

The Place
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*To my dearest Beverly,
you walk in the light each and every day
and remind me of the gift we are.
I love you always and all ways,
forever and a day!*

Foreword

In my writings I stress direct observation, which in my opinion is the evident truth. Yet, having met several profound teachers along my way, I discovered that direct observation certainly helps one to meet such gifted teachers. Three of these teachers who led me toward rewarding observations of my own were Chief Fools Crow (Oglala) and Bill Eagle Feather (Sichangu), as well as Old Black Elk's son—Ben Black Elk. But life moves onward, and one's initial mentors pass on. The spirits still must be watching out for me here in my later years. Jerry McGowan, a younger friend from the past, has brought his venture into my journey, and I am again renewed and refreshed by his story. His is a must-read for all spiritual seekers—yes, a definite must.

All of us want to be assured of a life beyond. My journey has been quite fortunate for me. The natural way is a matter of living out your beliefs and knowing, understanding, feeling, and being all that surrounds you that is nature-made and not man-made. It involves a lifetime of moral and ethical application.

The more you develop your mind to astutely perceive and look for clues and meaning set here before you by this Ultimate Creator, the more you prepare that miraculous mind for your own lifestyle while you're here. But when you're manifesting much higher thought, your goal should be a deep, serious, ongoing consideration for preparation of the mind for that much longer duration in that other world beyond—the spirit world.

I highly doubt that this preparation can occur without the help of certain spirit mates (teachers) that we encounter along the earth journey way. The more advanced we develop from direct observation and these chance acquaintances, the more advanced our minds, spirits, and souls will become for the spirit world, which most North American Indians sincerely believe awaits beyond. These are not really chance acquaintances, are they? I also believe the spirits in that beyond world place them here possibly for us. This supposition also means that we must un-clutter by removing clogging superstition, harmful appetites, greed, ego, and ignorance from our minds. Soap operas, shopping sprees, celebrity watch, Joe six-packing, and other such empty fascinations are not rewarding preparation for the beyond. You just might miss a great rewarding teacher by engaging in

these activities.

Nature-respecting two-legged humans believe that the Creator is All-Truth and All-Knowledge. The more truthful you keep yourself and the more knowledge that you seek—especially nature reflecting knowledge—the more god-like you become. Quite simple, is it not? Conversely, the more you stray away from truthful morals and a harmonious lifestyle that distances you from the Creator's obvious goals for humankind, the further away you move from the fruitful goals that can await us all in the beyond. Furthermore, I believe that this beyond is a place of all truth and all knowledge as well. Would not an all-truthful Creator make it so? But its offered advancement will not be attained by an unprepared, selfish, unfocused, and disinterested mind. Meeting and learning from those who obviously are strongly fortified on their own path is a wonderful gift from those who are watching out for us. I was utterly amazed and so deeply satisfied after reading Jerry's many adventures. Yes... and I learned... new knowledge.

When you set yourself upon this path of knowledge-seeking, you must listen and be grateful to those teachers you find yourself suddenly blessed with. Read on.

Ed McGaa

Eagle Man

Oglala Sioux, OST-15287

Author, Mother Earth Spirituality

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Introduction

As I watched my brother drowning not ten feet from where I tread water, my mind froze. I was six years old; Bob was four. I had no idea what needed to be done to save him from imminent death, but when the voice instructed me about what to do, I listened!

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Chapter One: The Voice

Sometimes we hear voices when we least expect them!

Summer, 1954

The sun filtered through the trees along the small dirt drive that wove quietly into the Ashburnham woods. The camp was in a small hamlet near the New Hampshire border. As the old Chevrolet made its way toward the cabin, the smell of pine needles was everywhere. I reached out the window of the car to touch the bushes that brushed alongside as we made our way toward the clearing.

There were four children in our family at that time: my oldest brother, Tommy; my sister, Mary; my younger brother, Bob, who had just turned four; and me. (I was six.) Like so many families in those days, people shared what they had with family and friends. My Aunt Maura and Uncle Johnny were kind enough to offer the camp to our family, and it certainly made our summers something to remember.

Dad was a fireman in Jamaica Plain, a small suburb of Boston. Mom was a teacher in West Roxbury, not too far from where we lived. We were a happy family, and although we always seemed to have what we needed, we didn't have much more than that. Receiving hand-me-down clothes and passed-along bicycles was a constant ritual among the boys. Mary got many of her clothes from cousins who had outgrown them. Yet we were content. Like most children, we thought we were special, and nothing would ever change that.

We leapt from the car and ran toward the cabin, tripping over one another in an attempt to be the first one through the door. The entrance took us into a small kitchen. On the drain board next to the sink was the old hand pump, where we quickly took turns pumping water from the well into the old copper sink that had been tarnished over the years into a myriad of blues and greens.

From the kitchen we raced into the living room where the great stone fireplace stood. Over the mantel lay Uncle Johnny's longbow. Our imaginations ran wild with the stories that bow could tell! On the other side of the room was a doorway leading to a screened-in porch with a view of the water. Above the doorway was a stuffed zebra head that was always adorned with a cigarette in its mouth or a humorous hat of some kind perched on its head.

Beyond the doorway we ran to the porch. This is where we would eat most of our meals, except when it rained or was too cold. There was a set of stairs that led off the porch to a path that ran across the yard. At the end of the path was a small channel of water, where an old wooden kayak rested, submerged in the muddy water. It was a dirty red-brown color, and the wood was lifting off in several places. It had become a home to frogs and salamanders, and one could often see the occasional water snake slither through the holes in the sides and back into the water. I was told it was an Eskimo kayak, and from the looks of it, the Eskimo could still be in there.

Next to it was an old wooden rowboat. The oars weighed more than I did and were as battered as one might expect from years of use. It did have oarlocks, so even a little guy like me could maneuver his way out to the main channel without too much difficulty. Getting back, however, was another story. The main channel led to the lake in one direction and to a fishing pool in the other. The pool itself was fed from the creeks and marshes on the other side of the road that led into the camp. There was a small bridge over the road alongside the pool where one could see the water flow into the pool, then out again to the channel and the lake beyond.

We ran back from the porch and made our way to the bedroom, which consisted of two sets of bunk beds meeting in the corner. This arrangement made for some wonderful pranks and lots of opportunities to surprise one another with all the imaginings of children. I immediately claimed the upper bunk, while my brother Bob took the lower one. As soon as I jumped up to my new space, Dad walked in and smiled, then told me it would be better if I took the bottom bunk. I knew why. I wet the bed as a child, through no fault of my own. It was just one of those things, I was told. I never felt bad about it, but that would change later on when it prevented me from visiting cousins for an overnight sleepover or from joining Boy Scouts. But for now, it didn't matter. My sister Mary and my brother Tommy got the upper bunks, and Bob and I were just as happy to be together on the lower ones.

"Okay," said Dad, "everyone out to help unload the car!"

We raced out the door and into the clearing, where the car stood next to an old wooden swing Uncle Johnny had built many years earlier. It was the highest swing I had ever seen. The ropes were attached to a wooden log he had managed to place in the forks of two trees. The seat hung far below, allowing one to fly high into the air. We moved quickly to take our share of supplies into the cabin, and in no time at all, the car was empty.

The next order of business was for my dad to take anyone down to the lake who wanted to go for a swim, enabling Mom to get beds made and things put away, unencumbered by little ones underfoot. Mary and Tom stayed behind to help, but Bob and I didn't think twice about the offer. In a flash we had our bathing suits on and were ready to go!

"C'mon Dad!" I yelled. "We're ready!"

Dad emerged from his bedroom on the other side of the cabin, dressed in a bathing suit and shoes. He had towels for each of us. He asked, "Who's going for a swim?"

"We are! We are!" yelled Bob and me in unison, and off we went. Dad stopped and gave Mom a good-bye kiss as we passed.

The journey through the woods on the way to the lake was always exciting since we never knew what we would see along the way. The deer and other wildlife were prolific, and we all kept our eyes peeled for anything that moved. I was as excited as a boy of six could be.

Bob clung to my hand like it was his last link to a world he was still trying to understand, enjoying the wonder of it all while he navigated through it. He was my closest friend—my only real friend. Everything we did, we did together. Good, bad, or indifferent, I could never imagine my life without him, and I loved him as much as a six year old could love his little brother.

As we moved quietly through the forest, our footsteps were softened by pine needles underfoot. We passed the old red outhouse, laughing and holding our noses. I saw my father smile as we continued on our journey. We broke off the path and ventured into a small clearing where the channel of the river became wider as it poured into the lake ahead. We carefully balanced ourselves while passing over river rocks, gravel, fallen logs,

and brush.

After moving past the last stretch of woods and rocky shore, we saw our first view of the lake. It was bigger than I remembered. The blue water seemed to stretch as far as the eye could see. Trees lined the water's edge, except on Hood's Beach. That was the only sandy stretch of shoreline, and it was where everyone went to swim, play, and enjoy the summer days. There was a small store on the beach where one could buy all sorts of treats, including popsicles, fudgesicles, and all sorts of penny-candy.

Bob and I ran toward the water while my father looked on. "Dad!" I yelled. "Can we go in?" I knew from past experience this would lead to more adventurous undertakings.

"Just up to your knees," he said, "and hold on to your brother's hand!" He was vigilant, making sure we followed orders.

With Bob in tow, I ran through small waves along the shore, splashing and stopping occasionally to peer into the water to see what strange and unusual creatures we could uncover. As my father looked on, we continued to play. The beach was already crowded, and it was only 10 o'clock in the morning.

I watched Dad as he waved to Mr. Condon, who was a staple at the beach. He owned a business nearby, and his family lived in a house right across from the water. He was a big man with red hair, and he always had a smile for us kids. He made his way toward my dad as Bob and I ran to join them. Mr. Condon said hello to Bob and me, then he and Dad began to talk. Bob and I ran back into the water but didn't look to see if Dad was watching since we knew that action would only invite more of my father's concerns.

It was the perfect summer day, warm and beautiful. There wasn't a cloud in the sky as far as one could see. There were boats on the lake, along with the giant rubber Navy raft that must have been left over from World War II. It floated a couple of hundred feet offshore, bobbing up and down over the waves the power boats left behind in their wakes. In another hour the old raft was so full of people that I thought it would sink under the weight.

This was actually the first time I had been aware of the raft. I remembered being at the beach the year before, but I didn't pay much attention to it because I was too busy playing with Bob and other friends. I later learned about it from Tom and Mary, who had spent lots of time on it that year. It was by far the biggest thing on the lake, stretching from left to right at least three arm's lengths and taking up my whole field of vision.

In fact, the raft was about seventy-five feet long and stood five feet out of the water. There was a ladder on the back that made it easy to climb on board. People took turns jumping off the sides, and everywhere we looked there was activity. As Bob and I continued to watch people swim out to the raft to play, we were content to splash in the shallows near the shore.

Occasionally, we found ourselves sitting in the water, staring at the fun the older kids were having as they jumped and bounced off the raft. It became more intriguing by the minute. We watched for what seemed like hours, but it was probably no more than a few minutes. My mind was racing in eager anticipation of an idea making its way to the surface, only to be interrupted by the shouts of my brother.

"Jerry," said Bob, "why can't we go out to the raft and play?"

"Because it's too far and we can't swim that good," I told him.

"I can swim good," he protested. "I know I can, 'cause I can swim in the tub and hold my breath underwater!"

I smiled at his courage, already knowing where this was going. "Why can't we go to the raft?" he continued. "Dad knows we can swim. C'mon, why can't we?"

As I watched people playing in the distance, I turned and looked for my dad. He was still talking with Mr. Condon. I looked back to the raft and then to my brother, and said, "Okay. But we just swim out, jump off a few times, and swim back. Is that a deal?"

"Deal," said my brother, smiling into my eyes like we were the last two people on the planet. At that moment, we could have been.

I looked back at my father one last time, then grabbed Bob's hand and began our swim toward deeper water. We didn't actually swim (it was more like a labored dog-paddle), but it got us going in the right direction. I tried to touch my feet on the bottom of the lake, but it was no longer there. Bob was next to me, and he was already working hard to stay afloat.

Side by side we slowly made our way toward the raft. It took us a whole fifteen minutes to get there. We were tired. I looked at Bob as he clung to the side of the raft, trying to catch his breath. I was concerned about

him and hoped I hadn't made a mistake coming out to the raft, but it was too late to think about that now.

"Okay," I began, "we jump off two or three times, then we head back before Dad knows we're gone. Okay?"

"Okay," Bob replied.

He was shivering, and his lips were turning blue. I knew we would probably have to get back sooner than we planned. I loved Bob too much to risk anything happening to him. We climbed onto the raft and were surprised at how high it stood out of the water. We watched as other kids jumped into the lake, laughing and shouting like it was the most fun in the whole world. I moved toward the edge with Bob and peered into the darkness.

"I can't see the bottom," said Bob.

"You haven't been able to see the bottom since we left shore," I told him, laughing.

"Yeah," he replied, "but I wasn't looking for it then!"

I found myself smiling at his logic; I understood exactly what he meant. I was only six, but I had known for some time that I was different—and not because I wet the bed. I could understand things other kids my age couldn't. I didn't talk about it much since there was really no one to talk with about the kind of stuff going around inside my head. So I put it in the back of my mind and turned back to Bob.

"Okay, are you ready to jump?"

"That's too high for me!" he said. "You jump first, and I'll jump in after. You can catch me."

"Okay," I replied. "But don't wait too long 'cause I think we'll only have time for one jump before we need to head back."

As I turned to jump into the water, I looked at Bob and watched his eyes eager with anticipation of my leaping into the air and plunging into the dark abyss. I looked back toward the lake, held my nose, and jumped as high as I could. I remember hitting the water and immediately opening my eyes. I saw legs and arms of kids splashing as they swam back toward the raft. Suddenly, I found myself on the surface, wiping my eyes and spitting water from my mouth.

"How is it?" yelled Bob, jumping up and down, eagerly waiting for me to give him the go-ahead to join me.

"It's great!" I yelled, treading water as best I could. "The water's warm. Hold your nose and jump toward me. I'll be right here."

"Don't move, okay?" he implored.

"I won't," I replied. "Now, jump!"

I watched as he held his nose and closed his eyes. He jumped as far as he could. He splashed into the water just a few feet from me, his head quickly bobbing to the surface and his arms moving in a dog-paddle to keep him afloat.

"That was fun," he said. The water ran from his eyes and mouth. "Let's do it again!" he said excitedly.

It was more fun than I thought, so I agreed to one more jump. One jump quickly turned to twenty, and before I realized it, we'd been gone for more than half an hour. If we didn't get back soon, Dad would be very upset.

As Bob started toward the ladder for one last jump, I grabbed his arm. "We need to go back now, or Dad will be mad."

"Just one more jump," he pleaded, "just one more?"

"No, Bob. We need to go back now."

Reluctantly, he agreed, and we began the swim toward shore. I was happy to be going back. I knew if Dad realized we were gone, he would be really mad, and it would be my fault. I began to swim faster, dog-paddling next to Bob. As I swam, I looked in Bob's direction, but he was no longer next to me. I suddenly heard his voice behind me.

"Jerry, help! I'm too tired. I can't swim anymore! Help me, Jerry, I can't make it!"

I watched as Bob slowly drifted beneath the water, his arms moving rapidly as he sank and then disappeared. I froze. A million thoughts went through my head, none of them clear. I panicked. I looked around to see if anyone was nearby, but there was no one. We were halfway between the raft and shore, and the water was still pretty deep. There was no one nearby to help. Suddenly, Bob's head broke through the surface of the water. He was coughing and choking.

"Help! Jerry, help me! I can't swim! I can't swim! Help!"

I swam toward him, more out of instinct than any realistic chance I had of saving him. He disappeared again, and I was going into shock. My brother, my best friend in the whole world, was going to die, and I couldn't do anything about it. I was completely lost. I frantically turned in every direction, desperately looking for help,

when it happened.

“Jerry,” came the voice, as clear as if it were Bob talking next to me. I looked in every direction, but there was no one there.

“Jerry,” came the voice again, but I still could see no one. I began to cry and yell for help. I felt completely helpless.

“Jerry,” came the voice a third time. “You must listen to me if you want to save your brother. Don’t think about me right now. I want you to think about Bob and do exactly as I say.”

I was beginning to get cold. The voice had startled me, but somehow I realized that voice was Bob’s only chance to survive. I stopped and listened.

“Okay,” I said, “help me.”

“You can’t swim well enough to save Bob, so take a deep breath right now,” the voice instructed.

I took in as much air as I could hold and listened.

“I want you to dive under the water to where Bob is. When you see him, take his feet and place them on your shoulders. Then, stand up as tall as you can. You must do that right now.”

I quickly ducked under the water. Bob was no more than five feet from me. I swam down toward him and grabbed his feet, then placed them on my shoulders.

“Jerry,” came the voice, “now stand up as tall as you can, and Bob will be able to lift his head out of the water and breathe. Do that now.”

I did exactly as I was told, and soon I heard Bob coughing. He was breathing.

“Jerry, keep your eyes open. Look for where the floor of the lake climbs upward toward the shore. Walk toward the shore now.” I saw where the floor of the lake sloped upward, so I began to walk in that direction.

I was not able to hold my breath another second, when the voice said, “When you have to breathe, let go of Bob’s feet and swim to the surface, and take a deep breath.” I quickly let go of Bob’s feet and headed for the surface. My lungs felt like they would explode if I waited another second. I burst through the surface, gasping for air.

“Tell Bob you will carry him to shore, but you must go back underwater to make sure he’s safe. He trusts you, Jerry. Do this now.”

“Jerry, don’t leave me here! I can’t swim,” said Bob, grabbing my neck and head, panicking while he tried to stay afloat. I took his arms and held them in front of me as I looked into his eyes.

“Bob, I can’t swim good enough to save us, so I am going back underwater to carry you to the shore, like I just did. Don’t be afraid. I’ll be right under you.”

“Don’t go, Jer! I don’t want to drown!” he cried, shaking with fear.

“I won’t let anything happen to you, Bob. I promise.”

I didn’t wait for a response. I swam back under the water and placed his feet on my shoulders once again. Then, I continued my walk toward the shore. The voice that had carefully orchestrated the saving of my brother’s life was silent. I was on my tiptoes when I was finally able to stand with my head above the surface, holding Bob in my arms while I carried him to safety. I held him like he was the most precious thing on earth because at that moment, he was!

I struggled to lift him from the water and help him to shore. We walked to the blanket and sat down, shivering.

“Bob,” I said, looking at him with his head hung low, “you can’t say a word to Dad or he’ll kill me! Okay?” I said.

“I won’t, I promise,” he replied. The fright was still visible in his eyes.

Bob grabbed my hand as we stopped and stared deeply into one another’s eyes. “Thanks for saving me,” he said, and then he burst out crying. As he wrapped his arms around my neck, holding on to me for what seemed like an eternity, he told me he loved me. I couldn’t bring myself to let go of him for some time.

“Bob, I’m glad you’re here,” I said, smiling through my tears. “I was just as scared as you,” I said, trying to understand what it might have been like without him but not able to wrap my head around the idea.

We sat there sobbing until the fear had passed—that frightening fear of not being in control, the fear of loss. We somehow knew this moment would be one we would carry with us for the rest of our lives. It marked a point in our lives, a pause in time, when we knew we had averted something bigger than either of us realized. Somewhere deep in our hearts we knew that day would come, but not now—not while we were locked in one

another's arms crying and grateful to be alive.

We sat on the blanket holding on to one another, happy and smiling. We were invincible once again, as all children think they are. I was still in shock, but I would be forever grateful to the voice that saved us both that day. I've thought about that voice many times since and how it sounded. Was it a man or a woman? I couldn't remember, and it didn't matter. I would never forget it, and I would not hear it again until many years later.

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Chapter Two: Being Different

It's not the destination, but the journey!

September, 1963

One rarely forgets experiences like the one I had with Bob, especially since it had such an impact on my life. I thought about it quite a bit as I grew older and found myself comparing it to other times and other experiences, but none ever came close to what happened that day on the lake. It wouldn't be long before my childhood would be replaced with the onset of adolescence, but I knew I would never be able to let go of the voice. I was vigilant about keeping my mind open to the possibilities of hearing it again, but as time passed, I became caught up in the fantasies of a young boy once again.

Life was perfect for two small boys growing up in a little town outside of Boston. We lived in a middle-class neighborhood, where all the experiences one could ever want lay at our doorsteps. There were so many things to do, and I remember each and every one of them as if it was yesterday.

Summers provided us with ideas and experiences that would last a lifetime, but Bob and I always looked forward to having winter fun together. Sledding down the hill across the street from home was something that never grew old. It was even more exciting when we walked the mile and a half to a nearby golf course and made runs down hills we still talk about today.

There was one day in particular that keeps coming to mind. We were with our friends from the neighborhood. Instead of using sleds, we chose to ride as a group on Bob's new toboggan, a gift from Santa that Christmas. We lugged it up from the cellar, and everyone stood around and stared at the masterpiece in wood and vinyl—each with our own vision of the excitement that awaited us all. It was as sleek a toboggan as we had ever seen. The wooden slats were covered with a blue vinyl cushion, and the curve in the front looked just like the one on the front of Santa's sleigh, only smaller. It had just enough room for five: Bob and me, Charlie and Tommy, and Randy (my best friend who lived next door).

We were all very excited. It had rained the night before, so everything was frozen. Try as we did, we couldn't imagine the speeds we would reach going down the big hill in the middle of a course. After trudging along the snowy sidewalk for what seemed like forever, we finally arrived at the end of our quest. There wasn't another person there. We had the whole hill to ourselves! We raced to the steepest run, where everyone took part in lining up the toboggan just right, ensuring the fastest ride. We were strategically positioned on the left side of the hill. There were three trees that separated one hill from another near the bottom, and I quickly took note to stay away from them.

We jumped on the toboggan and strategically positioned ourselves to get the most out of the experience. Being the tallest, I had the rear seat. I pushed the vehicle to get it moving and then jumped on board with the rest of the gang. Our eyes quickly filled with tears as our speed grew faster and faster. We held on to one another like there was no tomorrow! I put my feet out in an effort to help steer and quickly realized we had no control on the ice. We were drifting toward the right side of the hill, directly in line with the trees at the bottom. Yet we were laughing and shouting so hard that nothing else seemed to matter.

We had reached lightning speed and continued the ride for what seemed like hours, but in reality it took no more than a few minutes. As we neared the bottom, it became painfully clear that we were going to hit smack-dab in the middle of the first tree. I began dragging my hands and placed my feet on the ice in an attempt to slow us down, but it was no use. We hit the tree right in the middle of its trunk.

Bob was in the front, and he flew like a bird over the front of the toboggan, landing on the ground past the

tree. He was fortunate to have missed it completely. Tommy and Charlie were next, and they followed very close to Bob's flight plan. Randy simply slid to the front of the toboggan and raised his feet in front of him. They came to rest perfectly on the trunk of the tree.

As soon as I saw we were going to hit, I bailed out of the rear of the toboggan and slid on my back across the ice for twenty feet, ending up next to Randy. As we all rose from our various positions, Bob was the first to remark, "That was great! Let's do it again!"

Everyone was laughing at what we felt was a one-in-a-million chance of hitting the tree. We were certain it could never happen again in a million years. We jumped up off the ice and slipped and slid all the way to the top of the hill.

"Let's line it up more to the left so we don't hit the tree again!" I said to the others. Everyone agreed it was a sound idea. We became like miniature architects, figuring out the best place to begin the run in order to avoid the same outcome.

"This looks great!" said Bob, anxious to get the next trip started. He jumped into the front seat, and everyone took up their positions behind him.

We were ready once again, more intent than ever to go faster than the last run. A new land speed record hung in the balance. I gave the group a push, and off we went. The thrill was more exciting than the first run because it appeared we were going even faster than I anticipated. I could hardly see as the wind made my eyes water. I couldn't see anything, so I rubbed my face on the back of Randy's coat. It didn't do much good, but I was able to see that we were sliding toward the right side of the hill, in a direct line with the very same tree we hit on the previous run.

We were traveling so fast that no one dared to consider trying to stop the toboggan, out of fear of breaking a limb. I knew if we hit the tree it was not going to be fun. Fifty yards . . . forty yards . . . twenty yards. I knew what was going to happen. I tried to get free by sliding off the back of the sled, but this time we had the bright idea of holding on to one another's legs to streamline the vehicle. Randy had my upper thigh and Charlie had my boots. I was trapped!

We hit that tree going so fast, the toboggan flew up in the air from the back. I was launched, along with Randy and Charlie, past the right side of the tree. We landed hard on top of one another, and I never thought we would live through the crash. Bob averted the tree once again and sailed clear past Charlie, Randy, and me. Tommy wasn't so lucky. He was thrown clear over Bob's head and landed face first into the tree.

We lay there for some time trying to figure out what happened, none of us believing we could hit the same tree twice in as many runs down the hill. As we began to move, I saw that Bob was okay, but he did seem a bit groggy. Poor Tommy got the worst of it. He was crying from the bruises on his face and the bloody nose he was sporting. The rest of us survived to tell the tale. We did our best to stop Tommy's bloody nose by taking a wad of snow and placing it over his nose, but all it seemed to do was turn the snow red.

We decided enough was enough and began the long, cold walk home with our toboggan in tow. We must have been a sight to all the cars that drove past as we made our way down the sidewalk: a rag-tag group of five-, six-, and seven-year-olds whose courage had waned, admitting for the moment that the course had won the day.

There were so many other wonderful memories and just too many to count, as each day brought forth a flurry of ideas that would supply us for a lifetime. We built tree houses and swam in the mud flats. We fished in ponds and played all sorts of sports together. Each and every one of those experiences travel with me to this day. It was a wonderful childhood. I will always be grateful for the gift of my brother, Bob, for without him my life would not have been the same!

Time went by quickly, and before long I found myself in the seventh grade at a parochial school not far from home, two years from entering high school. During this time other new friends began inviting me to their houses to hang out. It was on one such day I decided to bring Bob along with me. We were growing apart, doing different things with different friends and engaged in activities that no longer brought us together as frequently as when we were children. Yet whenever the opportunity presented itself, we took advantage of it.

On that day I was invited to spend time with Jim. He was in my grade at school. After speaking with him on several occasions, he invited me to his house to meet some of his friends. (He lived near the center of town, about two miles from where we lived.) Bob was home from school, so I asked him if he wanted to join me. He jumped at the opportunity, so we hitched a ride and met Jim and his friends in his back yard, where they were playing hockey on the concrete.

Jim came over to us and slapped me on the back like we were old friends, telling me he was glad I came. He turned to Bob and asked, "Who's this, your little brother?"

I said, "Yes, this is my brother, Bob!"

Before Bob had a chance to introduce himself to him, Jim turned to me and said, "Why did you bring him along?"

"I like to hang out with my brother," I replied. "He's my best friend!"

"Well, we don't want him hanging out with us, so tell him to go home."

Bob was a few years younger than the others in the group, but that had never made any difference to me. I turned to Bob and asked if he wanted to stay, and he said yes.

"He wants to hang out with us. What's wrong with that?" I asked.

"You mean he won't go home?" asked Jim. "Then maybe you should punch him and make him go home."

I was torn for a moment because I wanted to stay with my new friend, but not at the expense of my love for Bob. I turned to Jim and said, "I've known my brother my whole life, and as I told you before, he's my best friend. I hardly know you, and I've never met your friends. Why would I want to ask him to leave when I've known him longer than all of you, and I love him as my brother?"

"Oh, so you don't want to hang out with us—is that it?" he replied.

I looked into Bob's eyes, then turned to Jim and said, "No, I guess I don't. C'mon Bob, time to go!"

I placed my arm over Bob's shoulder, and we walked the two miles back home. At that moment we were closer than we had been since the incident at the lake as kids.

"Bob," I said, "I love you more than any friend, no matter who they are, and I'd rather hang out with you than anyone else in the world."

Bob looked at me, clearly saddened by the event he had just been put through. With tears in his eyes, he said, "I love you too, Jer." As we continued the walk home, I pulled him closer with each new step we took, realizing once again that I would never have a better friend in the whole world than Bob.

To this day neither one of us ever forgot that incident. It came up several times as we moved through life together, cementing a love between two brothers that would only grow stronger with time.

Not too long after that incident, I developed relationships with a whole new group of friends, and one was with a boy named Tom. He lived a couple of streets over from where I grew up, and I soon learned he played the drums. I'd been playing guitar for a few years, and although I wasn't great, I could play along with most songs.

One day Tom and I got to talking and decided to form a band. At the time The Beatles and The Rolling Stones were all the rage, along with many other groups that marked the advent of the British Invasion. With all the new rock 'n roll music emerging on the radio, it was easy for a couple of boys to have aspirations of their own.

We realized there were very few bands with just a guitar and drums, so we began to seek out other kids who played instruments and might like to join our group. The first we met was a boy named Chuck. He played lead guitar and was pretty good. The other was a boy named Joe, and he played the organ. We came together at Chuck's house for the first time and started rehearsing in his basement.

In the beginning our music was somewhat difficult on the ears because timing and learning to follow one another was new to us all. Yet after a time we began to develop a sound of our own. We weren't writing any music, but we became pretty competent at playing songs from the top twenty hits on the charts. After many months of practice, we grew excited about the prospects of playing gigs and making some money. We soon learned that was easier said than done. While we sought out opportunities to play, we continued to rehearse several times a week.

During that time we all joined a group called the Columbian Squires, an organization for young men that was an offshoot of the Knights of Columbus. It gave us a place to hang out after school and meet others our own age. This organization offered our first opportunity to get the band a gig. The Squires had dances every other Friday night and were always looking for bands. The group got together and asked them if we could play at one of these dances. They said yes, and we set the date for two weeks later. I'll never forget that first time playing for money. The Squires paid two hundred and fifty dollars for a band to play at their dances, and we couldn't believe there was that much money involved.

Chuck's father helped us load our equipment into his work van and get set up for the gig. It started at eight

o'clock, and we began to play as soon as the hall was filled. We opened the set with a Beach Boys hit and then went through song after song until it was time for our first break. As we made our way toward an outside balcony, kids were coming up to us to let us know how great we sounded. None of us knew how to react because we were so used to our own music that we simply took it for granted. We never expected any kind of response. (We quickly learned that being in a band had its perks, and girls were part of the benefits.)

That night was a great success, and we booked dances for the Squires throughout the year. There were a few bands they booked as well, but we had become their main band. We no longer had to work odd jobs to have pocket change.

We began to receive some mention in the local paper. As our name got around, we were invited to play at other dances. We became very busy, and since we were going to different schools, it was a challenge to set a time to rehearse that worked for everyone's schedule. It required a renewed commitment to the group, which everyone was more than willing to make.

One of our best jobs came a year later, at the end of our eighth-grade year. It was the summer before we entered high school. Dances had become a great revenue source for the high schools, as well as a great place for everyone to see one another during the summer. We had been contacted by a large Catholic high school several towns away that had a reputation for the biggest dances in the area. Kids came from miles away to go to this particular dance, and the bands were often the best in the state. It wasn't unusual for them to get more than fifteen hundred kids at their dances, and that meant a lot of money for the school—not to mention how excited we were by the prospect of playing before such a large audience. Up until that time, our largest audiences were about two hundred and fifty, so for us, this was the big time!

We were playing back-up band for a group called The Argonauts, a well-known band who had been around for a while. All of them in that band were great musicians. They played back-up band for such notable groups as The Animals, which had made the big time a year earlier with such hits as "The House of the Rising Sun," among others. We were truly honored.

The night of the dance had arrived. When it came time for us to play, we started with a Beatles tune and went through a number of great songs, finishing up at the end of an hour. It was a very successful night for us, and we were so grateful about being accepted by so many people who had never heard us play before. It turned out to be the best time we ever had playing as a group together, and it was something we would never forget. We played almost every weekend that summer, and it was something we looked forward to. It never got old, and the music had become the glue that held our friendship together.

That fall I was off to a brand-new high school. It was an all-boy Catholic high school in the town next to mine, and we were the first class ever to attend. As freshmen, we would become the first sophomore class, until we became the first senior class. I was excited to discover what high school had to offer. As I did so, my childhood slowly faded into the background of my life. The experience at the lake had been replaced with all the distractions that come with being in high school for the first time. I would never forget the experience with Bob, but it was no longer prominent in my mind. Occasionally, I would find myself wanting to know more about the truth of what happened that day, but sadly, that would have to wait.

I would eventually learn that life wouldn't happen according to my agenda because there were bigger things at work that I had no control over. Although deep down I still yearned to hear the voice once again, I had to learn to be patient, and high school was just the distraction I needed to make that happen.

Going to high school at an all-boy Catholic institution was nothing like I anticipated it would be. Gone were the simple days of childhood when you were able to do whatever you wanted, as long as you cleaned your room, ate your meals, and went to bed when you were told. Childhood, I came to realize, is the best part of being human—free and untainted.

I began to see high school as a time for nothing else but to have fun and experience life. The band was still going strong even though I was once again at a different school than the other band members attended. The only interruption to this utopian existence was my studies, or lack of them. Although there were now conditions to my life that went beyond my parents' control, I made a commitment to myself early on that high school was a time to consciously spread my wings and fly.

My poor mother realized early on that high school would be no different for me than how school had always been. On several occasions I could hear her praying for my teachers because she knew there wasn't a person on the planet with enough patience to get me to do anything I didn't want to do. This was especially true as it

pertained to my studies.

I was not a difficult child, but I had my own ideas about how life should be lived, and there was no dissuading me from that truth. I realized from a very early age that the easiest way for me to learn anything was to teach myself. I had been told about autodidactic learning by someone who mentioned they were home schooled, and it made a whole lot of sense to me. I enjoyed the whole process of self-discovery but loathed having to sit at a desk and be lectured to about all the things that didn't interest me.

My teachers had a job to do, and I understood that. But more often than not, I found myself thinking about those things I would have preferred doing. I elected to approach my education with a minimalist attitude in the classroom: I did enough to get average grades and be promoted each year, but not a whole lot more than that. It seemed almost foolhardy to me—all those students who spent their time studying, leaving what little time that was left to do what they actually *wanted* to do. My way afforded me so much more time to do those things I was passionate about, while learning about life on my terms. This mindset was great for me, but it was not the kind of thing my parents or teachers thought was a good idea.

I remember one morning in geography class when a teacher asked me a question I knew nothing about. He quickly referred to me as a “dumb ass”! Didn't he understand? It was *geography* class. Geography was one of those subjects I had no interest in learning about because it simply wasn't applicable in my life. If I needed to learn about a place I was going to visit, then I'd learn about it. If I wasn't going to visit a certain place, then I saw no reason to learn about it! My rationale was simple: there were so many places I knew I *was* going to visit that I knew nothing about!

Most of my friends were different—their interests, their perspectives, most everything about them. I was not as popular as some students, but my size, involvement in sports, and ability to sing and dance afforded me entrance into many circles I would not have been invited to join otherwise. As I continued to learn more about myself, I also learned that cliques and circles were not for me. They always focused on qualifications and status, and those ideas were foreign to me. I saw everyone and everything as equal, and I still do! Why would anyone think they're better than anyone else? It's probably because most of those who feel that way were taught they were different, for all the wrong reasons.

This concept never settled well with me, and I thank my parents for that! I certainly understood we are all different, but to isolate ourselves from one another made no sense. I learned that by coming together, we have the opportunity to learn from one another. Why would anyone want to limit their evolution by isolating themselves into separate groups? I could never figure that out. I never limited my learning by becoming part of something that limited my experiences. I liked all people and was always willing to befriend anyone interested in befriending me.

I remember one incident when the school decided to put on a folk festival. Any student who wanted to participate could perform. It was a time when Bob Dylan was becoming popular and the folk group, Peter, Paul, and Mary, was still making hits. I had asked to play two songs, and I was excited to do so. I wrote a song about John Kennedy Jr. and what it must have been like for him after the death of his father. The other was a Peter, Paul, and Mary song I had sung when I was younger.

A few days before the show, I was approached by one of my teachers, a brother I had come to like very much. He asked me if I would do him a favor. One of the underclassmen wanted to sing, and he wasn't very good. This brother wanted to know if I would back him up on guitar. He was very shy, but my teacher felt that since I was a popular student, he wouldn't feel quite as intimidated if I performed with him. I felt honored, not only to be asked, but to have a chance to meet someone new and support him in his desire to sing. I met him the next day, and we rehearsed over the next two weeks.

The night of the show, he finished his performance to thunderous applause. Backstage he came running over to me, his face beaming with joy, and he gave me a hug. It was one of the most endearing moments in my high school experience. I will never forget the gift we can be to others if we are just willing to reach out and make ourselves available.

I felt good about my perspective on life while in high school. As I look back, I made a lot of friends that are still special to me, even though I have not seen nor heard from most of them since I left school many years ago.

That was the case with my best friend, Steve. He played bass guitar for several bands, and he was as good as any I had ever heard, including the professional players. Our band never had a bass player, so Steve agreed to play with us whenever he was free. He completed the sound we needed. Everyone had more fun than any of us

could have ever imagined. We didn't see much of one another after high school because I went to college and he pursued a career in music. His group signed with the same label as The Rolling Stones, and he did very well for a time. Steve eventually decided to fly planes and became a senior pilot for Continental Airlines, where he works to this day. We found our way back together and are good friends once again.

High school was one of those times you never really forget. I remember the first girl I ever fell in love with in high school. As I look back on it now, I think I *believed* I was in love, but my knowledge of what love was may have lacked a realistic understanding that could support it.

Love is a funny thing when you're in high school. You think you know what it is, but you really haven't got a clue. You learn very quickly that what you're experiencing is an emotional roller coaster you can never really understand, but you have to call it something and *love* seems as good as anything else. Nothing I ever experienced in my life affected me more than *love* at that age. It was confusing at best and more of a distraction than I needed at the time. With love came expenses. I had a job in the high school cafeteria and worked odd jobs on weekends.

I was still earning money playing in the band, which helped a lot. My parents couldn't afford much in the way of an allowance, and I didn't want to put too much pressure on them since there were five other siblings beside myself with their own needs. Continuing to play in the band also afforded me an opportunity to bring girlfriends to our rehearsals. The other band members began to bring their friends as well. I would bring my girlfriend to all our rehearsals, and it became a fun thing to do that didn't cost anything. Before we knew it, band rehearsal became a gathering place for all sorts of people to come and hear music while exchanging ideas and good conversation.

The band was doing well for a bunch of kids in their first year of high school. Each of us had a passion for music, and as the sounds on the radio changed, so did our ability to improve our repertoire. Chuck was still playing lead guitar, and his father continued to provide us with transportation to our gigs. He was a delivery person for Peggy Lawton Baked Goods, but on weekends, he was our roadie. When we had a job, we would pile all our gear into the Peggy Lawton Van and make our way to wherever work called us. We were all very close, and Chuck's dad was our biggest supporter. He was a wonderful man, and I remember him fondly to this day.

The band meant everything to us. Even though we would stop playing music together professionally long before we finished high school, it was an experience we would never forget. While the band was going strong, we continued to practice at Chuck's house several afternoons a week as well as on weekends, and our friends would make the rehearsals a staple of their weekly schedule.

One truly great thing that came out of that band was our visit to the Fernald School in Waltham. Chuck had a little sister who had been enrolled there some years earlier. It was more like a hospital than a school. Enrollees were severely challenged, and they ranged in age from children to older adults. For some, it was a difficult place to visit. It was very depressing, and the physical conditions of some of the patients there were hard to adjust to. When asked if the band might consider going there for our Sunday afternoon practice, we all jumped at the opportunity. We knew it meant a lot to Chuck and his family, so we booked a date for the following Sunday. When we arrived, I was impressed with the size of the compound. It stretched over a hundred acres. Red-brick buildings were everywhere you looked, but it appeared the whole place was in lockdown. There was no one outside, anywhere!

Shortly after we arrived, we were greeted by the person in charge. We were escorted to the main hall, where all their gatherings were held. We began to meet people of all ages and with every hardship you could imagine. It saddened me to see what some people had to live with on a daily basis. I immediately realized how fortunate I was to be a healthy person without the challenges these individuals with beautiful spirits had to endure. I had spent time with severely challenged people earlier in my life. My mother spent her whole life teaching them in the Boston school system. On more than one occasion, I was invited to class with her and loved every moment of the experience.

"Everyone is equally precious," my mother would often tell me, and I knew she believed it with all her heart. It was one of the most precious gifts she would ever pass on to me, and it served me well—both here and in the world beyond.

After being led down a series of halls and passageways, we finally emerged into a very large auditorium. Hundreds of people were there waiting for us. We felt like celebrities on a concert tour, much less a high school rock group at practice.

We set up the equipment and began the session. As soon as the music began, patients came from every corner of the room and rushed toward the stage to watch. There must have been five hundred people in the hall. They clapped and danced and moved every which way. Many were humming melodies and tunes that were different from the music we were playing, but that didn't matter.

It was without a doubt the most gratifying time I ever spent with the band—that is, until the next weekend, and the weekend after that, and all the others that followed. I grew to love those people, some with deformed body parts and others who had no idea who we were or what was actually going on. I learned from them the gift I was to them and how fortunate I was to be there. We returned many times over the next year, and everyone eventually knew us by name. They would yell our names as they guided us down hallways to the auditorium, and the whole experience would begin anew.

I learned some time later that my godfather, Uncle George, had a daughter in the very same school. Even though I didn't learn of this until long after the band dissolved, it was nice to think we brought some happiness into her life as well. (There is a reason for everything that happens, and although we may not know the reason when something occurs, what is important is that we know there *is* a reason!) Realizing how many severely challenged people in just that one school prompted me to wonder if our band was their only means of entertainment. It saddened me to think so. Little did I know the voice I heard at the lake some years earlier would speak to me again some twenty-five years later when I would return to play for these children of God once again.

My love of performing led me to consider entertainment as the path I would travel in search of a career. I performed all through high school and into my college years, as well as several years after leaving school. But life doesn't always turn out the way we think it should, no matter how hard we try to make it work. I always found myself coming back to where I was, and it had very little to do with performing.

As I look back at my high school years, I realize how wonderfully liberating they were for me. That period prepared me for my college experience and made me realize that my whole life up to that point had been nothing more than preparation for the next stage of my life. I was anxious to learn what lie ahead and how things would turn out with the kind of freedom college life offered.

High school was going by so quickly that it seemed more like a blur than an experience. From my junior year on, all the talk around campus was about college. I still had two years of high school left, and I just didn't understand when things were so good, why anyone would want to rush to give it all up. I learned later how some people rush from one thing to another looking for something they'll never find, until they learn to live in the moment. I was adamant about enjoying what was left of high school, and I lived each day like it was my last.

I guess it was inevitable that I would find myself sitting at graduation with all my classmates, certain we'd be spending our summers together and nothing would ever change. Boy, was I mistaken. After graduation, I don't think I saw the majority of my classmates ever again. I had either been blindsided and never saw it coming, or I was so unrealistic about it I was in denial. Losing all the friends I had seen every day for four years just didn't seem fair. Life is sad that way. We make friends and lose them, but life moves on, stopping for no one. As for me, things turned out better than I expected.

I was on my way to Wake Forest University on a football scholarship, and although I would miss my old friends, new ones were waiting to be discovered. I had not returned to North Carolina since being recruited the early part of my senior year, and I was looking forward to going back.

It was about two weeks before I was leaving for college. I was both excited and apprehensive about what the future held for me.

I never found it difficult meeting new people; in fact, I actually enjoyed it. However, I did realize from an early age that when it came to meeting people, it was different for me than most. My initial experience when meeting someone for the first time revealed something most others could not see. I would see the truth of who they were almost immediately. I always felt this was a by-product of my experience with the voice on the lake. Even though I didn't know that for sure, it was something I had come to rely on.

It was interesting to watch people present themselves in a certain way and know if they were being honest with me or not. I understood why people would sometimes stretch the truth to impress someone or perhaps embellish a story, but it still struck me as strange. It seemed like *real* life just wasn't fulfilling enough for them. It had to be bigger and better than the real thing. I came to realize that behavior would serve to define them, and

it was disappointing to me that people felt the need to pretend to be something they were not. I wondered if the environment they had grown up in had beaten them down into thinking they were less than they could be.

I understood when I was very young how special every being is, even more so after my experience with Bob. I guess that whole incident made me see things as precious. Nothing should be overlooked or downplayed. Everything was a treasure, one of a kind, and no one should ever feel less than that. I think Bob had more to do with my ability to see clearly than any other person OR experience in my life.

I know many people who have the ability to see the truth of what is. I have come to understand that this ability emanates from within, where the truth of one's spirit resides. As these thoughts came rushing into my head, I realized I had nothing to worry about because I would always be the happy spirit I had come to know. The key for me was the same as it was for everyone: Just be honest with yourself. That in turn would ensure honesty with others.

Relationships in high school can sometimes be pretty earth shattering, especially if those involved were experiencing them for the first time. Growing up was interesting enough, and it didn't require any additional pressure to make it so! I learned a lot during my high school years, but there was still so much more to learn about life.

The time had come to move on—to say good-bye to those high school memories and make room for new ones. I was heading off to college and live out my dream of playing football. I had worked very hard the summer after graduation to get into the best shape of my life. I knew there would be many talented athletes in my freshman class, and every one of them had the same dream of starting for the varsity team. I would have to give it my all if I expected to hold my own over the next four years. I was confident, but not overly so. I had learned that one who is confident and knowledgeable needs little else to succeed!

The drive down to North Carolina from Boston that August was a long one, but I enjoyed every minute of it. I was accompanied by my mother and father, who had never been to North Carolina before. The trip took three days to complete, and the journey afforded me some downtime with my folks. I would miss them very much, and I knew they would miss me!

Shortly after we arrived on campus, I got settled in my new surroundings and then joined them for dinner. It would be some time before I would see them again, so it was their last chance to tell me all the things they wanted me to remember. It was their way of letting me know how much they would miss me and how much they loved me. After dinner we returned to the campus, where I said my good-byes.

I was sad to see them leave. I felt like it was a turning point in my life we all experience only once. As I watched their car disappear on the horizon, I returned to my room, where I would begin another chapter in my life. What a chapter it would be!

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Chapter Three: Contact

The evolution of all that is!

September, 1967

It had been twelve years since I heard the voice at the lake. I was enjoying my time at Wake Forest and had made many new friends who helped to shape my life. Once I got past my freshman year, I had a pretty good understanding of how the system worked. The freshman year of college can be an intimidating time because everyone else seems to know more than you do.

Wake Forest is located on a beautiful campus that used to be the R.J. Reynolds estate. It encompasses several thousand acres of gorgeous buildings, forests, formal gardens, and pastures. It was one of the most beautiful colleges I had ever seen. There were three thousand students, including grad students, at the university. Because the school was so small, one got to know just about everyone there. For me, Wake Forest fulfilled every dream I ever had about what college life could be.

It was late one fall, and the football season had ended. We had a short reprieve until winter workouts began. It was a time for many to heal up from all the damaged tendons and torn-up knees they had experienced. I was

on my way out of the training room early one Friday afternoon and headed down to the girl's dorm to see a friend, when I suddenly found myself thinking of my roommate from the year before. Ronan was a year ahead of me in school, and he turned out to be one of my best friends. We'd been through a lot together, and when he left, it created a space in my life that would not be filled easily.

I hadn't seen or spoken to Ronan since May of the previous year, when he returned home to Wisconsin. That was the funny thing about college. When people left, one rarely heard from them again. It reminded me a great deal of high school in that regard. I could only imagine he had moved on to bigger and better things—new responsibilities, a job, and perhaps even a family. There were no computers with e-mail back then, and letters took a long time to write.

To actually get a phone call was a gamble at best since one was always in class or on the field.

As I walked along the concrete sidewalk, I had the strangest sensation Ronan had returned. We all know those feelings. They stop you from whatever it is you're doing and force you to pause and take notice. I stood there for a moment, recalling some of the outrageous things we had done together. Moments later I found myself smiling before continuing with my walk. Yet the feeling of his presence would not go away. It was stronger than anything I'd felt in some time.

I remembered back to the day Bob almost drowned and the voice that kept that from happening. I stopped again and looked around, trying to dispel the feeling that something special was taking place, when I noticed a tall, lean figure standing next to the iron railing at the back of Reynolda Hall. The figure was looking directly at me. It was Ronan. I broke into a run up the stairs and embraced him.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, excited to see him. I held him by the shoulders, not quite believing he was there. I stood back and looked at him. He had lost weight—not that he was ever that heavy.

He smiled that big-toothed grin of his and replied, "I needed to get away, so I thought I'd come down for a visit."

"So what are you doing, now that school's over?" I asked, expecting him to tell me about some great job he had, making lots of money.

"I work construction back in Milwaukee," he replied, with a hint of unhappiness. "It pays okay, but I don't like it much."

I knew what that was all about. I had worked construction since my thirteenth birthday, mostly during summers all through high school. If it wasn't for the band, I think I would have been bored to death. Even the thought of it made me tired, but I sensed it wasn't just the job that had him depressed.

"In order to be able to find a job, I needed a car, so I bought one," he said. "I can't wait to get it paid off so I can find a real job."

I was puzzled. Here was one of my best friends out of school, yet feeling trapped by car payments and who knew what else.

"I thought you'd be doing great and having a ball," I said, waiting for some kind of excitement to surface.

"Life after college isn't all it's cracked up to be," he said. "I started living at home because I had nowhere else to go. With no job and no money, I was stuck. It was okay for a week or so, and then my parents started pushing me to get a job so I could help with the mortgage," he continued. "They didn't much care what kind of job—just one that made money."

"Bummer," I replied, quickly finding myself hoping college would last forever.

"I had to get transportation in order to look for work, so I bought a car. My father co-signed for me," he said. "Worst mistake I ever made. Now, when I get a few days behind in the payments, he gets all bent out of shape, asking me when I'm going to send a check. It's not like I ever missed a payment or anything," he said dejectedly. "It's just different than what I thought it would be."

"I understand," I replied, not having a clue what he was talking about, but knowing how easy it was to get sucked into the expectations of society. My father taught me all too well about responsibility and accountability, not that I listened a whole lot.

Perhaps that was one of the reasons I was more like my mother than my father. She had the artistic personality in the family, not that she had much of a chance to explore it. But she also had the patience of a saint, unlike my father!

"So what do you want to do?" I asked, changing the subject before I became totally depressed. "Obviously you're here to get away from all that, so let's do it!" Before he could reply, I said excitedly, "Let's hit the tavern

for a beer. You can buy since you're working." He looked at me as if I hadn't heard a word he'd been saying, when we both suddenly burst out laughing.

I really liked his car, which was used, but a real beauty. It was a forest-green Grand Prix with a vinyl top and a simulated wood interior. It was better than any car I ever had. I mostly drove my father's car. Don't get me wrong. I appreciated the transportation, but it was a bummer arriving somewhere for a date in a car that was older than I was.

When we arrived at the tavern, we sat down and ordered our first round of beers. "So what else have you been doing since you left?" I asked.

"I traveled around a bit. I spent some time in Northern Wisconsin and really enjoyed it up there. It's such beautiful country! I would have stayed there in a heartbeat, but there was no work. How about you? How's football?" he asked.

"Football's good," I replied. "Hard work as usual, but still good."

"And how's your love life?" I asked, hoping to improve his mood with a change in conversation.

"Don't ask," he replied. "Who can even think of a girlfriend—or *any* friend for that matter—when I haven't got a pot to piss in!"

I started laughing because I didn't know what else to do! Hearing him so depressed struck me as both odd and funny at the same time. It was so different from the Ronan I knew just a year earlier.

"Ronan, if that's the case, I can certainly line you up with a date for the weekend. At least that way you can remember what it's like *having* a date!"

He looked at me and began to laugh at the irony of the situation. He took another drink of beer. It was good to see him start to unwind. There was nothing he could do about his problems here, so he settled back and began to enjoy the moment. I tried to keep him focused on his reasons for getting away in the first place. We made some more small talk, when I decided to share with him what had been going on with me.

"Ronan, can I talk to you about something?"

"Sure," he replied. "What's going on?"

"I know this might seem a bit bizarre, but I need your feedback—as a friend."

"What the hell?" he replied. "We just went through the sixties! Everything's bizarre!" The levity at the table made it easier to begin.

"Just before I saw you standing at the railing, I had the strangest feeling you were on campus. I've been having a lot of those feelings lately, and strangely, they've all been coming true."

"That happens to everyone," he said, sloughing it off like it was nothing to be concerned about. He took another swallow of beer. "Haven't you ever thought about someone you haven't seen in a while, and the next day they call you up?" he asked.

"That's exactly what I'm talking about," I replied excitedly, "but it's more than that. Hearing from you is one thing, but showing up? . . . I mean, that's a bit unusual, wouldn't you say?" I asked.

He looked at me and then placed his beer on the table. "Do you really think you're tapping into something special here?" he asked. "How much drugs are you doing?"

"It's not the drugs," I replied. "I really do think something special is happening here, and it's happening more frequently all the time."

He smiled and said somewhat nonchalantly, "Don't let it get you down. You'll figure it out. You always do."

"Yeah, I guess so," I replied, hoping for more feedback than he offered. "Thanks for listening," I said, then let I it go. I think he needed me to be there for him at that moment more than I needed his feedback.

We spent the rest of the night and weekend having a great time reliving memories and visiting old friends. However, before it ended, Ronan made a comment that sent a chill up my spine.

"If I could do it all over again," he began, "I think I'd stay in college for the rest of my life."

(Needless to say, my life in school was great, except for the studies.)

"Ronan, you hated class and hardly ever went. Why would you even think about being in school for the rest of your life?"

"Because it's better than having to live in the outside world, having to fend for yourself every day just trying to survive—never mind getting ahead."

I began to understand. I knew my life at school was as good as it could get. Why wouldn't it be? Being in school for four years and having everything given to me because I was there on a scholarship was the good life.

But to suddenly have it all taken away and be left to fend for himself must have been quite a culture shock for Ronan; I knew it would be for me! It must have been doubly hard transitioning from enjoying attention as an athletic star to being someone nobody knew, or much less cared about! Yet my own culture shock was awaiting me just around the corner!

As I sat there thinking about what his life had become, I realized mine was on the same course. I hadn't decided on any particular profession, so considering life after graduation was a moot point. I was twenty years old, my hormones were raging, and I was expected to think beyond that? There were so many more important things to consider!

Ronan's visit opened my eyes to a number of realities, the most important being a commitment to enjoy the rest of my college experience. I soon found myself thinking about how we found one another that day he arrived. It was no coincidence! He knew exactly where I'd be, and I knew he was there! I thought about this a bit longer and then began to reason it out. He probably went to my dorm, and not finding me there, began looking for me. The campus was small, so it would have been easy to find me. Unfortunately, I didn't think to ask him if that was the case. I tried to let it go, but the feeling wouldn't leave.

Ronan left early Sunday morning. I think he was sad to leave because coming back to school reminded him of how life used to be. We lost touch after that. It was some forty years later before we spoke again. He was married and had a family, but more important, he was happy. We shared some memories, but that was all. Life had changed for both of us, yet whenever I think of him, it's with a smile.

The following week I was sitting in my English Literature class, listening to a lecture, when another thought came to me. I found myself missing the fall foliage back home. There wasn't a more beautiful place anywhere to enjoy the fall season than New England. I wanted to be there to take in the colors and kick the leaves as I walked down the sidewalk. The sound of them crackling underfoot never got old—and neither did the crisp taste of cider, pressed fresh right at the mill.

As children, we raked the leaves into piles as tall as we were. We climbed trees and leaped into the piles before throwing them up in the air over our heads. When the weekend came, Dad made smaller piles that he burned along the side of the road. Burning leaves as a boy was something you never forgot. We watched as they burned, creating glowing red ashes before cooling down to become piles of wispy gray ones that lined the street before blowing away.

As I continued reliving my memories, I was interrupted by the students leaving class. I gathered my books and made my way to my dorm to get ready for my next class. On the way, I passed the post office and decided to check my box for any mail. I got very few letters from home since everyone there was just as busy as I was, so I was surprised to find a letter from my brother, Richard. He and his twin brother, Steven, were the last to be born into our family, so they are several years younger than I am.

I walked outside and made myself comfortable on a wooden bench and then opened the letter. Much to my surprise, in the envelope I discovered four perfectly shaped maple leaves with the most magnificent colors I had ever seen. As I held them aloft in front of my eyes, the sunlight made the colors brighter and more beautiful. The veins in each leaf were clearly visible and created complex designs one might easily overlook if he didn't have a passion for viewing leaves in the fall.

I soon found myself thinking about the daydream I had in class just a few moments earlier. Was this just a coincidence? When these things happened earlier in my life, I simply experienced them and moved on. This event, the one with Ronan, and others I experienced recently were different, or maybe I was just becoming more conscious of them now that I was older.

A week had passed, and I began thinking about the leaves my brother sent me. It reminded me that Thanksgiving was just a few weeks away. I looked forward to it every year. In our house it truly was a celebration of thanks: for life, friends, and food! Yet I knew I wouldn't be getting home this year since the money wasn't available for a plane ticket. I suddenly realized that I had another option. I chuckled that I hadn't thought of it sooner. What if I could find a ride home for the holidays? There were not many people attending Wake Forest from Massachusetts, but I knew I could find someone heading in my general direction. I put the idea in the back of my mind and headed to the cafeteria for lunch.

After lunch I stopped by the post office, and much to my surprise, there was a single letter in my box. I fumbled with the combination on the lock and retrieved it. Inside the envelope was a letter from my father and a round-trip ticket home for Thanksgiving. I couldn't believe it! As soon as the happiness wore off, I began to

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