

These are six of the ninety-two stories of my life.

***Life Check***  
A Human Journey

by  
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## **Drowning**

*SPRING 1956*

It was a cold early spring day. I slid into a deep-water-filled pit. My feet could not touch the bottom as the bulky winter clothes dragged me down into the muddy liquid.

Thankfully, my brother Thom reached in and found my toque. He quickly grabbed it and pulled with all the might his tiny hands could muster until my cap released from my head into his grip. Then, incredibly, he dragged me far enough out of the hole to liberate me from certain death.

My brother was lucky not to have slipped beside me during the rescue. The ordeal could have quickly ended at a double funeral.

I was a year younger than four-year-old Thom was, and he just saved my life.

The sheer-sided menace dug for a septic tank. Unfortunately, winter set in before the installation was complete, and the earthen-walled death trap filled with water during the first winter storm and remained so through later spring.

The temperature was as cold as a thawing freezer with continuous melting drips. Thom and I bundled in our winter coats and galoshes, with itchy woolen toques covering our heads. We played unsupervised outside in the presumed safety of our backyard.

Our family moved into one half- of a duplex, five miles from Port Alberni, Canada, in the heart of Vancouver Island the previous summer. The primitive dwelling without inside plumbing. The kitchen sink had an old chipped cast iron

hand pump mounted beside it. This contraption delivered the only water into the home from a board-covered outside well. Unfortunately, they never covered the empty septic basin.

The vertical wood-slatted outhouse in our backyard was beyond a wide ditch. This outbuilding's only access was a rickety plank bridge with split log handrails spanning the five-foot creek trench. My perilous crater was located just before the bridge crossing, alongside the building's backside, where our unit adjoined the other.

A family lived in the unit next door in the shared building. The parents had a girl, around age six, and a slightly younger brother.

On this near-fatal day, the older girl joined Thom and me in our backyard. The three of us frolicked as free as escaped puppies next to the ever-present septic hole. A thin sheet of ice occasionally appeared and disappeared, day to day, across its surface.

Throughout the winter, Thom and I previously broke any at-hand ice with rocks or sticks. But, admittedly, neither understood the danger.

This morning I lay on my stomach, stretched out one of my mitten-covered hands to reach down, and break the thin ice covering the orifice. Then, without warning, I quickly slid on the water-soaked muddy banks into the thick, dark milk chocolate-colored liquid.

The girl ran, abandoning Thom and me. It was up to my brother whether I lived or died in the next seconds.

As I lay free on a small rain-soaked grass patch, my mother came galloping up with the young neighbor girl on her heels. During the rescue, the childish next-door girl at least had the mind to find my mother and tell her I was in danger.

In reality, I don't believe the young girl understood the deadly situation Thom and I were in and only ran to tattle on us for playing around the water-filled pit.

This episode was my second life-terminating drowning experience in as many years..

## **Rosarito**

### *SPRING 1969*

Everyone jeered and applauded loudly, waiting for the last large bottle rocket launch. Someone in the dark inadvertently stepped on the rocket's long stem, breaking it and leaving it dangling a foot from its red paper-wrapped body. One student yelled, "Just break it off and shoot it!" The ignorant chaperones did just that.

As soon as it launched, the rocket's trajectory went awry. It flew erratically amongst the group of spectators. Students dodged and dove to the ground, desperately avoiding its unguided path. Finally, it hit a young man's arm and continued careening off the next chest before powering into my eye. Instantly, my eye swelled shut. A few yards from me, the rocket finally hit the ground in a deafening explosion, leaving my ears ringing.

The concerned counselors swept through the group, asking everyone if they were alright. I moved in quiet agony away, avoiding embarrassment while trying to nurse my wounds and retrieve my bearings. In the dark, they never saw me.

Previously, right before Easter break, during my sophomore year in high school, I attended a Campus Life's Christian student association meeting and handed a flyer denoting a new offshoot organization name Alpha Chi, a San Diego countywide boy's only club. The brochure announced the club's first three-day retreat to Rosarito Beach in Mexico. I immediately paid the fifty-dollar fee and signed up for their May weekend trip.

The day arrived, and I excitedly drove to the old College Avenue Baptist Church, the designated meeting place. It was Friday morning, and the parking lot was full of anxious teenage boys. I was the only guy from my school in attendance.

Around nine o'clock, the forty-six male teenagers and two adult male chaperones boarded the old school bus and drove off to Mexico. Besides, two more chaperones drove personal vehicles and met us on the beach.

We arrived two hours later. Rosarito is thirteen miles south of Tijuana on the old road leading to Ensenada. A small roadside community comprised a dilapidated gas station and a small bar/market/souvenir combination shop, surrounded by scattered shacks and sub-par dwellings.

Directly across the road from the businesses was the pristine desolated Rosarito Beach. Beyond the beach were coarse sand and dirt bluffs and plateaus. We set up our camp on the largest plateau overlooking the massive Pacific Ocean, filled with non-stop roaring waves breaking upon the sandy beach.

We spent the afternoon mingling with newfound friends. A couple of guys brought surfboards and made the short hike down a slippery sand trail to our private beach area. I wish I had brought my board.

Late afternoon, two counselors announced they were going to the market to buy penny bottle rockets. Everyone started scrambling through their backpacks, searching for dollar bills to purchase a stash. Figuring a couple of hundred-penny rockets would suffice, I forked over two crinkled dollar bills. They returned an hour later and divvied up the highly prized treasure. What they spent an hour doing in Rosarito was beyond me.

We each received a portion of delicious fire-roasted chicken with an abundance of potato chips and a Shasta soft drink for dinner. It proved difficult to balance my chicken

dinner on the thin paper plate. I ended up with many gritty-sanded bites.

Penny rockets shoot and explode. The red paper, gun-powered, filled fuel unit, attached to a stabilizing straw, guaranteed a straight flight line. After lighting the fuse, the firecracker becomes airborne and flies fifteen to twenty feet before exploding.

After dinner on this dark new moon night, the fireworks came out. The chaperones also purchased half a dozen large rockets attached to four-foot stems. They began shooting the missiles over the ocean, with everyone loosely gathered around them. The fuse crackled and sparkled while burning toward the propulsion unit—a few seconds later, the rocket fired, whistling loudly through the quiet night air. Seventy feet later, the missile exploded with a thunderous bang and a brilliant flash, lighting up the night sky and ocean below it.

Following the final large rocket's catastrophic flight, the time arrived for the bottle rocket war. But, reeling in all the excitement, no one seemed to notice the continuing swelling of my one-eyed, contorted face.

We split into two groups. My group scaled a small plateau, and the opposition assembled in the flat below us. We set to fire our penny rockets at each other. The war started!

My team lit and rained rockets on them as fast as possible while our counterparts tried to do likewise towards us. We had a distinct advantage. They couldn't escape the extended range of our rocket's downward trajectory, while most of their missiles couldn't reach the height of our position.

You need two hands to fire a bottle rocket; one holds the ten-inch straw stem while the other lights the fuse. I laid my excess inventory on the ground in front of me, but most of the others, not wanting to reach the ground to retrieve their next missile, stuffed them in the top front pocket of their shirt—not a good idea.

During our barrage, one rocket accidentally landed in an enemy's filled pocket because all his rockets started exploding at once in a massive display of light and noise, during which he frantically tried to tear off his shirt. Throughout his calamity, every penny rocket got decimated. This scenario repeated twice more before our defeat. Their team must have comprised slow learners.

They defeated us for one reason, Counselor Ray. Ray was huge, six foot four, and weighed three hundred-twenty pounds. Before his retirement and subsequent move to San Diego, he was a professional NFL football linebacker for a major franchise.

He witnessed his team's demise and took matters into his own hands. As soon as someone in our squad noticed him scaling the cliff to our plateau, everyone lined the edge and focused our attack solely on him. Unfazed or deterred, Ray crested the top and entered our domain. We scattered.

Convinced he had the upper hand, Ray fearlessly walked up to one of my teammates. He lit a bottle rocket, grabbed the neck of his victim's t-shirt, and ripped it down past his chest, exposing skin while leaving the rest of his shirt encompassing our soldier's abdomen. Then, using the attached half-shirt handle, he held his victim captive and, with increasing pressure, pushed the exploding end of a bottle rocket hard into the bare chest until it burst.

Counselor Ray went through our unit, repeating the torture—exploding gunpowder on your bare skin hurts! Finally, the unstoppable man declared himself the victor, and we agreed.

The evening's excitement wasn't over. We maintained our groups and set up to play capture the flag. Their team was shirts and our already half-naked guys—skins.

Capture-the-flag is a game where each side tries to infiltrate the opposition's territory and snatch their flag before returning it unchecked back to their side. When an



opposing team member tackles a foe, the tagged person is out of play for the rest of the game.

We placed someone's destroyed t-shirt as our flag on the edge of a cliff overlooking the beach and theirs somewhere high on a plateau. We met in the middle, and Ray declared, "Game on!" Both groups scattered across their respective territory.

I stood at the edge of a dirt cliff, somewhere between the flags, trying desperately to see through the darkness with my good eye. Two runners approached me with their feet crunching on the hard sand. I never saw them but felt the wind as they ran close past me, one after the other, straight off the cliff.

A while later, one of my teammates approached me and said it was my turn to guard the flag. I asked him to point me in that direction. I eventually found it lying unattended on the ground overlooking the ocean. Playing guard was the worst position in the game, with minimal action. I stood bored over our flag for the longest time. My head pounded like an old one-lung steam engine.

I eventually wondered if someone would take the time to trudge up the shoreline and end directly below our base position before scaling the cliff and seizing our flag. So I walked to the edge and strained my eye, trying to detect movement.

Unbelievable! Counselor Ray crawled up the steep, loose sand cliff on his hands and knees, ten feet below me.

Half his weight, and five-foot-eight inches, I hadn't a hope of capturing the colossal man, but without hesitation, I jumped onto the monster, yelling, "I got you!"

As we slid down the embankment, Ray retorted, "The hell you do," and reached around with a huge hand. He grabbed me and threw me towards the beach. As my body flew past him, I latched onto one of his feet and repeated, "You're down!" Instead of acknowledging me, Ray grabbed me and tried again. For the second time, I clung to his foot.

I climbed up his body. As previously, we started sliding further down the bluff. I continued yelling, “I got you! You’re captured!”

Disgusted, Ray rolled over, knocking me off his back, and exclaimed, “Enough of this shit!” He picked me up and threw me to the beach. I landed hard in the sand, thirty feet below.

Ray got our flag and headed back for the win. As I lay in the dark, I heard a few faint voices crying, “I got you.” “You’re caught.” “You’re out,” while Ray bulldozed over my teammates on his final touchdown run.

Counselor Ray stood in the middle of the battlefield, waving our piece of t-shirt, and declared victory. The game was over.

The following day was uneventful. Groups of students stood around most of the day, swapping stories and getting to know one another. Not that anyone could overlook it; no one asked about my swollen, out-of-shape face and closed eye.

Early afternoon, a nude woman showed up on the beach to sunbathe. Even though she was too far away to see clearly, we all wasted an hour gawking. But one-eyed-me couldn’t tell if it was a woman or a man.

After another excellent camp dinner, we made a substantial stacked-pallet bonfire and sat around discussing Christ and how good Christians should talk and present themselves to prospective converts.

I silently relived the previous night’s battle with the linebacker on the cliff and the irony of his locker room language.

By the time I returned home the next day, my face had turned a multitude of red, blue, and purple colors. Unfortunately, my Medal of Honor did not reopen for a week.

## Uncertified Dive Class

SPRING 1969

The water was bone-chilling cold. I was on my very first scuba dive—a hundred and ten feet below the ocean’s surface on the edge of La Jolla Canyon when I ran out of air! At sixteen years old, I was unprepared to die.

My dive partner, Gary, was four years older than me, and this was his first dive as well. He had no more experience than I had.

We worked together at TLC Convalescent Hospital in San Diego’s East County. He studied pre-med at San Diego State, and I was a sophomore at El Cajon Valley High School. As part-time kitchen aides, our job was to load the dinner carts, clean the kitchen, and wash dishes.

One day, Gary brought a flyer to work advertising scuba diving lessons. Having never missed an episode of the sixties TV show, *Sea Hunt*, starring Lloyd Bridges, I always thought *that would be fun* and jumped at the chance to learn the sport. So Gary and I signed up.

It turned out to be an inexpensive, uncertified class taught by an older San Diego State College student named Ken. Unlicensed as a diving instructor, he was trying to earn a little extra pin money. Ken held the dive class in his off-campus apartment swimming pool. That’s where Gary and I learned to use scuba equipment.

We excitedly showed up for the first class. Ken and three students were there: Gary, myself, and someone else. He was an experienced diver, and to Ken’s credit, he put together a class outline similar to an accredited school. He taught us the

dos and don'ts, including dive charts. The charts are complicated formulas used to determine air consumption, nitrogen buildup in the blood, and time and depth restrictions for consecutive dives.

To Ken's, or should I say our detriment, he failed to adequately teach us about all the diving equipment variations.

After the first two Saturday morning classes, we were ready to hit the pool. Pool instruction comprised an additional two Saturday sessions. We started with a swim test, continued with snorkeling, and ended with equipment ditch and don, and buddy-breathing.

After completing the sixteen-hour class, we were ready for our first ocean dive, and the following week, at eight in the morning, the four of us met at the south end of La Jolla Shores beach. Ken brought a mess of borrowed equipment from everyone he knew.

We owned our fins, mask, and snorkel; Ken had all his gear. The other three split up the remaining hodgepodge at random.

The standard-size tank holds seventy-two cubic feet of air. I ended up with the top half of a wetsuit, a weight belt, and, unknowingly, a fifty-cubic-foot tank. Both sizes look the same; you must know which size you are using. Unfortunately, Ken overlooked informing me that my tank was a third smaller than the others.

Worse than the size differential, my tank sported a *K* valve. Tanks fitted with one of two valve choices. A *J* valve has a reserve, which activates by pulling down a wire alongside the air tank. The reserve gives you an additional two minutes of air, which is adequate for surfacing from any depth. A *K* valve has no reserve. Ken missed this lesson.

Finally, the last equipment omission was buoyancy compensators, a rubber vest you can partially fill with air through a mouth tube. If you have too much or too little weight on your belt, you adjust your buoyancy by adding or

removing air in the vest. Properly adjusted buoyancy allows you to swim freely or float without continually fighting to stay up or down. Critically, you will sink to the bottom if you are too heavy and lose consciousness. A vest also contains an emergency gas cylinder you can release to fill and immediately take you to the surface. It would have been good for me to have a buoyancy compensator on this dive.

On that first, nearly disastrous dive, we were hundreds of yards offshore and just below the ocean's surface when the other student couldn't clear his ears. Ken used hand signals to tell us he was staying with him. Then he waved his hand in a circular motion. Gary and I interpreted that gesture to mean, "Go, look around. Have fun."

We made our way deep to La Jolla Canyon's edge, half a mile offshore. The six-hundred-foot-deep canyon is considered an advanced dive and certainly not recommended for a novice, let alone a first dive.

However, we were young and fearless as we approached the canyon's edge, which gradually sloped downwards for twenty feet or more before dropping straight off. Then, we glided out over the pitch-black abyss. There was absolutely no visibility below, in front, or to the right or left of us. Looking up, you could barely see the hazy ocean surface, and turning around, it was hard to visualize the sand leading back to the safety of the beach. We would have been lost in utter darkness a little further out. A terrifying experience!

Because we were squeezed by the pressure of over three atmospheres, cold and apprehensive, we breathed more air faster. And I ran out of air!

Gary and I had just checked with each other to confirm everything was okay, and he was swimming away from me. I breathed in through my regulator, and nothing. No air, just a hard pucker. So I swam after Gary as fast as I could. He turned around after I grabbed one of his fins. He got the out-of-air signal from me, slashing a hand across my throat.

I felt for my reserve wire along the side of my tank and found nothing. I turned my back to him, pointing to my valve, thinking *he'll turn it on for me*. Instead, Gary spun me around and shook his head. Feeling the burn in my lungs, I knew I was in trouble. If I were going to survive, I had to initiate buddy breathing. It wasn't a big deal; Lloyd did it every episode.

As I was the one out of air, it was my job to orchestrate the buddy-breathing maneuver. To accomplish this, I remove my partner's regulator from his mouth, take two breaths, and return it to his mouth for two breaths. Repeat until we were out of danger.

Being out of air for two minutes, I was critical. I fast exhausted the remaining oxygen in my lungs and bloodstream and seconds from drowning. I reached for his regulator, not realizing a neck strap attached to it. His head snapped when I pulled on it. Gary grabbed it back out of my hands and tried reinserting it into his mouth. At these depths, things distort. Gary couldn't find his mouth for four or five tries.

While tragedy unfolded, we swam upward. In a final desperate attempt at survival, I reinserted my regulator into my mouth and sucked in, using every muscle in my body. We were so deep! The small amount of air left in my tank expanded as we rose, and I received a short but life-sustaining breath.

Gary, finally situated, motioned to me; he was ready to begin buddy breathing. We did and quickly ascended to the surface. Our ascent was too fast and dangerous, but the risk of drowning was imminent, so we kept kicking hard. Upon reaching the surface, we jetted out of the water to the mid-chest level.

Ken tried to follow our bubbles and was only a few yards from us when we shot from the ocean's depths. Agitated, we were buddy-breathing—he demanded to know what we were doing. He interrupted my explanation and kept repeating,

“Nobody ever buddy-breaths. Nobody ever buddy-breaths.” I interjected; we had to, and he had taught us how. Ken said it was just part of the class, but “Nobody ever buddy-breaths. With modern equipment, you just don’t get into those situations.” Then, glaring at me, “Why would you go so deep and do such stupid things?”

Ken’s rant suddenly stopped. He looked hard at me and stated my ears were bleeding and I needed to get to a doctor. So the four of us swam to shore.

I didn’t see a doctor until the following Monday. I was young and invincible, and I could still hear. The doctor said my ears were fine. My canals bled a little when they adjusted to the pressure changes, but no permanent damage.

We were lucky. The only thing that saved my and possibly Gary’s life was the fact we did not panic through the peril and did almost everything right.

I never saw Ken again, but I suspect we were his first and last diving class and his only students.

Our experience did not discourage me. I survived my first dive—barely but barely counts. After that, Gary and I dove two to four times a month over the next several years.

We never bothered with buoyancy compensators. We made frequent Canyon dives between two and two-and-a-half hours; no floating or resting, just constant swimming to stay off the bottom or fighting to stay down. Those dives were physically exhausting. We lost up to five pounds on a Canyon dive. The pounds stayed off until we got to the nearest Taco Bell and stuffed ourselves with as much food as we could afford from our minimum-wage part-time jobs.

## **First Drunk**

*SPRING 1970*

Seventeen is an awkward age in a young man's life—shy of adulthood, yet mentally ready to refuse advice and make his own decisions. It is an age of experimentation.

I have known Doug since the seventh grade and met Bill on the first day of high school. By seventeen, we were high school juniors—men who ruled our corner of the world. We were cool, owned our cars, and had an image to uphold. A teenager's reputation is more important than food.

Before this, I'd tried beer a couple of times and weed only once, unlike most of my friends, who experimented with numerous drugs. However, these minor infractions were enough to solidify my standing with my peers.

I was careful about weed. I was unimpressed by the effect when I tried it. Still, my primary concern, being a Green Card carrier and not an American citizen, was any illegal drug use a felony, making it a deportable offense. If I were with a group of friends and someone pulled out weed, speed, mescaline, or any other illegal drug, I would immediately make an excuse and leave the area. If I walked into a party with a hint of drugs, I would make a beeline to the exit. Having lived in America since I was eleven and considered it my home, I wanted to keep living here.

Late in the second semester, I hung out with Doug and Bill during the lunch period when Bill told us we should get drunk. His older sister would buy us a bottle. Like the other two, I thought that was an excellent idea. Plans made, and money exchanged hands, so we were set for Saturday night.



The week felt like an eternity until D-day arrived. At eight o'clock that evening, I climbed into my eight-year-old Chevy pickup and headed for the rendezvous. When I met with my compadres at the Atlantic Richfield gas station where Doug worked, Bill proudly exhibited the ill-gotten quart of Bacardi rum. We were finally ready to roll.

What now? Where do we go? And when we get there, do we drink the rum straight or mix it? If we mix it, what do we use? Our plan was not as well-conceived as we thought. Decisions needed finalizing. The idea was to drive through Jack-in-the-Box, buy large Cokes and mix in the rum before cruising town, indulging. It was a terrible plan, but a plan nonetheless. We headed to the nearest fast-food location.

Taking our purchases back to my truck, we sat in their parking lot, pouring ninety percent of the soda from our paper cups onto the asphalt, replacing it with rum.

With phase one complete, we started phase two. We hit the popular route around Main Street and Second Avenue. After a couple of laps, sipping our rum tinged with Coke, Bill asked us if we were drunk yet. Both Doug and I responded negatively. Bill then suggested we go to Outer Limits and do a little jogging and jumping jacks, figuring exercise would speed up the process. We eagerly agreed.

Outer Limits is the stage for urban myths. Our Outer Limits was a small dirt road winding through low hills east of El Cajon and hemmed with dry grass and goat-head stickers. Some teenage legends included a resident Monk who killed bicycled-riding kids, an old shotgun-toting maniac who slaughtered everyone, and the ever-popular Hook-Hand stalking young lovers. The perfect spot for serious drinking.

We arrived twenty minutes later, indulging all the way. All left was finishing our paper cups of booze and jogging in the bright, full moonlit night. It worked, and soon we drunk-as-lords. Mission accomplished.

Doug, Bill, and I leaned against the tailgate of my truck for a while, slurring unfunny jokes and laughing our heads off. We did not yet realize that trouble was stalking just around the corner.

I noticed a set of headlights moving in and out around the corners in front of us. We threw our cups and empty bottle into a small adjacent field. There was no place to turn around, so I started driving toward the oncoming lights. A quarter-mile later, I rounded a corner and came face-to-face with the impending intruder. I applied my brakes and quickly stopped on the dirt road. The patrol car's lights immediately came on and started flashing red. They caught us.

Three more patrol cars magically appeared behind us. All flashed red lights. It must have been a slow crime night with all four on-duty El Cajon City Police vehicles surrounding three teenagers in one pickup truck.

The officers to our rear exited their units and searched both sides of the road with flashlights. Even though they wore thick black leather boots, the officers would not venture far into the dry thorn-laden field, fearing the tedious job of removing goat heads from their uniform pants.

The officer in the front patrol vehicle shouted into his PA system, ordering me to exit my truck. The mountain-sized officer emerged from his unit wearing a perfectly pressed navy-blue uniform. Momentarily, he stood beside the open vehicle door, studying the scene and his three young perpetrators. He sported short-cropped, jet-black hair glistening under the bright moonlight and projected the perfect image you would expect to see on a late-night horror film.

He called me over. It terrified me. I approached his patrol car and slyly pressed my thigh hard into the vehicle's fender to stabilize myself—a lousy time to stagger around like some sloppy drunk.

He approached with a regimented marching gate, stopping directly in front of me. I stood alone beneath the

intense, glaring red lights, repeatedly flashing on and off, and the concentrated glare of this intimidating monster.

The officer snapped, "Why did you turn your lights on?"

I hadn't. They'd been on but obscure until we drove around the corner and stopped. The officer did not understand I had driven far from our crime scene. The other officers' search for evidence of our excessive alcohol consumption was in vain. I answered confidently, "I didn't want you to run into me."

His second question was harder. "What have you been drinking?"

I responded with the blatant, common lie, "Nothing."

Next, he barked, "Blow into my face!"

Protruding my upper lip over my lower lip, I blew straight down. Unfortunately, it did not work; he saw through my clever ruse, forcing me to re-blow directly into his face.

He smelled the alcohol on my breath and asked again, "What have you been drinking?"

My next lie was, "My parents were having a small party, and I snuck a little taste." I couldn't possibly admit three skinny underage youths downed a quart of Bacardi in less than an hour.

Unconvinced by my attempt to minimize my crime, he asked, "Can I search your truck?"

With nothing to hide, I replied, "Of Course."

A minute later, the officer slammed the empty rum bottle onto the hood of my truck. I muttered, "Shit!"

Without wanting to lose the last half-inch of liquid gold, Doug stuffed the bottle under his seat instead of tossing it with the paper cups. Indeed, he wasn't the criminal mastermind I could depend on in a time of need.

The officers terminated their fruitless search for evidence in the grass. Thanks to Doug, they had all they needed to incriminate us. My officer dismissed them, and

they left the scene, leaving only the monster standing between freedom and me.

My officer mimicked a drill sergeant teaching a recruit as he leaned in close, his face only inches from mine. To my utter dismay, he never mentioned the ill fate of drunk youths. Instead, I endured a good half hour of screaming, decrying my ability to lie to authorities, and expounding on the seriousness of that critical character flaw.

The louder his volume increased, the more I saw my chances of gaining freedom shrink.

But weirdly, concluding my chastising, the officer screamed, “Get in your truck and go straight home! Never let me catch you again!”

I silently vowed he never would. I jumped back into my truck, where Doug and Bill had remained quiet through my ordeal, and as quickly as my drunken state permitted, I drove off. After dropping my two accomplices at their respective homes, I drove home alone.

The only remaining hurdle was to sneak past my parents. So far, it had been a lucky night, and my luck was about to continue. It was close to eleven o’clock, and my parents were already in bed. Without hesitation, I snuck through the quiet house and did likewise.

My parents never knew about my first drunk or my brush with the law.

For a long time, I wondered why he freed us. I came up with many scenarios, none that would ever come close to reality. I can only surmise my stabilization trick against the officer’s patrol car worked—he never realized how genuinely drunk I was.

## **Monahans Texas**

*WINTER 1972*

A thunderous explosion of metal permeated the still night air. I immediately looked in my side-rearview mirror, trying to see what I ran over to cause such a raucous sound. To my bewilderment, I saw in the moonlight the freeway filling with broken metal engine fragments flying from under my truck. My pickup had exploded.

My engine seized, and I immediately jammed in my clutch and threw the shifter into neutral. I coasted safely to the highway's dirt shoulder before stopping. My Mardi gras trip ended.

After completing my first semester at Grossmont Community College, I took the next semester off and went on a road trip to Maris Gras in New Orleans. I put out the word to my community of friends I was leaving the first week in February and looking for a traveling companion.

No takers came forward.

I equipped my eleven-year-old truck with a homemade camper shell a few months earlier. I found it in the local newspaper's classified ads and bought it for fifty bucks. Unfortunately, the windowless unpainted steel shell was completely rusted, leaving it masked in a dirty red-brown color. Moreover, it made for a short-bed compact pickup, just not my truck style. I pounded hard with a small sledgehammer on top of the shell, forcing it onto my truck bed as far down as I could, but it did not sit tight on top of

the bed walls, leaving gaps all around. The setup came straight out of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. I could not have been prouder!

I gained a hand-me-down single-sized stained mattress and two single-shelved plywood cabinets and added them to the camper. The boxes were salvaged from my parents' old tent trailer.

The cab didn't have a working heater or radio. So I installed a cheap Kraco eight-track tape deck and bought four tapes: John Mayall, Steppenwolf, The Band, and Cream. Much to my friends' disgust, I listened to John Mayall's blues John Mayall most of the time.

I took a two-week leave of absence from my part-time Longs job. By the time my last shift ended at nine-thirty Tuesday evening, I was completely loaded, with an inexpensive sleeping bag, propane-fueled camping heater, Coleman lantern, and a hard-plastic red ice chest filled with Coke, bread, mayonnaise, canned tuna fish, and other finger-food treats.

I hit the road a little after ten o'clock that evening, traveling east away from El Cajon. I drove the slow, winding up and down the mountain highway through San Diego's backcountry and eventually down the steep In Ko Pah grade into the desert.

An hour later, I continued on the heat-destructed asphalt for seventy miles through different small desert towns to the Algodones Dunes' western edge.

This six-mile-wide dune field extended from the Mexican Border northwest forty-five miles through the California side of the Sonoran Desert. The towering mountains of sand depicted the famed African Sahara.

It was a crisp winter night. I wore my standard uniform, comprising a white tee shirt, Levi's 501, white socks, and lightweight suede desert boots.

By midnight, I got cold, pulled into the all-too-familiar rest stop in the dunes, and went to bed.

The sun woke me up early, around six o'clock that morning. Cold from my poorly insulated sleeping bag, I climbed out of my icebox camper, eager to drive the remaining twenty miles to Yuma and get a piping hot cup of coffee. And as I walked to the blue-colored port-a-potty to urinate, I silently vowed to use my propane heater every night for the rest of my trip.

I fired up the old truck, dropped the gear shifter into second, and stepped on the accelerator. My right rear drive wheel spun in the fine desert sand. I switched to the granny-low first gear and tried again, with no better results. Finally, cursing to myself, I got out and inspected the situation.

Previously visiting this rest area, I was familiar with the alligatored old asphalt covered with a layer of sand from the frequent winds, making it hard to find a safe place to park in the daylight, let alone the middle of the night. As a result, I inadvertently parked where Dennis and I had tried to assist an elderly couple in removing their Cadillac from the same sand trap.

I got to work by retrieving my folding puke-green army surplus shovel and a three-foot plank from behind the front bench seat. These items were standard equipment in my truck, as I frequently needed them for such situations. I dug the sand from in front of the afflicting wheel and shoved the plank as far under it as I could. The truck easily drove forward. From experience, I kept it moving until I maneuvered to solid safety before I retrieved my equipment and headed for Yuma.

I drove across the old wooden border bridge spanning the Colorado River into Arizona and the Border Patrol inspection station. When questioned by the officer, I lied, stating I was an American citizen, and immediately waved through without producing my green card or answering further questions.

Yuma was a highway city. The main East-West thoroughfare was a city street continuum of the freeway and

ran five or six miles through the business district. Even though I was on a sightseeing vacation, I didn't bother touring the historic Yuma Territorial Prison, having been there many times.

I pulled into an independent gas station with a Seven-Eleven next door. After filling my gas tank with Regular, I walked to the convenience store for desperately needed caffeine and a package of Ding Dongs, two small chocolate-covered crème filled cakes. I liked the breakfast.

Leaving Yuma, I picked up a fellow hitchhiking from the side of the road, aware the following stretch to Tucson was flat and visually unappealing unless you liked Saguaro Cactus and dusty sagebrush. I looked forward to breaking up this mundane leg with some idle chat.

The first of only two points of interest was Dateland, a highway bus and public rest area featuring mostly date shakes and other date products in its small store and soda fountain. I disdained the odd-tasting little fruit and drove past without stopping.

The other point of interest was the Space Age Lodge and Restaurant built in Gila Bend during the early sixty's space race. It featured a large lighted space-themed sign and a gigantic pseudo-flying saucer on its roof. The state highway passed by it, and I slowed, admiring the scene but again did not stop.

The underweight hitchhiker was dirty and looked hungry. I pulled over on a wide spot on the shoulder of the highway, being extra careful not to park in the sand, somewhere past Gila Bend, and made tuna and mayonnaise sandwiches on the tailgate of my truck. I opened the steel can of fish and added heaped spoonfuls of mayonnaise before mixing. The previous summer, I learned about this recipe.

He was grateful and quickly devoured two soggy sandwiches and two Cokes.



My truck developed a familiar loud grinding noise just as we arrived in Tucson. I quickly pulled into the first service station I came across. The homeless hitchhiker profusely thanked me for the ride and lunch. He bade farewell, and he headed off to find a local hostel.

The on-duty mechanic analyzed my problem and concluded the noise came from a worn-out main bearing holding my crankshaft, not a wheel bearing, as I thought.

I didn't have an extra two-hundred dollars in my budget for the repair and phoned my banker for a short-term loan. I promised dad I could afford to repay him as soon as I got home and went back to work. He wired the money.

I spent a second frosty night in my camper in the station's parking lot, with my propane heater inches from my face. I was naïve to the dangers of propane fumes. My predetermined destiny was that my ill-fitting camper shell offered much airflow.

The next afternoon, after my truck repair, I drove toward Las Cruces, New Mexico.

I picked up another hitchhiker for the continuing boring desert drive. He taught me to flick my headlights when semi-trucks, dragging large trailers, passed me, signaling they had room to move back in my lane. The truck drivers always blinked a thank-you back. The highway was plagued with semis, and it helped break up the boredom.

After dropping my guest off in Deming, New Mexico, I gassed up. Then, on the next leg, I stopped along the roadside a few times to consume assorted finger foods and sodas from my ice chest or pee behind scattered cacti.

Las Cruces' night lights sparkled in the clear air as I drove down the grade into the small city later that evening. The day's mundane drive was not over as I continued driving around the jumbled town streets and country roads for more than an hour, looking for a suitable place to spend the night. Finally, at the end of a long, desolate dirt road on the east

side, I pulled over and went to bed. I spent another restless, frosty night snuggling my heater.

Early the next morning, after digging myself out of the sand again, I desperately wanted out of the desert. Soon I located a rural highway leading north-northeast and continued.

After visiting White Sands National Monument late that morning, I drove east through the traffic-free beautiful mountains and valleys leading to Roswell, New Mexico.

Roswell was famous for its unconfirmed nineteen-forty extraterrestrial spaceship crash-landing, complete with alien occupants. Within the area, everything centers on the event. Flying saucers, aliens, and spaceship icons abound. I refused to believe a word of their Fantasyland advertising.

For many blocks in the old downtown section, the streets lined with bookstores and private storefront museums, capitalizing on the occurrence. I spent hours perusing the tourist traps, remaining unconvinced.

Late in the afternoon, I made the two-hour trip south in the Guadeloupe Mountains to Carlsbad Caverns and spent another freezing night hugging my heater in the cavern's parking lot.

I browsed the gift shop, drinking coffee for a half-hour the following morning, waiting for the caverns to open. Luckily, there were very few mid-winter visitors, and the caverns were void except for two other couples.

I followed the rock-bordered dirt path to the cave's entrance at eight-thirty and climbed down the cave's vertical natural opening, leading to the Main Corridor. The steep, sometimes narrow, winding Main Corridor descended one and a quarter miles to over seven-hundred and fifty feet into the earth. It's constantly a chilly fifty-six degrees Fahrenheit.

The path leads you through bat-filled rooms dripping with water. Stalactites and stalagmites protruded up and down everywhere. Finally, after over three hours roaming alone through the halls, I encountered the Big Room

containing a snack bar, restrooms, and, more importantly, elevators—saving me from the long, tedious return hike.

I left the area shortly after noon and kept traveling south, stopping a couple of hours later in the small desert town of Pecos, Texas. I could not believe I was back in the desert.

The only interesting landmark in town was an old cemetery. I strolled through the grounds and located the gravesite of Clay Allison, *The Gentleman Gunfighter*. The old, weathered, cracked wooded headstone decried, “He never shot a man who didn’t deserve to die.” I thought about this and wondered what the deserving standards were between living or dying by Allison’s gun.

Leaving Pecos, I headed east on a rural highway to, what would be, the end of my Maris Gras run.

After my truck’s engine annihilation, two miles from Monahans, Texas, I opened the hood on the side of the divided highway and used a flashlight to seek the damage. A piston protruded through the top left engine head.

I hadn’t seen another car traveling in my direction since getting on the roadway, and only a few passed me on the other side. But rather than walk in the dark for two miles into town, I slammed the truck’s hood and when to bed. I would figure out my next move in the morning light.

Again, I dozed off and on throughout the cold night with my arms wrapped around the heater. Occasionally, large trucks swished by me and rattled my camper shell.

By seven o’clock Saturday morning, I finished a full examination of the damage. All my engine oil had drained out, creating a long, stained, wet path from the incident site to my last resting spot. I was eternally grateful no semi had slid in my oil slick and crashed into my truck in a fiery ball.

Besides having a piston sticking through the top of my motor, a second piston was visible through the bottom. The engine was unsalvageable.

I stood behind my open hood, cursing the Tucson mechanic who botched my crankshaft-bearing job when a

white Cadillac pulled over. It quickly stopped in a cloud of dust a few hundred yards ahead of me. The driver put his caddy in reverse and slammed on the gas. I never saw anybody drive in reverse at such a high speed, and terrified he wouldn't be able to stop on the loose shoulder before finishing off my truck and me. I stood there, frozen in disbelief.

After he made a successful stop, I noticed the giant steer horns attached to the front of the long hood. I stared, mystified because I thought Long-Horn Steer adornments were only for movies. I glanced around for the *Candid Camera* crew. Apparently, this was Texas, and films reflect reality.

Ralph introduced himself and vigorously shook my hand for an unusually prolonged period. *He had to be a salesman or a preacher.*

Finally, releasing his grip on my hand, he quickly pulled a rope from his car trunk, mentioning he had a mechanic friend in Monahans and offered to tow me there. I could not believe his willingness to drag me with his Cadillac. But with no other option, I agreed to the much-needed help.

We tied the vehicles together and drove into town. He led in his Caddy, and I followed, controlling my truck's steering and braking at a mere six-foot rope length behind him. To my relief, the rescue ride turned out a lot slower than I had worried about after witnessing his previous lead foot.

After safely reaching the station and introductions made, his friend let me park my truck in the unpaved area beside his shop. We untied the vehicles and pushed my pickup into the allocated space.

Ralph told me he was the preacher at a local church and invited me to the following morning's Sunday worship service.

I was using the trip as a personal crusade to find direction in my life and spent time every night on the road reading the Bible under the light of my Coleman lantern before falling

asleep. I struggled with Christianity for the previous five years, and for a brief period, I believed I would like to become a pastor. However, by the time I left Monahans, I had finished reading the New Testament and much of the old.

Grateful for Ralph's help and unable to fabricate other plans, besides feeling duty-bound, I told him I would see him in the morning.

Ralph met me at the door of his Episcopal Church. I believe he prayed I would show up, but what else did I have to do in a one-horse town on a Sunday?

He asked, "Do you know what an altar call is?"

I responded, "Yes," and explained I had participated in one.

Dennis and I attended a special showing of the Christian movie *For Pete's Sake* at our local theater a year earlier, and we went forward at the altar call. Ralph told me he was planning to end his morning sermon with one. I responded, "I better find a seat," and entered the church. He either never heard me or felt my previous conversion hadn't counted.

I was thankful the front pews packed and found a seat in a sparsely filled pew at the back of the worship hall. All Bible-belt town churches are full on any given Sunday. I sat there looking over the congregation, happily talking and chuckling amongst themselves. I concluded the church was filled with regularly saved devotees, and the altar call was designed solely for my benefit. When he called for first-time visitors to stand, the only person everyone looked at was me.

After the service, when I hadn't responded to his altar call, Ralph must have thought I needed more persuasion and set me up with Sunday dinner at his second-in-command's home.

I rode with the family to their lovely middle-class home after the parishioners were gone. They were pleasant people; mother, father, and two young preteens; a girl and her younger brother.

While waiting for dinner, the father and I sat on the living room couch. He brought up the subject of rock'n roll music. He wasn't a fan and didn't think I should be, though he never said it outright.

He expected me to interpret the lyrics to Three Dog Night's popular hit *Never Been to Spain* and other songs they wrote or performed. He first asked what *I've never been to heaven, but I've been to Oklahoma*, meant. Embarrassed, I refrained from stating that I thought they were saying Oklahoma was at least as glorious as heaven or maybe more but struggled to assign Christian values to the lyrics.

Next, he questioned the Beatles' Eleanore Rigby and what it meant. I uncomfortably tried to appease him, not by stating that Christians never realized their dreams. And Father McKenzie never saved no one, but by telling him, Eleanore Ridgy was a God-loving Christian woman who worked at the church.

Mom could not serve dinner fast enough.

The Texas pot roast and vegetables were delicious. I craved a decent meal. After dinner and dishes finished, I anxiously looked for an exit opportunity. I wanted quiet relief alone in my truck. Suddenly the father announced, "We only have five minutes to get to the night service." He sprung the trap, and I was the unsuspecting prey.

The church was considerably less crowded, and I'll be damned, Ralph had another altar call. But, again, no one partook.

As I escaped towards the door, Ralph caught me and mentioned that there was a bible study if I was still in town Wednesday evening.

I walked back to my truck.

The winter nights in West Texas were freezing. Every morning, I woke up with my camper shell covered in frost and condensation dripping on me. I hugged my propane heater all week and even burned my nose and forehead a few times. Still, I shivered to sleep every night.

I woke up Monday morning knowing I had to take care of business. First, I talked to the mechanic about my options. He explained the estimated costs for a used engine and the unacceptable installation period if he could find one. I decided I would have to sell my truck for parts or call a junkyard to see if I could get anything. He said he would make a couple of calls for me to see if anyone was interested.

Ralph's friend was on the phone when a customer walked in. While waiting for the mechanic, the new arrival and I talked. He owned the local milk delivery service and immediately offered me a job delivering bottled milk upon hearing my predicament. I explained I had to return to my current position in San Diego. But also refrained from mentioning, "Your Good Humor whites are not conducive to my image."

Eager to start, I couldn't wait for the mechanic to get off the phone. So I left, walking on the dirt path beside the roadway to downtown Monahans. The business region comprised one short block of conjoined shops on the south side of the street and a few separated businesses on the opposite side. I won't even call it a town.

I entered every shop and explained my situation and the condition of my "for sale" truck. This was thirty years before networking became vogue.

I was in the small market when a customer overheard me and said he was interested and wanted to stop by and take a look. So we arranged a meeting for that afternoon.

Another overhearing customer approached me and suggested I go with him and work in the oil fields scattered around the surrounding desert. Again, I declined. Monahans could not have been further from my perceived image. I was a big city boy, er, man.

I felt less pressured because of my upcoming appointment and knew I would close the sale in any way possible.

The small jewelry store I entered was going out of business. So I purchased a thirteen-dollar pearl necklace for my girlfriend, who patiently awaited my return.

Back at the service station that afternoon, the mechanic called me over, saying he had found a potential buyer for my truck. I spent the next two days conducting a bidding war between the two interested parties and settled on a one-hundred-ten-dollar price that seemed fair for the piece of junk, well past its prime.

The winning bidder agreed I could keep my father's two wooden cabinet units, and he would pick up the truck Thursday morning.

With no other pressing engagements, I attended Wednesday's evening Bible study. It shouldn't have shocked me at the last-ditch effort for my conversion. And once again, I passed on Ralph's final altar call.

I stuffed all my belongings into the two plywood box units and the plastic ice chest on Thursday morning. After which, I struggled to carry the first heavy cabinet topped with the ice chest a short distance toward town and followed up by moving the second heavy unit a little further past the first. I used this leapfrog method, with a needed rest between each carry. The five-block trudge to the bus station took two hours.

There was a choice to be made. I could get a ticket to New Orleans or back to my waiting job in San Diego; I bought a ticket home. Unfortunately, there weren't any express buses, and I purchased a regular ticket, which meant stopping at every station between Monahans and San Diego, including the dreaded Dateland.

I sat atop my cabinets on the sidewalk for eight hours until the bus departed at six o'clock late that afternoon.

The nine hundred-and-fifty-mile bus trip took twenty-five hours. I hate buses! I disembarked at the El Cajon Greyhound station at seven o'clock Friday evening on February eighteenth.



We lived a short distance from the El Cajon depot, and not wanting to relive my leapfrog ordeal, I phoned my father. He picked his cabinets and me up and drove home.

It was my birthday, and I was excited to be home in time to celebrate with my girlfriend. So I borrowed my mother's older Chrysler New Yorker with a push-button transmission and drove to my girlfriend's house. The pearl-neckless surprise was stuffed in the glove box.

I knocked on her front door. Unfortunately, her parents and I never had the best relationship, and as soon as her mother opened the door and before I could sputter a word, she glared at me and stated, "She's out for the evening." SLAM!

I drove all over El Cajon, checking places she and her girlfriends usually hung out to no avail, and ended my search sitting across the street from her house for two hours. Finally, around eleven o'clock, she and a friend of mine pulled into her driveway, ending their date.

Not expecting me back or recognizing my mother's car, I drove home unnoticed and went to bed. I needed to be at work at eight o'clock the next morning.

## **First Funeral**

*SPRING 1976*

“No! No, he’s not dead! Go back and try again!”

“I’m sorry he’s gone. We’ve done everything we could, and there’s nothing more we can do.”

I collapsed into my wife’s arms. We both stood as one, with tears streaming down our faces. Our clothes were soaking. Keith, my first child, was born and died at Grossmont Hospital.

We still lived in El Centro, and after working Saturday morning, my family of four, my wife, almost three-year-old Keith, his newborn younger brother, and I drove to her parent’s home in El Cajon. It was Easter weekend, and we planned to spend the night with them and celebrate Easter Sunday the following day.

They lived in a new upscale home my father-in-law built on Mt. Helix’s eastern edge. Higher up, one of San Diego’s affluent communities, filled with gated mansions and large, expensive properties.

Sunday plans included getting up early, and after Keith found his hidden Easter basket, we would attend a sunrise service in an outdoor amphitheater atop Mt. Helix. The theater sits in the shadow of a huge white cross, visible throughout East County. Also, the park features a three-hundred-sixty-degree view of San Diego and the surrounding communities. This beautiful location hosted the yearly service for as long as I can remember.

Following the ceremony, we planned a brunch buffet at fashionable Tom Ham’s Lighthouse Restaurant on Harbor Island overlooking San Diego Bay.

In the afternoon, we would hide eggs for Keith's Easter hunting, followed by a backyard barbeque, and then return to our home on Sunday evening.

The exciting Easter celebration never happened. Keith drowned Saturday afternoon.

After arriving, we prepared for the next day's activities. My wife and mother-in-law pattered around the kitchen, and her father took Keith to sweep and clean the back patio. They told me there was nothing I could do to help. So I went to watch TV in the back room. I reclined in a sizeable over-stuffed chair; no-shows caught my attention, and I snoozed within minutes.

I snapped from a deep sleep at the loud, hideous shrieking. Jumping to attention, I bolted to the dining area, where Keith's grandfather stood in the open sliding glass doorframe holding my infant son. He looked terrified and distraught, standing there with Keith's pure white, limp body cradled in his arms.

"Call 911! Start CPR!" his grandmother screamed orders. My father-in-law laid my boy on the floor and started pounding his chest. I ran to the phone and dialed. I tried to explain our location to the operator. Not sure if their new partially complete neighborhood was in El Cajon or La Mesa, it took an ungodly amount of critical time for the operator to understand where to send the paramedics.

I galloped the block to the corner as fast as I had ever run. It was an eternity waiting to flag down the fire rescue vehicle and the following ambulance so I could guide them to my beautiful baby boy. Standing there, with tears streaming down my face, I could only think, *Keith... Keith... my perfect baby Keith. What kind of father am I? Sleeping, not watching over your every move? I know better than that!*

Finally, I heard the blazing sirens coming over the top of the hill and started frantically waving, afraid they might miss me and drive by. They saw me! When the two-vehicle caravan turned onto the street, I was halfway down the block, distraughtly running back to my baby's lifeless body.

Immediately, they went to work. Two black-bag-carrying paramedics ran inside while two more unloaded a gurney. They

worked on him for only a minute before knowing they had to get him to a hospital as fast as they could.

They threw his wilted form onto the gurney and headed for the ambulance. But, as they rounded the corner to the front door, Keith's tiny frame slipped off and fell to the floor. Immediately an emergency worker scooped him up and ran on while the others pushed the empty gurney behind.

The emergency team worked at lightning speed, loading the gurney and leaping inside the vehicle. The man holding my son handed him to one of the waiting men in the back. They clutched Keith in place on the stretcher, slammed the doors shut, and took off like a rocket, again with earsplitting sirens and flashing lights.

Not knowing where the ambulance headed, my wife and I sprinted to our car. I ran the stop sign at the end of the street, desperately trying to catch them. I barely saw the top of the ambulance over the crest of the hill, take the left-hand turn, and instantly knew they were going to Grossmont Hospital.

We arrived seconds after them and ran through the emergency room, urgently searching for our son. A nurse led us to a small area outside a private emergency treatment room. My in-laws showed up with our newborn minutes later.

I went into a small adjacent office and phoned my parents. I told them there had been an accident, and Keith was dying. Also, we were at Grossmont, and the doctors were saving him.

Fifteen minutes later, they entered our waiting area. My mother, a career RN, approached me and asked what was happening. I told her the doctors were still working on him. Mom looked me straight in the eyes and emotionlessly stated, "You know he's dead. It's been too long."

With tears welling in my eyes, I blurted out, "No, he's not. They're saving him!"

Minutes later, a doctor emerged and told us he was gone.

Solemnly everybody walked to their vehicles and returned to their respective homes except my wife, baby Wayne, and me. We went for a long, disheartening drive.

While we drove aimlessly, I asked my wife what had happened. She explained it to me. When Keith's grandfather poured the patio cement, he heard about a new doggy duty system and cemented a stainless-steel bucket into the corner of the courtyard. He hosed their dog's droppings into it. But he never finished the installation, adding a secure lid.

He was sweeping and not paying attention to his grandson. When he looked for Keith, he found him lying face down in the fetus-filled sludge at the bottom of the bucket.

Hours later, we returned to my in-laws and spent a tearful, sleepless night.

On Easter Sunday, we had to go home to pick up an outfit for Keith's burial. Too distraught to make the four-hour drive there and back, I phoned my father and asked if he would fly me to El Centro. Of course, he agreed and rented a four-seat Cesena, so my wife could come along.

I called my boss, told him what had happened, and asked him if he could pick us up at the local airport in Imperial, drive us to our mobile home ten miles away, and return us. He instantly agreed.

Al waited for us as we landed forty-five minutes later. He grabbed and hugged me hard for a long time.

After we flew back to El Cajon, my wife and I went to the Lakeside Funeral Home. I chose this mortuary because the caretakers were friends of my grandparents, and I had been at their apartment above the first-floor mortuary. We picked out a small white coffin and arranged for a Tuesday funeral.

My wife and I returned to my in-laws and made sorrowful call after sorrowful call, notifying relatives and friends.

We went to the El Cajon Cemetery on Monday morning and purchased a plot. After, we spent the afternoon with Keith at the funeral home. He looked so mature, lying silently within his tiny coffin, dressed in his best outfit. We also added some of his favorite toys and keepsakes beside him. I took off the cheap wedding band I had purchased in Las Vegas and worn since my wedding day and slipped it over Keith's cold thumb.

After another desperate, sleepless night, I knew we could never put this behind us.

We arrived at the mortuary Tuesday; it was packed, with quite a few attendees standing throughout the service. After the mortuary, the procession went to the cemetery for a graveside service. At the service close, my wife and I laid a single red rose on his coffin and said goodbye to our son.

I was so out of my mind with grief I had never heard a word of either service. It was the first funeral I had ever attended.

My mother and father invited everyone to their house for an after-service gathering.

We stayed only as long as we emotionally could before my family of three drove the two hours home.