeks of Hawaiian heaven.

That was the trip where I had to make the decision that faces most dads, at one time or another. My daughter was two months old at the time and I often carried her around wherever we went. One morning I was to meet the CEO of the venerable Mauna Kea Resort and play golf with the head pro of the golf course there. I was nervous, it was one of my first travel trips. They sent a limousine to pick me up. I had on my best golf shirt, but as I was handing my daughter off so I could get into the limo, she threw up – all over my shirt. Right then I had to decide, am I going to

try to stay a cool guy or am I going to be a dad. I was already late, so I crawled into the limo – a full-on dad with a shirt to match.

When I got to the clubhouse, I explained the smelly, spreading stain and the CEO and the head pro laughed and said they were dads too. They gave me a free shirt from the rack in the pro shop and slapped me on the back. “Welcome to the club,” the CEO said.

I remember that trip for another reason. I took my mother along with us and she loved to golf. In one round she hit a shot on a par 3 facing the beautiful Pacific and the ball rolled into the cup. It was her first hole-in-one in many years of golfing. We bought her a plaque and I wrote about it in my story. She talked about that day for years. She passed away at age 96 in April 2021, but I’ll always see her raising both arms high into the air as the ball disappeared. She looked at me, laughed, and said, “Michael, this is really fun.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

AN ENVIRONMENTAL PASSION

An Interview I Can't Forget Pulitzer Prize Winner Gary Snyder

*San Francisco Chronicle and
Environmental Action Magazine*

When I began my freelance career, the first two stories I sold were a profile of Gary Snyder, a Pulitzer Prize winning poet who focused on the earth and earthly things, and a second piece on how to build an electric car. That one I sold to a newspaper in Boston.

The piece on Gary Snyder, which I've included here, ran in a little magazine called Environmental Action and then again in the San Francisco Chronicle. I was thrilled to sell my first feature, especially since Snyder's collection of poems called Turtle Island (which is what some native American tribes called the earth), was one of the treasures I still keep in my bookshelf. At the time, Snyder was one of my literary idols. I had always put him on a pedestal with Steinbeck, Harper Lee and Scott Fitzgerald. Whenever I read Snyder's work, I thought of myself again as the green, aspiring writer I had been when I first interviewed him at his home decades ago.

This spring, (2022) as I was preparing this book, I found out that Snyder still lives in northern California and is active at the age of 92. I tracked him down, thinking that an interview with him would be a great addition to this manuscript. I had no idea what a strange turn that interview would take – and how it would challenge me as a journalist more than anything has in a long time.

He answered the phone himself and said he was happy to talk to me. I thought that was a good start. I was ecstatic. My idol was happy to talk. But his answer to my first question changed everything – permanently. It was a simple question really. I probably should have known where it would lead.

After I introduced myself and we had a few moments of small talk, I started the interview with this question, “Is there an environmental issue today that you feel is more important than the others?”

He was silent for a moment, then turned the tables on me. “What is your opinion about climate change?” he asked.

It was my turn to be silent for a moment. Everything I’d always held important regarding journalistic values suddenly came to the forefront. Climate change is an extremely volatile issue and how I answered, and what he thought about my answer, would dictate how the interview would proceed. But most importantly, as a journalist – and this is where I disagree with so many “modern” journalists – I try not to express my opinion on things when I am interviewing someone. I tried to stay objective. I told him it certainly seemed like a critical issue, but more research needed to be done.

“You’re the enemy then,” he said dismissively.

His words had three profound effects on me. First, I was angry. I’d written hundreds of environmental stories and a few books over the years, and had suffered multiple death threats because of them. I doubted whether Snyder had ever been threatened in such a way over his poems.

Secondly, I was hurt. My idol had just called me “the enemy.” What do you do with that?

Thirdly and most importantly, I realized that my response to him would be – to me anyway – a reflection on my entire career. If I got mad and hurled an insult back, it would have been terrible. I will admit it was my first impulse. But it would have gone against my strong belief that a true journalist has to master the art of disappearing. I knew that to get the true story I had to get out of the way.

I had to quickly sweep aside my anger. I gently told him I hoped I wasn't the enemy and mentioned some of the stories I had covered over the years. That seemed to calm him down and we moved on.

The story I had originally done with him focused on what he saw as a threat to the environment near Nevada City in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. Today, nearly three decades later, the fight over reopening the gold mines is still simmering in the area. As gold prices have risen, so has the interest in mining in the Gold Country. However, the economics are still not quite in favor of opening a new mine, so for now, all is quiet on San Juan Ridge.

Idol's End

Our conversation then warmed, and he told me about his new work, *This Present Moment*, which is about the death of his wife. My heart went out to him, and Snyder took a new place in my thoughts. No longer an idol – it was time for me to put aside my last 'idol' for good – I saw him as a talented and emotional man.

Toward the end of the interview, he expressed his view on modern life in a poignant way. "I believe that the abstract part of our religions which controlled so much of our past is dropping away," he said. "We're becoming more open to the world and humans are including all living things in their thinking and in their religions. This includes the whole family of life – leaves, bugs, birds – and everything else that lives on this earth."

(I edited the following stories for relevancy and space.)

Zen Meets Gold on San Juan Ridge

*San Francisco Chronicle and
Environmental Action Magazine*

Gold, economist John Maynard Keynes once observed, “is just a barbarous relic, a commodity like pork bellies that should have no more monetary impact than wampum beads.”

Gold isn’t edible, won’t power automobiles or keep homes warm. It is, for all intents and purposes, useless. Yet, in the past several years, the age-old lust for gold has become a fever – an epidemic. Looking for a hedge against inflation and the declining value of the dollar, people have invested heavily in the precious metal, driving prices up to dizzying levels. And now, gold fever is coming to San Juan Ridge.

The quest for gold is nothing new in this area, a landscape punctuated by white cliffs, some 140 miles northeast of San Francisco in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. Old gold mines that lured prospectors in the mid-19th century honeycomb the area, and occasionally there is activity around a small mine where somebody is still trying “to find some color.” Local bars have names like the “Nugget” or the “Claim Stake,” and there are streets called Gold Dust Drive and Pay Dirt Road.

The miners of the last century only skimmed the surface of San Juan Ridge’s wealth. Buried 400 to 600 feet underground is a treasure chest which until recently would have been so expensive to extract, it simply wasn’t worth it.

But with today’s staggering gold prices, Placer Services Corp., a wholly owned subsidiary of the giant St. Joe Minerals Corp., has leased 2,200 acres on the

ridge and is ready to dig, not with picks and shovels, the tools of prospectors of yesteryear, but with massive, highly mechanized construction equipment. Standing squarely in the way are the people who fled to the ridge seeking a simple, self-reliant way of life. Unlike in the old days, when the fights were over who should get the gold, the fight today is over whether anyone should get it.

The ridge, some 10 miles long and six miles wide, was once the site of the world's largest hydraulic gold mine. Between 1850 and 1884 miners used giant water hoses, which could wash away hillsides from a distance of 400 feet, to reach gold rich ancient river beds. They took millions of dollars' worth of the metal from mines at Malakoff, Columbia Pit and Badger Hill. In the process, some 1.3 billion cubic yards of mud and debris were dumped into the Yuba River, eventually choking it, flooding the valley's farms and towns.

Finally, in 1884, a federal court ruled that the miners had to stop dumping debris. A profound quiet settled over San Juan Ridge.

It was this aura of solitude that led Richard Baker, president of the San Francisco Zen Center, to make the ridge a retreat for urban refugees seeking a life where self-reliance means more than flagging down a taxicab. Poets Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder, friends of Baker, also purchased land on the ridge in the late 60s, and it was here that Snyder wrote *Turtle Island*, his Pulitzer Prize winning book of nature inspired poems (see box). More homesteaders followed, including an Indian yoga master, Swami Kriyanada, who established a retreat nearby.

Snyder, like some of the other ridge dwellers, has lived for 10 years without electricity. Solar homes and gardens are common features of the area's homes, many built by the inhabitants themselves.

“We moved up here to try out our ideas,” says Snyder. “Our community is involved with making a fresh start here, with the attitude of living with the land. It’s not utopian, and it’s not revolutionary, but it’s real. We will be here in the future.”

The new ridge people, for all their solar greenhouses and organic food stores, get along well with the long-time residents, old gold miners like Bill Steel, owner of Tokey’s general store in North San Juan (population 50) and Bert Hybart. This rapport can, in part, be attributed to the strain of self-reliance that runs through both groups. After all, whether your house is heated by the sun and you grow vegetables in a garden or, like some of the miners, your wealth is in gold, you are less apt than most to rely on the fate of the outside world.

Snyder, Ginsberg, author-artist Christopher Swan and others of their ilk-writers, loggers, architects and ranchers-fear that the noise, the destruction and the mining itself will ruin their way of life. They’ve banded together, forming the San Juan Taxpayers Association, to block Placer’s plans.

Two years ago, Placer, bolstered by the Nevada County government’s pro mining stance, applied for a permit to begin exploratory drilling. The association, using the state of California’s environmental protection law, managed to hold up the permit for 19 months by swamping county officials with impact statements and the like.

“We figured it up the other day,” says Bruce Boyd, a onetime San Francisco architect and president of the Taxpayers Association. “We spent more than 3,000-man hours on this thing.”

But the permit was finally granted. Placer has until June 1981 to complete its exploratory drilling and six months later, if the taxpayers group cannot head it off,

the company will begin full scale operations. Meanwhile, the association is appealing the verdict to allow the exploratory drilling and challenging the county general plan and the environmental impact report.

The group argues that Placer's mining operation will be massive, destroying the rural quality of the ridge. They are worried about what the heavy equipment will do to already tortuous roads and also concerned about the trailers and mobile homes that will be used to house the miners.

"We're not against mining – as long as it's done on an appropriate scale," Snyder says. "And it isn't a case of long hairs against growth. We're just trying to protect our way of life here."

George Taylor, the 62-year-old president of the San Juan Gold Co., is also frustrated with the Taxpayers Association. "The feeling I got," he says, "was that they thought gold mining was a thing of the past. That it happened once, maybe, but it was all over now, like stagecoaches and covered wagons. Mineral resources are an important part of Nevada County's wealth. You have to go where they are. It isn't like deciding where a factory should be built."

The taxpayers group argues that mining may no longer bring the kind of economic security and self-reliance it brought in the days when lone prospectors combed the ridge with picks and shovels – that Placer's operation will be capital intensive and will not bring many jobs for local residents. "The only certainty the gold would bring is if we left it there," Snyder believes. "We should leave it there as a giant underground Fort Knox. If the government ever needed gold, they'd know right where it is."

Conversations with Gary Snyder

(This ran as a sidebar)

I met Gary Snyder for the first time last fall, but I feel like I've known him much longer. As an energetic, irreverent student at the University of California at Berkeley in the mid-50s, Snyder was the inspiration for the character of Japhy Ryder in Jack Kerouac's novel, *The Dharma Bums*, an early favorite of mine.

"Japhy wasn't big, just about five foot seven, but strong and wiry and fast and muscular. His face was a mask of woeful bone, but his eyes twinkled like the eyes of old giggling sages of China, over the little goatee, to offset the rough look of his handsome face. He was merry at times, but sometimes he'd quiet down and just stare sadly at the floor, like a man whittling," Kerouac wrote of Snyder.

Since those early days at Berkeley when he wandered with Kerouac through the mountains of Yosemite and the sea cliffs of Marin County, Calif., Snyder has become one of the leading poets of the environmental movement.

Snyder spent 12 years in Japan, studying the mysteries of Zen Buddhism, but returned to California. "I came back with the deliberate intent of playing a role in the environmental consciousness and politics in America," Snyder said. Intrigued by the solitude and beauty of the Sierra Nevada foothills, Snyder settled in North San Juan, a small town on San Juan Ridge. He defines his lifestyle as one of "minimum consumption."

But the energy is still there - a personal energy which has kept him traveling, lecturing, writing and "acting as a consultant to those looking for an alternative lifestyle."

Snyder served on the Friends of the Earth board and was a leader in the San Juan Taxpayers Association's fight to keep the gold miners from digging up San Juan Ridge. He has held poetry readings to help finance the legal battle against the miners, often with help from friends Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky. (Ginsberg was recently involved in some demonstrations and actions against the Rocky Flats plutonium processing facility near Boulder, Colo. and often carries a sign to the poetry sessions that reads, "What If the Rocky Flats Truth Force had all the money that it needed and the Pentagon had to finance itself with poetry readings?")

More than once Snyder has given testimony in front of a hostile Nevada County Board of Supervisors, which sits under the watchful eye of a huge gold miner painted on the wall of its meeting room.

In the words of one critic, Snyder's poems "range from lucid, lyrical, almost mystical to the mytho-biotic, while a few are frankly political. All, however, share a common vision: a rediscovery of this land and the ways by which we might become natives of the place, ceasing to think and act (after all these centuries) as newcomers and invaders."

Beginning with *Riprap*, published in 1958, Snyder has published nine books. *Turtle Island*, a Pulitzer Prize winning collection of nature poems, was inspired by life on San Juan Ridge. His latest, *He Who Hunted Birds in His Father's Village*, is a study of the mythology of the Indians of the Pacific Northwest and reflects an interest nurtured when Snyder was a boy growing up in the woods of Oregon and Washington.

Snyder passes on this advice in "For the Children."

"Stay together
learn the flowers
go light."

What Happened ‘Before’

One of my favorite quotes that I’ve used over the years is from naturalist Theodore Roszak, who said, *“There has never been a culture whose vision of life and society that is not deduced from its vision of nature.”* I first used that quote during my second year in college when I was asked to be part of the university newspaper staff. I thought about the offer and declined. I wanted to start my own newspaper and I did. I was able to secure some advertising to pay for a couple of editions and I talked to a couple of professors and some prominent people in town to write stories for it.

Toward a Sensible Environmental Embrace

Many of the articles I’ve done over the years show how and why we must move away from energy sources which contaminate. Without question we are polluting the air – and almost everything else. I am finding myself at odds, though, with some influencers today who express no workable vision about the future, but favor punitive acts in the name of climate change. Skyrocketing gas prices and restrictive laws that could gravely harm the middle class and the poor are not an effective way to go. They are, though, giving those who are against meaningful environmental protections a cause to rally around. They are creating a great divide that is going to make the real progress that is essential – healthy air, clean water, and protection for all living creatures – more difficult than ever. A better way toward a clean future lies in educating and recruiting people.

There is still time – we can do it, but we need leaders who can provide a clear, embraceable vision of a vibrant, sustainable planet, and then outline the sensible steps required to get there. **We must all be free to discuss and debate these steps and even the vision itself.** It will take courage to do this, but perhaps nothing is more important on a large scale.

I could go on about this, but the topic needs its own book – in fact, it’s worth many books. It’s always been my feeling that human

happiness is based, in large part, on our ability to remain in direct contact, physically and spiritually, with the natural world. Whether it's something as simple as maintaining a bird feeder outside the window so we can watch these incredible creatures closeup, or taking hikes into the wilderness and imagining what it would be like to live in the forest, or under the sea, we need to understand that we don't live in harmony with nature – *we are a part of it!* We cannot live separate from nature and remain happy. Therefore, we sure as hell should take good care of it.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Caught in a Plastic Trap

International Wildlife Magazine

I was ecstatic to score this assignment for a couple of reasons. This included the fact that it was one of the first stories to focus attention on the massive amounts of plastic trash that was (and still is) being dumped into our oceans. I was in constant touch with scientists and biologists around the world and I knew how concerned they were with this. All of them were excited that I was going to get the story into the media. While I was successful at directing attention to the problem, I've since come to accept that sometimes reporters can make an immediate difference, but at other times, changes that are badly needed can be exasperatingly slow. This is one of those.

The second reason I was thrilled to gain this assignment was it had been my dream to break into *International Wildlife Magazine*. It's funny, most freelancers I hung out with at the time were hoping to score a story with *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly* or some other highbrow media – not me. I wanted to be taken seriously as an environmental journalist and I wanted to do something groundbreaking and important.

I was also excited that the article was accompanied by photos from Frans Lanting, who was one of the top outdoor photographers in the world at the time. To this day, it remains one of my favorite pieces I've done – it showed me that if I worked hard and was willing to accept the 93 percent rejection rate of my queries (welcome to the world of a freelancer) – I could achieve some cool things.

At the end of the story, the editors wrote: “*California writer Michael Bowker specializes in environmental subjects.*” That did it for me, I felt legit. I remember walking out onto a grassy bank of the American River by myself and shouting in triumph. A deer, probably annoyed that I had ruined a perfectly good afternoon nap for him, jumped out of a nearby thicket and ran away into the forest. I laughed and watched him go. Then I jumped into the river, floated through a tiny rapid, got out and danced barefoot on the trail back home.

Quick sidebar on getting out of the way

In my career, so far, I've been called a crime reporter by FOX, ABC, NBC, CBS, 20/20, the *Oxygen Channel* and HBO, a finance reporter by *American Banker*, a political reporter by a dozen different media outlets and an investigative medical reporter by the *Los Angeles Times* and many others. It's the world of a freelancer – you go with the flow, try hard not to make mistakes, and get out of the way of the story so you can come as close to the truth as possible. Deep knowledge of the topics you cover isn't as important as your knowledge of basic journalistic skills. Just be prepared to learn fast and ask a variety of quality questions because the person you're talking to usually knows a great deal more about the subject you're covering than you do. The plastic trash issue, though, still bugs me. It's getting worse, much worse. Let's do something about it.

Caught in a Plastic Trap

International Wildlife Magazine

Even from a distance, it was obvious that something was wrong with the seal. The animal was sunning itself on a buoy near San Diego, just like dozens of other seals. But its neck was oddly pinched, as if it were wearing a too-tight necklace.

Our boat motored closer until we could see the cause, a band of plastic around the animal's neck. The seal had slipped its head into some cargo strapping that had been carelessly tossed into the water. Now, the seal was growing-and the plastic was holding tight. The animal's eventual fate would be a slow, constricting death.

The grim news is that the unfortunate seal is not alone. By some estimates, nylon fishing gear, plastic bags and other forms of nonbiodegradable plastic waste in the oceans are killing up to a million seabirds, 100,000 sea mammals and countless fish each year – and horror stories pour in from all around the world. A South African scientist recently pulled enough plastic from the gut of a starving leatherback turtle to make a ball several feet in diameter. California fishermen find dozens of pelicans each day which have become entangled in fishing nets. And one study showed that nearly one-third of the fish in the Atlantic Ocean have plastic pellets in their stomachs.

Many experts believe that plastic may be a worse scourge of the oceans than spilled oil. And although unusual climate patterns such as El Niño (an infrequent shift of ocean currents and wind in the Pacific) can kill tens of millions of seabirds, says Warren King of the International Council for Bird Preservation, “Plastic pollution is a force to be reckoned with on a par with El Niño because it is killing animals every year.”

No one really knows how much plastic is fouling the oceans. But a recent report by the U.S. National Academy of Sciences estimated that up to 350 million pounds of packaging and fishing gear alone may be lost or dumped by commercial fishermen and sailors each year. Millions of pounds more may come from individuals, private boats and the waste streams of factories. The problem is steadily increasing, experts say, because of the growing use of plastic.

Plastic in the sea can trap fish, mammals, turtles and birds in knotted tangles, causing death by drowning, strangulation or starvation. Or it can be eaten, leading to a whole host of ailments – and, often, starvation.

In accidental entanglement, scientists say, the major culprits are synthetic monofilament fishing nets. The nets are cheaper and more durable than traditional nets of flax, hemp and cotton, but their thin strands are difficult for sea creatures to detect and avoid.

Monofilament lines are most insidious when they break off from fishermen's nets, forming "ghost nets" that may drift for years. "Unlike working nets, which fish for specified periods of time, these free-floating nets fish indefinitely," reports Cornell University biologist Duff Wehle.

"Ghost nets are not only a tremendous threat to fish," adds University of Alaska ornithologist Robert Day. "Hundreds of thousands of birds drown every year after they dive for the trapped fish and become trapped themselves."

Other forms of plastic can also snare unwary sea creatures. The natural curiosity of seals prompts the animals to nose into potentially fatal cargo strapping bands. And in their search for fish, such seabirds as pelicans accidentally dive into the yokes that hold

six-packs together. The plastic rings can clamp their beaks shut.

Since 1962, when plastic was found in the stomachs of albatrosses nesting in Hawaii, scientists have discovered that many sea creatures eat plastic debris. The list now includes four species of turtles, animals at almost every level of the Galapagos food chain, mammals such as dolphins and 42 species of seabirds.

In most cases, scientists believe, animals mistake plastic for food. Sea turtles cannot tell the difference between plastic bags and jellyfish, which are part of their normal diet. Robert Day has discovered that plastic beads eaten by parakeet auklets in Alaska resemble small crustaceans, a favorite food item.

Eating plastic is decidedly unhealthy. Toxins such as PCBs in some debris cause a number of maladies, including eggshell thinning in birds. Sharp edges on utensils tossed overboard by ships' crews lacerate animals' stomachs. But most often, the plastic, which is indigestible and not easily excreted, simply accumulates in the gut. Unable to put enough food into its stomach to survive, a fish, bird or turtle dies of starvation.


Solutions to the problem of plastic pollution are hardly mysterious. Scientists recommend passing new laws to prevent sailors from dumping plastic waste overboard. They also urge that plastic be recycled instead of discarded, and that filters be placed on the outflows from plastics manufacturing plants. But people's behavior is difficult to control – and the plastics industry has traditionally resisted large-scale recycling and other pollution-preventing measures. “We consider it a ‘people problem,’” explains Ron Bruner of the Society of the Plastics Industry. “The problems aren’t caused so much by the material itself, but how it is misused.”

Many experts, however, believe that the plastics industry should be trying harder to find solutions – and some lawmakers in the United States apparently agree. The legislatures in many states have put pressure on the industry by passing laws requiring that all six-pack yokes biodegrade within 120 days.

Meanwhile, other people are trying to remove plastic waste from the world's coastlines. Annual beach clean-ups sponsored by governmental agencies and some nonprofit organizations, net tons of plastic each year.

Ultimately, scientists and environmentalists hope educational efforts will help reduce the problem. “Most people are not aware of the devastating effects of plastic pollution,” explains Neilson. “When they are educated, they will begin putting pressure on those who are causing the problem.”

What Happened After

For the record, I think this topic would make a dynamite documentary. I have dreamed of talking a film star or other recognizable, caring person into being the face of this effort – because this remains a huge and critically important story. To this day, it remains one of the more under-reported tragedies around the globe. My article inspired a number of other stories and for a time, a great deal of focus was placed on the ‘trash islands’ that were building daily in the Pacific. After a time, it became apparent that although the United States is responsible for much of the trash, other countries, with which we had limited relationships, were also dumping tons of trash into the oceans every year. Today, the  has at least tried to curb its plastic trash addiction, but other countries continue to act as though the world's oceans are their private trash dump.

As with almost all environmental issues, this one is often nudged aside as fixing it could inconvenience the huge companies and governments that have decided that massive amounts of plastic trash in our oceans is a price we all have to pay for billions in profits – for them.

The Oceanic Society recently reported that “Plastic pollution remains one of the greatest threats to ocean health worldwide.” *The OC reported that up to 12 million metric tons of plastic enter the oceans each year – enough to cover every foot of every coastline in the world!* That number is expected to triple by 2040. Plastic has been found throughout the North and South Poles.

Plastic water bottles alone are a worldwide disaster. It might be calming to think of them all being recycled, but that isn’t the case. Nearly 95 percent of plastic water bottles ARE NOT recycled. It typically takes hundreds of years for them to decompose. Enough water bottles are tossed into landfills to reach from the earth to the moon at least 37 times.

The terrible impacts of this are stunning. Scientists estimate that about half of the major species of mammals and fish and nearly every single seabird on earth have eaten plastic trash in their lifetimes. Divers worldwide report an ever-increasing amount of plastic in every corner of the undersea world. The long-term harm from this plastic horror show is likely to be felt for decades.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Searching For Mountain Lions

Los Angeles Times

I've been lucky to write several stories for the *LA Times* over the years, but this was one of my dream assignments. The editors asked me to trek into the high Sierra with a couple of professional wildlife trackers to see if we could spot mountain lions as part of a population count.

I agreed immediately. I stuffed some things in a backpack and the next day set off to meet the two trackers. It was cold, with a mixture of snow and sleet slanting down, when I met them high on a remote mountain south of Lake Tahoe. They were hardcore fellows from the hill country of the southern United States. They didn't say much and I didn't get the feeling they were overjoyed I was there, but I was happy. The issue and the story were important. Cougars, (Native Americans called them *Nashdoitson* – Spirit of the Mountains), are highly secretive and it is difficult to determine their population in California and the West. I had seen them, on rare occasions, while I was hiking with friends in the wilderness near Lake Tahoe, but for the most part, they can be a few feet from you in the woods and you would not know it. So, how does the State's Fish and Game Department go about trying to manage the population when there is only a wide general guess as

to how many there are? That's what these trackers had been hired to do – count mountain lions in the wilderness as best they could. Other methods included trying to count them through reported vehicle kills, livestock deaths due to lions, and field sightings. But none of these were anywhere as accurate as the process of actively seeking them out in their habitats and attaching small tracking devices. We had to bother them in order to save them. That sounded like the perfect job to me – running around in the forests after mountain lions. I was excited.

The two taciturn trackers drove large pickup trucks with tracking dogs in the back. These were the perfect hounds, baying like extras on a *Downton Abbey* hunting episode. I love dogs so this was terrific for me. Not so mountain lions, which are terrified of almost all dogs. They will typically head up the nearest tree when encountering even a small dog. Lions are faster, but the hounds have more endurance. At the end of a chase, the lion often wears out and climbs a tree. The dogs surround it, howling at the unhappy lion. Once the trackers catch up, they shoot the lions with tranquilizer darts. Typically, they are caught in large nets when they fall out of the tree. Then they are tagged so they can be tracked and counted. All types of valuable information can then be gathered, such as the lions' hunting behaviors, travels and the average size of their territories.

The storm kept up all afternoon as we drove along on the old muddy, rutted logging roads, but I didn't care. We were on a safari after lions – not to kill them, but hopefully to help save them. Finally, we stopped near a summit covered by thin, darkening clouds and the trackers let the dogs out of the truck.

Immediately, they took off at a joyful run, baying and howling. The trackers casually closed up the truck and we grabbed our backpacks and headed out in the direction of the howling. We hiked for about an hour through the thick, dripping trees before coming into a clearing. The dogs were in a circle beneath a young Jeffrey pine and in it, up on a limb, was a full-grown female cougar. She was slumped over in the rainy sleet, her ears drooping down and she looked totally defeated and sad to me. I walked over to one of the trackers who was missing several teeth, and said: "That

doesn't look much like the ferocious mountain lion image we're always being shown in the movies."

The tracker looked at me and spat tobacco juice onto the wet forest ground. "Yeah?" he raised his eyebrows, then nodded slightly to himself. He wandered over to his comrade and said something in a low voice. The lion was hunched over on a branch about 15 feet right above me. I was busy taking photographs of her. I waved my arms a little bit trying to make her look at me so I could photograph her face and eyes. I barely noticed each man taking the dogs nearest to me away from the circle. Soon, there were no dogs on either side of me.

I sensed something, but before I could move, the lion suddenly leapt – directly from its hunched position – right over my head through the gap left when the dogs were taken away. For a moment, the world turned dark as she flew over me. The hair on the back of my neck stood straight up and I felt an electric shock rip through my entire body. It seemed like an eternity before the lion hit the ground, running. She bounded up the mountainside so fast the dogs didn't have time to bark. She disappeared in seconds into the mist. I stood transfixed, watching this incredibly athletic creature, a perfect symbol of nature, race away in the blink of an eye.

The tracker ambled over and spat on the ground again. "Whatta think now?" he asked. He and his cohort grinned. "I think I owe you both a beer," I said. "That was one of the coolest things I've ever experienced."

I became an honorary tracker that day. They slapped me on the back, and we told stories all night around the campfire.

Hunting the Mountain Lion

Los Angeles Times

Because of the mountain lions highly secretive nature, California Indian tribes called it *Nashdiotson* – Spirit of the Mountains. Today the mountain lion, which ranges

throughout much of California though rarely seen by humans, remains as elusive as ever – confounding scientists’ efforts to collect badly needed biological and population information.

As a result, the small scraps of population data that do exist on the mountain lion have become the focal point of one of the most emotional wildlife issues in California’s history. Just how many mountain lions exist in California and how many are needed to sustain a viable population are numbers in rigorous dispute,

The increasingly bitter controversy began last year when the California Fish and Game Commission ruled to re-establish a sport hunting season on the big cats, following a 16-year hunting moratorium.

The situation became more clouded in June when a Superior Court judge rejected the commission’s ruling, making it unlikely the state would be able to comply with environmental impact statement requirements in time to start the hunt Oct. 8 as scheduled.

The commission had based its decision on the Department of Fish and Game’s estimate that there are about 5,100 mountain lions in California – more than enough, the commission insisted, to sustain the loss of around 190 lions annually through sport hunting.

Those opposing the department’s move, including the Sacramento-based Mountain Lion Foundation and other conservation groups, argue that data are so scarce there may be only half that number.

Ironically, independent wildlife biologists – who say they have been virtually ignored during the controversy – say the immediate issue of whether to hunt isn’t biological at all – it is political.

“There is a lot of argument about how many mountain lions there are in California, but the fact is

nobody **knows-and** it doesn't really matter anyway," said Rick Hopkins, a mountain lion expert who is a PhD candidate in wildlife ecology at **the** UC-Berkeley. "You can manage the population successfully without knowing exactly how many there are."

Michael Kutilek, a professor of biology at San Jose State who has spent several years researching mountain lions, agreed. "The exact population figure isn't important, but population trends are. Most [researchers] agree the current mountain lion population is healthy, although the animal is so elusive it is hard to say anything with surety, so the final question becomes a philosophical one – Is the trophy-hunting of lions acceptable?"

However, biologists are quick to point out that to assure the long-term viability of the species, more must be learned about the mountain lion and its habits. "It's more important that we learn how they interact with prey species and their environment," added Hopkins. "Most importantly we need to know how they are being affected by the commercial and residential development of their habitat."

But collecting reliable biological data on the big cats has been a difficult task. "Unfortunately, there is no magic method of gathering all the information on mountain lions we need," said Maurice Hornocher, a world authority on mountain lions, who is the director of the nonprofit Wildlife Research Institute and – professor of biology at the University of Idaho. "Almost all predatory animals are elusive by nature and the mountain lion is perhaps the most elusive of all the predators."

The Department of Fish and Game uses five primary methods to arrive at its population estimates. However, the department admits that counting mountain lions

is not an exact science. “Anytime you come up with [mountain lion] estimates statewide it has to be considered soft data,” said Terry Mansfield, the department’s wildlife manager in charge of mountain lion studies. “But using all these techniques together gives us a good idea of how many lions there are out there.”

The methods include: charting trends in the number of lions killed by vehicles and by hunters with depredation permits; actual field sightings; track transects and radio telemetry.

The first three methods have drawn heavy fire from wildlife biologists and conservationists.

“Road kills and field sightings don’t buy you much,” shrugged Hornoher. “Many people cannot properly identify a mountain lion, so field sightings could be due to increased vehicle traffic – which is likely in California. It would be unwise to base any kind of lion population estimates on them.”

“If everything was equal you might be able to correlate increased livestock depredation with an increased lion count,” said Wayne Evans, assistant director of the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, who has studied lions for 15 years. “But it has been my experience that increased depredation reports are more likely to trends in how excited ranchers are about reporting livestock problems than in an increase in lions.”

The DFG’s fourth method of gauging lion populations, which is in the development stage, is a technique called track transecting. Researchers drive slowly along dirt roads, or through snow, systematically searching for mountain lion tracks, which are carefully measured and recorded. Accurate track transects are difficult to develop, however, because the same animal can make different sized tracks depending upon soil types and whether it is going uphill or downhill.

For example, a lion traveling downhill will often slide in soft soil or snow, elongating its tracks. Moreover, mountain lions walk by placing their hind paws directly on the tracks made by their front paws, leaving a confusing overlay for trackers to measure. The fact that lions appear to walk on roads more often when they live in steep terrain and thick cover also can skew track transect findings.

“Because of all these variables it is clear to [biologists] that track transects should not be used to determine lion population densities at this time,” declared Hopkins. “All track transects can do is give you a general feel for the population, they won’t give you firm numbers.”

Radio telemetry – which involves tracking an animal that has been captured and tagged with a radio transmitter – is the most commonly accepted method of gaining information. But it is also the most expensive. “Ideally we would like to have a budget large enough to catch and collar every lion in the state,” said Mansfield. “But right **not** that isn’t possible.”

What Happened After

In 2014, the California Mountain Lion Conservation Program was established to coordinate scientific research and population monitoring. By 2019, mountain lions (puma concolor) were listed as protected animals under the California Endangered Species Act. From 4,000 to 6,000 are estimated to live in the state and perhaps as many as 30,000 live throughout the Western States and Canada. They also live in parts of Florida.

In case you are interested, even Usain Bolt, Olympic gold medal winner and the world’s fastest person, cannot outrun a mountain lion. Not even close. While Bolt was clocked at nearly 28 miles per hour in a recent race, cougars can run almost twice as fast. They

can weigh more than 200 pounds and grow to eight feet in length. By the way, they don't roar like African lions, although they screech and growl a bit. They more often purr like house cats.

Are mountain lions a threat to humans? If you are trapped in a small area with one, you could be in trouble, but consider these numbers. There have been 27 confirmed human deaths attributed to mountain lions in the **US** and Canada in the past 100 years. You can compare that to the fact that *humans* kill about 475,000 humans *every year*, (I know I'm cheating a bit here because that number is worldwide). The most dangerous animal of all? You guessed it, the mosquito. The diseases they carry are blamed for about one million human deaths a year. It's funny, though, which do we instinctively fear most, mountain lions or **mosquitos**?

I remember taking my young daughter out on a hike and coming across some cougar tracks at a lake's edge. Cougars often retract their claws when they walk and it's in that way you can tell their tracks apart from those of large dogs. We saw the tracks were headed for a cave about fifty yards away, so we slowly and quietly exited the scene. I already knew what it felt like to have one flying over my head. I was happy, though, to see the tracks.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

In the Shadow of the Volcano

Wildlife Conservation Magazine

It's fair to say I have a massive love affair with all things wild, and that includes most of the American West, especially the West Coast. I used to love driving back and forth from San Diego to Seattle for stories or to visit friends and family. Maybe it is in part a reaction to having grown up in the flat-ish plains of eastern Kansas, but I am in constant awe of the coastal mountains, seashores, foothills, and especially the incredible iconic volcanoes that dominate the landscape from northern California northward.

One spring day a friend and I made a spontaneous decision to drive from Sacramento to Seattle. We took his old pickup truck, tossed in our backpacks and a bundle of sandwiches and took off. We drove past the first big volcano, Mt. Lassen, and then past Mt. Shasta in California, and cruised up I-5 through Portland and into southern Washington. Near Castle Rock, a little town in southern Washington, we slowed down. The news we had been listening to on the radio said that there was a bit of action happening at Mt. St. Helens, a volcano not far from us. Nature was stirring. There were rumors of an impending volcanic eruption there. We knew we had to get as close to the mountain as possible if we were going to get to see what was going on.

We turned east and drove right toward the volcano. It wasn't long before we could see an ash plume, as busy official emergency crews began driving by us. My press pass got us past the original law enforcement barricade, and we were allowed to park and get out of the truck in a small area near the base of the rumbling volcano. Ash started to fall like snow, but my friend's truck was old and he was ready to trade it in anyway. What was a little ash on the hood?

Then we began to feel the earth begin to twitch and move under our feet. We looked at each other and laughed. What an adventure. At that time, the pure, white cone of snow at the top of the volcano was still intact, except for a grey-black gash where the ash and smoke were billowing out. A ranger standing nearby told us the volcano could erupt at any time. In fact, the ranger said, it was likely that it would – and soon. Cool, we thought. Can't wait. I had my camera ready.

We were standing there, bravely admiring the beauty of it all, when a small explosion took place on the mountainside and suddenly a huge blast of noise came from a big siren attached to a 50-foot pole right behind us. It was deafening and we jumped. It was terrifying, our legs were moving before we hit the ground. Everyone around us ducked and scattered to their vehicles. We jumped into the truck and drove out as fast as we could. Booms from the mountain, sounding like the beginning of an artillery barrage, chased us back to Highway 5. Ash and embers floated down onto the windshield and cut visibility, but we didn't slow down for several miles. We stopped later and wiped off the embers and ash that had – just minutes before – perhaps come from deep inside the volcano. It turned out this was only a warning tremor, but we didn't know that and we weren't going to turn around.

It was less than a week later, when we were safely in Seattle, the volcano blew up for real, causing the largest landslide in earth's recorded history. The watery mud, rocks, trees, houses and ash traveled more than 14 miles in a 'river' more than 150 feet high. At the same time, more than 540 million tons of ash spewed out of the volcano. If you stacked that on a football field, it would have created a tower of ash 150 miles high, according to the **US**

Geological Service. I thought about that the next time I looked at my friend's old truck.

A Surprising Story of Recovery

About 13 years later, I went back to Mt. St. Helens. I stood where my friend and I had been on the day the mountain rumbled, but it wasn't the same place anymore. The blast and subsequent debris flows had changed everything. Sadly, 57 people lost their lives, including local residents, visitors and journalists there to cover the event. Millions of mammals and fish were also killed and everything on the northwestern flanks of the mountain was covered in up to 600 feet of ash, rocks, mud and trees. Massive amounts of beautiful forests were blown down – like matchsticks they lay on the ground at my feet, even 13 years later.

I was there, this time, at the request of *Wildlife Conservation Magazine*. My assignment from the magazine was to cover not only the original destruction of the eruption, but most importantly, the remarkable recovery of the forests and wildlife – which occurred in a way that fooled most biologists.

In the time since the eruption, nature had taken its own pathway back into the blast area, in an unexpected way that was gaining the interest of biologists worldwide. Most scientists admitted they were surprised by the re-growth process. The magazine sent me to find out what was going on, and why.

Having witnessed the 'before and after' scenarios at Mt. St. Helens helped me with perspective and I was thrilled at getting to go back. The biologists I was with received special clearances to go far into the blast area and up the flanks of the mountain. We traveled across the blown-down terrain in jeeps and then where the road ended, we hiked. The size and power of the volcanic eruption was staggering. Nature packs quite a seismic punch. The devastation I saw during the research of this story was beyond anything I could ever imagine. Yet, nature was already reclaiming parts of the blast area – you could clearly see the cycle of life beginning again. I was amazed by it. It was fantastic that such a scene of utter destruction could also generate such powerful feelings of hope, optimism and humility.

In the Shadow of the Volcano

Wildlife Conservation Magazine

On May 18, 1980, during an otherwise clear and beautiful morning, an earthquake shook Mount St. Helens, in Washington state.

It triggered the largest landslide in recorded world history.

Then water deep within the volcano flashed to steam, and in one furious moment a monumental, super-hot blast blew off 12 percent of the mountain top. The landslide combined with the blast and concussion winds, twice the speed of a hurricane, to snap off and scorch 200 square miles of forest in a fan shape extending as far as 17 miles to the north and west. The explosion carried a force equivalent to that of three atom bombs.

But the volcano was far from finished. A gas storm, superheated to 4,000 degrees, roared in a deadly fireball hundreds of feet high, incinerating everything in its path. Temperatures 16 miles away exceeded 400 degrees. Melted snowpack and debris formed a huge mudflow that rumbled down the mountain at a hundred miles an hour. The slurry of pulverized rock, ash, and giant chunks of glacier—the consistency of pancake batter—buried everything in its path, sometimes up to 600 feet deep.

Fifty-seven people lost their lives in the eruption. Also destroyed were an estimated 5,000 black-tailed deer, 1,500 Roosevelt elk, 200 black bears, 15 mountain lions, millions of smaller mammals and birds, some 11 million fish, and no one knows how many insects. In addition, about 4.7 billion board feet of Douglas firs, hemlocks, cedars, and other conifers were lost.

Today, the predominant element on the north side of Mount St. Helens is grayish-white ash, punctuated by small chunks of lightweight pumice. Thousands of

full-grown trees still lie eerily where they were blown down. Lending an even more bizarre touch are the ghost-white skeletons of smaller trees bent in prayerful postures, facing the gaping mouth of the crater. After being whipped by the furious winds from the eruption, these saplings were flash-dried in position by the heat blast that followed.

Recovering from the total devastation caused by a volcanic blast is one of nature's foremost challenges, but at Mount St. Helens, the wildlife responded with incredible swiftness to reclaim the mountain. In the pumice cracks and ash crevices, insects are now thriving. Steelhead trout and other fish dart in the shadows of eroded creek beds, and the tracks of river otter, mink, long-tailed weasel, and raccoon are imprinted in the streamside ash. High on the still bare upper ridges of the mountain, the startling silhouettes of an elk herd can be seen.

Incredibly, some wildlife survived the earthquake and the subsequent eruption. Insects, amphibians, reptiles, and a few underground mammals such as shrews, moles, mice, and pocket gophers were protected by snowpack, underground or in decaying logs. That the eruption occurred in spring also helped the survival rate. But these survivors alone were not responsible for the remarkable pace of the wildlife recovery. Indeed, the regeneration at Mount St. Helens has been fueled by unexpected sources, and with surprising rapidity.

Nature began the process of rebirth almost immediately. Several hundred research projects have been set up to record the rate of recovery within the 109,900-acre Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument. The monument was designated by Congress in 1982 to protect the volcano and its surroundings for public use and scientific study. Outside the monument

area, recovery has been given a helping hand by man, especially by timber companies and other private concerns.

John Edwards, a University of Washington zoology professor, is one of the many scientists documenting the return of wildlife on the mountain. "In elementary biology one is taught that devastated areas are colonized first by bacteria, then by lichens, then by plants, then by insects, with predators and scavengers following. But at Mount St. Helens it's all going backwards."

Like invading armies, seeds, winged insects, and spiders on weblike parachutes floated into the devastated area from surrounding habitats. Edwards estimates that nearly 60 pounds of insects and seeds continue to rain onto each square mile every day during spring and summer.

"These bugs provide food for smaller mammals, which in turn provide food for the larger predators," he says. "I think everybody was surprised to see this entire spectrum of animal life take to the barren areas before the plant life."

In fact, animals have often promoted plant life at Mount St. Helens, not the other way around. Small mammals excreted digested seeds and bugs into crevices in the ash and lava, where airborne plant seeds landed. Nitrogen and phosphorous from this bug compost created a fertile bed in which the seeds could sprout. Pocket gophers also played a critical role in this scenario. Protected in their burrows, the rodents emerged after the eruption and tunneled through the deposited ash, mixing it with soil and fertilizing the ground for plant germination.

In the months following the blast, many biologists were pessimistic about wildlife recovery, believing it

would take decades. The mountain fooled everybody. Without competition, wildlife moving back into some regions quickly multiplied. It was an ecosystem gone berserk, however, and populations of a number of species exploded and then either leveled off or disappeared again.

Among the species that have been reported in the blast area are bald and golden eagles, sandhill cranes, black bears, beavers, bobcats, mountain lions, five species of hawks, several types of warblers, ospreys, snowshoe hares, and dozens of others. There are reports that even a wolf family has moved in, although there has been no confirmation.

The rapid wildlife recovery within the monument has taught biologists some surprising lessons. They've learned that nature can recover from what seems to be total devastation. Many of the blast survivors and the early colonizers died from lack of food and shelter; in turn, they provided food and shelter for others. Aquatic habitats have rebounded much faster than terrestrial ones. After the eruption, the clear water of Spirit Lake was heated to about 100 degrees and covered with uprooted trees and debris. Today, oxygen levels have returned to normal and frogs and toads are again breeding there.

But perhaps the most important revelation of the Mount St. Helens eruption and recovery process is the interrelatedness of all living things on Earth, including man. Outside the protected site, engineers, foresters, and other recovery specialists immediately mounted huge campaigns to "fix" the erosion, flooding, siltation, and myriad other problems caused by the eruption. Nearly 16 billion new trees, for example, have been planted by Weyerhaeuser and other private timber companies since the eruption. Many

of these conifers are already 25 feet high in marked contrast to the much smaller, naturally seeded trees in the monument. Meanwhile, funded by federal emergency relief money, the Soil Conservation Service dropped tons of grass seed and chemical fertilizers from helicopters on the barren soils of the blast zone. Unfortunately, most of the fertilizer blew away and the seeds attracted hundreds of hungry rodents. When the seed supply ran out, the mice turned to the tasty bark of the tree seedlings planted and nurtured by the timber companies, which took great umbrage and had to eradicate the rodents.

This is just one of many examples of man's manipulation of the natural order of things at Mount St. Helens. In a number of cases, the remedy was worse than the malady. To put the matter in perspective, 13 years after the eruption, maybe \$10 million of public funds have been spent on scientific research at Mount St. Helens. The new 30-mile-long highway to the visitor center alone cost \$145 million.

Ironically, the lessons of Mount St. Helens may ultimately teach us as much about ourselves as about the remarkable natural evolution taking place on its scarred flanks.

What Happened After

Scientists report that the volcano has never truly gone back to sleep. It continues to rumble deep inside. Less than 20 years ago it shook and blew out columns of ash for nearly five years in a row. Yet, nature is reclaiming the blast area with a steady stubbornness that is inspiring to see.

Meanwhile, the latest surveys **who** that a huge lava dome covering the volcano's 'mouth' has been growing and rising for the

past several years. Is it getting ready to blow again? My hope is to gain another assignment next spring and return once again to the mountain. To report on this incredible place, where in a single glance you can witness both the irrepressible forces of new life and the primitive fiery forces that threaten death to everything in its path, is irresistible to me.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Comeback of the American Condor

The Explorer Magazine

For some unknown reason, I have always felt a special connection to condors, the giant birds that look like small airplanes. They are spectacular to see in the air, soaring and diving like lords of the sky, but up-close they are bald and quite ugly. Somehow that makes them even more endearing.

Being as big as they are, condors were easy prey for hunters, you had to be a bad shot to miss one. Their wingspan often measures more than ten feet across – the height of a one-story building. They are America's largest and possibly rarest bird. Besides hunting, the condors fell victim to pesticides and habitat loss. In the early 1980's their population dropped to a terrifying low total of about 26 birds. Few believed the population had a chance to survive. When I was in high school and college, I read about them every chance I got. I was afraid I would never get to see one in the wild.

Then I heard of a new program at the San Diego Zoo aimed at trying a bold new project whereby baby condors would be captured in the wild. They would be raised and bred at the Zoo, then released back into the wild. I immediately set out to find a magazine that wanted the story.

The Explorer Magazine, published by the Cleveland Museum of Natural History and supported by 32 other natural history and science museums and organizations nationwide, accepted my proposal and gave me the assignment. They were taking a chance because I was just starting my career and I appreciated their confidence. Within two days, I was in San Diego talking to the extraordinary young man who was in charge of the captive condor project, Bill Toone. He was an outgoing, smart and optimistic young biologist who wore his heart on his sleeve. He knew that much of whether the American condor would survive as a species or fade into extinction lay in his hands.

I liked Toone immediately and felt with him, the condors had a chance. But trying to save these giant, elegant birds was more complicated than you might think, politically. Typically, groups like the Sierra Club and Friends of the Earth are at the forefront of trying to save wildlife, but in this case, they had taken the stance that the condor population should be allowed to die in peace. Somehow, they felt the natural path was toward extinction and humans should not get involved. A few naturalists completely disagreed, and thankfully so did Toone and his mentor, Noel Snyder, a dedicated scientist. The issue was battled over in court and before various California state commissions. In the end, it was determined that a limited captive condor program could proceed.

Threats to the Condors

The threats facing the condors included man-made pollutants, like DDT, habitat destruction, and especially the ingestion of lead shot from the guns of hunters. Condors are carrion eaters and readily ingest the lead shot (pellets and bullets) inside animals that have been shot by hunters. The lead is poisonous to the condors and most often causes them a slow death.

In 2019, California outlawed lead shot, largely because of its poisonous effects. The new ammunition, which does not harm the condors if ingested, is readily available and costs about the same as

the old lead shot. Yet, for some inexplicable reason, some hunters persist in using the old shot. As a result, condors continue to die needlessly. Habitat destruction continues to be a major hazard as well. Although the condor population has stabilized at a little more than 500 birds, it is still considered threatened.

However, at the time Toone became involved, the situation was far more dire. Extinction is a 'forever' word. A key to that early program was the fact that like chickens, condor mothers can 'double-clutch', meaning if they lose an egg, they will hatch another until they get a chick. That meant Toone could safely take an egg from a condor nest in the wild and be assured the mother would lay another.

After the green light was handed down to capture a condor chick, Toone and Snyder climbed to the top of a peak in the Sierra in Southern California where they thought there might be a nesting mother. When they saw the mother leave a small cave, they both went in and saw an egg in the nest.

"I remember looking at that egg and a million thoughts went through my mind," Toone told me. "I was most worried about the idea that if this baby condor was hatched it could spend its entire life in an enclosure. I didn't want that. I made a quiet promise to myself to stay in the program until one of them could fly free."

Not long after the chick hatched and was named Sisquoc - he was the one I saw when I was there - and then four more were successfully captured in the wild and hatched in the zoo. All of them survived. Snyder, in his subsequent books and writings on the issue gives much credit to biologist Jan Hamber, who had done prior extensive work with condors. Without Hamber's impressive lifetime of work on the condors, it's likely the captive program would not have worked nearly as well, according to Snyder.

Ultimately, every American condor was captured and cared for by Toone and others. Constant adjustments had to be made in the project before it became a success. For example, at first, when some were let back into the wild, they flew into the growing

number of electrical wires stretching across the landscape, and most were wounded and died. A program was then instated among the captive birds whereby mock electrical towers were constructed in their enclosures. Whenever a captive condor would then land on these, they would receive a mild, but irritating shock, so they learned early to avoid flying into the wires or landing on the towers. This seems to have worked because the number of condors killed by the electrical towers dwindled to almost zero. Lead shot, pollutants and habitat destruction remain the lethal culprits right now.

All the captive birds, when they reached an independent age, were released successfully into the wild.

My story (the one that follows) was among the first on the project, but it was catching the attention of the media around the country. Soon, dozens of media outlets were running the story and Toone became a national figure. He even appeared on the Johnny Carson show with his puppet that looks like a mother condor. Handlers like Toone would feed the chick through a hole in the wall. All the chick would see was the condor puppet so it would not 'imprint' on a human. Toone had learned that in the Andean Mountains in Chile, where condors thrive. People there had been making similar condor puppets for 2,000 years. He studied the process and successfully made his own. I got a chance to play with the puppet in San Diego and I found it a strangely emotional moment. A condor parent. It felt awesome.

The program – unlike so many environmental issues today – was an amazing success. “To me, it shows that our moral pathway as human beings is to try to solve the problems facing wildlife,” Toone said. “These problems are nearly always solvable – we just need to do it!”

Condors for Tomorrow

Explorer Magazine

You won't insult Bill Toone by telling him he has the ugliest baby you've ever seen. He'll probably just smile and feed it another mouse.

Tucked away in the windswept "condorminium" deep in the San Diego Wildlife Park, Toone's "baby" is doing fine. The 60 or so mice it consumes daily have given it a comfortable layer of fat, essential to baby California Condors.

At first glance Toone seems an odd choice to be foster parent to one of the rarest birds in the world. At 26, he is still boyish around the edges, but the looks are deceiving. Toone has worked at the park since it opened 10 years ago and he holds a master's degree in Avian Science from the University of California at Davis. He was hand-picked by park bird curator, Dr. Arthur Risser, to care for the chick.

One park official explained Toone's qualifications this way: "Bill's a special kind of guy. He has a solid scientific mind that's spiked with a sense of humor and a kid's outlook on life. That's why he can handle such a frightening task as raising a California Condor."

The park is the final step in the overall Condor recovery effort. The chick was taken from a nest north of Los Angeles in a joint effort by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Audubon Society.

Made cautious by a blunder two years ago that resulted in the death of a Condor chick, the team pulled off the capture without a hitch. However, the fate of the remaining 30 or so wild Condors in California remains in doubt.

Gymnogyps californianus (the bird with the naked head) was at one time found throughout the western populated Los Angeles basin, the Condor has become the best-known endangered species in America. Some say leave the birds alone. Others insist that a “hands on” approach is the only way. Even the biologists have split over the basic questions:

Has human interference caused the Condor’s decline? Or was the giant vulture already doomed to extinction and we just hurried it along?

Can the California Condor live with people?

Can it live without us?

The answers to those questions have formed the philosophical platforms around which both the State of California and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have built their Condor recovery efforts. Unfortunately the two bodies have arrived at different conclusions.

The time is the year 2000. The setting: the pure blue skies above the Grand Canyon National Park. The black spots you see are circling, riding on thermals (rising bodies of warm air) high above the Canyon trench.

They are Condors, many of them. Caught in the rugged mountains in Ventura County, California and captively bred in San Diego, the Condors have thrived and been set free in a place that was once their home.

That is the dream of Dr. Noel Snyder and men like him who make up the Wildlife Service/ Audubon group, known as the Condor Recovery Team. They have the money - \$20 million to be spent over the 40-year life of the program, courtesy of the federal government. On August 5, 1982, they requested the final permit from the California Fish and Game Commission which would allow them to begin the project by taking at least two captive chicks and a number of eggs.

The taking of eggs was emphasized by Snyder, director of the Wildlife Service part of the recovery team, because of recent research results on a technique called “double-clutching.” Snyder explained to the commission that eggs can be taken from a female Condor without fear of decreasing the wild population since if the egg is taken at the right time she will simply produce another. A hormonal cycle that occurs within the female Condor when an egg is produced will be repeated if the egg is taken before the cycle is completed.

“We have found that the birds will always double-clutch and sometimes ~~triple-~~ and quadruple-clutch,” said Toone, who has successfully double- and quadruple-clutched Andean Condors, a species similar to the California species.

Researchers have been able to get up to six babies in two years, instead of the single egg a Condor will usually lay in that time, Toone said.

The final part of the recovery team’s plan was a radio telemetry program. Solar-powered radios, weighing less than two ounces, were to be placed on the adult Condors’ wings and would allow researchers to gather heretofore unknown information on Condor eating and breeding habits, causes of death, hunting ranges and other clues to the Condor lifestyle.

“There is doubt in my mind of ever achieving a wild population that is viable without telemetry,” said Snyder. “What good is it to captive-breed, then release the birds without knowing what their problems are? They would only face extinction again,” he said.

Unfortunately, however, the state commission, relying on a “hands-off” recommendation from its advisory committee, said no to the telemetry program. Moreover, it allowed the recovery team to take only one

chick that was being abused by its parents, and only one egg to be taken in the spring of 1983.

The commission's 3-2 vote did not come easily. "I'll tell you how tough this is," said Commissioner William Bunker. "My wife is against the program and my daughter is for it and I'm stuck in the middle. Emotionally it's the hardest decision I've faced all year."

The recovery team was shocked and dismayed over the commission's decision.

"They've turned their back on the wild population," charged Snyder. "It was a totally emotional response. They've put all their eggs in one basket."

The team threatened to pull out of the program altogether, but the state has indicated it may agree to more chick and egg captures in 1983 if all goes well with the captive in San Diego.

It seems ironic that the success of the Condor project may rest with the San Diego Zoological Society which operates the Wildlife Park. The SDZS has refused to participate in the political aspect of the program and was not even represented at the August 5 hearing. But the Society has raised some \$250,000 in private donations for the first year of the Condor project.

Meanwhile Toone is on the hot seat.

"If we fail here, or even at any time make a visible error, there will be a lot of pressure," he said. "If I mess up here I could drive a water truck the rest of my life. And sometimes it doesn't work. We are working with living creatures and sometimes they die. But we have the feeling we are going into this with everything we need. We're optimistic, which is the only way to go into it. To take on a responsibility like this and feel pessimistic would be nuts."

The Condor chick has adjusted to the wood and wire complex Toone has named the “condorminium.” Other Condors from around the world are next door neighbors and usually you can see several Turkey Vultures sitting on the outside of the wire enclosures, jealously eyeing the captives’ food.

The chick is fed a diet of dead fish, chickens, mice, and commercial meat prepared for tigers and lions.

“The meat for the big cats is varied and is especially high in protein, which is good for the birds,” Toone said.

The chick has already survived one of the two most dangerous periods in a captive Condor’s life. Only about half of all Condor babies live through their infancy, whether in the wild or in captivity.

“In four or five years we will know whether it has passed the second test,” says Toone.

If a mature bird is maladjusted it will not breed. “You can always tell if they are happy,” Toone said. “If they are, they’ll make babies.”

Imprinting (developing a human-“parent” bond between bird and keeper) is another danger of captive breeding. To avoid imprinting the young birds, Toone had large hand puppets made that look identical to a Condor mother. The chick is hand-fed with the puppet until it is old enough to eat on its own.

The success or failure of the Condor program will be watched closely in the future. It may well be the most important endangered-species project of this century.

“It’s been said that this will be a cornerstone in wildlife preservation,” said Toone. “If we fail, never again will we be likely to see a wildlife project gain the kind of funding this did. But if it works, it will open doors

to other projects. Right now, we're talking about a bird whose numbers you can practically count on your fingers and toes. If this works, it will be a victory for people."

What Happened After

I talked to Toone again this spring (2022), at length, to catch up and to talk about those experiences in retrospect. "In some ways it feels like yesterday," he told me. "There was so much emotion and pressure involved. I went from a guy working in a zoo to being on the national media almost every night. It was still controversial to some extent and I was dealing with it all the time. It certainly changed my life."

In the 1990's, after the captive condor chicks were released into the wild and seemed to be thriving, he left the San Diego Zoo and the Condor program. He took time to recover from the pressure he had faced.

He told me he hasn't stopped trying to make a difference, however. He has built a program he calls Ecolife Conservation that is dedicated to improving the lives of people worldwide. He has focused on projects like creating and improving ways in which people in poor countries can heat their homes and cook meals. Today, he says, smoke from indoor cooking fires is among the leading causes of death in the world. He is also working on sustainable agriculture projects, often in Third World countries.

He told me a touching story of how he spent a great deal of time in an isolated **are** of the island of Madagascar trying to help impoverished people there. He and his team became close to a small boy, Emilian, who helped them communicate with the indigenous villagers. Toone left the village at one point and a typhoon struck destroying it. He feared Emilian had been killed and flew back to the village. There was no sign of the boy. A few years later, Toone had open heart surgery and survived against the odds. After he recovered, he again flew back to Madagascar and trekked back

through the jungle to the isolated village which still had no Internet or connection to the outside world. Toone was determined to find Emilian, if he could. This time, almost ten years later, Emilian heard of Toone's approach through the 'word of the jungle' and he met Toone at the beach where the boats pulled in. They hugged in a long, heartfelt embrace.

Toone continues to work on air quality issues in third-world countries. He still wears his emotions on his sleeve and is openly passionate about his mission. I firmly believe if he didn't have those personal qualities American condors would not exist today.

Fire on our Tails

I still like to keep track of how the condors are doing. In 2017, the Thomas Fire in southern California raged for almost 30 days on the flanks of the coastal mountains in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties north of Los Angeles. One of the largest wildfires in California history, it burned through a large swath of the California condor range northeast of the coastal city of Ventura. I watched it burn from my office window every day for weeks.

Concerned, I called the biologists at the **US** Fish and Wildlife Service Hopper Mountain Wildlife Refuge and asked how the condors were faring in the fire. The USFW deserves credit, in a big way, for fighting for the captive condor program and it has been front and center of the entire recovery process from the beginning.

I was told that one six-month old condor chick had been in grave danger from the flames. Condors don't typically learn to fly until they are six months old and this chick had never left the nest. The flames were roaring up the mountain, most of them 30 feet high or higher. The nest was only about 20 feet above the ground. Beneath it was thick underbrush, just what the fire needed to leap upward like a giant torch. A ranger watched helplessly from the banks of the nearby Sespe Creek. Just as the fire approached, the young condor hopped out of the nest and stood on a branch. The flames, though, were only a few feet away.

Suddenly, the condor spread its huge wings and jumped off the branch. Unfortunately, it flew the wrong way, directly into the fire. The ranger looked on horrified, only to see it reverse course and fly out of the smoke and flames, its tail feathers on fire. The giant bird dove down past the ranger and dragged its tail through the creek until the fire was out. Then it flew straight up above the trees and soared across the mountain to a place well away from the fire.

The ranger at the refuge told me that the young condor, which has a solar-powered signal attached to its talon, is healthy and strong today.

A Perfect Metaphor

For some reason, that story always seems to me to be a perfect metaphor for American journalism. We are facing a serious crisis, one of survival. Whether we are as successful at coming back as these magnificent birds have been, is still to be seen. I think, though, the image of the condor with its tail on fire is one every journalist should consider. That is precisely what is going to happen to us if we keep bungling our moral duty to practice fair and unbiased reporting.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

My Multi-million Dollar Deal?

This chapter is a little different. It does not have an article attached, I just wanted to take a moment and share a story of something that happened to me in Hollywood. It's a tragedy or a comedy, depending on your point of view. For me it was a little of both.

During the years I worked regularly for *Reader's Digest*, I was writing original stories. The magazine often bought other articles already published in other media, but mine were always published first in the *Digest*. I was surprised to see several of them, after they were published, becoming the basis for a number of television shows and films, including a handful of 'movies of the week' on major networks.

I was never consulted so I finally called a well-known producer to protest, and he just laughed. "You're a great source for us," he said. "We just wait for your stories to come out each month. We use your stories as part of our pitches." Of course, I wasn't being paid a penny and I became increasingly annoyed at that.

Although most writers dream of having their work turned into films, I never thought much about it. I had been involved a little with movies and television in the past, and I was well aware that the world of Hollywood can be a cut-throat and highly annoying place to do business.

Money Flowing Around Me Like a River

Still, it was clear there was serious money flowing around me like a river. From my little cabin in the woods in the northern Sierra, I decided to do something about it. I contacted a film company I knew about called Von Zerneck-Sertner Films. Owned by Frank Von Zerneck and Robert Sertner, two successful producers, they also had good business ties to the Hallmark Hall of Fame folks. I thought this was a perfect group to help promote what I had in mind.

I met with them a few times in Los Angeles, giving my pitch. I suggested we do three films based on *Reader's Digest* stories, and get the magazine leadership involved with the project. I knew the *Digest* was rumored to be suffering from a drop in advertising. That was, in part, due to the perception that it was becoming “grandma’s and grandpa’s magazine,” meaning its readership demographic was trending older. I didn’t think that was true, when I worked there the *Digest* had nearly 20 million subscribers, many of them under 40 years old. It also had more than 100 million readers worldwide in about 70 countries.

But the perception appeared to be cutting into advertising sales for the *Digest*. I thought I knew how they could change that. If we focused on films with younger actors – we talked about actors like Ethan Hawk and Natalie Portman (who were just starting their careers) – we could attract a younger audience. I suggested we run the young actor’s pictures on the cover of the magazine. That would both attract a younger readership to the publication and advertise the films at the same time. What could go wrong?

The first answer I got from Von Zerneck-Sertner was amazing. They wanted to up the ante. They wanted me to pitch not three, but 18 films to the *Digest*! I would be assistant producer on the first six, producer on the next six and executive producer on the final six. They had already talked to then-popular actor, Robert Urich, about being the host of the series.

Wow! Now all I had to do is get the *Digest* on board and figure

out how to make money – and how much money – out of this myself. The truth was, of course, I had no idea what I was doing and it never occurred to me to contact an entertainment lawyer.

My next step was to touch base with Ken Tomlinson, who was then the CEO of the *Digest*. He had been great to me in the previous few years. He even called me at home and assigned stories to me directly, at times. I always enjoyed working with him. He loved my idea about the film series, especially when I told him the *Digest* was under no obligation to finance any part of this – or they could finance the entire production or any part of it, if and when the films proved profitable. It was a no-lose situation for them – plus it would do something that could have changed the future of the magazine – give it a younger face.

It took me more than a month to secure a meeting place. The *Digest* wanted it in New York, the film company wanted it in Los Angeles, and neither was budging. I called everybody I knew and finally found a wonderful Chinese restaurant on 5th Avenue in New York that happened to be next door to a small office run by the film company. It was perfect. It wasn't Hollywood, but I convinced the film company it was an extension of their own offices. The *Digest* folks were happy because it was in New York.

Finally, everyone agreed to the meeting site and date. There was only one problem. I still didn't know who was going to pay me and how much. The *Digest*, while embracing the overall idea, told me I had to get it all from the film company.

Negotiations Begin: What is a Deal Memo Anyway?

So, I called the film company and we began to negotiate. Again, I had no idea what I was doing and these were the days just before the Internet really got going. I had to drive out of the mountains to a Barnes & Noble in Sacramento to purchase books on how to negotiate a film contract. I bought every book remotely related to that and read them as fast as I could. I immediately noticed something called a 'deal memo' which was a legal contract, but consisted of only a few sentences.

However, it contained everything both sides needed to make a legal deal. That's for me, I thought.

The next day, I told the film company attorney that I wanted a deal memo. At the time, the air conditioner had gone out in my little office in the mountains. When I began serious negotiations with the company lawyer on the phone, I was in my swimming trunks, suffering in the heat, holding a book that contained a list of deal memo terms. When the lawyer used a term I didn't know, I quickly turned to the appendix and looked it up.

Ultimately, I demanded the following deal – I would receive nearly \$4 million over the next three years as we made the films. I also was to receive some royalties, but since there were few royalties in those days, I didn't expect much there. However, I also wanted the first rights to writing each script at \$50,000 per script. So, in the end, I was going to make more money than I could imagine. I've never thought much about money, but that seemed like fun. I could get a new mountain bike.

We held the meeting in New York and everyone came – the top executives from the *Digest*, the leaders of the film company, and many others showed up at the restaurant. I was the host and everything went smoothly. That was so much fun. I even bought a new tie for the meeting. In the end, everyone stood and clapped and there seemed to be verbal agreement all around.

When I flew back to California, I didn't think I needed the superfluous airplane.

I waited on the final signed agreement from the *Digest*. A week went by, then another. During the third week I grew worried and called my editor at the *Digest*. He was silent for a long moment. "Well, I guess the deal has fallen apart," he said. He explained that the CEO with whom I had worked with for nearly five years, and who had loved the idea of the 18 films, had quietly retired from the magazine. The new CEO, after settling in, announced he did not want to do the deal. Not much of a reason was given other than he said he was not interested in anything that had to do with Hollywood, my editor said.

My \$4 million contract was suddenly nothing more than smoke and vapor. I was sorely disappointed and went mountain biking in the woods to forget about it at least for a while. Of course, I still remember the entire affair and wonder sometimes what would have happened had we gone forward with it. The *Digest* went into bankruptcy (financial restructuring) afterwards, so I often felt this deal might have helped prevent that. Given all the current film potential with Prime, Netflix and others, **I still think it would be a good idea**, but all I could do at the time was shrug and move on. There are many more books to write and things to cover. I like what the great science fiction author, Isaac Asimov, remarked when they asked him what he would do if a doctor only gave him six more hours to live. “I’d write faster,” he said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

MY BOOKS SO FAR

“GODS OF OUR TIME: More Than Just a Paris Love Story”

*Winner of the
“International Novel of the Year Award”*

Sixty Degrees Publishing

One of my editors told me I shouldn't include this book here because it is not non-fiction like the other stories. But I loved writing this novel and I think it should be here. Besides, the internal struggles that each major character, including the journalist, faced were real to me as any non-fiction.

I had wanted to write fiction since childhood, but it wasn't until recently that I gathered the courage to do it. Economics had a lot to do with it, I had a family to support, but the truth is, writing fiction also scared me. What if I wasn't any good at it? Worse, what if I didn't like

the process? This second fear was bigger than the first. I had already proven that I could write books and articles that people didn't mind reading. But what if I finally summoned the courage to write a novel and found I didn't like the actual writing part of it? Where do dreams go from there?

I also wondered whether it was worthwhile. It takes a relatively long time to write a novel. Then, one fine summer's day, I was walking along the beach in Santa Barbara and the answer suddenly came to me in the form of a question. What books have had the biggest impact on my life? That was easy. They were all novels. Books like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Narcissus and Goldmund*, *Lord of the Rings*, *The Dharma Bums*, and *Cannery Row* had huge effects on me. I realized you can touch and encourage people as easily through fiction as non-fiction.

So, not long ago, I finished my first novel. The setting was easy – Paris, France. I have been there many times and I love the city. If I was going to be somewhere in my imagination for several months, why not Paris? Also, I chose the year 1925 because I've always been enchanted with the 1920's. It always seemed a dynamic and colorful time to me. I am a huge *Downton Abbey* fan because it so beautifully depicts that era. Paris was even more romantic and dangerous, at the time. It was full of characters like Scott Fitzgerald, Picasso, Gertrude Stein, William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway.

The main characters in my novel are fictional, Sophie and Jake. Jake is – this probably will not surprise you – a journalist from the American Midwest. He was sent to Paris to interview the artistic aristocracy who gathered there in the 1920s. He struggles with many of the same issues independent journalists struggle with today, including trying to report the truth of what he sees and hears, even though he knows that is not what his editors want him to write.

His primary challenge, though, comes from within. He's been raised to believe he has to be 'perfect' in his life and work. He is desperate with the belief that these artists, whom he was to interview for his story, will be the 'gods of his time' who would show him how to be perfect.

Jake's interview with Hemingway (which was so much fun to write) and some of the other artists reveal they are far from being perfect

people. Terribly disillusioned by that and other events that take place, he struggles. Sophie, meanwhile, has witnessed a terrible event in a bombing raid during World War I, and is also struggling emotionally.

Then they meet in the most unlikely of circumstances in Paris.

Jake's trials as a young journalist – both his internal doubts about his writing abilities and his struggles with his editors – were easy to describe. Sophie's journey to find out whether she can trust the world enough to love again was a different kind of challenge for me – but one I understood from the beginning.

Developing subplots involving politics and a band of criminals was also a natural path for me since I've done so many stories on both. During all this, I came up with my own slogan for how one writes fiction. You go with what you know – then exaggerate. That is where it departs from journalism – or at least where it should.

When I finished the last page, I realized I love writing fiction. There was not a single second of frustration involved during the entire writing of *Gods of Our Time*. I no longer had to fear I wouldn't like the process of writing fiction. It was as much fun as playing in the forbidden creek when I was younger – you can literally feel the energy and life flowing around and through you.

A Scene from Gods of Our Time:

The flames rose high in the fireplace. The black dog staked a claim on my feet, curled up and fell asleep. Emile's wife, Bridgette, sat beside me. "You know, we have met before," she said in a low voice.

I remembered.

"You were in a hurry and you almost knocked me down," she said.

"Yes, and I was sorry for that."

"So you said," she smiled slightly.

"You called me a gangster." I said, and laughed. We looked at her friends sorting through the contraband in the big, warm cavern.

She laughed lightly. "We are all gangsters in one way or another. Thank you for saving Emile. I know there is much more to the story than either of you is admitting, but I will leave it alone. The story is good just the way it is."

Then she gently touched the big wound on my forehead. I had forgotten about it until then. I shrank back. "It is ugly," I said before I realized I was going to say anything.

"No," Bridgette said swiftly. "Do not think that." Then she disappeared for a moment, returned with a cup, and scooped a clear, salve-like substance out of it. She smoothed it onto my forehead and rubbed it around the wound. "The scar will fade, but it will take time," she said. "But something else might not. If you are going to become a decent writer, you must know something." She stopped and stared into my eyes, and I couldn't look away.

"You fear imperfection," she said. "But there is no such thing as a perfect place, a perfect world or a perfect love." Then she looked across at her husband, who had been listening, and she smiled. "A beautiful love, yes! We can achieve that. And that is even better."

I thought for a long moment about everything that had happened since I met Sophie. "A woman once told me there is no perfect in art or love," I said. "I didn't know what she meant until tonight."

"Ah, and where is that woman now?" Bridgette asked with raised eyebrows.

I stared at her for a moment, then stood up quickly, knocking the chair over behind me. The black dog

woke up and everyone in the room stopped and looked over.

“I have to go!” I shouted in English. I hugged Bridgette, shook Emile’s hand quickly and shouted, “*Merci* and *Au revoir!*” many times. Then I ran out the door into the rain.

My clothes were still wet from the river and outside the wind hit me like a whip. It was dark, but my footing was good and I ran up the Quai Montebello, then down Boulevard Saint-Germain. I cut across a small park as the rain eased up and the moon came out, low in the sky. I saw an owl banking against the soft silver lining and then I heard a girl’s voice singing clearly and beautifully. She sang in French and I did not know what she was singing, but it gave me great energy.

As I raced through the city, the sky closed and it began to rain hard again. I had to wipe my eyes as I ran. My shoes splashed on the road. I turned a final corner, looked up and saw the light in Sophie’s apartment window. It was the brightest and most beautiful light in the universe.

**The new release of *“Gods of Our Time”*
will take place in the spring of 2023.**

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Fatal Deception

Rodale Publishing and Simon & Schuster

Researching and writing *Fatal Deception* was a challenge and a joy. What happened after, though, was a wrenching disappointment. I am proud of the book, and I would write it again even knowing everything that was going to happen. But some hard realities of journalism and life came with it.

When I took the assignment to write the expose', I was thrilled because it was about people who needed help. An international chemical company had poisoned their town and nobody was doing anything about it. That was exactly the kind of challenge I liked.

In the end, I exposed not only the nefarious actions of the corporate leaders in that town, but similar 'profit-over-lives' activities by this terrible industry all over the world. I was – and am – glad I wrote it, despite the frustrations it continues to create whenever I think about it. I was told that *Fatal Deception* was up for a Pulitzer Prize nomination, but few books that seriously challenge the most powerful companies in the world win those sorts of awards.

What I did receive for writing this book changed my career forever. The best way to explain it, perhaps, is in bullet points.

Otherwise, this chapter might run far too long. This is some of the fallout I received from writing *Fatal Deception*:

- A rainbow of death threats for more than a year toward me and my family.
- A cancellation by a major publishing company that was owned by one of the international corporations my book exposed. This included an abrupt withdrawal of more than 100 media opportunities from NPR, and many other major outlets. I had already done more than 100 shows of one type or another and it wasn't anything I did or said that caused this. It was the fact that victims of asbestos companies, which had knowingly poisoned workers and consumers of their products for more than 50 years, were using the book in lawsuits seeking justice. (Often, the large corporations being sued had not distributed asbestos products themselves, but had acquired companies that had, and thus assumed their liabilities.)
- I was asked, during this time, to give extensive testimony on the ongoing dangers of asbestos, to groups of **US** Senators and Representatives in the **US Capital** Building. I met with many of the Congressional members in one-on-one sessions. I explained what I had learned researching and writing the book. After returning home to California, I was called back to Washington by then Senate Majority Leader, Harry Reid. He asked me to give a 45-minute speech to Congressional members and their staffs. I wasn't thrilled getting back on an airplane, but I gulped a couple of glasses of Kentucky's finest, and headed back to Washington. I was grateful to be able to tell the tragic story of the people in Libby and elsewhere. It was if someone was actually paying attention to 'those who don't have voices'.
- My feeling of triumph didn't last long, though. Unfortunately, the huge corporations ultimately won in Congress and those poisoned with asbestos lost. To this day, they still don't have voices. Money doesn't just talk, it shouts.
- Last year I received a subpoena from a plaintiff's attorney firm to testify in a case they had filed against Johnson & Johnson for

allegedly, knowingly leaving asbestos in their baby powder. I answered questions for nearly five hours in a deposition about a study of J&J's baby powder I had done in 2004, in an EPA-approved laboratory. The laboratory found asbestos in the baby powder.

- In the year following the publication of *Fatal Deception*, I also received an invitation to speak to administrators at a school district in northern California. At least one of the schools had a student parking lot contaminated with naturally occurring asbestos fibers. In a public hearing, I simply provided information the EPA had supplied to me about the tremolite, (asbestos) veins existing in the area. No one disputed these facts. You can actually see the tremolite veins near the schools. Some at the hearing may have felt this information challenged the immense residential and commercial construction going on in this area. Massive profits were at stake. It was after this testimony that the death threats increased.

Taking the Risks


This book, more than any other, reminded me that as a freelance, investigative writer, I was essentially on my own. I was able to avoid office politics and write what I wanted on my own timetable, but in exchange, I had little backup. If the people I was exposing or writing about don't like what I am doing and pushed back in one way or another, I usually had to figure out how to deal with that myself.

My goal isn't to discourage anyone from becoming a journalist, just the opposite. As in most industries, though, sometimes doing the right thing involves risk. Everything comes into question when you hear the kind of threats that were left on my phone machine every week. Should I quit? Should I hide? I wasn't sure what to do so I just kept writing. I talked to the FBI and they provided me with some suggestions. No attempts were actually made to carry out these threats, but it's something you don't forget easily.

Asbestos is a Current Killer

Asbestos is not a man-made poison, but a naturally occurring rock. It is also a terribly boring topic. People's eyes glaze over when they hear about it. They think of it as yesterday's problem. Well, actually, it isn't. It still affects tens of thousands of people every year.

Here's a bit of news I'll bet you won't believe. Asbestos is still used in countless products in America. It is NOT illegal to do so. This is one damn difficult truth to get anyone to accept. Asbestos is still legal to use in products in America, and it is still killing people. If only we had someone like Julia Roberts to star in a movie about it, perhaps people would pay attention. (I'm talking about the film *Erin Brockovich*. The toxic issue in that film affected less than 5,000 people. Asbestos has adversely affected tens of millions of people worldwide.)

More than 114 metric tons of asbestos was imported into the  for use in products in the first three months of 2022, according to the United States International Trade Commission.

The California State Rock

Just a bit about asbestos. It is a fibrous rock usually curled up inside other rocks, such as serpentine, which, ironically, is the California State Rock. Serpentine got its name from the fact that the white asbestos fibers, which you can often see, look like small, coiled snakes inside the otherwise green rock. When I learned that, I wrote up a bill for the California Legislature that would have changed the state rock from serpentine to gold (makes sense, right?). They clearly did not want to draw attention to asbestos and the giant companies involved, and therefore did not act on it.

The problem with asbestos is it can contain billions of invisible fibers that often break off, and can hang in the air for hours. You generally don't even know you are breathing them in, but you can inhale hundreds of thousands of them in an hour. These can

cause many types of cancer and asbestosis. One disease you have probably heard about on television commercials is mesothelioma. The pathology is initially not all that complicated. The fibers pierce and stick in the soft tissue of your lungs and other parts of your body like microscopic spears. They often migrate, ever so slowly, across your lungs, sometimes piercing your cell's DNA. The migration leaves lines of scar tissue, ultimately shutting down your ability to breathe and provide oxygen to your vital organs. Part of the 'fatal deception' in the **US** is due to company doctors covering up this damage and blaming worker deaths on the collapse of the organs themselves. Frequently, the cause of death is blamed on 'lung failure' without including the fact that the victim's lungs contained a million asbestos fibers. As one reviewer wrote: "If you don't know what evil is, you will by the time you finish this book."

I suffered "Journalism zappo PTSD" again while talking to the dying asbestos victims I met in person and online while writing this book. That caused me to give up writing for a time and start a nonprofit to help them. I did that for more than three years. I worked passionately, but in the end, not much was achieved, other than the test I did on the J&J baby powder. Everyone who showed signs of asbestos poisoning died – it was inevitable. I also joined with others trying to get asbestos banned, and to get money to seek medical help for patients and many other things. In the end, though, nothing was ever done about any of it. That was a terrible disappointment. The giant companies won and created an inadequate fund for those who were poisoned. None of these companies, of course, were ever sanctioned, even though more than a million lives have been sacrificed to their greed. Today, following a time-honored tradition of guilty corporations, they simply file for bankruptcy. That allows them to slip out from under the financial 'burden' that comes with losing lawsuits against those who were poisoned.

Again, I don't want to dissuade anyone from becoming a journalist or fighting for what is right. You have to know, though, that you might suffer for it. You often don't win, and you won't always be recognized for your fight – it's just what you do. My way

of dealing with setbacks is to eat a plate of the best chocolate chip cookies I can find, have a shot or two of good Bourbon, think if there is a way to do it differently next time, and then get back to work.

A Writing Technique

I wanted to take a minute to say that the construction of *Fatal Deception* was done in honor of one of my favorite writers, John Steinbeck. He wrote *Grapes of Wrath* in a particular sort of literary dance rhythm and I used it in *FD*. Steinbeck used two major points of view – one in each alternating chapter. One chapter would typically involve an intimate account of the actions and emotions of the Joad family and the people around them, and then in the next chapter he would pull back and give a general overview of the politics and social upheavals occurring in the entire country. I did this by writing one chapter about the people suffering in Libby, Montana and the following chapter would expand the scope of the narrative, looking at the history, politics, finances of the US asbestos industry and then pull back even more to give the world view of asbestos contamination. Then, in the following chapter, I went back to the personal stories in Libby and ‘danced’ through the entire book this way. It was not only my tribute to Steinbeck, it was a convenient writing device.

“Against the Most Powerful Corporations in the World”

I remember one day, sitting in front of most of the members of the **US** Senate, ready to give my talk, when the then Senate Majority Leader, Tom Daschle, leaned over to me and said, “You know, it’s us against the biggest and most powerful corporations in the world.” That didn’t scare me, (it should have). I was proud of telling the true story, but I could see the deep concern in Daschle’s face. For good reason. Although he was the highest elected official in South Dakota history, he was upset in the 2004 election by an opponent

who had received huge contributions from companies outside of South Dakota. I was reminded again how money talks in politics, often far louder than middle class or poor people ever can – even when their lives are at stake.

Here are a few short pieces from *Fatal Deception*. In the first one, Bob Wilkins was a foreman at the W.R. Grace vermiculite mine in Libby, Montana. Vermiculite is used in potting soil and through building and home construction materials that are still in millions of American homes. It was used throughout the World Trade Center Towers. Vermiculite is combined in nature with asbestos, in the Libby mine. You can't separate the two. It comes out of the ground that way. The owners of the mine have always known this. The same is true of talc, in many mines.

I met with Wilkins many times at his modest home in Libby while researching this book. He died of asbestosis two days before *Fatal Deception* was published. The book is dedicated to him and the other brave people suffering in Libby.

From the Pages of “Fatal Deception”

Rodale Publishing and Simon & Schuster

Bob Wilkins never got used to the men dying early at the mine. He was told it was because they smoked. “I didn’t know about that, but I never got used to losing so many friends,” he said...After seeing combat in WWII, he took a job as police chief in Wolf Pointe, but too often he was again faced the violence men can do, and he moved his family to Libby. It was the soft light of the canyons there that made Wilkins feel he had finally found peace.

He took the job offered by W.R. Grace as a foreman and was quick to agree when the company asked him

to help fix the baseball fields and nearby running track. “We brought down waste material, which was mostly a mix of dirt and vermiculite, and put it down on top of everything,” he recalled. “We spread it out and even built the baseball bleachers right on top of it. None of the workers knew that it was contaminated with asbestos. But the company knew – and nobody said a word.”

The company also donated asbestos-laden dirt from the mine for the town skating rink and the running track at the Libby middle school. Similar material was also donated to almost every resident in Libby, who packed it into the walls of their homes and into their attics to protect against the winter cold. Often, children stuffed the material by hand into the tight corners of the attics...

Information regarding asbestos contamination in the mine was readily available as early as 1963. That year, Ben Wake, an industrial hygiene engineer for the Center of Disease Prevention for the State of Montana, became concerned about the high rate of lung disease among Libby miners...He sent air and ore samples from the mine to the federal Occupations Health Research Facility in Ohio for analysis and received these results:

Asbestos present in ore – Yes

Type of asbestos – tremolite

Percent of asbestos fibers in airborne dust samples – 40 percent. (This is an extremely high and lethal level).

Wake insisted that the classification of the dust be changed to the same category as talc and asbestos and dramatic changes be made inside the mine. Wake’s official changes and call to action were never made or acted upon. When the mine was finally officially closed in 1990, the asbestos-laced air miners breathed everyday was still labeled as a “nuisance dust.”

What Happened After

The book is packed with stories from around the world, tracing the giant spiderweb of death, caused by asbestos. In England, for example, asbestos-caused deaths were not a subject of the corporate-driven ‘fatal deceptions’ and government health officials openly named it as the ‘number one cause of death of UK males under the age of 65’. At the time I wrote the book, in some third-world countries, children were still carrying uncovered asbestos-containing materials around storehouses. It’s fibrous and light, perfect for young hands and young lungs. I wish someday some brave entrepreneur would film a documentary about this – it is essentially murder allowed to continue for profit’s sake.

A Few Reviews

I received thousands of reviews, emails and comments from *Fatal Deception*. Here are just a couple of the reviews and comments about the book.

“Journalist Bowker’s riveting, anecdotal look at the damage done by mining and manufacturing companies who denied the harmful effects of asbestos might have been titled “Evil Incorporated.” The personal stories make for a gripping read. In classic muckraking style, Bowker gives voice to many who suffer from long-term exposure to asbestos and argues for a ban on asbestos products in the U.S.” – *Publisher’s Weekly*.

One reviewer from Amazon, who gave me five stars, wrote: “Read this book late at night with the lights on! In a way this IS a horror story. Bowker paints an alarming portrait of corporate murder and the cover-up of this crime not only by the asbestos industry, but the government – Democrats and Republicans. This is an excellent book.”

And finally, one woman wrote: “You are truly a courageous person to blow the whistle on such powerful corporations. And hopefully, the truth will prevail. Please stay alive and keep up the good work.”

I wrote, thanked her and promised I would do my best.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Playing From the Heart

Prima Publishing (Random House)

This was my first published book. It is a fun and inspiring story of a quadriplegic athlete, Roger Crawford, who beat the odds and played professional tennis.

Roger is a terrific guy. He was born with different legs and arms than most people. He is one of the most courageous, open and friendly people I've ever known. I wish I could insert the entire book here so you can see how he handles life. It is so touchingly inspirational. I read the book whenever I'm feeling lowly – and I wrote it! It is his voice, his story, and his thoughts about life that light up those pages.

He had a prosthesis from his knee downward on one leg. His arms were shortened and many of his fingers were missing. Yet, he had winning records in high school and on the University of Loyola at Marymount tennis team near Los Angeles. What he lacked physically, he more than made up for mentally. I've done dozens of stories with professional athletes and none of them were better than Roger at strategy, patience, quickness and knowing his own strengths.

He became a successful professional speaker after he hung up his tennis racquet. We met often as I interviewed him about his life. We also talked a great deal on the telephone. I wrote the book, they slapped a great cover on it, and soon after Roger appeared on *Good Morning America* and a number of other shows. *USA Today* did a big spread on the book and we received a great deal of media attention. The entire process was gratifying. It was my first book to be officially published.

Roger has done well in his speaking career. We touched base for the first time in many years in 2022, and are now talking about writing another book together – I’m looking forward to it. There are many funny stories in this book. I’ve chosen just a couple of paragraphs where he gives some terrific advice.

From the Pages of “Playing From the Heart”

Prima Publishing (Random House)

If I had one message to parents, it would be that most people with physical inconveniences are not insulted in the least by the curiosity of children. Most of us look forward to the opportunity to talk to them about why we look different. If I show them kindness when they ask questions, then hopefully when they see another person who is different than they are, they will look at them with understanding, not fear or pity.

The word *handicapped* was coined in the early days in England, when people with visible physical problems were turned out by society and had to beg along the roadways. Most of them held their caps out. They were referred to as *hand-in-caps*, which was modernized to *handicapped*. It’s why I’m not overly fond of that word.

One thing I'd like to stress to able-bodied people who encounter someone who is physically different, is this: If you're curious, it is perfectly okay to ask them about it. If they take offense, that is their problem. Asking these questions is not bad manners or in bad taste. I welcome such questions because once they are answered, we can take the next step in our relationship. For example, I find the topic of my hands a good social icebreaker. Once people find out about them, they feel they know me better and are more willing to open up about themselves.

One of Roger's favorite quotes, which becomes more profound and full of truth the more you think about, is this: *"I'd rather have one leg and a positive attitude than two legs and a negative attitude."*

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The Visionary Leader

Prima Publishing (Random House)

The Visionary Leader is a book that stays with me nearly every day. I loved not only writing the manuscript, I love what it says and the ideals it represents. It is a leadership book and I was hired to write it by three business consultants, Bob Solum, Bob Wall, and Mark Sobol.

The book addresses ideas that I fervently believe in – including creating a deep-spirited environment of caring in the workplace where, as I wrote, “*People are happier coming to work on Monday than they were leaving work on Friday.*”

Later, I wrote another progressive business book, *The Whole Systems Approach*, with change consultants, William and Cindy Adams. I enjoyed working with them. We met in Park City, Utah a few times, which quickly became one of my favorite places in the West.

Both books focused on new ways of transforming and running businesses. I was thoroughly engaged with the processes these consultants were outlining because I have always detested office politics. It is a big reason I became a freelance writer. Working

for myself meant escaping the inevitable barbs, betrayals and bone-headed moves incumbent in corporate politics. I have no patience with people who negotiate friendships solely for their own benefit. In many ways, work stress, brought on by narcissistic supervisors and co-workers may cause more illness among working Americans than anything else. We took this on in *The Visionary Leader*.

The book explains, step by step, how leaders can generate enthusiasm, ingenuity, joy, excitement and peak production from employees. I wrote, “If you buy new software or hardware for the company, your competitors can do the same in a week. But, if you capture the hearts and minds of your employees, you will have an advantage most companies can’t ever match.”

It’s not a fantasy, this kind of work environment does exist, but only when leaders are enlightened and not so insecure that they spend all their time trying to be “the boss.” It is a terrific book that ended up on the **best-seller** list of business books for several weeks.

I still feel a soul-connection with that book. One of the co-authors, Bob Solum, and I became close friends while working together. We shared a lot about our lives, ambitions, hopes, fears and families. I was crushed when I received a phone call from a mutual friend who told me Bob had died in a scuba diving accident. He lived in Seattle and was diving in the dark waters of Puget Sound. It took some time for me to recover fully from that. He and I had talked extensively about writing more books together. He was a hell of a good guy and I still miss him.

From the Pages of “The Visionary Leader”

Prima Publishing (Random House)

Corporations trying to gain an edge by buying or developing new technology will usually find their competitors have soon gained the new technology. But

those companies that win over the hearts and minds of their employees will find a permanent advantage...

There are more than a few books out there predicting that dramatic changes lie ahead for savvy American and international business leaders. This book is not one of them. We believe the change is already here. This book is about a re-organizational effort within your company that requires more vision, courage and commitment than capital.

At the heart of this reorganization is the dismantling of the outdated top-down authority structure that defines so many of America's struggling corporations and companies. In its place, a new concept of organization is being developed, one that spurs creativity, empowers employees, encourages learning, and ensures customer satisfaction. It is a streamlined organization – stripped of middle-management bureaucracy – with a free flow of communication through its horizontal form...

Blazing the trail as a visionary leader is not for the meek or fainthearted. Choosing to be a leader who exerts influence by empowering others, rather than through direct control, is a major league decision. Far more than a management tool, it is a philosophy of life that defines your interactions and relationships with other people. It has the potential to transcend the workplace, but in this book we contain our thoughts to this arena...

A HIGHER PURPOSE

Many, if not most leaders have been power brokers looking to control and be served. Their days are numbered. In the new organization – in the new paradigm – successful leaders are driven by a higher purpose: the desire to empower and serve others.

With that in mind, it's worth asking yourself: "Am I interested in this? Does this appeal to me? Do I have what it takes to give my authority away to my staff?" If the answer is no to any of these questions, if there is no satisfaction in this for you, don't do it. Your personal joy and fulfillment must come from giving power away, rather than wielding it like a hammer. The personal "juice" of being a visionary leader comes from the enormous satisfaction of witnessing the growth and development of those you lead. If you don't understand this – if the idea of being the BOSS and master of your span of control is too hard to let go of – then you should not attempt the visionary process.

After all the discussions, evaluations, and calculations are done, your decision to become a visionary leader must come from your heart. Empirically, there is ample evidence from enlightened companies that empowering employees and building a participative work environment will yield substantial productivity gains. But the new paradigm is based on the understanding that while profits are our end goal, they are not the most powerful leadership focus. Profits are analogous to breathing. We need to breathe to live, but breathing is not the highest purpose of our lives. Leaders need profits to thrive, yet they are not the highest purpose of leading...Long-term, sustainable profits are the direct result of this visionary process of winning over the hearts and minds of those within your company.

The irony of the role of the visionary leaders is that they must become a servant to those they lead. The paradox is their companies – and their employees – will all profit most when leaders are busy giving their power away.

For those leaders who understand this and have the courage, stamina, skills and most of all, the vision, to share it with others, the ultimate corollary is simple. You win, your team wins, your company wins.

What Happened After

A few years after *The Visionary Leader* was published, I had a chance to put all the ideas and strategies in the book to the test. I took a job as Executive Editor for one of the largest English language Hispanic magazines in the **US**. Called *Hispanic Business Magazine*. We covered all aspects of the challenges facing Hispanic business leaders throughout the **US**, Mexico and other countries.

The owner of the magazine knew I had been the speech writer and political consultant for Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and knew I had spent time working with Hispanic business and political leaders. I enjoyed my time at the magazine. We had a circulation of nearly one million readers. We won lots of awards and I oversaw the creation of our first online edition. I chose most of the content in each edition and helped choose the covers. I oversaw our staff, hired freelance writers and photographers and generally wrote a major feature or two.

More than anything, though, I was keen to see whether the leadership concepts and strategies I wrote about in **The Visionary Leader** worked. They did, wonderfully well. The entire magazine staff got on well as a team, helping each other at every turn. Nobody was afraid to express concerns or ideas of how to make the magazine or one of our processes better. I didn't need an 'open door policy' because everyone had theirs open. They knew if they had an issue I could help with or a resource they needed, they could bring it up as I walked by. If they didn't say anything, I just kept going and didn't bother them.

The owner began my tenure by insisting on an old-school, monthly staff meeting so we could all ‘catch up’. I told him that was unneeded and over time he came to trust that I understood what was happening every day in real time and there was no ‘catching up’ needed. It was fun to watch him change. I still receive – so many years later – emails from several staff members, letting me know what is happening in their lives and careers. To me, that is the biggest testimony I could imagine for *The Visionary Leader*.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The Health Care Solution

Viking Press

This book was intriguing to write for a few different reasons. I don't recall how we were connected, but I do remember receiving a call from Duane Dauner, who was then President of the California Association of Hospitals and Health Care Systems. It is a bureaucratic-sounding title but Duane was a powerful figure in California. He is also incredibly intelligent and committed to improve our limping health care system. I was immediately interested in writing the book with him, especially when I heard that the two biggest names in the **US** Congress at the time, Bob Dole and Richard Gephardt, might become co-authors.

Most of all, I was motivated by the idea that we could produce a health plan that would not only work, it would help all working middle-class Americans, who were especially struggling at the time, to afford health care.

I liked the rough plan that was outlined to me and the fact that it was bipartisan. Gephardt was a leading Democrat Congressman from Missouri and Dole, a leading Republican Senator from Kansas. The idea that I could be part of a powerful new health care system that would be affordable and efficient was intriguing.

Dauner was quite businesslike, decent and supportive. He gave me free reign to conduct research on health care plans internationally. I loved figuring out what worked in New Zealand, England, Hong Kong, Canada and other places. What parts of these health care plans would work in the **US**? Great stuff – I enjoyed that research.

The book itself is a step-by-step blueprint for changing the system so it would serve all Americans directly. It contains many ideas and designs that should still be considered today.

Near the end of the project, though, Dole decided to run for **US** President against Bill Clinton. I only talked to him once on the phone. Dole was friendly – we were both from Kansas after all – and he was surprisingly candid with me. He said he couldn't put his name on the book, which would have been an endorsement for the plan inside, because he didn't want to give the Democrats any ammunition to criticize him during the campaign. He and Gephardt gave the book nice testimonials. Ultimately the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Tip O'Neill, wrote the Foreword. In part, it read:

"If there is one fault I find with the medical profession, it is that it has become too impersonal. It has gone from a profession in which success was measured by the quality of a doctor's expertise and bedside manner to one where success is determined by the bottom line."

I loved that sentiment and I think it is probably more true today than it was then. That, however, is yet another book.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Long Hauler's Syndrome

Sixty Degrees Publishing

This book I researched and wrote in the spring of 2021. I was motivated to write it after a family member and a close friend were both diagnosed with Long Hauler's Syndrome, which usually is called Long Covid in Europe.

I wanted to learn more about this often-devastating sequel to COVID-19, which is now affecting millions of people worldwide. Long Haulers consists of a multitude of symptoms that typically surface for patients about a month after an initial bout with Covid-19. These range from tachycardia, cognitive impairment and extreme fatigue to dangerous blood clotting and issues involving most major organs.

I put everything else aside to write this book last year. I wrote and had it published it in 100 days. To make the message as legitimate as possible, I interviewed the following experts, among many others, all of whom were working with Long Covid patients. Here is a partial list of doctors appearing in the book. I am still in debt to them all for taking the time to talk to me.

- Dr. Avindra Nath: NIH Clinical Director of Neurological Disorders and Stroke
- Dr. Greg Vanichkachorn: Mayo Clinic Occupational Medicine Specialist
- Dr. Mitchell Miglis: Stanford University Neurological Specialist
- Dr. David Patrino: Mount Sinai Medical Center
- Dr. Laurie Jacobs and Dr. Jonathan Shammash: Hackensack University Medical Center
- Dr. Lynn Fitzgibbons: Chair of Infection Diseases Dept. of Cottage Hospital, Santa Barbara, CA
- Dr. Rachel Salas: Johns Hopkins Neurologist
- Dr. Janna Friedly: University of Washington Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation Physician
- Dr. Aaron Bunnell: University of Washington, Co-Director of Rehabilitation
- Dr. Matthew Ashley, Neurologist at the Centre for Neuro Skills
- Dr. Christian Sandrock: UC Davis Director of Critical Care
- Dr. Iana Simova: Head of the Cardiology, Heart and Brain Center, University Hospital, Pleven, Bulgaria.

This is NOT in the Patients' Heads

I interviewed dozens of others as well, including many people struggling with the avalanche of symptoms Long Covid can create. I listed these doctors to give you an idea of the task I took on – motivated by the urgency I felt in trying to make sense out of what was attacking my family, friends and people worldwide.

The key message of the book is that Long Haulers is real – it is not “In the patients’ heads,” as so many doctors and some journalists have said and still want to believe. They are dead wrong. If you don’t agree, please read the book. Every medical expert I listed above, and many more, affirmed the epidemic of Long Covid. They agreed again when

I allowed them to double-check what I had written. There is no doubt in any of their minds that Long Covid is a serious and real health issue. Still, to this day, there are many doctors and others who shrug off this post-pandemic. Even some otherwise clear-headed television journalists have called into question whether these symptoms aren't just made up by patients. That is a massively wrong and dangerous assumption. I would challenge them to read the book and reconsider.

There were such tremendous political forces at work regarding Long Covid, but I worked hard to eliminate all politics from the book. I felt it was too important to present the facts and to affirm that Long Covid is indeed a real medical issue. My hope is we evolve from this and stop politicizing health issues in the future. People die needlessly when we do that. Surely we can reach a place where we care more for each other than we care for profits and power. Imagine a world like that – it's good to dream.

I heard from thousands of patients from around the world who appreciated the book. It was nice to know it was important to them and gave them hope. That was the point of the book, along with calling for work to continue into the search for cures and preventive measures that seem so elusive. I plan to continue to write stories about Long Covid until that happens.

Once again, I would like to plant the idea, here, that this is a perfect subject for a documentary film.

From the Pages of “Long Hauler’s Syndrome”

Sixty Degrees Publishing

Many doctors remain in the dark about Long Haulers or Long Covid, which the NIH has labeled Post-Acute Sequelae Covid (PASC). “It wasn’t long ago that I still saw a Harvard University physician on Twitter

doubting PASC,” Dr. David Putrino, PhD, Director of Rehabilitation Innovation at Mount Sinai Health Systems in New York, told me. “These doctors who don’t work in critical care units often have not seen this syndrome and can be slow to recognize it.”

It is essential that the entire medical world realizes and accepts the fact that PASC exists, and that it defies past medical and personal experience that says disorders strike us with no more than two or three symptoms at a time. Evolving beyond that thinking is critical. Treatments and potential cures need to be studied, considered and debated – disagreements are expected and fully accepted in that regard – as long as they are part of the process of finding solutions. But the first step, accepting the fact that PASC exists, isn’t optional. Any physician who disagrees should be avoided. The care providers who have taken up the challenge in medical centers and clinics around the world – including the physicians and experts interviewed in this book – are forward-thinking and true heroes. The amount of human suffering they are helping to eradicate is monumental.

One nationwide group, the Long Covid Alliance, has estimated that at least 3.2 million **US** patients are suffering from PASC symptoms and that number may be far higher. For many patients, not knowing what is wrong with them, and suffering sometimes debilitating fatigue and pain create what some described as, “Hell on earth.”

“PASC symptoms can be quite severe,” said Dr. Greg Vanichkachorn, a specialist at the Mayo Clinic. “The fatigue **associate** associated with this is not a normal fatigue – this is far more profound. People often say they have to rest for hours after taking their pet for a walk of only a block. What we have to realize

is this post COVID syndrome is not rare – patients, providers, and employers should all be expecting to see it prominently in their communities.”

A Special Forces Hero Navy Seal Faces “Toughest Enemy”

It was not unusual for people to agree to be interviewed with the promise of anonymity. I agreed only a couple of times, but I think you’ll see there was a good reason regarding the following story. Through a friend, I was introduced to man who had worked for a Special Forces arm of the **US** military as a Navy Seal and who now works for the Department of Defense.

Although he was involved with many rugged military operations, perhaps none of them have presented the nearly overwhelming attack of the PASC symptoms from which he’s been suffering for nearly a year.

“It’s the biggest and toughest enemy I’ve ever faced,” he said. His symptoms, which came on in a hurry weeks after he recovered from Covid-19, include spiking blood pressure, intense brain fog and fatigue, tinnitus, a rolling mix of numbness and pain in different parts of his body, shortness of breath and other issues.

“Psychologically it is very disconcerting,” he said. “It’s been months and everything I was once able to do physically and mentally is missing. Many of us define our identity by what we can do and now that is so greatly diminished, it’s like being a wounded warrior in battle.” When he was first diagnosed, even the term ‘long haulers’ was not known but in small circles. No one could even guess what was happening to him. The closest thing

doctors could guess was that he was suffering from some type of dysautonomia, the central nervous system misfiring, but they didn't know why or how to treat it. He was given a series of increasing stronger drugs, especially to try to relax his racing heart, but nothing really worked for long. They ran all manner of tests on him, from an MRI and CAT scan to an EKG and blood work. The test results, as you might expect, told his physicians little about his condition or why he was suffering. Meanwhile, his life was being turned upside down. He couldn't work every day and some days he couldn't work at all because of the fatigue and cognitive reductions. It was devastating, not only physically, but mentally. "There were times, especially as the months went by and no doctors could do anything to help, that you figure it's all over - or should be. You think you might be getting better and then different symptoms come at you that you didn't even know existed. Your critical thinking ability to ability to concentrate in general is gone - all gone. I had to stop working and take a medical leave of absence. That might have to turn into a short-term disability. I can't get my arms around long-term disability yet. That is too much for me to think about right now. I'm not ready to quit, but I'm not anywhere near well yet, either. The fatigue level especially is just horrible."

As one of the most physically fit and mentally tough people on the planet, he is bed-ridden often after even a short stint of exercise. "You can't push through this," he said. "Your body will tell you what it can do each day and you'd better listen to it. I've learned that much."

PASC is an enemy armed with weapons we have yet to find a way to fight effectively. It is a monster that is looming - it's time we all become part of a special force team that fights back. The current **US** Congress is passing bills containing trillions of dollars. It seems,

from here, that for Congress to allot \$50 billion for research funds that could help millions of patients, would be a great beginning in our war against PASC and the human suffering that could be prevented from future viruses.

What Happened After

Just before this book went to press, I caught up with Les, the Navy Seal in this story. It had been a few months since we had last spoken. The story above and my book, *Beating Long Hauler Syndrome*, was published in early summer 2021. Since that time, Les has had to retire from the Navy.

“I’m doing better, but I’m far from being well,” he told me. “I am basically disabled now, I cannot go back to my former life.” Les, two years after coming down with Long Haulers, still suffers from fatigue, brain fog, high blood pressure and intense tinnitus. He had seen his neurologist just a few days before we talked. “I asked her if there were any studies, research or anything the medical world had come up with that could help me proactively – anything to help heal us folks who are suffering – and she said ‘No’,” he said. “It was not a good thing to hear.”

Suicide rates among Long Hauler patients have skyrocketed. Les has a strong family around him and has done a hero’s job in staying positive and strong. “You have to do your best not to live in a ‘can’t-do world’ because that is a dark place,” he told me. “I am trying to make the best of where I am, to maximize the capabilities I still have. I try to help others. I volunteer at my church. You have to keep yourself ‘others focused’. If you sink into thinking about what you can’t do, you are going to be very unhappy. I am lucky, I am surrounded by people who love me and I love them back.”

His family and friends continue to research whatever is available on Long Haulers. He tries the various herbal supplements and

nearly everything else people suggest. “I don’t know if anything really helps, but you keep trying.” He said that at his sickest point, which was nearly a year ago, he was at about 25 percent of his normal health. “Today, I’m at about 40 percent,” he said. “I’ve been there for about five months, though, so I seem to have hit a ceiling. I unloaded some boxes out of a truck the other day and it took me three hours – I had to stop and rest about six or seven times. Two years ago I would have unloaded the truck in 20 minutes. It’s easy to slip into depression because no one seems to be looking for a cure, but you just have to focus on those you love and try to stay strong. There are millions of people going through this, and it doesn’t seem like the government is paying much attention.”

My First Encounter with Long Haulers

In February 2020, I had never heard of Long Haulers. I barely knew anything about Covid-19, it was just starting to make its way into the headlines across the country. I knew about it because a close friend and long-time golfing compadre, Billy Mandarino, caught it in January.

He seemed to recover in the following weeks and we scheduled a round at Sand Piper Golf Course, which hugs the high cliffs above the Pacific north of Santa Barbara. Billy is a little over six feet tall and weighs a solid 200 pounds. He is a good athlete and a strong man. When he showed up at the golf course that morning in February, though, he looked like walking death. He had lost nearly 30 pounds during his Covid bout and his face was white-on-white with black circles around his eyes. Worst of all, he walked in a crouched shuffle, as though his entire body hurt.

I was stunned. To cut this as short as I can, we peeled off the course and got Billy to the emergency room at Cottage Hospital. That’s where I overheard one doctor casually drop the term, ‘Long Haulers’. My ‘spidy’ journalistic senses were poked. I knew there was a story in that term. I just didn’t how big the story was going to be.

The following piece is the first article I wrote on Long Haulers, it appeared in the *Montecito Journal* about five days after I first heard the term, 'Long Haulers'. After it ran, I knew I had to follow the story to its larger origins – the book came out of that. I edited the following piece a little bit for space

Long Haulers Syndrome Slamming County

By

MICHAEL BOWKER

Montecito Journal

On January 22, Billy Mandarino, a real estate adviser for Engel & Volkers in Santa Barbara, was excited to play golf after recovering from a bad bout with COVID-19. He looked forward to being healthy again. What he didn't know was his nightmare with the disease was just beginning.

The morning after his golf round, he woke up to find his hands, feet, and face had gone totally numb. He was told by a neurologist to take ibuprofen, but his symptoms worsened quickly over the next two days. "I had a terrible pain in my hips, my tongue and mouth were on fire, and my feet were so numb I was walking like a drunken sailor. My wife, Desa, had to help carry me to the car so I could get to the emergency room."

Although doctors were puzzled at first, Mandarino was ultimately diagnosed with what many medical experts now fear is a second pandemic that is already spreading across the county, and the country. Called

“Long Haulers Syndrome” among many other names, it is striking those who have already suffered, and seemingly recovered, from the COVID-19 virus.

“We are being slammed with patients with these symptoms – which are different than the ones people have when they first get COVID said Dr. Lynn Fitzgibbons, Chair of the Infectious Disease Department at Cottage Hospital. “In the near future, we should expect to see hundreds, if not thousands, **or** patients in Santa Barbara County suffering from these long-term effects.”

More than one hundred thousand cases have been reported nationwide, and the number of unreported cases could be far higher. Surveys conducted by patient groups indicated that 50 percent to 80 percent of patients continue to have symptoms three months after the onset of COVID-19 - even after the virus has left their body, according to a report from the Harvard University Medical School. To date, there are an estimated 30,000 cases of COVID-19 in Santa Barbara County, nearly 30 million cases in the U.S., and 106 million cases reported worldwide.

“So far we’ve seen about two-thirds of the patients who suffered initial, acute COVID attacks later come down with these other, often worse, symptoms, which can last for months, if not for a lifetime,” said Dr. Christian Sandrock, Director of Critical Care at the UC Davis **o**clinic, which was formed to care for those with these recurrent symptoms. “We call it the Post-Acute COVID Syndrome (PACS),” he said. “It’s quickly become one of the biggest health issues in the country.”

(NOTE: For some reason, the NIH’s Anthony Fauci later renamed it Post-Acute Sequelae Covid (PASC), which unfortunately served to confuse people about this mysterious disease even further.)

Symptoms are varied, but most often include cognitive breakdowns called “brain fog,” difficulty breathing, leg pain, numbness, tachycardia episodes that can send a patient’s heart suddenly racing to 135 beats a minute, constant fatigue, depression, headaches, chest pain, migraines, disrupted sleep patterns, lung and heart scarring, and many other problems. At its worst, PACS has caused death by shutting down breathing pathways, and causing strokes and heart attacks. “It’s too early to tell how this will affect Santa Barbara County in terms of heart issues,” said Sansum’s Dr. Michael Shenoda, one of the leading cardiologists in the area. “We’ve seen a lot of pericarditis/myocarditis (inflammation of the lining of the heart muscle), but no post COVID heart failures.”

WHAT TO DO IF YOU SUFFER SYMPTOMS

If you are suffering from any of the identified symptoms of Post-Acute COVID Syndrome, nicknamed “Long Haulers,” such as profound fatigue, constant cognitive issues (brain fog), sudden jumps in your heart rate and blood pressure, or leg or chest pain, dizziness or numbness, you should immediately contact your physician, according to Dr. Lynn Fitzgibbons, Chair of the Infectious Disease Department at Cottage Hospital.

“I also highly recommend that if you suffer from these symptoms, keep a daily diary of them,” said Fitzgibbons. “Keep track of exactly how you feel, and what is happening to your body. It is extremely important that your physician understand what you are going through. We are at the beginning of this and every bit of data is going to be critical to them in being able to guide you toward the correct treatment.”

A detailed list of symptoms also helps convince physicians you have a physical, not psychosomatic ailment. “One thing is now clear,” said Dr. Mitchell Miglis, a Stanford University neurologist who has treated many PACS patients. “These mystery diagnoses are real, and they aren’t just in the patient’s head.”

Too many with PACS were not taken seriously earlier in 2020. “With the suddenness of the COVID pandemic and now this, doctors have been asked to learn a huge amount in a short time,” said Fitzgibbons. “Keeping a detailed list of your symptoms will help them tremendously. You should work shoulder-to-shoulder with your doctor on this.”

For those trying to recover from the sometimes – devastating effects of PACS, doctors and physical therapists strongly recommend not rushing the process. “It isn’t like other recoveries,” said Dr. Christian Sandrock, Director of Critical Care at UC Davis. “You have to listen to your body every day. If you wake up feeling fatigued, you shouldn’t do anything. Rest is the best medicine.”

For Billy Mandarinino, a Santa Barbara real estate adviser who recovered from Covid in mid-January only to come down with PACS, which left him nearly paralyzed, the physical therapy efforts he is undergoing at Cottage Hospital have been counterintuitive. “Having been in athletics all my life, I’m used to recovering from injuries by pushing through the pain,” he said. “You can’t do it that way with this. I am being trained to do about fifty percent of what I think I can do regarding the physical therapy and when I’m tired or in pain, they have me quit immediately. They have told me that damage done by PACS is often so widespread that doing too much reverses the healing process quickly.”

Are doctors in the Santa Barbara area becoming more aware of the dangers of PACS? “Yes,” said Fitzgibbons. “Unfortunately, more and more of us are getting first-hand experience with it as more patients come in. It’s helpful and tragic at the same time.”

Many experts are calling for PACS clinics to be established in every community in America. “We have no idea how long this is going to last,” said Sandrock. “Some of these symptoms may last a lifetime, we just don’t know. The most important piece of advice I can give is for people who are suffering, don’t think it is all in your mind – take these symptoms seriously and call your physician.”

A Critical Point in the Pandemic

One sobering fact about PACS is, unlike the initial COVID symptoms, younger patients are highly vulnerable. “We’re seeing it in younger and middle-aged people who had only light symptoms when they initially caught COVID, but who are now suffering a great deal,” said Fitzgibbons. “We don’t know yet how long these symptoms will last. Some patients have been struggling for months and are still struggling, but others seem to be getting better. We’re seeing a range of recovery – there just isn’t that much data yet.”

Major issues still face the medical community and those who are failing prey to PACS. The rapid spread of PACS for whatever reason, has been slow to penetrate the nation’s media and me doctors are still relatively unaware of it. Part of the problem is the symptoms are varied and present themselves differently. Many patients are treated for obvious symptoms, such as depression, fatigue, or high blood pressure and sent home, only to suffer tremendously without knowing why.

“I think this is a critical point,” said Fitzgibbons. “We all have to come to the realization this is not a psychological problem – this is not a made-up ailment in people’s heads. It is a real physical problem that can attack the brain, lungs, heart, and other organs in long-term ways.”

For many patients, not knowing what is wrong with them, and suffering sometimes debilitating fatigue and pain, it can create what some described as, “hell on earth.” Les Steel, an ex-Navy Seal, has suffered for months from central nervous system and heart issues. “The fatigue level is just horrible,” he said. “This causes so many problems in so many parts of your body. Imagine a one-hundred-car pileup in your body where everything keeps crashing into itself.”

With so many symptoms presenting in different ways, trying to deal with PACS has been a challenge. Mandarinino had to undergo hours of MRIs – especially excruciating because he is claustrophobic – and many other tests, including a spinal tap, before he was diagnosed with PACS, with part of it being a rare disorder called Guillain-Barre, which itself slams the body with multiple symptoms. Originally admitted to Cottage General, he was moved to the hospital’s rehabilitation center eight days later. He is still there.

“Post COVID symptoms can be quite severe,” said Dr. Greg Vanichkachorn, a specialist at the Mayo Clinic. “The fatigue associated is not a normal fatigue – this is profound. People often say they have to rest for hours after taking their pet for a walk of only a block. What we have to realize is this post COVID syndrome is not rare – patients, providers, and employers should all be expecting to see it prominently in their communities.”

Right now, there is no cure for PACS. Doctors can treat many of the symptoms, like lowering blood

pressure, but the strong autoimmune element of PACS makes its exact cause elusive.

Worldwide, PACS is emerging as a problem no one expected or wanted. An initial study done in Wuhan, China found that three-quarters of COVID patients suffered from PACS six months after being released from the hospital for initial COVID treatment. In Paris, physicians reported seeing hundreds of patients with PACS monthly, with an average age around 40 years old, according to a report in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. A study in Italy showed that 125 out of 143 Italian patients were suffering from PACS two months after their first COVID symptoms emerged. In England, where it is known as “Long COVID,” say some studies show up to 50 percent of COVID patients have suffered these continued symptoms for months and many are still suffering. Funding for immediate research into possible medicines and cures is greatly needed. Governments are already beginning to gear up for what could be an onslaught of disability – short and long-term – claims due to PACS.

“I am having to learn to walk again,” said Mandarino, who can only go short distances with the aid of a walker. “It’s a slow process. The severity of the symptoms come and go. Luckily, I have great doctors, but I have had to rely on every positive concept I know. This has included some of the darkest moments of my life. But I have to trust we will be able to conquer this in the end.”

What Happened After

Billy did conquer it in the end. He has completely recovered and is working full-time and golfing on weekends. Ironically, part of his recovery was the result of his being diagnosed with

Guillain-Barre syndrome. Although it is rare, it has been treated successfully in the past. While others with Long Haulers have been difficult to diagnose because of the multiple complications involved, Billy received the normal procedures for GB, and healed within a month. Tens of millions of other people worldwide have not been as 'lucky'. It is a problem that has not gotten anywhere near the attention it needs – again, a documentary on this topic would find a large audience.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Winning the Battle Within

Sixty Degrees Publishing

After my emotional rollercoaster with *Fatal Deception*, I decided to take a few months and write something a little less intense. I paired up with golf psychologist, Dr. Glen Albaugh, to write a book we called, *Winning the Battle Within*. It's about golf and deals with life issues as well.

I played golf in high school and college and played in a few professional events before moving into writing full-time. I knew the pressures of playing for high stakes and was looking forward to helping Glen formulate some of his ideas into a book. Many of the teachings in the book are his, some are mine.

I also spent several hours together with Seattle Seahawks NFL Coach, Pete Carroll and the late Bill Walsh, who guided the NFL's San Francisco 49er's to three Super Bowl wins. Walsh had been Carroll's mentor and the three of us sat in an empty classroom and talked non-stop for hours about the mental approach to sports and life.

My takeaway from that discussion was enormous. I only wish I had known what they knew about how to prepare and produce

peak performances when I was competing in sports. I believe it has greatly helped me in my life outside of sports. What we discussed wasn't mental rocket science, it was beautifully logical and brilliantly simple.

I also got the chance to interview 50 or so PGA touring professionals, who were happy to share their trials and tribulations – and what worked and didn't work for them. Writing this book reconnected me with golf and most importantly, how to play it well and enjoy it again. I had a great deal of fun playing golf when I was a kid with my parents, but after I won the Kansas State High School championship as a sophomore, the pressure collapsed on me. It went from a fun thing I did in the afternoons, to the media and even friends constantly hounding me about how I felt about winning again next year, and whether I was thinking about joining the PGA Tour. I was 15 years old and bewildered. I played well at times, and won tournaments after that, but most of the joy was gone. I didn't know how to get it back. Talking with these two Hall-of-Fame coaches helped bring back the fun, and I remembered how to relax and enjoy the game again. They wrote glowing testimonials about the book. Walsh wrote that it was "The best book ever written on the mental approach to sports and life." The insights they shared that afternoon is the gift I cherish the most.

Another book I wrote, on how to change American education, was a wonderful collaboration with my friend Randy Gaschler. Randy was an all-American football player at UCLA. Afterwards, he rose to new heights as one of the foremost thinkers in the country regarding education systems from K-12.

Like most writers, two of the challenges I still face are structuring my time correctly and not allowing anyone's negative opinion to slow me down. That second one, especially, faces just about everyone, at one time or another. When someone does offer a critical comment, I suggest extracting any truth from it, if it has any, and then quickly disregarding the rest. Consider this a letter of support to you, then. All of us are unstoppable if we choose to be.

From the Pages of “Winning the Battle Within”

Sixty Degrees Publishing

There is virtually no limit to your improvement as a golfer when you make learning to trust your swing your primary goal. Of course, this is a perfect metaphor for life as well – trusting and believing in yourself and your own instincts makes everything else possible.

There are as many different ‘perfect swings’ out there as there are successful golfers – trust is the only common element. Trust can be elusive and many golfers, particularly those who seek improvement solely in the latest swing fixes and equipment offerings, fail to find it. But, lasting trust is not something you find or buy, it is something you develop within yourself through quality practice.

Even if you’ve secretly doubted yourself and your game for years, you can change those old tapes and build new, deep beliefs. You can choose to be confident. You can become an intuitive, imaginative, creative player and give yourself the best possible chance to compete every time out.

Your golf identity – exactly like your personal identity – is not set in stone. You can always learn to do old things in new ways and the improvements are limitless. All of us can learn to play, as Coach Bill Walsh of the SF 49’ers once told me, “with calm intensity.” All of us can find the freedom, grace and harmony that the game so generously offers, if we remember that the perfect swing is the one we trust. It is then that we give ourselves the best possible chance to win the battle within.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

A Word (or two or three) on Writing

If you have no interest in writing or its many mysteries, feel free to skip this chapter. It isn't long – I wanted to take just a moment to share a couple of things.

When I got my first job working on a newspaper, it was fast and wild because we had no wire copy service. To fill the paper, each reporter had to write a minimum of three stories per week. We partied too, but you always had to be ready to go again in the morning. I wrote about 150 stories a year.

Most non-fiction is written with the purpose of providing accurate information to the reader. It is formulaic – who, what, why, where and when, with a few nice verbs and adjectives tossed in. A writer's job is to accurately pass along information.

This changed when I worked for the *Reader's Digest*, where we were challenged with touching the reader on an emotional basis. In my opinion, that is far more difficult. It opens up a greater number of choices from the writer's standpoint. Much like the process of writing fiction, you can go about telling the story in a variety of ways. The challenge is making and executing the right structure and word choices to engage, entertain and most of all, to get the reader to 'feel' the story as well as understand it. Ironically, there was no

formula for telling original *Digest* stories, yet how you tell the story was of foremost importance.

For example, I wrote a true story for the *Digest* about a young, vibrant woman from Boston who collapsed at work and was rushed to the hospital. Doctors told her parents her kidneys were rapidly failing and she needed a transplant within three weeks or she would die. In this special case, she needed it from one of her parents. The parents looked at each other and then at the doctor. “She’s adopted and we have no idea who the birth mother is,” they said, with fear in their voices.

Since this was a true story, I could not change timelines or any fact. I knew that most likely, tens of millions of people around the world were going to read it. If I goofed anything up, an avalanche of protest letters would make their way to my editor. The *Digest* had a fact-checking squad that was as good as any I’ve ever come across. I had to get all the details exactly right. Still, there were always choices about how to tell the story.

My first question was, how do I start the story? With the young woman’s collapse and the parent’s dilemma? That is one way. I chose another. I started it with a scene of a woman in Florida, who was lighting a candle at night with tears in her eyes. Behind her, in the next room, her children were playing. “I hope one day they will be able to meet their sister,” she says softly. The scene ends there and we go forward to a second scene, this one with the stricken young woman and her parents exchanging fearful and then tearful looks as the doctors explain the dilemma and what is at stake.

I knew the majority of readers would immediately put the pieces together and link the woman with the candle in Florida with the young woman and her parents in Boston. Allowing the readers to ‘get ahead of the story’ helps recruit them into feeling they are part of it. Sometimes it works to allow them to know more about the overall story than the characters do. Most readers enjoy figuring things out. It helps them join the emotional current of the story. They will pull for the investigators to make the right decisions and grow impatient when things do not go smoothly.

I've found that when I do it right, this 'reader buy-in' can be powerful. Sometimes it isn't easy. Good editors can be your best ally if you get stuck.

After I've gotten the opening I want, I like to look at each story much like a screenplay. I cruise over my notes and decide what the major 'scenes' should be. That's where I slow the writing down and include critical details. What was the look in her parents' eyes? How did they each feel? I try to 'show' those things as much as I can.

This story ends with the birth mother and her daughter meeting each other for the first time in 20 years. They are lying side-by-side on gurneys in the hospital after the kidney transplant was successful. I met with both families near Boston and there were tears and hugs all around. There was also an announcement of a new baby on the way.

A Hallway Interview

Writing speeches is an entirely different skillset. When I grew a bit tired of being so isolated everyday working out of my office in the mountains, I was told about a speech-writing job opening up for the Speaker of the California State Assembly, Antonio Villaraigosa. As I mentioned earlier, he later became a two-term Mayor of Los Angeles.

I was introduced to Villaraigosa by a friend, John Waldie. John is a terrific guy with a wonderful family. His daughter was great friends with my daughter. I got a hallway introduction to Villaraigosa in the gleaming white Capitol of the California Legislature on L Street in Sacramento. There were 40 other applicants. I think I was the only one who had never written a speech before. Antonio interviewed me for about five minutes, with legislators and staff members cruising by. I told him I had no experience, but that I knew I could do the job. He laughed and told me I had 48 hours to prepare a speech that he was going to deliver to a powerful group of Los Angeles business people. They wanted to know what Villaraigosa could do to help attract big tech business to LA, which was lagging far behind the Silicon Valley.

We shook hands, then I practically ran out of the Capitol Building and headed for the nearest bookstore. I knew little about Los Angeles, and less about the topic I was supposed to cover. I also had no idea how to format a speech. I bought every book **Barns** & Noble had on how to write speeches and drove quickly home. I stayed up most of the night, writing and rewriting. I read all the 'how-to' books, including about four containing nothing but 'clever quotations'. The next day I called all the businesspeople in LA who were scheduled to be at the meeting and asked them what their primary concerns were. I stayed much of the following night and after learning what font the Speaker preferred, (sans comic), and at 4 am finished my first speech.

The following day he called me back to his office in the Capitol and told me I had the job. "Not bad Bowker-Man (he continued to call me that as long as I worked for him), you start tomorrow. Better get ready, we're going for a ride!" We laughed because earlier we had talked about how unlikely it was for us to work together. He was the son of a Mexican immigrant from the barrio in Boyle Heights in Los Angeles. I was the son of a Danish immigrant from the farmlands of Kansas – yet we found we had an amazing amount of common ground. We thought alike in terms of valuing the working middle class, protecting the environment, the critical importance of education and so on. He often shared that he valued what I wrote, and I enjoyed the work.

I wrote in taxi cabs, hotel rooms, and restaurants. I had an office in the Capitol, but we weren't often there. I met governors, presidents of many countries, and even wrote speeches for three **US** Senators for the 2000 National Convention in LA. I also wrote numerous editorials and 'papers' for not only Antonio, but many of the members of the California Assembly. I had a blast. It was like being inside the proverbial sausage factory. You got to see first-hand how things were made – deals, laws, compromises, and how elections are won and lost. Most of all I loved the action. I went from a long-haired journalist in blue jeans to a GQ upper-level political consultant in Italian suits. It was hilarious. Sometimes it's

fun to shake things up a bit. Most of all, I was in the middle of things and that is where I've always enjoyed it the most.

Antonio was a highly successful Speaker and could have had a Willie Brown-esque type of lengthy stay in that position, but California's term limits law forced him to leave the Assembly. For what it is worth, I am not certain Villaraigosa and I would see eye-to-eye on some things anymore. I'm glad we did at the time.

I stayed for a time after with the next Speaker, Robert Hertzberg, but I was growing restless inside politics. Hertzberg later wrote an excellent book called *Working Clothes* and included me in the Acknowledgments. I appreciated that. This is when the stories that led to *Fatal Deception* came to my attention and my career clicked back into journalism

CHAPTER THIRTY

Part II

Catching the Golden State Killer

Sacramento Magazine

September 2018

Sometimes you get pulled into a story much deeper than you'd like. After the first story I did on the GSK, when he was still called The East Area Rapist, I stayed in touch with homicide detectives Daly and Stincelli and some of the victims over the years. The GSK was still at large, but investigations **has** uncovered nothing about his identity and the trail gradually grew cold.

My conversations with Daly and Stincelli continued, but we gradually began to be about other things. Then, in 2016, the entire affair blew up again. For still undisclosed reasons, then FBI Director, James Comey, decided to re-open the case. He announced a \$50,000 reward to anyone who could provide information that would lead to the capture and conviction of the GSK.

The reward set off a series of events that changed my life for a couple of years. First of all, the FBI suddenly focused on a pencil

drawing of the GSK that was radically different than any other. I talked to some of his rape victims in Sacramento who got partial views of him. He usually wore a ski mask – and all of them described him as having a round face and short, dark hair. But the FBI picture, which much of the media suddenly focused on, was far different. It portrayed a man with a much narrower, more Nordic face and lighter, longer hair. Most of the GSK's victims I've talked to were furious with that picture, saying it was misleading and would hinder the capture of the man who had caused so much sorrow.

It wasn't long after that I began seeing some weird posts online. Social media has a deep capacity for vile and irresponsible things. Some Internet trolls decided that because of that drawing, and because I had done a story on GSK so long ago, and because I had lived in two of the seven California counties in which he murdered people, I must be him. "Michael Bowker is the Golden State Killer," a website suddenly proclaimed.

At first I just shook my head. I thought they were harmless idiots. Trolls are trolls, often the worst kind of cowardly scum imaginable. But I was wrong about them being harmless. The phone calls began shortly after. About twice a month for two years I received threats, from blocked phone numbers, each with a different voice. Many were menacing in one way or another, including some direct death threats. I finally started telling the particularly threatening voices that I would gladly meet them at a restaurant at a certain time and we would "see how it all turns out." None of them took me up on my offer, usually they didn't know quite what to make of it. Neither did I, really, but it typically made them hang up.

I remember two of the strangest calls. One came from a woman who said, "I really need that \$50,000. Can you just confess right now so I can get it? Wait until I turn my tape recorder on, though." The other came from a young man who said fiercely that he and a few others were going to "Come out to California to get you." Then he hesitated and added, "But, until then, can we be Facebook friends?" He didn't laugh afterwards, but I did. What else could you do?

This went on until the spring of 2018, when I received a call at almost midnight. My caller ID read, “Carl Stincelli.” Carl and I had talked frequently over the years and had become good friends. He had become a world-renowned expert on law enforcement interview techniques. He knew I was (and still am) planning to write a mystery novel and he was helping me put together correct police procedures. He is a proper kind of guy, though, and he never called late at night. So, I knew instinctively what had happened.

“They caught the Golden State Killer didn’t they,” I said.

“Yep,” Stincelli said. “His name is Joseph DeAngelo and he was living in the Sacramento area the entire time, right under our noses. He’s a former cop.”

Two years later, DeAngelo ultimately plead guilty to many of the murders and rapes, after his DNA was positively matched to the past crimes. For the record, he did have a round face and short, darker hair when he committed the terrible crimes.

A Quick Sidebar on Mass Killers

True crime remains a fascination. I believe the primary reason is we are all searching for the reason – what drives these killers to do what they do? What snaps inside a person to make them want to commit murder? The answer is evasive. I am frustrated. I believe, like millions of other Americans, there has not been enough effort to look into the forces that cause people to go off the rails and kill.

While I was researching the story, I asked several prominent people what they thought causes serial killers and mass murderers to act as they do. These included a public defender, a prosecutor, the head of a major university psychiatric department, a homicide detective and a religious leader.

I gave them each three choices: Was it physical or chemical abnormalities? Was it because they suffered great abuse as children? Or finally, were they just born evil?

As I wrote in the second article, all five gave the same answer, “They were born evil.” I have to admit their swift and unanimous answer stunned me. I expected a spectrum of responses. Nope. There was only one answer given, and it may not support my theory that we should take the study of extreme violence seriously. I would counter that if everyone in the country felt that way, I do not believe there would be such a deep interest in these killers. We desperately want an answer to the question, “Why?” Why do they kill? What motivates them to do this to other human beings?

That is the question most of the survivors told me they wanted to ask DeAngelo, the Golden State Killer. “Why? Why? Why?” They have every right to ask that. The federal government, perhaps with the help of some university departments and other experts, should be doing everything they can to provide the best answers possible. Or, is that just a fool’s errand? Are some people just born evil and there is nothing we can do about it? That’s hard for me to absorb, but most people I respect greatly are certain that this is the answer. I had to debate whether even to leave that question in here – it almost dwarfs everything else, if you think about it too much. I’d rather think about heroes.

Heroes of this Story

When the massive crime spree of the GSK is looked at in total, my role was minuscule. The surviving victims suffered scars that will be there for a lifetime. I just hope my efforts helped, in whatever small way, to bring him to justice. I stay in touch with some of the people who suffered through his assaults. I am incredibly proud of how they have dealt with it all, and moved on to live loving and positive lives. My focus was on telling their stories. They are the real heroes you rarely hear about – they inspire me to this day.

Golden State Killer - Caught at Last

Sacramento Magazine

FOR 42 YEARS, the East Area Rapist evaded Sacramento law enforcement as he assaulted and murdered almost at will, from the eastern communities of Sacramento to Southern California. He seemed to come from nowhere and escaped to nowhere. He was the original boogeyman, the uncatchable criminal, the terrible menace behind the mask. But that all may have changed in April of this year, when Sacramento County Sheriff's Department officers and FBI agents arrested 72-year-old Joseph James DeAngelo, whose DNA matches that of the East Area Rapist's, now being called the Golden State Killer. DeAngelo was arrested in his home in Citrus Heights where he had lived for 38 years, in the middle of the community where he allegedly caused such mayhem, fear and pain.

If DeAngelo, a former Auburn police officer, is found guilty of these crimes, which include multiple rapes in Sacramento and numerous murders in Santa Barbara, Ventura and Orange counties, it will end the longest successful manhunt in Sacramento law enforcement and FBI history. The criminal who unleashed his own particular reign of horror, rape and murder was a cold-blooded terrorist. Although new facts continue to emerge about the case, it is already a wildly diverse story of a deranged psychopath who changed Sacramento from a small, trusting town of unlocked doors into an armed encampment where fear stalked the streets.

There is no trial date set for DeAngelo, and there may not be for some time as investigators are still looking for crimes he may have committed. In fact, it may be years before DeAngelo goes to trial because so

much evidence is being gathered by law enforcement and so many legal issues must be resolved. While having a viable suspect in jail has relieved victims and buoyed law enforcement investigators, even a guilty verdict or plea will not answer all the questions this case has raised.

Chief among these: Who exactly is DeAngelo? And if he's proven to be the East Area Rapist/Golden State Killer, why did he embark on a singular pathway of destruction with such anger and viciousness? Did he truly stop his rampage in 1986, as records seem to indicate? How did he get away with it for so long? Did he, as one former investigator suggests, have an unwitting friend in the Sacramento Police Department, and did the two talk frequently about the upcoming strategies law enforcement was planning to use to catch the East Area Rapist?

The bizarre case involves everything from the use of 50 psychics and the world's largest computer system to the resignation of Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy, the passage of sweeping new criminal laws and, finally, a brilliant new discovery of the potential of family DNA ancestry sites to help solve crimes. Still to come may be legal tests that could determine how law enforcement is allowed to use those DNA sites. And, ultimately, California's controversial death penalty law may be put to the test.

There is another crucially important part to this story, though-one that has been mostly overlooked in the barrage of media coverage. It involves the bravery, hard work and ingenuity-and sheer tenacity-of investigators. The case also played a role in the evolution of women as a force within local and state law enforcement agencies.

One of the brightest lights to emerge from this story is Carol Daly, who became one of the first female homicide investigators in California during this case

and who made historic changes in the way rape cases were handled.

In 1975, Daly went through the training at the FBI National Academy. About that time, law enforcement began to change its policies at the gun shooting ranges. Male officers had been expected to practice a “quick draw” action, where they pulled their guns from their holsters before firing, while female officers practiced pulling guns from their purses. Daly was soon adept at both.

“I loved the job immediately,” she says. “I felt such a sense of satisfaction that I was helping people. I guess you could say it became my ministry. I feel it was my faith that gave me the patience, wisdom and understanding to work with victims, to genuinely care about them and do what I could to help them put their lives back together.”

She couldn’t have known then how much her skills and her faith were about to be put to the test.

IN THE PRE-DAWN HOURS OF JUNE 18, 1976, Sacramento County dispatch received a frantic call from a young woman, who gasped that she had just been raped and was still tied up and feared her assailant might be coming back. Deputies responded to the call on Paseo Drive in Rancho Cordova to find a 23-year-old woman bound with thin rope. Her wrists and ankles were tied so tightly that her hands and feet were already a dark purple; she had barely been able to dial the phone. She was terrified; only later was she able to tell what had happened that night. She was the first official victim of the East Area Rapist. The assault would be repeated dozens of times with other victims in the east area of Sacramento over the next 18 months.

The woman told investigators she was awakened about 3 a.m. by a bright light shining in her eyes. Still mostly asleep, she wondered if she was having a

nightmare. In front of her, holding a large knife in the air, was a man in a ski mask. He wore a dark T-shirt but no pants. He was erect. Terrified, she pulled the covers over her head. He was on her in an instant, swearing and threatening, throwing off the blankets and stabbing the tip of the knife into her temple. Talking in a guttural, violent voice through clenched teeth, he told her in graphic terms he was going to rape her, and he did.

“Although this is the first *official* case we considered the work of the EAR, he quite possibly did others before in the east area,” says Carl Stincelli, who was a young deputy with the sheriff’s department at the time. “Most of the odd behaviors the EAR would illustrate in subsequent attacks were present in this one. He occasionally broke into a house a couple times before the night of the rape. It was speculated he would feed the dog so it wouldn’t bark the next time they met. Sometimes he would kill it. He would first tell the victims he was just there for food and money, in an effort to calm them, but he would then scream, ‘Shut up!’ over and over if anyone tried to respond. He was into terrorizing his victims and gaining total control over them.”

Prowling and obscene phone calls were reported throughout the neighborhood before the attack. Those, too, would become common elements of East Area Rapist assaults.

The rape victims, who began to grow in startling numbers in late 1976, told investigators that the masked man often ransacked their houses after the rape. He would open every drawer and closet and throw items all over the room, making noise and tearing everything apart. He sometimes stuttered and usually talked between clenched teeth; he often seemed angry to the point of exploding. He was described as being between

5 feet 8 inches and 5 feet 11 inches tall with a medium build, with dark hair and green or light-blue eyes. One description many rape victims agreed upon regarding the attacker- and this was relevant because it was often the only part of his body left uncovered- was that he had a small appendage.

“Many victims said he also talked to himself a great deal while he was rummaging,” says Stincelli. “It was as if someone else was in the room or he wanted victims to think there was. He would frequently start sobbing and repeatedly said things like, ‘I’m sorry, mommy!’ Some thought he might have been **say**, ‘Bonnie’ which was the name of DeAngelo’s former girlfriend.

At first glance, his actions seem deeply psychotic, but Larry Pool, a senior investigator for the Riverside County District Attorney’s Office, who ultimately had as much to do with the final arrest of DeAngelo as any law enforcement official, says he believes the East Area Rapist’s actions were contrived. “All his antics during the rapes can be distilled into one word: misdirection,” he says.

Pool, who worked for several years for the Orange County Sheriff’s Department, adds, “He was evil, clever and cunning, and everything he did was planned to throw people off his trail.” During this early time, Daly was assigned to question and accompany the rape victims to hospitals. She helped make them a top priority for medical centers, and they were treated carefully and immediately upon arrival. She also helped further the development of rape kits. She was promoted to captain and then became the first female undersheriff of Sacramento County. She was later appointed by Gov. Gray Davis to serve as the chairperson for the Board of Prison Terms, becoming one of the most accomplished and influential women in California law enforcement. She was also named “top female cop” internationally and traveled to England for her award.

But in 1976 and 1977, it wasn't Daly or anyone else in law enforcement who was in charge of fear in the city— it was the East Area Rapist. He raped and rampaged seemingly at will. At first, he raped only single women, alone in their homes, but when a local newspaper ran a piece pointing that out, he began attacking homes where couples, and often their children, slept. In a methodology that has been well-covered in media reports, he would break into the homes in the middle of the night, shine a flashlight into the eyes of the sleeping couple, make violent and perverse threats with a gun or knife or both, and order the woman to tie up the man with shoelaces or other ligatures. He would then tie up the woman and retie the man, often using the infamous “diamond knot.” Then he would place the man face down on the floor and stack dishes, such as cups and saucers, on his back and threaten, “If I hear those dishes rattle, I'll kill everyone in the house!” Taking the woman into another room, he would rape her, then ransack the house and usually come back and rape her again. Sometimes he took money, and sometimes he didn't, but he always took some souvenirs, such as one earring, and he almost always took the victims' wedding rings.

As local media began to cover the rapes more closely, the communities grew anxious. The sheriff's department began holding town hall meetings. Often, more than 500 people showed up. Daly conducted the meetings.

“Once, a man stood up in the audience and said this would never happen in his house or to his wife,” says Daly. “Less than a month later, the East Area Rapist broke into their house in the middle of the night, tied up the man and savagely raped the woman. It was the worst rape of them all. Clearly, the East Area Rapist had been at that meeting and took the man's challenge personally.”

That story, though, did not end there. “The fact is, out of the 20 couples victimized by the EAR, this couple was the only one that is still together today,” says Daly. “From the worst experience, they have made it the best. What they overcame to keep their love together is the greatest single piece of this entire story.”

ALTHOUGH LAW ENFORCEMENT had more than 7,000 suspects at that time, and had filled out more than 30,000 reports, they couldn’t catch the East Area Rapist.

“It was frustrating as hell, but you have to remember there was no 911 or video surveillance, portable radios, pagers or cell phones,” says Stincelli. “When we had problems with our dispatch radio, we had to use pay phones on the side of the roads. One thing we had was a series of sensor lights that could detect the vibrations of someone walking. We put those along the river and bike trails at night because we knew he was probably using them to travel in the darkness. We’d sit in a van out of sight, and we could tell if anyone was moving in the dark. We placed the sensors along the trail in plastic things that looked like animal poop so if the suspect saw them he wouldn’t get suspicious. We called it the ‘indigenous feces’ project.”

License-plate numbers had to be taken down by hand, and although tips flowed in by the thousands from the public, none of them panned out.

A higher tech effort came when the CEO of the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, east of San Francisco, called law enforcement and said he was worried because his daughter was going to Sacramento State. He offered the sheriff’s department free use of the company’s computer system, which at the time was the largest in the world. The offer was accepted, but they still could not catch the East Area Rapist.

BY 1977, every gun in every store in the county had been purchased by residents, a total of more than 6,000 firearms. Law enforcement officers were volunteering to work overtime every week, and special patrols searched the river parkways and other open areas the rapist was known to use in his nightly prowling. While the added security had the ironic effect of greatly decreasing overall crime in Sacramento (burglaries dropped from 1,400 a month to 200, according to former sheriff's investigator Richard Shelby), it did not stop the East Area Rapist.

The Victim's Journey: From Pain to Power

"I don't believe in capital punishment because of my religious upbringing, but I do believe that what will happen to him after he dies and goes to hell will be far worse," says Linda O'Dell, who was the 20th victim of the East Area Rapist. Her sentiments were echoed by the other victims, who are all faced with coming to a new psychological reality now that a suspect, Joseph James De Angelo, has been arrested.

Victims, ranging in the hundreds of people if you could afflicted close friends and family, have already been through their own individual forms of hell. The trauma the East Area Rapist put victims through caused a multitude of long-lasting psychological challenges, including forms of PTSD. Some still don't want to talk about it, while others find healing in sharing their ordeal.

The **S**tories of O'Dell, Margaret Wardlow and Jane Carson-Sandler, for example, are full of courage, strength and an unyielding desire to gain their lives back. In the mid-1970's, all three were brutally and separately assaulted inside their homes by the rapist, who stayed inside sometimes for hours, threatening to "kill

everyone in their house” if they didn’t do exactly what he wanted. Wearing a ski mask and breaking in during the night or early-morning hours, he used knives, ice picks and guns to bolster his threats. He was terrifyingly psychotic, a night terror who often made obscene and threatening phone calls to his victims before and long after the attacks.

“We all started from a place of desperation, anger, fear and total mistrust after the attacks,” says Carson-Sandler. “It was hard in those days, when rape was still considered a shameful thing for a woman, to get real help. Few talked about it afterward. It was not an easy thing for any woman psychologically.”

It also had to be devastating for the men whose wives and girlfriends were raped while they lay tied up in adjoining rooms. The emotional effects of not being able to protect their loved ones must have been shattering, but there was virtually no counseling offered to men in those days.

“Many of us struggled for years over this, but slowly, and with help, I believe the victims I talked to have dealt with this horror, and we’ve triumphed over it by getting to a point of strength. We call it moving from ‘pain to power,’” says Carson-Sandler.

“Carol Daly’s role in helping nearly every female victim in the Sacramento attacks was huge,” says O’Dell. “It was so nice to have a woman taking the lead in these cases; she was so far ahead of her time. She really is a hero to a lot of people.”

“It was a revelation, this last April, when a suspect was finally apprehended. All of us talked to Carol, and I think we all cried for a long time,” says Carson-Sandler. “His arrest doesn’t answer all of our questions...but at this point, I don’t let anything or anyone negative interfere with the joy I’ve found in my life.”

“I have peace of mind now, because he was caught,” says Wardlow. “But I haven’t let him rule any part of my life for a long time.” Wardlow was only 13 years old when the rapist broke in.

“Afterward, my mother told me not to talk to anybody about it – remember, in those times rape was a taboo subject – but I talked to myself about it, a lot,” she says. “I finally told myself there was nothing I could have done to prevent it. I said, ‘It’s not for me to carry this anymore. I don’t have to own it. I can move on; it’s not mine to suffer.’ I would like to share that idea with every person who feels guilty about something someone else did to them. Let it go! It isn’t your burden! Be free of it!”

By sharing their stories with the media, Carson-Sandler and the others have been able to inspire others who have suffered this kind of assault. It’s been a **tremendous step forward for them and for those they touch.**

Yet, even with a suspect behind bars, it does not mean there is automatic or total closure for the victims. “I’d like to ask him how he would feel if this was done to his granddaughter,” says O’Dell. “Still, I don’t dwell on any of it. I’ve chosen not to be his victim anymore.”

He continued to strike at will, including five times in May.

Then, in 1978, he suddenly vanished from Sacramento. He told at least one of his victims that he did not like the constant roar and searchlights of the helicopter, which was on loan to the Sacramento County Sheriff’s Department.

His movements from that time onward were unknown at the time, but now investigators know he was a regular visitor to the East Bay, Stockton and Davis, where at least 19 attacks, with similar MOs, were reported.

Then, on Dec. 29, 1979, a seemingly unrelated crime was reported in Goleta, a suburb of Santa Barbara. Dr. Robert Offerman, 44, and his girlfriend, 35-year-old Alexandria Manning, a psychologist, were found shot to death in Offerman's house. The killer shot Offerman three times and Manning once in the head before moving to their refrigerator and eating the rest of their turkey dinner. Their hands were tied with familiar knots. The East Area Rapist evidently had graduated to murder.

Santa Barbara law enforcement had a local suspect, but when that didn't pan out, the case went unsolved. "It didn't affect this area like the EAR's crimes did in Sacramento," says Bill Allen, a neighbor of Offerman's and a retired prosecuting attorney. "Everyone thought it was a local crime. It was a complete shock when we finally learned it was the work of a serial killer."

In the following few years, murders were committed in Ventura and Orange counties and then, 18 months later, a second double murder in Goleta. Most of these victims had been tied and then bludgeoned to death. At times, far more force was used than was necessary to kill the victims. A total of four men and six women were savagely murdered. It would be years before they were all linked together by DNA to one man.

The hunt for the East Area Rapist in Sacramento and the killer they now called The Original Night Stalker in Southern California ebbed and flowed after that. There were more than 15,000 suspects total. "At times, I felt we were a voice crying out in the wilderness," says Pool. "I wasn't sure we would ever catch this guy, but I knew we couldn't give up trying."

In the 1990s, Orange County law enforcement received a large federal grant to fund its DNA and crime labs. Pool then went to work nearly full time on Orange County murder cases, traveling thousands of miles,

checking tens of thousands of leads, even investigating criminals in Europe through Interpol and exhuming a possible suspect from a grave on the East Coast. Other investigators, such as Mary Hong, Larry Crompton and Paul Holes from the Contra Costa County Sheriff's Department and Richard Shelby, Jim Bevins, Ken Clark, Paul Belli and others from the Sacramento County Sheriff's Department, continued to work on what would ultimately become one unified case. Sacramento County District Attorney Anne Marie Schubert is often credited with helping persuade the FBI to reopen the case.

In 2001, a breakthrough occurred when Pool helped link the DNA found at the murder sites in Southern California to DNA in the rapes in Contra Costa County and then to the DNA left by the East Area Rapist in Sacramento. The *modis operandi* in each case matched, also. The findings stunned investigators; many even doubted that it could be true. But it was.

Still, even though they had connected the deadly dots, they still didn't have the identity of the man responsible. In 2004, investigators got a break when Bruce Harrington, the brother of Patrice Harrington, one of the victims murdered in Dana Point by the Golden State Killer, spearheaded the passage of Proposition 69 in California. The new law made it mandatory for criminals committing certain crimes to give a DNA sample to an offender database. Harrington donated nearly \$2 million of his own money to help pass the law.

Since that time, nearly 3 million DNA samples have been collected and more than 70,000 criminal investigations have utilized the nationwide Combined DNA Index System (CODIS). It has its share of critics, who have expressed concerns that DNA collection is a violation of privacy. Others point to the fact that in 2014, DNA databases helped investigators track

down Sacramento's so-called "Roaming Rapist," who raped at least 10 women in the capital area. DNA was also used to capture Dennis Rader, the notorious BTK (Bind, Torture, Kill) serial killer in Kansas. In 2010, California investigators used the database created under Proposition 69 to track down a Los Angeles man, Lonnie Franklin, for the murder of at least 25 women, making him one of California's most prolific killers. He is currently on death row.

In the case of the Golden State Killer, although there was plenty of his DNA available from victims, nothing showed up in the offender database, or anywhere else. As has been widely reported, it wasn't until the beginning of this year that the evolution of the DNA ancestry boards grew to a point where law enforcement tried a database called GEDmatch, where nearly 1 million people had volunteered their genetic codes in hopes of discovering their relatives and ancestors. Investigation insiders say that DeAngelo had been a known suspect for at least six months before the DNA project was completed. While they did not say where the information linking him to the crimes originated, it is possible that it came from someone close to DeAngelo.

In an operation originated and run by Holes, investigators used traditional techniques to reach family members associated with the DNA collected from the Golden State Killer's victims. They quickly narrowed down the "family tree" to one man, DeAngelo. Sacramento County Sheriff's investigators followed him to the Roseville Hobby Lobby and obtained his DNA from the door handle of his car. More DNA, collected from his outside trash can on collection day, confirmed that his DNA matched perfectly with that of the East Area Rapist and the Golden State Killer.

On April 24, 2018, DeAngelo was arrested, perhaps ending a chase that lasted more than 42 years. When the news broke, tears were shed up and down the state by victims and others. “I couldn’t believe it,” says Daly. “Several victims called me to ask if it was really true. It will take a long time for this to really sink in.”

Despite the relief felt throughout the state, questions remain about who DeAngelo really is and what motivated him. Is he brain-damaged? Was he terribly abused as a child? Or was he, as many have said, just born evil?

“I feel in my heart he was just born evil,” says Daly, whose feelings are backed up by behavioral experts such as Dr. Peter Yellowlees, a professor of psychiatry at UC Davis.

“Some people have a singular goal in life, and that is destruction,” says Yellowlees. “You can diagnose them all you want from a scientific point of view, but the bottom line is they are pure evil.”

The science is thin in this area, which is why some have suggested that, along with a DNA sample, certain violent criminals should also be required to have brain scans done and perhaps even donate their brains—after they have died of natural causes – to science so studies can be done to determine if these killers have similar brain abnormalities.

What is known of DeAngelo’s past only provides more strange twists to this story.

Neighbors in Citrus Heights said he was bellicose and angry much of the time, often stalking around in his backyard, screaming profanities at seemingly nothing. Many were afraid of him. Not long ago, he reportedly threatened to unleash “a load of death” upon his neighbors if they didn’t quiet their dog. Former Auburn police officers remembered him as “Junk Food Joe” because of his obsession with fast food and sweets.

He appears in the Folsom High School yearbook and reportedly joined the U.S. Navy after high school and spent time in Vietnam. He then attended Sierra College and Sacramento State, where he received a criminal justice degree. Ironically, Stincelli got a similar degree from the university during the same time. Little did he know he would soon be tracking a classmate wanted for multiple rapes and murders.

In May 1973, the footsteps of the Golden State Killer and DeAngelo began to intertwine. DeAngelo joined the police department in Exeter, a small town near Visalia, where shortly thereafter, a series of home break-ins began to occur. The “Visalia Ransacker” was never caught, but hundreds of homes were invaded, with drawers and clothes and items strewn about. On Sept. 11, 1975, a resident –Claude Snelling, a journalism professor at the nearby College of the Sequoias, surprised the burglar, who shot and killed Snelling. In December of that year, a Visalia police officer was shot and wounded by the Ransacker. Most investigators believe the Visalia Ransacker, East Area Rapist, The Original Night Stalker and Golden State Killer are one and the same man.

In the spring of 1976, DeAngelo apparently returned to the Sacramento area, taking a job with the Auburn Police Department. Coincidentally or not, the ransacking in Visalia stopped, but on June 18 of that year, the home-invasion rapes began in the eastern suburbs of Sacramento. In early 1978, a young couple in Rancho Cordova, Brian and Katie Maggiore, were shot to death. Investigators suspected the East Area Rapist, but there is no DNA proof in that double murder.

In a bizarre occurrence early the following year, DeAngelo was fired from the Auburn Police Department for shoplifting a can of dog repellent and a hammer.

It might have seemed suspicious to some because investigators had a strong theory that the East Area Rapist, who continually silenced dogs, was perhaps a cop, but no one questioned DeAngelo at the time. He then seemed to disappear.

Records show DeAngelo was married to a Sacramento-area divorce attorney, Sharon Marie Huddle, in 1973. Although they reportedly separated in 1991, they did not live far apart at the time of DeAngelo's arrest. The peeping, prowling, raping, killing East Area Rapist would have had to be gone from his home for hundreds, if not thousands, of nights. Most husbands would find that hard to explain to their spouses. At the time of his arrest, DeAngelo's daughter and granddaughter were living with him. The family is being cooperative with law enforcement, reports indicate.

What DeAngelo did from 1979 to 1989 is still unclear, but in 1989, he began working in Roseville for The Save Mart Companies, which operates and stocks more than 200 food stores in California and Nevada. He retired two weeks before his arrest.

Where was he in the last 10 years? "One could speculate that he could have been a truck driver," says Stincelli. "It would have given him a reason to have been in so many jurisdictions throughout California."

A major question for law enforcement is did the Golden State Killer simply stop raping and killing in 1986, his last known murder? Despite popular belief, there are cases where serial killers have stopped for long periods of time.

One of DeAngelo's relatives allegedly told a reporter that, as a child, DeAngelo had been forced to witness the rape of his young sister at a military base in Germany. An old newspaper report of DeAngelo joining the Exeter Police Department stated that he is the son of "Mrs.

Jack Bosanko of Garden Grove and Joseph J. DeAngelo Sr. of Korea.”

“Much of his life is a ghost story right now,” says Daly. “I suppose it will come out in time, but regardless of what he suffered as a child, there is no excuse for what he did.”

The case, which began in Sacramento when Gerald Ford was America’s president, is unlike any other in California history. “It took a long time, but nobody gave up – ever,” says Daly. “It’s a powerful testament to law enforcement and to this entire community. In the end, it is the triumph of good over extreme evil that makes this story worth telling.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

A Nice Guy Finishes First The Charles Osgood Story

Reader's Digest

I spent more than a week in New York doing the piece, most of it in the CBS headquarters in Manhattan. I sat through the shooting of two of Osgood's television shows and I interviewed some of his close friends, including broadcasters Walter Cronkite and Dan Rather. I included this piece in large part because of these interviews. What Cronkite, the king of all television broadcasters, said to me while I was there, is highly relevant to the turbulent world of journalism today. Rather, who has gone through some controversies in his later career, also had some introspective insights into the media. I'm going to include these first, and then introduce the piece I did on Osgood, whom I found to be as friendly and genuine a person as I've ever met in the broadcast business, or anywhere else for that matter.

My discussions with Cronkite started when he showed up at the door with a glass of Bourbon and handed it to me and said, "Come on in Michael, put your feet up and let's talk awhile." We had a second conversation when I was back home in California. I was young and called him Mr. Cronkite during all of our conversations.

Fresh out of my little workspace in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, being in a high-rise office with Cronkite overlooking the Hudson River was like being invited into Buckingham Palace, although a smaller, messier version. Cronkite was royalty to most of us who grew up during this time. He was “The most trusted man in America,” according to public polls during his career as a TV anchorman.

By the way – I wonder if any journalist could lay claim to that title today?

Cronkite clearly liked Osgood and was happy to talk about his friend. After I had enough comments about Osgood, I carefully steered my questions toward the ‘current state’ of journalism. I was excited to hear what Cronkite was going to say. It was the mid-1990’s, so things were different, but in some ways not so different from today.

I had already interviewed Rather by this point. I repeated what he had told me about one negative trend occurring among the media. “I asked Mr. Rather about the fact that many journalists these days feel they should always leave their subjects in a pool of blood,” I said to Cronkite. “He told me he also believed that was true, and he criticized journalists who were doing that. He said, ‘The proper role of a journalist is to be a watchdog, not an attack dog. But neither should they be lap dogs’.”

Cronkite smiled briefly at that. But he was looking down, and it took him a few moments to answer. What he said next greatly surprised me and I’ve never forgotten it. “Most of us giving the news on television are phonies,” he said. “Most of us don’t do our own research and we rarely write our own scripts. Most often, we simply read what someone else writes for us. The only real journalists are you guys,” he said, waving his hand in my direction. I knew he didn’t mean me specifically. I’m sure he had never heard of me before that day. He was talking about those working in print media – newspapers and magazines. We typically, for better or worse, do our own research and of course, write our own copy. Back then, no one told us what to write.

I have only written about this a few times in the past. Each time I get comments from people in television journalism who show great irritation over the quote. But it is an accurate quote from a man most people believe is the most important and influential television broadcaster of all time. I know there are some terrific television journalists who do their own research and write their own copy, and I will leave it at that.

There is Hope

I like to think that sometime in the future, a journalist might again win a poll as the most trusted person in America. I know, we're a long way from that now. It's going to take some time and a bunch of courage to get there again.

The motto I have over my desk is, "To give a voice to those who don't have voices." I fashioned that in college and it still works. It motivates me every day to get going on the next story. It's not always easy because many of the big media outlets have drawn sides. If you aren't on their side, they are not only uninterested, many will also try to shut your work down and lock it – and maybe you – away. The answer, right now, is to stay nimble. Going forward, I believe we need a new vision – one based on the morals and rules of traditional journalism yet embracing the new technologies, such as podcasting, direct streaming and whatever else is coming. These will provide platforms and avenues for journalists that have never been available before. There is hope in that. Overall, I'm optimistic. We just need to remain uncompromised in our definition of what true journalism is and move away from the "Click bait: If it bleeds it leads," concepts that has a stranglehold on too many media outlets. Stories of courage, hope, kindness, imagination and ingenuity have a worldwide audience, if told well. That's my opinion, I believe it is provable, and I'm sticking to it.

Charles Osgood: Nice Guy Finishes First

Reader's Digest

It was a brutally hot summer day in London last year while Charles Osgood was visiting Buckingham Palace with his wife, Jean, and two of their five children. To make matters worse, the Osgoods were stuck in a long line that snaked back and forth as it led to a gate on the palace's south side.

Osgood sweltered in the shimmering heat for more than 20 minutes before he realized that people were stealing glances at him. Finally one young man spoke up. "You look just like Charles Osgood, the guy who does the news on Sunday television back in America," he said.

Osgood grinned. "I know."

The youth continued to stare. "You are Charles Osgood," he said finally.

"Yes," an amused Osgood replied.

"Well, you're famous," the young man said, now clearly puzzled. "Why are you standing in this hot line like everybody else?"

It hadn't occurred to Osgood to ask for special treatment. "I'm a tourist too," he said. "Just like everybody else."

Meet Charles Osgood, an ordinary fellow who also happens to be one of America's most popular social commentators since Will Rogers. His radio program, "The Osgood File," is heard by 12 million listeners on 393 stations nationwide. Millions almost more watch his "CBS News' Sunday Morning" show. At age 62 Osgood is at the top of his form, yet his success has confounded media insiders.

Conventional wisdom suggests that in the cutthroat world of broadcast news, nice guys finish last-if they finish at all. But Osgood, wearing his bow tie, reading poetry and playing his banjo on the air, is as unlikely a foot soldier in the no-holds-barred network news rating wars as there ever was.

Nothing to Lose

Charles Osgood never intended to be a newscaster. After graduating from Fordham University in New York City with an economics degree in 1954 and serving a stint in the U.S. Army, he planned to become a business executive, like his dad. His first big job was as general manager of WHCT-TV in Connecticut, which was experimenting with pay television. But the experiment failed, and Osgood was fired.

At 29 years old, Osgood felt his world had fallen apart. Resentful and discouraged, he walked the streets of Manhattan for weeks, searching for work. "I began to wonder whether I would ever be good at anything," he says. A short time later a friend told Osgood that ABC was looking for a news correspondent. "What do I have to lose?" he figured.

There was a long line of people waiting to audition at the ABC studios in New York, and Osgood almost turned away. Then, at the last moment, he decided to give it his best shot. "I was dreadful," he says now. "It's a miracle they hired me."

At the request of ABC's management, Osgood changed his name. His real name is Charles Osgood Wood, but the station at the time had a well-established broadcaster named Charles Woods. To avoid audience confusion, Osgood offered to use his middle name on the air. He has been Charles Osgood ever since. He was

asked at ABC to write some humorous or thoughtful side bars on the day's news events. "I'd never written anything before except business letters," he says, "but I thought it would be fun to try." During those early days Osgood learned something that served him for life. "I realized I shouldn't try to be like anyone else," he said. "The only thing I was good at was being Charlie Osgood."

That meant going by his instincts. "I'd never taken even one journalism class," he said. "I figured as soon as ABC executives found out I didn't know anything, I'd be out of there." But the lack of training didn't seem to hamper his creativity.

"From the beginning Charlie did things that blew our minds," said Stewart Klein, one of the writers hired with Osgood at ABC and now a film and drama critic for WNYW TV in New York City. "One time the network fed us a speech by a civil-rights leader that was so long and dry we couldn't use it. Charlie blended it with a song that had just come out, *Blowin' in the Wind*,' by Bob Dylan. The result was incredibly moving and poetic."

After spending four years at ABC, Osgood got the morning-news anchor spot at CBS Newsradio 88 in New York City. There, he met and fell in love with Jean Crafton, a reporter who often wrote his copy. When Osgood finally worked up the nerve to ask her out to a basketball game, she turned him down. "I had no interest in sports," Jean explained.

Ever the optimist, Osgood asked Jean out again a few weeks later, this time to a classical music concert. She said yes, and the relationship blossomed. They were married in 1973. By then Osgood had joined the CBS radio news network as a New York-based correspondent, becoming part of the legendary lineage that included

Eric Sevareid, Walter Cronkite, Charles Collingwood and Edward R. Murrow. Determined to succeed, he put in 12-hour days. "I had to," he says. "People often complain they don't have any opportunity to express themselves in their jobs. Here I was, talking to millions of people each morning. I had more opportunities than I had opinions!"

Relying on Instinct

At CBS Osgood first incorporated a short rhyme into one of his radio broadcasts. His program manager said, "Very nice, Charlie. But that's not what we do here." After a decent interval, however, Osgood did it again. Like his bow ties, the poems became part of his trademark.

Now CBS executives were curious to see how Osgood's gift of gab might translate to television. His first TV broadcast, made from Cronkite's chair, was a monstrous failure, he says. Afterward, sitting despondently in his office, he got a phone call from "60 Minutes" correspondent Mike Wallace. "You looked like you were about to be executed," Wallace said. "You have to accept that you belong in that chair. If you don't believe in yourself, the viewers certainly won't."

Buoyed by Wallace's advice, Osgood gradually grew more confident in his own style, and in 1981 he became anchor of the "CBS Sunday Night News." Osgood wrote the bulk of the show himself, making him one of the last network television broadcasters to actually write his own newscast. Relying on his instincts, he wrote warmly sometimes, satirically at others, but always with a gentle touch that comes from an awareness of words and their meanings. The show thrived, in large part because of Osgood's integrity. Audiences liked him.

One secret to Osgood's appeal, says his colleague and friend CBS anchorman Dan Rather, is that "Charles is not afraid to let the child in him have good rein." For example, in a story titled "And to the Republic for Richard Stands," Osgood wrote: "Richard Stands is mentioned in no American history book, yet to countless school children he has been a central figure. Many are the children who each morning pledge allegiance, not only to the flag of the United States of America but also to 'the Republic for Richard Stands.' Never mind that you don't know who this Stands fellow is. You figure the teacher will get to that later in the year."

Up Before Dawn

The "Sunday Night News" with Charles Osgood aired until 1987. After that, Osgood did morning news programs and radio commentaries for a few years and then returned to radio full time. He did four shows a day, under the name "The Osgood File." These four-minute segments, often done in verse, celebrated the arts, creativity and achievements of ordinary people. In a world full of "shock jocks" and bombastic ideologues, he came across like a cool breeze of reason.

While television has always fascinated Osgood, radio has been an affair of the heart. Five times readers of the *Washington Journalism Review*, now called the *American Journalism Review*, voted Osgood the "Best Radio Reporter," and in 1990 he was inducted into the National Association of Broadcasters Hall of Fame.

Still, television has had its rewards. Last year, Charles Kuralt, the popular host of "CBS News' Sunday Morning" show, announced his retirement. Executives needed someone who, like Kuralt, could share his wonder and amusement with everyday life. They needed someone with

whom viewers would enjoy spending a leisurely morning. This time Osgood didn't have to stand in line for the job. He began hosting the show in April 1994.

Osgood works seven days a week in an office at the CBS studios on Manhattan's West Side. Five days he's up at 2:30 a.m. and at the office long before dawn to prepare for "The Osgood File," which he still writes and delivers on the radio. On Saturdays he prepares for the Sunday TV show, which he does live.

A Musical Family

Getting up early has its compensations: he's always home for dinner with Jean and the children. "They adore him and also keep him on his toes," says Jean. "To them he's just dad, not Charles Osgood, the broadcaster. They are always amazed when someone asks for his autograph. He plays the banjo around the house, and it drives them crazy. The funny thing is, they're just like him." Winston, 19, plays the electric violin; Emily, 15, the accordion; Anne, 17, the electric guitar; and Jamie, 12, and Kathleen, 20, the piano.

The passing of the "Sunday Morning" torch between Kuralt and Osgood has gone smoothly. People have often mistaken one ~~other~~ even before this transition. Once when Osgood was a special guest at a chamber of commerce meeting in Texas, the fellow giving the invocation asked the Lord to bless everyone at the luncheon, especially their guest, Charles Kuralt.

"I stood up and told the fellow that when I got back to New York, I'd tell Kuralt, and how touched he'd be to know they prayed for him in Texas for no apparent reason," Osgood said. It's a measure of Osgood's self-confidence that he is amused at being mistaken for someone else.

Equal parts newsman, philosopher, child, humorist, musician and poet, Charles Osgood has reached the pinnacle of a remarkable career, and he's done it on his own terms. He's one nice guy who's finishing first.

What Happened After

I know I took a chance ending this book with the Osgood interview. It was risky – Charles who? Osgood, though, was such an iconic and standout example of what a journalist can become I thought it appropriate to celebrate his career. I want to make it clear I'm not saying we need to retreat to “the old days.” There is no doubt that evolving technology will continue to open exciting new avenues for journalism and we should embrace them.

There are some qualities of old-school journalism, though, ones that Osgood and Cronkite personified, that should be worked into the mosaic of this new journalism. These include striving for objectivity, and re-discovering the idea that we serve the public, not the rich and powerful. The potential for journalism to expand, and help people improve their lives by providing **trust-worthy** information, is immense. I hope to be a part of that.

EPILOGUE

What Happens Next?

Have you ever wondered what you would write about your own life – twenty or thirty years from now? What is going to happen after today? It's kind of wild to think about it. We can't really know, of course, but maybe that's part of the fun of it.

What we can do is work on building a positive vision for what we would like to happen. The '*What Happened After*' section regarding my career as a journalist will have to be written sometime in the future. I can only have an idea, a dream maybe, of what it might say. There are still many stories, books, podcasts, documentaries and hopefully other things I haven't thought of yet, to be written and completed.

Writing this book has been immensely healthy for me. It has allowed me to take a moment to consider and evaluate the trail I've explored so far. As my British friends would say, I'm awfully glad I chose it. Being a journalist has opened a world rich with stories about the good and the bad people do. It allowed me to shine a light on actions that big business, big government, and some people with pure murder in their hearts, would rather cover in darkness. At the same time, and more important in my opinion,

I've been able to share examples of love, bravery and humanity that still amaze me.

Blazing this trail has been fun, fulfilling, often surprising, and challenging, always. Looking back at the diversity of stories in this book, and the passion and courage of the people I was privileged to meet and interview, I'd say it's a good start.

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