

Missoula

For...

My wife Kathy, who probably made a terrible mistake marrying me, but stayed by my side for so many years regardless.

My daughter Lauren, a source of eternal delight. Becoming her father was one of the best things that ever happened to me.

My mother, whose enduring gentleness and sense of humor is a model for many.

My father, an imperfect, tormented man who I only understood completely after he died.

My friend Dave Patterson, who I disliked when we met in the second grade. He soon became more of a brother than a friend.

Chapter 1

Welcome to Canaan

Epiphany can occur with a vision, or with the lack thereof (think of Saul on the road to Damascus). The soul can be liberated with a sound. The promise of a new future can be communicated in a single touch.

But for Jeff Louden, epiphany arrived with an aroma—the fragrance of hot roofing tar. He savored the pungent vapor as he stood on the campus of the University of Montana on a crisp September morning in 1973. Just 100 feet away an asphalt kettle boiled and sputtered as grim men in denim jackets ascended their ladders. To Jeff their stoic expressions only served to mask the depths of their despair.

“Poor exploited bastards,” he whispered.

The object of their labor was the blistered rooftop of a dormitory known as Duniway Hall, an architecturally nondescript rectangle of bricks and windows that linked stately Elrod Hall to the south with Craig Hall to the east.

As Jeff paused on the concrete portico that formed Duniway’s north entrance, he turned slowly and took in the vista of the campus, the city and the mountains beyond. He was slightly disappointed with the mountains; they didn’t sport the jagged alpine peaks he had expected. Magnificent as they were, the summits that ringed the city of Missoula were rounded with pine trees and yellowish grass. In the far distance, Jeff saw at least one peak crowned with bare, gray rock, but it was the exception.

No matter. Until he and Paul Jepson had reached Wyoming on their westward journey, neither had seen mountains in the flesh. Now Jeff found himself in the bosom of the Rockies, preparing to embark on what he felt would be the greatest adventure of his life. It was his childhood dream come true—best friends together at the threshold of adulthood, far away from home and free from parents at last.

“Ow da way,” Paul Jepson mumbled as he labored up the short flight of steps. He carried a load of record albums beneath one arm and a small loudspeaker under the other. His bearded face was almost completely hidden by a sheet of paper clenched between his teeth.

“Ofen da door,” was the nearest thing to speech that Paul could manage. Jeff dutifully pulled open one of the heavy steel doors.

“So what are our room assignments?” Jeff asked.

Paul jerked his chin up sharply. “Tay it. Tay it and read.”

Jeff gingerly plucked the form from Paul’s mouth. He grimaced as he wiped the saliva from the University of Montana letterhead.

“Hey!” Jeff cried as he quickly scanned the paper. “We’re not in the same room. Hell, we’re not even in the same hall! You’re in Craig.”

“Yep. That’s a drag, but it’s the hand we’ve been dealt,” Paul replied as he stepped aside to let another student pass. “Look on the bright side—they didn’t assign roommates. We’ll have our rooms to ourselves. Besides, Craig is attached to Duniway; I’ll be just down the hallway.”

Paul disappeared into the shadows, the sounds of his hiking boots echoing in the stairwell. “Better get your stuff out of the car,” he said. “The campus cops might give us a ticket for parking here.”

“But what about the rooms?” Jeff called out. “This isn’t what we planned. Are we going to try to change the assignments?” There was no response.

Jeff grabbed his suitcase and started up the stairs. He found his room about 15 feet down a narrow corridor made institutionally ugly through the flagrant use of brown outdoor carpeting. Dusty yellow ceiling lamps drew a dotted line of light on the fading carpet, creating an airport runway effect that stretched the entire length of the hallway.

Although it lacked visual grace, the first floor of Duniway Hall radiated warmth and welcome. All the room doors were standing open; rock music blared from dozens of stereo systems and radios. Students brushed by with their possessions piled in their arms. Everyone exchanged glances, usually followed with smiles.

A student wearing a knit wool cap atop a chaotic riot of chestnut hair squeezed past Jeff, flattening himself in exaggerated fashion against the wall.

“Excuse me,” the student said with a toothy grin. He disappeared into a room immediately adjacent to the one that the U of M Resident Hall Assignment form had decreed for Jeff.

Jeff stepped into the doorway of his new home and shook his head. Room 149 was roughly twice the size of a walk-in closet at his parent’s house. At the moment, it was furnished in a decor that might be charitably described as unpretentious. A fitful breeze stirred a set of gauzy white curtains that fluttered over a bare wooden desk and bookshelves. A single bed—little more than a mattress on a steel frame--was nestled against yellow plaster walls in the shadow of a towering pine cabinet.

Again, Jeff relished the scent of roofing tar. It was carried on the same wind that swept music and voices through the windows.

“Here I am,” he sighed. Jeff threw his suitcase on the bed and popped the latches.

“Your clothes go in the cabinet, my man,” a voice said from the behind. The knit cap student walked rapidly into Jeff’s room and peered out the windows.

“Who--”

“Rich Runyon, your new best friend. You’re lucky, man. You have a set of windows that actually work. Mine are painted shut. We share a delightful

view of Miller Hall, though. That's the hideous block building across the courtyard. I've been told it's mostly a home for homos, but you know how rumors go."

"Ah...hello. I'm Jeff Loudon, from Indiana."

"Damn glad to meet you Jeff Loudon from Indiana," Rich said as he pumped Jeff's hand. His smile was dazzling—a salesman's smile. "We're going to have great times together."

"Okay. Whatever you say."

"I'm here all the way from Florida, Mr Loudon. Can you believe it? I wasn't very keen on going to college in the first place. I just needed to get away from home. My step dad was so pissed with me, he was happy to foot the bill. Strong incentive to do my best, huh?"

"Ah, sure," Jeff stammered. "I...drove here...with my friend."

Rich's eyes widened. "Do tell! That would be wicked far. Thanks to my asshole step dad, I was able to fly to Missoula. I'd go nuts crawling across the continent in a car."

"It isn't that bad. You see, my friend...well...we've known each other since childhood. His name is Paul Jepson and his room is somewhere in Craig Hall. I'm a journalism major and Paul is into forestry. We were supposed to be--"

Rich suddenly placed his hand on Jeff's shoulder. "You're babbling, son. You must be tired and tense. Drag all your crap into the room and I'll finish setting up my little corner of the universe. Then we'll talk."

Jeff spent the next hour rescuing his stereo system and other treasures from the trunk of Paul Jepson's car, a rusting Ford Mustang that had ferried them safely across 1700 miles. He removed each loudspeaker with great care so as not to scratch the wood finish. Jeff carried the speakers to his room, wrapped in blankets like sleeping children, and placed them on the highest planks of his bookshelves.

Next came the stereo receiver and turntable, the heart and soul of his system. They too occupied places of honor on his bookshelves. Only after the stereo system was wired and checked could Jeff concern himself with less critical items such as his books, clothing and an aging Selectric typewriter.

By noon, Jeff had completely settled in. Now he could relax, sitting by the open window, listening to the Moody Blues on his stereo and watching students in the courtyard below. His door remained open so that he could also enjoy the ever-present buzz of activity in the hallway.

When his door suddenly slammed shut, Jeff leaped from his chair and bumped the turntable, sending the needle skating across the record grooves with a hideous screech. Rich Runyon was standing in the middle of the room, scowling.

"Never leave a door open when you're about to consume illegal substances," he said, and then smiled.

“Illegal substances?”

“Hash oil,” Rich replied as he pulled up a chair. “Ever try it?”

Jeff shook his head.

“You need to have your horizons expanded,” Rich said as he fumbled in the pocket of his leather jacket. He soon produced a tiny spoon, the melted stub of a candle and a vial containing a thick black fluid. He placed the candle on the desk and struck a match.

“Do you think this is a good idea?” Jeff asked.

Rich froze in mid-motion with the lighted match hovering above the candlewick. “It is your room, Jeff. You call the shots. Hurry before this match burns down to my fingers.”

Before Jeff could reply, there was a knock at the door. Rich blew out the match and closed his fist around the vial.

“Come in!” Jeff said.

To Jeff’s relief, Paul Jepson strolled into the room. Rich rose quickly and grabbed his hand. “You must be the childhood buddy of my friend Jeff,” he said.

“If you say so,” Paul replied with a grin.

“I do indeed! Do you smoke hash oil?” Rich asked.

“Sure,” Paul said. “But I don’t have any.”

Rich produced the vial and wiggled it in the air between his thumb and forefinger. Paul’s eyes widened.

“Close that door, Mr Jepson, and join us.”

Soon the candle was burning and the tiny spoon was floating in the flame. The black liquid it held began to boil.

“Take your places on the bed, otherwise known as Jeff’s couch,” Rich said as he resumed his seat at the desk. “It’s show time.”

The liquid suddenly erupted in flame. Rich raised the spoon to his lips and blew out the fire with a practiced puff. Smoke billowed from the spoon.

“Hurry!” he said as he inhaled the gray smoke. Paul leaned in and eagerly drew the fumes into his nostrils. Jeff approached slowly. Rich nodded his encouragement as Jeff inhaled through his mouth.

They sat silently, holding their breaths for as long as possible. Jeff was the first to begin coughing, bending forward with a choked spasm that almost sent him to the floor. Paul slapped him on the back and laughed.

“Good man,” Rich said between coughs. “Hold that precious smoke. It’ll do you good.” He waved the spoon under their noses and again they filled their lungs and sinuses.

As the new round of coughs subsided, Jeff noticed that the omnipresent odor of roofing tar had been replaced by the sweet smell of burning hashish. He settled into the mattress with his back to the wall and watched a white haze descend from the ceiling, slowly filling his entire field of vision.

Rich and Paul were chatting, but Jeff didn't follow their conversation. He simply watched Paul's shoulder-length hair bouncing with every gesture. When he turned to Rich, it seemed as though his knit cap was floating on his hair, not quite touching his scalp. His deep brown eyes flashed and his teeth—his perfect teeth—seemed to gleam.

From somewhere in the distance, the Moody Blues were singing in perfect harmony. Jeff closed his eyes and found himself standing on a concert stage in a vast arena. There were spotlights in his eyes and a guitar slung low across his waist. Jeff grabbed the guitar and began ripping into "I'm Just a Singer in a Rock 'n Roll Band," shooting sly glances to Justin Hayward and John Lodge as he strutted about the stage. He was hot. They were hot. It was the greatest performance the Moody Blues had ever delivered.

Their time in the lights complete (to the roar of the crowd begging for more), the Moody Blues made their exit and Jeff stayed behind to jam with Johnny Winter. Before Jeff knew it, Johnny had departed as well, to be replaced by Eric Clapton, who warmly shook his hand and invited him to launch into a powerful rendition of "Layla."

Rich Runyon slapped Jeff hard across the knee. The music abruptly stopped and the arena disappeared. Jeff sat blinking in astonishment; two hours had passed.

"Get up, Jeff," Rich said. "We're hungry. Aren't you?"

"Sure," Jeff replied. He could feel himself smiling too widely. Rich returned the smile just as broadly.

"Up," Paul said as he gently nudged Jeff's elbow.

"I'm moving," Jeff answered quietly. As they entered the hallway, Rich shot past them with wide strides.

"Hang on, guys. Let me get Grady." Paul and Jeff exchanged bemused glances. A moment later, Rich reappeared with a gaunt figure wearing what appeared to be an ankle-length gray trench coat.

"Grady Wallace, meet the gang from Indiana. These two upstanding gentlemen are Jeff and Paul." Grady smiled with closed lips and merely nodded. Jeff thought he heard something that sounded like a grunt, but couldn't be sure.

"Grady is a math major," Rich continued. "Go figure!" They all laughed, except for Grady who emitted more grunts.

By the time they reached the cafeteria, it was brimming with students, hundreds of conversations taking place at once amid the sounds of colliding tableware. Paul ushered Jeff through the food line like a caretaker leading a blind man. He gestured to various types of food and Jeff obediently piled them onto his tray, smiling all the while.

They found a table and, for several minutes, fed furiously in silence. Jeff was fascinated by Grady's mechanical eating style. He would place a forkful

in his mouth, sit upright and chew, glance at his plate, then repeat the actions precisely.

“So Grady,” Jeff began, “are you from around here?”

Grady’s head pivoted in a disturbingly mechanical fashion. Jeff thought he could hear servomotors. “Yes,” he replied quietly. “My parents live about 20 miles from here in Frenchtown.”

“I see. But if your parents are in Frenchtown,” Jeff asked, “why do you live on campus? Couldn’t you just drive back and forth?”

Grady seemed to hesitate as he processed the question. “I like the campus atmosphere. I like people.”

Jeff shrugged. “Okay.”

Rich Runyon leaned across the table. “He wants to be with the cool people, the people who are going to make a difference in the world.”

Paul tossed a tuna sandwich onto his plate with a frown. “The first thing we need to do when we improve the world is improve the food in this cafeteria,” he said.

“Damn right,” Rich replied. “It’ll take time, but be patient. Over the next couple of decades, we’ll worm our way into power and shape the country to our liking—cafeterias included. Look at what’s happening in Vietnam. We took to the streets and spoke our minds. Now the war is winding down.”

“There is still Nixon and Agnew,” Paul said.

“Bumps in the road,” Rich replied through a mouthful of salad. “Nothing more.”

Jeff arranged pats of butter wrapped in paper as he listened. “I’m tired of waiting. I’m here to make a difference now, not years later,” he said at last.

Rich and Paul stopped in mid chew.

“Bullshit. You’re here for the same reason I am,” Paul said with a chuckle. “You don’t want to end up digging ditches for a living.”

“Not true,” Jeff replied without taking his eyes off his butter pats. “I’m here to make changes. That’s what the revolution is all about.”

Rich raised his eyebrows. “Whoa! Revolution? That sounds like way too much trouble and angst for me. Sorry, man, but I’m gonna play the cards I’m holding in my hands right now. That means enjoying life as it is and working to change the system from the inside, more or less.”

“And you’ll lose,” Jeff murmured. “The deck is already stacked against you.”

Grady had stopped eating and was observing the conversation with clinical fascination. “Jeff, are you a hippy?” he asked.

Everyone seemed surprised to hear Grady speak. “You didn’t notice?” Jeff answered, pointing at the hair that fell behind his shoulders.

“Hair don’t make the hippy,” Paul sneered. “And trust me, Grady. We’re no hippies—at least not the political variety.”

Jeff glanced at Paul and blushed. “That sure sounds like a departure from what we talked about on the way to Missoula. Remember?”

Paul shook his head. “I don’t recall doing that much talking myself, but I clearly remember *you* talking. Mile after mile you bored me to tears going on and on about how we’d join the protests, about how uplifting it would be. Well, I don’t see much protesting on this campus. Be sure to give me a heads up when it starts, though.”

Rich and Paul laughed. Grady grunted. Jeff could only shrug before returning to his butter pats.

Across the cafeteria, a glass tumbler flew off a table and struck the ceramic tile floor. It bounced once, twice then shattered. There was a round of applause.

“How idiotic,” Jeff said.

“No, no,” Rich replied. “I’ll show you idiotic.” He snatched Jeff’s butter pats and proceeded to roll them in a paper table napkin.

“What are you doing?” Jeff asked.

“Rolling a joint, a doobie, a marijuana cigarette, as they say.”

Rich displayed his cigar-like creation and Paul produced a cigarette lighter. Within seconds, the end of the napkin was aflame.

“Oh, man,” Jeff exclaimed. “You’re going to get us thrown out of here.” The orange flame began to dance in the lenses of Grady’s wire-frame glasses.

“Don’t worry, Jeff. This is what you came for,” Paul laughed. “Hail the revolution! Burn baby burn!”

Grady leapt to his feet, clutching his tray. “I gotta go,” he announced. Rich began beating the flaming end of the butter-pat joint on the edge of the table. Burning bits of paper took to the air and floated to the floor.

By now, they had an audience and several began to applaud. Rich extinguished the napkin in the remnants of Grady’s Coke. That was Grady’s cue to exit as rapidly as possible.

Rich bowed deeply to his fans and nodded. Paul clapped enthusiastically. “Long live the revolution,” Rich shouted. “Power to the people, and various animals.”

Jeff sat back in his chair with his arms folded across his chest. “That’s pretty cute,” he muttered as the applause died and everyone returned to their meals.

“Jeff, my man, we *really* have to work on you,” Rich said with frown. He turned to Paul and jerked a thumb at Jeff. “How long have you known this guy?”

“Too long,” Paul said, then looked hard at Jeff. “I’m *joking*, man.”

Jeff nodded, but didn’t smile. “About 13 years,” he said to Rich. “We met in kindergarten.”

“Cool,” Rich replied. “It’s great to have a friend that you’ve known most of your life. Me, I go from one friend and one place to the next. Everything is temporary in life, after all. Nothing lasts.”

Rich and Paul began another animated conversation while Jeff stared into the distance. Beyond the cafeteria windows, the sun was settling into the mountains. Long shadows were already stretching into the city.

“I’m done,” Jeff said as he stood with his tray. Rich nodded and Paul stabbed an errant french fry with his fork

“What are you guys doing next?” Jeff asked.

“More drugs,” Rich replied, rolling his eyes. “Always more drugs.”

“We’ll stop by your room later,” Paul said with a dismissive wave.

With that, Jeff weaved through the gauntlet of students and made his way out of the cafeteria. He walked aimlessly through the parking lot, then eventually found himself in the green, leaf-littered expanse of the Oval commons.

The Oval was aptly named for it was literally a large oval of grass encircled and bisected by concrete sidewalks. The western end of the Oval met a stylized sculpture of a grizzly bear, the University of Montana mascot, which stood on a circular dais, glowering at passing students with its forepaws raised in angry challenge. At the eastern end stood the imposing redbrick University Hall with its bells and clock.

Revolution was supposed to be about throwing off hoary traditions, but Jeff couldn’t help but appreciate this faux Ivy League tableau. This wasn’t a truly ancient campus like Yale or Harvard, but the University of Montana still managed to project a kind of elder stateliness that Jeff found captivating.

He stood beneath a spreading maple tree and watched a pair of hang gliders as they soared from the top of Sentinel, a 2000-foot mountain that stood guard at the eastern edge of the campus. Behind towering Aber Hall, a hiking trail zigzagged its way up the side of Sentinel, ending halfway to the summit at the base of a white concrete “M” cast into the very soil of the mountain.

The sudden appearance of a woman with straight, waist-length hair interrupted Jeff’s meditation. She walked slowly past him and smiled. Jeff nodded in return. He opened his mouth to speak, but said nothing. Jeff stared with his mouth ajar and simply watched her disappear into the dusky shadows.

Jeff wandered back to his room and put the Moody Blues’ *A Question of Balance* on the turntable. He stretched out on his narrow unmade bed as the music merged with the oncoming night. It was only 7 o’clock, but Jeff would soon be asleep. Rich and Paul never arrived.

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