

Cooperland

Working Draft

Word count: 146,441

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Foreword

The case of ‘D.B. Cooper,’ the man who hijacked Northwest Airlines Flight 305 on November 24, 1971 has fascinated investigators over the years. Cooper has been lauded as a hero of the masses, and reviled as a criminal. He has been the subject of films and song, as well as an annual celebration in the town that may have been closest to where he jumped. To this day no one knows his true identity, or even if he survived his attempt to parachute from the airstairs of a Boeing 727 while carrying \$200,000 in cash he extorted from the airline. The only traces of him found to date have been a placard with instructions on how to open the airstairs, and \$5,800 in cash buried on a beach along the Columbia River. The placard was found by a hunter along the official flight path. The money was found some miles west of the flight path. Because the money was found off the flight path, it creates more questions than it answers regarding Cooper’s fate, or even how it arrived on that beach. This book is not an attempt to solve the mystery of D.B. Cooper’s true identity, not directly. That was done in my previous book, *Into the Blast – The True Story of D.B. Cooper*. That particular book presented the case that Kenneth Peter Christiansen, a former U.S. Army paratrooper and an actual employee of Northwest Airlines, was probably the Guy Who Got Away With It.

A strange thing has happened in the fifty years since the hijacking. Unlike other unsolved mysteries of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as Amelia Earhart’s disappearance over the Pacific Ocean, or the vanishing of Jimmy Hoffa, a sort-of cult has built up around Cooper. Not a cult in the ordinary religious sense, but one that better fits the sociological description:

*‘A self-identified group of people who share a narrowly defined interest or perspective...’*

I choose to call this group, and the world in which they live, *Cooperland*. This is the story of my life both before, and after I entered that world. I think I should call it Wonderland, instead.

## Chapter One

*“Yes! Live! Life's a banquet and most poor suckers are starving to death!”*

Rosalind Russell from the film, *Auntie Mame*

My mother Marie is the most memorable person I have ever known, and reminds me of Rosalind Russell's famous character, Mame Dennis. I have no early memories of my natural father, because he dumped my mother flat in 1956, when I was two years old. We were living in a rented trailer in Connecticut and it was the dead of winter, a bitterly cold one with snow up to your ears. My father said he was going to work one morning at his construction job and he simply never came back. My mother had no friends or family in Connecticut. She was from southern California and my father Barney had convinced her that jobs were much better back east, and moved us clear across the country. The only time I ever met him in person was fourteen years later, and he was busy ripping off the Holiday Inn people for nearly a million dollars. But that's another story entirely.

Mother waited at the trailer for some days, after reporting him missing to the local sheriff, to see if Barney would return. She told me years later that sometimes he went off drinking, but he always came back. We lived miles from town, we had no close neighbors, no phone, and my father had the car. Eventually the cake mixes and leftover flour ran out, and the sheriff showed up. He took pity on us and bought my mother a one-way bus ticket back to my grandmother's house in Costa Mesa, California. As he dropped us off at the bus station, he pressed a couple of twenties into her hand and wished us luck.

When we got as far as Las Vegas, mother made a stop at the local Western Union and picked up some additional money sent to her by my Aunt Dora and Uncle Roy. She took a cheap motel in Vegas just long enough to get a divorce, and then continued on to California. For a while, we bounced back and forth between my grandmother's trailer in Costa Mesa, and my aunt and uncle's home up in Santa Rosa.

Uncle Roy was one of the biggest electrical contractors in that part of California, with a fleet of Chevy panel trucks, and a big warehouse just down the street from their little ranch. It was a lot more fun staying at the ranch than at my grandmother's trailer park home in Costa Mesa, but eventually my mother realized she was going to have to do the single-mother job on her own. My uncle gave her enough money to get her own place, and we moved into a nice flat on Montgomery Street in San Francisco.

She got a job in the secretarial pool at a large company downtown, but I think she found it boring. The late 1950's in San Francisco was a hotbed of coffee shops, beat poetry, and bongos. Mother dragged me around to all of them and I was introduced to her friends, some of whom were downright strange by the standards of the day. She enrolled me in a private art school, but the teachers found out I couldn't even draw stick people very well. So I started writing little stories and keeping the results in card stock folders.

After school, I would sit around our cold-water flat watching the Mickey Mouse Club and Huckleberry Hound on television. When summer came and school ended, mother would leave me

at a babysitter's house while she worked. One was particularly mean to me and would drop a peanut butter sandwich on stale bread in front of me for lunch, along with a glass of water, while her own kids got hot soup and grilled cheese sandwiches. Mother came to pick me up early right when lunch was being served, and flew into a rage with the babysitter. She dragged me out the door and I never saw the babysitter again. Instead, she found a new roommate named Emmie, a French girl who barely spoke any English, but who had a night job and would watch me during the day. I was in love with Emmie and Annette Funicello at the same time, and when I accidentally saw Emmie coming out of the shower one morning, that's when I realized there were big differences between boys and girls. Emmie just smiled at me and shut the door. I went back to the television to see if the Mickey Mouse Club was on yet.

Meanwhile, mother was still on the hunt for a husband, and one of her main criteria was that he had to be just as good a father as a potential husband. Sometimes I got to tag along on the dates when no one was available to babysit. One memorable time, a young pilot named Jack took both of us up in his small plane – and then proceeded to fly upside down. I didn't mind at all, but my mother never dated him again. Another guy was Italian and ten years older than my mother. He had one requirement for marriage. We would have to convert to Catholicism or his family wouldn't approve. The Italian guy was quite rich, and mother almost went along with it, but in the end she said no and moved on.

With the dating scene going nowhere, and her continuing struggles to raise me in a big city, mother decided it was time for a change. A long-distance phone call came in to our flat from my grandfather, who was running an import-export business in Manila. He wanted my mother to come to the Philippines and work for him. A couple of weeks later, she booked passage on the S.S. Franklin Pierce, a freighter that made runs across the Pacific delivering cargo to Manila with several stops along the way. Freighters sometimes took regular passengers back in those days, to beef up the bottom line for the company. My mother and I were the only passengers on this run.

As we wound our way across the Pacific, the ship made stops at Midway Island, Kwajalein Atoll, and other places. The usual stop was generally one full day, and on Kwajalein mother and I were able to walk the beaches in a fairly short time. On Midway, thousands of 'Gooney Birds,' or albatrosses, kept pecking at my shoes. All the time we were actually at sea, the crew kept an eye on me, especially when I would wander around on deck. One time, I nearly went over the rail when a wind-up toy car I was playing with dropped into the ocean. Some big guy reached down and snatched me up by my belt and pulled me back from the railing at the last moment.

We ate our meals in the Officers' Mess and mother made sure I minded my manners. Meanwhile, we meandered our way through the Marshall Islands making a few more stops before reaching Manila.

Manila in the late 1950's was much different than today. Mother immediately rented a house not far from downtown and hired a live-in maid who doubled as the cook. This combination cost her less than \$100 USD a month, but in the Philippines back then it was a lot of money, and people thought she was rich. She enrolled me in a local Catholic school and I was the only American kid at the school. No one held that against me, and one of the reasons is because in those days Filipinos absolutely loved anything and anyone American. That was because World War 2 was still

fresh in a lot of peoples' minds, and it was MacArthur and the U.S. Army who had saved the Filipinos from the horrors of the Japanese occupation. All movie house owners in Manila had to do back then was screen *Back to Bataan* dubbed into Tagalog and they could pack in the customers.

Mother was invited to a party at the home of a rich Filipino man and decided to take me along since it wasn't a school night. There was a long table in the main dining area piled high with so much food that I couldn't believe people could eat it all. In the bathrooms, the faucets were gold-plated. Even though I was barely five years old, one thing I discovered about Manila pretty quickly was that there were three basic classes of people. There were the very rich, the very poor, and merchants, although everyone seemed to get what they needed.

Then one day my mother said something about being broke and needing money, which later turned out to be nothing. But the next morning I asked the cook to run up a basket of doughnuts, and she did it without even asking why. I took the basket and the equivalent of maybe five bucks in Filipino money and caught a 'Jeepney,' (cabs made from old jeeps that were highly decorated) and told the driver to take me down to the docks. Once I got there, I started selling doughnuts for a buck apiece to the U.S. Navy sailors as they came down the boarding ramps from their ships to go on liberty. Some of the sailors, seeing a small American boy doing this, dropped several dollars into the basket without even taking a doughnut. A couple of hours later, one of them had the sense to take me home.

Mother was very angry at me, but when she saw the basket full of money and the handsome sailor to boot, she forgot about all that and invited the sailor to dinner. I'm not sure if he stayed the night, but he probably did. He must have met mother's minimum standards for male company, or he wouldn't have been allowed to stay, I'm sure.

The strangest thing I saw in Manila was an older American lady walking her big standard poodle down the street on a leather leash. A Filipino man ran up behind her with a bolo knife and slashed through the leash in one quick swipe, snatching up the dog and running away. The lady screamed and shouted for him to stop, but to no avail. Even as young as I was, I knew that dog wasn't going to be sold to someone else as a pet. It would be on the menu somewhere, dressed out and hanging in one of the local meat shops.

I learned another term in the Philippines, called 'boondocking,' which was a word that meant stealing. Filipinos had a strange attitude about stealing. If you were stupid enough to leave something out in such a manner so that it could easily be stolen, that was considered *your* fault, and boondocking it was an acceptable response to your stupidity.

Filipinos, for the most part, were religious and honest, but the thieves there were very good at their trade, and they even boondocked my mother once. Our house was a two-story place with three bedrooms upstairs. Mother, the maid, and I, all had our own rooms on the second floor. One morning we came down for breakfast and everything was gone. I mean *everything*. They took every stick of furniture, all of the silverware, the dishes, rugs, pictures on the walls, food in the cupboards right down to the spice rack, and even the light fixtures and switch covers. Our downstairs looked like a house that wasn't quite finished yet, and we never heard a thing. Although I was shocked, I had to admire the skill that went into doing something like that in the middle of the night without making a sound.

After a year in the Philippines, my mother got word from a guy she once knew named Larry that he was now living on Guam, and pumping jet fuel as a civilian worker at Anderson Air Force Base. She had dated him briefly sometime before she met my real father, and although things hadn't worked out, she still liked Larry. Meanwhile, my grandfather had decided to close down his import-export business and return to the States, so my mother agreed to meet Larry. Instead of taking a slow freighter, we flew to Guam via Northwest Orient airlines, the main carrier in that part of the world in those days. As it turned out, I would always associate Northwest Airlines with certain memorable parts of my life, including my later investigation into the famous (and unsolved) 'D.B. Cooper' hijacking case.

When we got off the plane, Larry was waiting at the gate. He was a tall, skinny guy with hair bleached almost blond by the tropical sun, and had a nice tan and a big grin. On the way to his car, my mom turned to me and said, "Robert, this is Larry. And he has two kids. A boy and a girl." When we got to the car, I saw a blond girl and a dark-haired boy, both younger than me. I was shocked and completely tongue-tied. All my life I had known no one else except my mom, and I thought my whole world was just the two of us, and maybe – a father would magically come along for us someday. An entire instant family? I wasn't prepared for that, and sat sullenly in the back seat next to Larry's kids without saying a word. The car started up and we drove to Larry's folk's house at the Apra Heights development, which were homes made of concrete.

Once we got to the house, there were more people, and even at my young age I knew something had happened between Larry and my mother even before we arrived on Guam. I found out much later that they had been exchanging phone calls and letters for a couple of months before my mom decided to fly us to Guam, and that they were already in love.

My mom moved us in with Larry and his kids, Larry Jr. and Kristin, and less than a month later my mother married him in a civil ceremony. I thought I would hate the whole thing, but the truth was that within a couple of days I had gotten used to being part of a family for the first time in my life, and I accepted the whole idea very well. My new little brother was five years old to my seven, and my new sister was three years old. I enjoyed suddenly being the oldest. It was as if we were all made for each other. My brother also told me why he and his sister were with their father. Their mother had abandoned them and run off without a word. I told him that my real father had done the same thing to me.

For the next year, Larry Jr. and I became true brothers and wandered the hills, jungles, and the lagoons on Guam in our free time. Sometimes we organized games of playing Army with dozens of friends, using real tanks and artillery pieces left over from World War 2. Spent rifle brass was everywhere. Canteens, rusted-out rifles, and bayonets were our toys. On Saturday nights we went to the drive-in and my 'dad' would shell out a buck to watch movies. Back then, it was a buck a carload. The movie theater made its real money on the concessions.

Some people actually collected unexploded artillery shells, although the practice was forbidden. When one of them went off in someone's house and killed a boy and his mother, the Army Ordinance people started cleaning up the island yard by yard. It took them years.

Then one day dad came home and he and my mother had a private talk in the bedroom. When they came out, he said: "All right kids, we're going back to the States right now. You can take whatever you can pack into one suitcase, and then we're leaving."

My mother's face was pale, and her eyes wide. I had never seen fear on her face before, but it was certainly there now. "Come on, kids. Let's go," she said.

A short time later, we boarded a cruise ship down at Agana harbor and left the island. My new stepfather (I called him 'dad' from then on) caught a plane to get back to the States first. There was no explanation why he went ahead of us, and my mom didn't offer one. The ship cruised at full speed as if it were running away from something.

It certainly *was* running away, it turned out. A few days later, on November 11, 1962, Typhoon Karen struck Guam with winds reaching 185 miles an hour. It was the most powerful storm to hit the island in recorded weather history, and 95% of the homes on Guam were damaged or destroyed. The native population, known today as the Chamorro, ('Guamanians' back then) were hit especially hard. We escaped just in time. My step-grandparents, however, decided to stay behind and tough it out. We got pictures in the mail later showing their back patio. The winds had been so fierce that they tore out a steel post on a corner of the concrete patio roof at their house. The pole had actually come away from the roof and was bent over at an angle. Fortunately, they were unharmed and the patio roof did not collapse as a result.

When we finally got to San Francisco, it was my first sight of the city in three years. Dad was waiting at the docks with a big travel trailer hitched to a 1954 Desoto. He had an even bigger grin on his face. We were going to Oregon, he said. He had a promise of a job there at a lumber mill, in the small town of Sutherlin. I also noticed my mother's stomach was growing, and by the time we settled into a big bungalow-type house in Sutherlin, she gave birth to my half-sister Cathy.

It was a hard life for my father at the mill, though. He worked long hours for average pay while the four of us went to school. Back in those days, the wife did not work outside the home so much as now, and my mom was a typical stay-at-home housewife. But like her only son, she was also creative, and took up painting. She even managed to sell a few of her works. My brother Larry Jr. and I were assigned to chopping up the wood when dad came home with loads of green lumber that were so tough to chop that water came out of the rounds when we hammered at them with the axe.

It wasn't long before my dad found a better job a few miles away in Roseburg, and we moved into a nicer home that had electric heat. But we didn't stay long. Boeing Aircraft up in Seattle was actively recruiting workers and offering moving bonuses and high wages. Dad applied, and was accepted to the Seattle plant as a tool-and-die maker, and we were on the move again. After a short stint in a tiny rental house in Auburn, Washington, he purchased a small five-acre farm just outside of Sumner, Washington in December 1965.

This turned out to be the place where I would finally grow up. The farm. And the place where I would first hear about D.B. Cooper, the skyjacker I liked to call The Guy Who Got Away With It.

He was one heck of a nice guy, too. How do I know? *Everyone he knew said so.*

## Chapter Two

When my folks moved us onto the farm in Sumner, it was a bit crowded at first. The property had three big barns, a fenced pasture out back, and two holly trees nearly twenty feet high – one on each side of the biggest barn’s door. But the house itself was a tiny affair, with a little kitchen, a small living room, and two miniscule bedrooms. It was far too small for a family of six. The Dieringer Middle School was right next door, and that was the only convenient thing about the place.

Next door at the school, there was a big, bungalow-type house with a covered front porch and no one lived in it. One day, my dad walked over to the school and asked about it. The principal told him it had been there for years, and they intended someday to tear it down, but the district didn’t have the funds to get rid of it. So Larry bought it for a dollar from the school, and then paid a few thousand dollars more to have it moved onto our property and set onto a foundation. All of us kids were glad to move out of the dollhouse we lived in for the first year, and I got my own bedroom up near the front of the house.

Tracy Kellogg, an old man who lived across the street from us, was also the guy who sold us the farm. He had farmed the place for years, and often came over to offer us advice on how to farm, since nobody in our family had the slightest experience in growing crops, or running a working farm. He was a big help to us, but sometimes he could really be funny.

For example, he hadn’t been to a grocery store in many years. His wife did all the shopping. One time, she was a bit under the weather, so she sent Tracy into town to do the weekly grocery shopping – and he took five dollars with him, thinking that would be enough. He drove home, picked up his checkbook, and went back to the store. When he got home, he told his wife he was shocked at how the prices had gone so high for groceries. She told him it wasn’t 1945 anymore, and that he should get out more often.

Old Tracy had tossed in everything we needed when we bought the farm. He included the old single-cylinder (‘one-lunger’) tractor, all the usual implements you dragged behind it, such as a plow and a disker. There were old chicken pens, a fenced pasture for cattle or sheep, and even a spot for pigs. We bought a couple of beef calves, a few pigs, and a lot of chickens. When slaughtering time came for either the pigs or beef, we paid the slaughtering crew with a share of the meat. Our share went to a freezer-locker in town that kept the temperature inside the lockers at exactly zero degrees Fahrenheit, which kept the meat very fresh for more than a year. Every time my mom would drive us into town to draw some food from the locker, she always sent me in to brave the cold. I got in and out of that place as quick as I could. If you stayed too long, you might turn into a popsicle, it was that cold. We didn’t have much money, but we sure ate well.

After that, my brother and I started planting the property in the ‘truck’ farm style, which means you grew anything and everything that was suitable for the area except flowers. My dad built a vegetable stand out front by the road, and each summer my brother and I would tend it and collect the money. But after the first year of doing all the farm work, milking the cows, picking the harvests, and selling the veggies, we went on strike. We told Dad we wanted a share of the profits. As it was, my brother and I spent a lot of our summers picking crops for other farmers just to earn enough money for good school clothes. Dad agreed, and after that we got our extra money by selling crops from our own farm instead.

It was a good life, a good living for us. We kept cats around to control the mice, and a German shepherd whose only name for all the years we had her was simply 'Girl'. However, we had one particular pet that was the most memorable, and she was a terror for sure.

One summer a twenty-two pound Siamese cat showed up at our door for a handout and decided to stay. She quickly moved into my room, and then found a spot at the foot of my bed. She was a huge ball of fur and muscle, and even with her large frame there was scarcely a bit of fat on her. She was all lean sinew and sheer power.

For the first few days everything was fine. I had a new pet - a BIG pet - that kept my feet warm at night. But on Saturday mornings there was no school, so I tried to sleep in for a few extra hours. Siame had other plans. I woke up screaming after she climbed onto my back and gave me the kneading treatment with half-inch long claws that were as sharp as razors.

"Siame! Damn you!"

She had two names, really. 'Bad Kitty' and 'Damn You'. Both fit her quite well.

Later that day I was sitting on the front porch reading a book when I saw a German shepherd wander into the yard. The dog spotted Siame and bolted after her with his teeth bared. I jumped up to chase the dog away, but I needn't have bothered. Siame just hunkered down, and amazingly, did not try to run. When the dog was upon her, she leaped into the air and landed on the dog's back.

In a split-second, she had wrapped her front paws around the dog's neck and began kicking down the dog's back - *hard*. The poor dog yelped and screamed and chased its tail in an effort to shake off the cat, but to no avail. It was a rodeo bull rider getting the best of the bull. After a few seconds, Siame used her back feet to launch herself away from the dog, which ran off yipe-yiping in the opposite direction with blood streaming through its fur.

Siame walked up to me and lay down on the porch, purring. She never even looked back to see if the dog was going to return. She knew it was gone for good.

Soon afterward, Siame whipped another dog so badly that it panicked and ran into the road - and was promptly struck and killed by a passing car. Stray dogs who wandered onto the property were sent packing with new scars and bloody faces. I tried to keep her indoors as much as I could, but she always found a way out, including breaking an old-fashioned window pane to escape, the thin, wavy type of glass perfect for a mean cat to break out with its head. From then on Siame came and went as she pleased, beating up local dogs along the way.

A few of our neighbors came to the house in a group, telling us Siame was a menace. They threatened to start sending us the vet bills for their pets. I told them to keep their dogs on a leash. They tried going to Animal Control, but were laughed out of the office.

*A cat? A cat is a threat to your dogs?* Animal Control asked in amusement.

And of course, I never slept in late on Saturdays anymore. Siame was an early riser who believed everyone else should get up early, too. I tried locking her out of the bedroom once. She howled and scratched the door so hard that she made a little pile of wood chips and paint. I gave up, let her in, and set the alarm.

After a few years of being subjected to the Cat from Hell, the neighborhood dogs finally took their revenge. Two of them ganged up on Siame and trapped her in a corner of one of our barns.

They took turns going at her, until one of the dogs succeeded in breaking her front leg. Then they killed her without mercy.

Siame 'took' one of the dogs with her by injuring it so badly during the fight that it was later euthanized. The other dog was blinded in one eye.

When I buried Siame, I thought I would feel anger against the dogs or remorse over her death. Neither happened. I realized it was always meant to end that way.

As the years passed, changes came to my family and some of them were not so good. Dad lost his job during the Big Boeing Layoffs that happened in 1969-70. It was the absolute low point for both us and the Seattle area in general. Former Boeing execs were seen flipping burgers at McDonald's. Hundreds of applicants would wait in line to fill out forms advertising a single job. Some people even committed suicide. Others lost their homes. Many people gave up and left Puget Sound for good. Someone bought billboard space along the interstate in Seattle that read, 'Will the Last Person to Leave Seattle Please Turn Out the Lights.'

Thanks to the farm, we still had good food to eat, but no money. Dad finally managed to get a job at a plywood factory, pulling sheets of heavy wood from the dryer line. He would look at each sheet as it came off the rollers and grade it quickly, before tossing it onto one of three different pallets. The sheets came one after another, and was extremely difficult work that paid just five bucks an hour. But he never complained, although he came home exhausted most nights. My brother Larry and I took side jobs picking crops again to help put money into the family fund, and we managed to get by somehow.

After a couple of years the economy finally began to recover, and Dad got a job as a union welder at the shipyards in Seattle. We were back in business. The summers came and went, crops sprouted from the rich topsoil on our farm, and we grew both in age, and as a family.

Today, Seattle is a hip city with Microsoft, Amazon, Starbucks, and yes, Boeing Aircraft, but back in the late 60's it was still a bit of a hick town, believe it or not. In July of 1969 my brother and I watched the first moon landing on a black-and-white TV, and not long afterward we got a look at one of the official handbills that actually reached Seattle about the upcoming 'Music and Art Fair' coming to Woodstock, New York. We were so dumb about the whole thing. We envisioned vendors under canopies selling macramé and homemade art, with occasional music acts. When we found out what really happened at Woodstock, we were shocked and amazed. The handbill certainly didn't sound like a half-million people would show up for the biggest music festival in history.

In December of the same year, one of my friends called me up and demanded I come to his house and listen to a record album he had just bought. It was by a band called Led Zeppelin. I recalled faintly that the same band had appeared in Seattle the previous year and had been practically booed off the stage. No one in hick town was ready for them, I guess. When I got to my friend's house, he put on the album and cranked up the volume. After the first few seconds of hearing *Communication Breakdown*, I knew music would never be the same. Before that, it was AM radio and Saturday nights in the hay loft camping out there with my brother. Afterward, it was all different. The Seattle music scene was already famous with their 'Northwest Sound' that featured bands such as the Wailers, the Kingsmen, and Paul Revere and the Raiders. It was a good and happy

time. My brother and I thought we were in heaven, and the fishing in the nearby creeks was good. He would come home with so many trout that my mother finally had to insist on catch-and-release because everyone was tired of eating trout.

1970 came and I graduated from the school next door to the local high school in Sumner. On weekends, my brother and I would still hang out at the middle school next door to play baseball with our friends. That spring a huge tragedy struck that still leaves me with the most terrible memories today. We were playing ball out back of the school when I saw three boys walking along the tracks that divided the school property from the river some distance beyond it. It was a common way for kids living in the area to reach the ball field at the school, rather than cutting through other peoples' farm property and damaging their crops. I waved to them, and they waved back. They were still some distance away, but I could tell they were coming to join the game. The youngest one and his older brother I knew. They were friends of mine. The middle kid had just moved into the neighborhood.

Suddenly, I noticed the headlight from an Amtrak train behind them. It was about two miles distant, but it was flying up fast. I started to run up toward the tracks and some other boys followed me when they realized what was happening. I started waving and shouting to the guys up on the track, yelling wildly for them to get out of the way of the oncoming train. They waved back at me, not noticing the Amtrak that was rapidly closing on them. When I reached the railroad tracks I was waving like a madman and screaming at them.

At the very last second, the train blew its horn and sparks flew from its wheels as it tried to stop. Everything seemed to happen in slow-motion, and even today each detail is scarred into my memory. One of the boys, the youngest, leaped out of the way just in time. Another leaped in the other direction, but tripped on the rail and fell down on the tracks. The oldest boy turned around and was struck face-first by the train. A pink cloud appeared in the air for a few seconds where he had been standing, but it was blown away by the train as it passed. The train stopped about a quarter mile down the tracks. It had been going sixty miles an hour. When I ran up to the scene, I saw the mangled remains of the boy who had tripped on the rail. The youngest boy, the one who had escaped, was sitting by himself in total shock, staring at the ground. He was covered in blood, but it wasn't his own, but his brother's. The oldest boy, who was a friend of mine and brother of the kid who was sitting on the ground, was just gone. I saw a tattered t-shirt on the ground nearby. It was completely red, when it had originally been white. I vomited in the bushes and nearly fainted.

The police came and cleaned up the scene. Hardly a word was spoken. There was nothing left of my friend bigger than an orange. The cops used plastic bags and pillowcases to pick up the remains. I had nightmares about the accident for years, and went sort of crazy for a while. The following week I stole a bicycle from someone at my school and ran away, driving it more than twenty miles up to the town of Buckley. I had no particular reason to do it. When a cop in Buckley spotted me and tried to stop me, I ditched the bike and ran off into the woods. I avoided the highway and instead hiked a dozen miles along the river as the crow flies all the way back to my house. The bicycle was returned to its owner.

This was the time in my life where I just gave up on everything and forgot every moral lesson my folks had ever taught me. I started sneaking out at night and stealing motorcycles and I wasn't even sure why I was doing it. *Why would someone steal sixty-nine motorcycles?* In the end, that was the

number the police told me I had stolen. Over a period of six months, I stole so many motorcycles that the local papers started running articles about it, saying it was probably being done by an organized gang. I tempted fate even more, becoming bolder about it. I took a Harley right out of someone's driveway, even though I was barely large enough to control it. I became an expert in hot-wiring motorcycles, and knew which ones were easier to start with wire cutters and a screwdriver than others. Sometimes I even returned them to their owners in the middle of the night, just to surprise them. It was totally ridiculous, and no one had a clue who was doing it. I began storing the motorcycles out in the woods in a place I knew that was safe.

They finally caught me when I tried to recruit someone at my school to help me, and he turned out to be one of my victims. I had stolen his brother's motorcycle a month ago. He turned me in to the cops and the principal at the same time. Of course, I denied everything when the police arrived. They took me to juvenile hall anyway, and then got a search warrant for my bedroom. Under my bed they found a single tool kit from one of the Hondas I had stolen, and it had the registration inside. Still, I was pretty stubborn and said I found it on the side of the road. They had no real proof, but back in those days juveniles didn't have the rights they have today. The cops kept me locked up at the juvenile hall for sixty-two days, and sent detectives to talk to me three times a week.

The detectives would come at me with a stack of stolen motorcycle reports. 'Did you do this one?' they asked. *No*. 'This one?' *No*. And so it went for more than two months. I saw they weren't going to give up because they knew they had their guy, and that guy was me. I finally told them where the motorcycles were stored out in the woods and they recovered them all.

Since it was my first offense, and they got all the stolen bikes back, the judge went relatively easy on me. My folks came to my court hearing and my dad told the judge I hadn't been the same since the train accident. My mom surprised the hell out of me by telling the judge she thought part of my problem was an unconscious resentment because my real father had dumped us when I was little. I leaned more toward my dad's explanation. It was true I had gone off the deep end after my friend was killed in the rail accident. But once Mom voiced that other idea where I could hear it, I thought: *Maybe*.

The judge decided I should be sent out of Washington State for a while to spend time with my real father. But no one knew where to find him. They took me back to my cell and I spent Christmas 1970 eating a cheap turkey dinner alone on my bunk and wondering about my future. Over the last two months, I had faced a lot of personal issues and decided that whatever happened from then on, it wasn't going to involve stealing motorcycles. I also realized my mother was right. I did resent Barney for dumping us in the middle of winter like he did. Why did he do that? What was he really like? I wondered and waited. I was fifteen going on twenty-five, and had personal issues that I had kept buried for years without even realizing it.

A week later, my cell door opened and I was taken to the release desk. They had found my real father and contacted him. He had agreed to take custody of me. My folks had dropped off a suitcase with my clothes and \$250 in cash, along with a plane ticket to Dulles Airport in Washington, D.C. When I looked at the ticket, I saw that Dulles was only a stop and I was to catch a connecting flight to Raleigh, North Carolina. They told me that when I got to Raleigh, my 'real' father would pick me up there and I would be living with him until my eighteenth birthday. I didn't

know what would happen, and I was in shock while the juvenile officers took me to SeaTac Airport in the back of a county car. But I figured going to Virginia was better than sitting in juvenile jail.

At the airport, there were no off-limits areas or baggage searches as they do today. The juvenile officers assigned to me, big guys with stern faces, made sure I checked in properly and they didn't leave until I had actually boarded the plane. It was a 747 jumbo jet. I went aboard with everyone else and found my seat. I wasn't sure what would happen next, but I was excited and scared at the same time. I also noticed it was a Northwest Orient flight, the same airline I had flown between Manila and Guam so many years ago, and which would become a significant part of my life.

In fact, it all started that very day, and had nothing to do with D.B. Cooper. He was still a few months away from pulling off his little stunt with Northwest Airlines.

### Chapter Three

On the flight across the country to Washington, D.C., I became enamored with a pretty blonde stewardess. She was probably twenty-one, which made her six years my senior. For a while she sat next to me and we talked. I lied to her and told her I was eighteen, and a few minutes later I was seriously in love. I'm not sure if she believed me about my age, but it was worth a try. Her blue eyes looked strange because you couldn't really see her pupils, so I asked her about it.

"Colored contact lenses," she explained. "We're not allowed to wear glasses."

"Why are they colored like that?" I said.

"If one drops out, they're easier to find on the floor," she said, laughing.

"What's your name?"

"Karen," she said.

My heart jumped into my throat and I turned red as a beet.

When we touched down in Dulles, the fog was so heavy you couldn't even see to the end of the wing on the jet. I got my bag and went to the NWA counter to find out about my connecting flight to Raleigh. It had been canceled due to the extreme fog, and although some flights were still going out, the smaller commuter planes were completely grounded. I had resigned myself to spending the night at the airport, because I didn't think anyone was going to rent a fifteen-year-old kid a hotel room.

Karen walked up to me, pretty as a picture with those strange-looking blue eyes and that sharp NWA uniform. "What are you going to do, Robert?"

"I don't know. Hang out here until tomorrow, I guess."

"I have a place not too far from here. Why don't you come with me and spend the night. You can sleep on the couch," she said with that big smile.

*Decision time.* Go with the pretty girl to her place, or spend the night on a bench in the airport? I picked up my bag and followed her out the door. We caught a bus from the airport to somewhere in the Georgetown area, and she pulled the stop cord on the bus as we passed a set of rather modest apartments.

"I share this place with some of the other Northwest girls," she said. "I don't think any of them are here right now. They won't mind you staying the night, though."

My hands were sweating as she inserted her key into the lock and we went inside. "Have a seat on the couch," she said. "I'll be right back." She went into the bathroom. I got up and turned on the television just to put a little sound into the apartment.

Karen returned a few minutes later dressed in a loose skirt and a low-cut blouse. She still had blue eyes, but they looked normal behind her wire-rimmed glasses. "I had to take my lenses out," she said. "They start to hurt after a while." She went to the cupboard and opened it. "You want a drink?"

My mouth dropped open in surprise. No one had ever offered me a drink in my life, and her cupboard was stuffed with scores of those tiny liquor bottles the airline used. I laughed. "Sure."

"What would you like?"

It was as if I was in a dream, and the dream was being Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in the Rye*. A thousand thoughts raced through my head at once. My heart was pounding so hard I thought

it would pop right out of my chest. “Uh, vodka I guess.” I had visions of some rough-looking pimp coming through the door, calling me ‘Chief,’ and demanding money, just like the scene in the book where Caulfield gets punched in the gut by the pimp.

Karen opened two little vodka bottles and poured them expertly into a glass. She took a can of Seven-Up from the fridge and poured it on top of the vodka, topping that with a few ice cubes. She mixed herself the same drink and handed mine to me as she sat down next to me on the couch. I wanted her so bad, but she was grown-up, and I was just the kid who had lied about my age. I decided to play it as cool as I could and not make any clumsy, ham-handed moves. Truth was I didn’t have the nerve to make the first move anyway. *What if she was just being friendly*, I thought.

We finished our drinks and she moved closer. I kept watching the TV.

She leaned over and kissed me. My resolve disappeared faster than a box of Twinkies at a diet club meeting. I reached inside her blouse and found gold. We made it several times that night, until we were both completely exhausted. It was official. I was no longer a virgin.

When I woke up the next morning, Karen was gone. She had left a note on the bedroom nightstand. I was absolutely crushed, and I was ready to not only move in with her, but propose marriage. I picked up the note.

*Hello Robert. I had to leave early this morning and I won’t be back for a few days. I hope you had fun. I know I did. I also know you’re not even close to being eighteen. What happened between us was a beautiful thing, but we can’t see each other anymore. I will always remember you, though. Please lock the door on your way out. Karen.*

She added some directions on how to catch the bus back to Dulles Airport and said flights were going out now, and that mine was leaving at noon. At the end of the note was a little heart drawn in red ink. I never found out her last name, and I never saw her again. I didn’t keep the note, but later I wished I had.

I managed to drag my depressed self back to the airport and somehow made my flight. All I thought of was Karen the whole time. But by the time I got to Raleigh and checked into my pre-arranged room at the Raleigh Hotel, I was feeling much better. The guy who carried up my bag said ‘sure’ when I handed him a ten-dollar bill and asked if he could bring me a six-pack of beer. I told him to keep the change. I wasn’t old enough to drink, but I was a long way from home and no one was around to stop me. Yesterday I had been a different person. Today I was a man. At least I thought I was. The hell with it. I felt like a grown-up today and I wanted a beer.

It was about five in the afternoon when the phone rang. I was already on my second Budweiser when I picked up the phone. “Hello?”

“Is this Robert?” a male voice said.

“Yes. Are you Barney?”

“No. My name’s Craig. I work for his construction business. I’m supposed to drive down there and pick you up. There’s been a mix-up. Your connecting flight was supposed to come here to Tennessee, not down there in Raleigh. Someone bought you the wrong ticket.”

“Where are you?”

“Bristol, Tennessee. Your family lives here. I’ll be there in the morning. I already have your room number. Ya’ll just be there when I get there.”

“Where’s Bristol?” I said.

“It’s about two hundred miles from where you are now. It’s a long damn drive boy, so don’t go anywhere.”

“Okay.”

“Good. See you tomorrow about noon.” He hung up the phone abruptly.

*Your* family? I didn’t know any of them, their names, or even that they existed. It dawned on me that my real father had his own family, and I suppose that meant they were *my* family as well. But I couldn’t dredge up any feelings for them. If Barney and his family in Tennessee cared about me so much, why didn’t he try to find out how I was doing once in a while? He’d been out of my life for over twelve years. Maybe I would finally find out why he dumped my mother and me in that trailer in the middle of a cold winter. I wondered how my parents up there in Washington State had talked Barney and his family into this idea of flying me clear across the country to take custody of me. Why would they agree to it? They must have been told the reason why, which was because I had stolen sixty-nine motorcycles and gotten caught. I opened another Budweiser and decided not to worry about it. So far, I was having the most fun I had ever had in my life.

Right around noon the next day, I heard a loud knock at the door. When I opened the door, a tall guy in his mid-twenties was standing there with a scowl on his face. He was dressed in a flannel shirt and jeans. “Get your stuff, Bobby. Let’s go.”

*Bobby?* No one had called me that after the age of six, but I ignored it. I grabbed my suitcase and coat and followed him out the door and down the stairs to the lobby.

“I should tell your dad about those beer bottles,” he said gruffly. He didn’t look back at me. “What the hell is that about? You better not do that where we’re going or you’ll get your ass kicked.”

It was a four-hour drive to Bristol, and neither of us said much on the trip. Craig acted like I was just a big pain in the ass. I slumped down in my seat and got depressed again. I had thoughts of running away back to Washington State as soon as I got to wherever we were going. “Is my father going to be there? I mean, when we get to where we’re going?”

“No,” said Craig. “His wife doesn’t want you living with them. You’re staying at your aunt and uncle’s place in Bristol. Your dad lives in Kingsport. It’s a few miles from Bristol. He will come by your aunt and uncle’s place and see you there.”

“You said on the phone he has a construction company?” I said.

“Yeah. We’re working on three Holiday Inns right now. I should be with the crew, not having to drive hundreds of miles to come get you because one of your dumb-ass parents in Washington can’t even buy the right plane ticket.”

My anger meter zoomed off the scale. My dumb-ass parents? *Fuck you, asshole*, I thought. I sat there in the passenger seat doing a slow burn. I started making plans for my escape. I still had most of the \$250 my folks gave me for the trip, and I was sure I could make it back to Seattle on that much money. The hell with what that judge said. I already wanted to go home. Or maybe I could hang around the Dulles Airport until Karen showed up again. She would take pity on me, I was sure. About a minute later, I realized both those ideas were pretty dumb. I was just going to have to wait and see what happened next, and try to roll with it.

We reached Bristol by late afternoon and it was already close to dark. Craig pulled into the parking lot of a local grocery store and shut off the engine. "Wait here," he said. He got out and slammed the door roughly.

I watched him as he ran to a pay phone near the front of the store. He dropped in some coins and talked to someone for a bit. The weather outside was gray, overcast, and gloomy. When he came back, he slid behind the wheel and looked hard at me. "Get your bag and wait over by that phone. Someone's coming to pick you up in about ten minutes. Stay there."

"Who's coming?"

"Your Uncle Dave. He's driving a white Ford Fairlane. Just wait at the phone." He reached over and opened the door for me. "Get going, kid. I have to head home."

I dragged my heavy bag from the back seat and walked over to the pay phone. When I looked back, Craig was already gone. I sat on the suitcase and waited. A short time later, a white Ford pulled up and a man in his late thirties got out and waved at me. "You Bobby?" he said with a big smile.

I was in complete shock. I nodded dumbly. My 'Uncle Dave' *looked exactly like me*. It was like staring into a mirror and seeing an older version of you. "Are you..."

Dave laughed. "No, I'm not your father, Bobby. Come on, get in."

"You look just like me!" I said.

"Yeah, I guess we do look a lot alike, and yes I knew your mother. But I'm not your dad. It's just a family resemblance or something. Let's go."

I was exhausted now, and all the fight had gone out of me, at least for now. I dropped my suitcase into the back seat and got in the front seat. My uncle (if that's who he really was) put the car into gear and drove out of the parking lot. "I'm staying with you now?" I asked.

"No. I'm taking you to your Aunt Juanita and Uncle Harry's house. Juanita is your father's older sister. You're staying with them. Barney's coming to see you tomorrow."

As we cruised to wherever the hell I was going, it started to snow.

Harry and Juanita lived in an older two-story house in a nice neighborhood. By the time my uncle got us there, the snow was starting to pile up. He took me inside and introduced me to my aunt and uncle, and then got the hell out of there in a big hurry. No one said very much to me. It was like no one knew what to make of me, or that I was just an unwanted package or something. I was too tired to care. On the way to my room, I was introduced to my cousin Ginny, who was just out of high school. She waved at me. "We can talk in the morning," she said with a pretty smile. I was asleep a few seconds after my head hit the pillow.

Morning came and I went downstairs to see what was happening. The smell of bacon and eggs wafted in the air. I ate with everyone but I didn't say much except if someone asked me a question. Outside, the snow continued coming down and had now piled up to about a foot on the front porch.

By midday, I had found out a lot of things about my aunt and uncle, and how they lived so much differently from anything I had seen before in my short life. They loved potato chips and bottled Coca-Cola, and had cases of it delivered to their house. The potato chips were fresh-cooked and came in big cookie tins with lids. The Cokes were delivered in wooden boxes. I hardly ever saw

anyone in that house without a bottle of Coke in their hand, or some potato chips in a bowl. Harry and Juanita were retired, but I found out they had made a great deal of money by selling a shoe business they had owned for years in Bristol. They lived on the money they received from that, plus Harry's Social Security, and they did very well. They had paid off the mortgage years ago. Everyone spoke in southern accents and I didn't always understand the terms they used. They all called me Bobby. I didn't try to correct them. I had a feeling they wouldn't take that too well, and I was right. They were from the school that taught children should keep their place and be seen, not heard.

Barney sent word that he was unable to visit for a few days. I was curious to meet him. I wondered how much he looked like me. Juanita, a big woman with an attitude, told me he was busy building a trio of Holiday Inn motels, and would come as soon as he could get away. When I asked about the motels, she said they weren't the big, tall ones with many floors, but smaller, single-level motels. "Your father has his own construction company," she said. "He's very successful. That Holiday Inn job will make him over a million dollars. So when you meet him, have some respect."

Then the stories started coming. My aunt and uncle and I were sitting in the living room, and Ginny opened a bottle of Coke and joined everyone. They told me that when my mother was married to Barney, that she also had a boyfriend on the side, and that she and this boyfriend had supposedly pulled off a robbery at some local restaurant. They said this was why Barney had left us all those years ago. My mother and this boyfriend had stashed the money in a garbage can not far from the restaurant and returned for it later. This was the reason, they said, that Barney had taken my mother and me from Bristol and up to Connecticut. He wanted to get her away from both the cops and the boyfriend. When they related this story, it told me that my mother and Barney had stayed with his family between the time they left California, and when they moved to Connecticut.

I knew my mother very well, and even though I was only fifteen, I knew right away this whole story was complete baloney. *It had to be something Barney made up when he came back to Tennessee after dumping my mom and me in that trailer*, I thought. I tried not to show my anger, but I was burning with fury that my so-called father would make up a story like that just to make himself look good with his relatives. I even wondered if it was Barney who pulled off the robbery, and that was the reason he dragged my mother and me to Connecticut. Who the hell knew what the truth was? I certainly didn't, but I had some questions for Barney, if and when I ever saw him. I already didn't like it here, and was thinking of ways I could bail on the whole scene and get back to Washington State somehow. I missed my folks, and my brother and sisters so badly that it was a physical pain in my gut.

My cousin Ginny was gracious enough not to add to the awful things my aunt and uncle kept saying about my mother. She just sat there staring at me as if she were trying to figure me out.

The snow finally stopped around dinnertime and I didn't say a word while I ate my chicken-fried steak. It was good, but I hardly tasted it and I could barely hold back the tears. I was homesick for the first time in my life, and tired of hearing their bullshit stories about my mother. After dinner, it was back to the living room for more canned potato chips and Coca-Colas.

I picked up a copy of *Life* magazine and started flipping through it. In the background, I could hear Ginny, Juanita, and Harry go on about the Civil War. They were having a conversation about what-if-General-Lee-had-done-this, or what-if-someone-else (another Confederate

commander or other) had done that – then the South might have won the war. I put them on hold in my mind, but once in a while I would pick up on something that I knew was just not historically true. Aunt Juanita asked me if I had any opinions of my own. They wanted to hear from the Yankee kid, I guess.

“Civil war?” I said. “Well...”

My aunt interrupted sharply. “We don’t use that name, Bobby.”

“What name?”

“*Civil War*. We don’t like that name.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s called the War Between the States. Didn’t you study about it in school?”

Something came over me, a desire to make them feel as badly as they had made me feel with their stories, their lies about my mother. I had studied the Civil War at length, and not just in school, but from books I had read in my spare time. For a teenage kid, I considered myself very well-informed on the war. “Well,” I said casually, “the main reason the South lost the war is because the North had an overwhelming advantage in manpower and manufacturing capability. And the blockade against the South was generally effective. The South had better military leaders, but they couldn’t make up for all that.” It rolled off my tongue as easily as if I were telling them my name.

You could hear a pin drop. Ginny suppressed a giggle and shook her head at me a tiny bit. She looked down at her Coke and said nothing.

“Go to your room,” said Juanita coldly.

“It’s true,” I said. “I was listening to you guys. Saying if this general had done this, or done that? It’s just not true. It might have affected a few battles, but the North was going to win the war in the end just the same.”

“He’s a Yankee,” said my Uncle Harry. “What ya’ll expect?”

“Go, Bobby. Get to your room and stay there,” Juanita said.

I grabbed the *Life* magazine and went upstairs. I heard Juanita say something about calling Barney on the phone.

A few minutes later, someone knocked and then opened the door to my room. It was Ginny. “Boy, ya’ll gonna get yourself in a lot of trouble saying things like that around here.” But she was smiling at the same time. “Come to my room.”

For the next few hours we sat on her bed listening to records and talking about all my relatives, the ones she knew, the ones I had not met. I had a grandfather and grandmother in St. Petersburg, Florida she said. Barney had a second wife now, and she didn’t like me, and I had a half-brother and half-sister from that marriage I had not met, either. As it turned out, I never did meet them. Everyone except Ginny thought of me as a troublemaking kid from Washington state who should have stayed there. I wanted to go home *so* badly. It was an ache deep in my soul, but there was nothing I could do. If I ran away from these people, I would end up back in the juvenile jail, most likely. I was stuck with them for the present.

## Chapter Four

The next morning, in what turned out to be one of the craziest days of my life. I finally met my 'real' father, Barney. He came flying up to the house in a big Cadillac and barely managed to stop the car out front, sliding around in the packed snow. I looked out my bedroom window and saw a rather short, stout man with red hair walking up to the door. *That was him?* I thought. *He doesn't even look like me.* I was five-eleven with brown hair, and this guy was a lot shorter and we resembled each other about as much as an orange looks like a pear. I had my paternity doubts, for sure.

I went downstairs to meet him. He came right up to me and gave me the once-over. "Hello, Bobby. How are you?"

"I'm okay, I guess."

"That boy has a mouth on him, Barney," said my Aunt Juanita from the kitchen.

"He gets that from his mother probably," said Barney. "Come on, kid. I have to go to work. You're coming along."

I grabbed my coat and followed him out the door. When we got in the car he pulled out his wallet. "You need any money?"

I had the money my folks had given me before the trip, but I lied anyway. If he was offering money and I decided to run back to Washington, I would need it. "Sure."

He handed me a one-hundred-dollar bill. "Keep this," he said. He started the car and we headed down the street. I had no idea where we were going, but I could see he liked to drive way too fast on a road with a foot of packed snow. The Cadillac was doing a little fishtail here and there as we drove to wherever it was he had in mind.

"Bobby, open that glove box and hand me what you find in there."

I looked inside and saw a pint of whiskey and a snub-nosed .38 revolver. I handed him the whiskey bottle, and he took a long drink before handing it back to me. I sure wasn't handing him the gun unless I had to, that was for sure. I put the whiskey back in the glove box. "Where are we going?" I said.

"I have to check on the motels we're building for Holiday Inn," he said. "We're just about done with the framing."

We spent the rest of the morning driving around to three different construction sites, all in different stages of development, but none of them past the framing yet. At each site, Barney would get out of the car with a big satchel and talk to the workers. I watched as he handed them envelopes, which I assumed correctly were full of money. By afternoon, we were headed back to my aunt's house.

He dropped me off out front of the house. "I'll see you later," was all he said.

"Am I going to start school here?" I said. "Can you tell me anything about what's going on?"

"You're going to Florida," he said. He put the car into gear and sped away. That was the last time I saw him in person. At least he let me keep the hundred bucks.

It figured. I was being shuffled off again. The next day, my Uncle Harry took me to the local airport near Bristol, Tennessee and I was put on a Piedmont Airlines prop plane headed for

someplace I can't remember now, and then I was to catch a connecting flight to St. Petersburg, Florida to live with my paternal grandparents. The plane didn't get very far before smoke started coming from one of the engines and the plane diverted to another airport. The smoke never developed into a fire, but the airline unloaded our baggage and provided a bus to take everyone to another airport. I caught the flight to St. Petersburg from there, and a few hours later I was picked up by more people I didn't know.

My grandparents lived in a nice house within walking distance of a high school, and I was enrolled there, but it didn't last long. No one really wanted me around, I could tell that. It didn't matter that I was getting almost straight A's and never gave them a problem. This lasted three months before I finally called my parents. "I want to come home," I said. In the meantime, I had heard Barney had declared bankruptcy or something, or simply defaulted with the Holiday Inn people.

Later, I found out the truth on how he cheated Holiday Inn, and the purpose of the white envelopes he passed out among his workers. It was a simple scam, really. He had taken a multi-million dollar contract with Holiday Inn to build three motels, and payment was made to him in thirds. One-third of the contract was paid at the start of the project. One-third was paid after foundations and framing were finished, with the final third to be paid on full completion of the motels. Barney had decided not to finish the project, but claim he was broke after the second payment. So, after the foundations were hastily poured and some framing done, he had paid off his workers with bribes, told them it was over, and then hid the balance of the money. My best guess is that he cleared over a half-million in the end, and then filed for bankruptcy. That was a fortune back in those days, when you could buy an average home for about \$25,000.

Maybe that's why contractors must have surety bonds and insurance today. I also heard he moved out of Tennessee after the bankruptcy proceedings. I never saw Barney again, and I had no wish to do so.

I got a call from my parents a few days later. They said the judge in Washington had agreed I could return home, and custody was given back to my parents. My mother asked me if I needed a plane ticket home. I said no. I had other plans. Instead of flying back to Washington, I surprised everybody by buying a backpack and a sleeping bag, telling my so-called family in Florida to go to hell, and started hitchhiking back home. I had reached my fill of these people for sure. I still had most of the money that my parents had given me a few months ago, which I had carefully hidden from everyone, plus the hundred dollars Barney had bribed me with, and I decided to make my own way. So I did.

I hitchhiked north from St. Petersburg along the Gulf Coast for a while, and then cut east to Interstate 75 and worked my way north. I had a map and I would study it at night and try to figure out the best way back to Washington State, which was a long damn way. I slept in fields near the road, or in trees, and even under overpasses on the highway. Occasionally, I took the old country roads, but mostly I stuck to the interstates. It was always about whatever looked best on my USA gas station map. I finally reached Atlanta, then Birmingham, Alabama. From there I made my way through Tupelo, Mississippi and on to Memphis. I saw a lot of interesting things along the way in

places I had never seen, but surprisingly, no one ever bothered me and I never got picked up by weirdos. One thing I learned pretty quickly was that my clean-cut look was a good idea. It seemed like everyone wanted to help you down there – as long as you didn't look like a hippie. So I had very good luck getting rides from mostly nice people.

In any case, it sure beat sitting in Florida, or someplace in Tennessee listening to bullshit stories about my own mother. I couldn't get away from those people fast enough. The more distance I put between them and me, the better I liked it.

Once I crossed the Mississippi River near Memphis, I stayed on Interstate 40 and kept going west through Arkansas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico. When I finally made it as far as Bakersfield, California, I turned north on the highway I knew led home, Interstate 5. I thought I would be home in a few days for sure. But it turned out to take longer than that because after I looked at my map, I decided to cut west even further and try Highway 101 up the California coast. It was the most beautiful scenery I had ever seen, and I took my good time working my way north, even cutting over to the famous Highway 1 that hugged the Northern California coast.

In all, I spent three full weeks getting back to Puget Sound. Years later, I would draw on the things I had seen on this trip, the places I had been, and used them in some of the books I wrote.

I decided to walk the last three miles from the town of Sumner to our farm, just to think about what I was going to say to my folks when I showed up unannounced at their door. I hadn't called them the entire trip, although they must have known by now I had decided to bail the whole program in Florida. I wondered if they would roll my butt over the coals for doing that when I came home.

When I walked up the dirt driveway to the main house, it was late afternoon and the farm was just as I remembered it. There was the big bungalow house, the smaller house nearby that was a rental now, and the barns and pastures were the same. I went to the door and knocked. My mother answered the door and nearly fainted when she saw me. She gave me a big hug and kept saying how sorry she was for what had happened, was I okay, how did I get home, and how she missed me.

Everyone was happy I was home and I related most of my experiences at the dinner table to my family. I didn't leave much out, including the part where Barney's family had claimed my mother had helped rob some restaurant. She explained that one very quickly.

"Barney robbed that place," she said. "I was only nineteen. He was twenty-five. Then he moved us up to Connecticut."

It was exactly how I figured it in the first place, so I told everyone about Barney's little scam with Holiday Inn.

"Figures," my mom said, spinning some more spaghetti onto her fork. "He never *was* honest."

A couple of weeks later, my stepdad Larry had a surprise for me. He took me out back to one of the barns and said he had something for me that he had bought with his tax refund. He threw open the barn door and there was a Honda 175 Enduro motorcycle parked inside, with a helmet on the seat. "I don't want you stealing any more goddamn motorcycles," he said. "Now you've got your own."

I knew I didn't deserve that motorcycle, and before I could ride it, I would have to get a license.

Then he told me the bad news. I had been permanently expelled from Sumner High School because of the stolen motorcycles. He told me I would have to register for school in the nearby town of Auburn. That would come later, since it was still summertime and school didn't start for a few more weeks. I borrowed my mom's old Ford Falcon and used it to take the test for my drivers' license. A week later I used the Honda to get my motorcycle endorsement.

Wouldn't you know it? *It only took me a single day to get into trouble again.*

The next morning, I jumped on my new Honda and headed south along a place called River Road on my way to Tacoma. It was a warm day with bright sunshine and I felt free as a wind blowing across an open prairie. Because I had driven a lot of bikes, (all stolen, of course) I thought I was Evil Kneivel racing down River Road at seventy miles an hour. Traffic was light, so I stood up on the seat and pointed one leg out behind me and waved at people as they drove past. Some of them honked, others gave me dirty looks or wagged their fingers at me. I pushed the bike as fast as it would go with a big cheesy grin on my face. Up ahead, I spotted a cop car and dropped back onto the seat. Too late. He had seen my antics and immediately locked up his brakes and did a u-turn with the tires screaming and throwing smoke. He flipped on the lights and siren. I gave a quick thought about trying to outrun him, but I knew that 175cc engine wasn't up to the job. I pulled over to the shoulder and stopped.

I looked in my mirror. He was an older cop who looked like he once played center for the Green Bay Packers. The guy was huge beyond belief. The wind flew from my sails in a nanosecond. *Oh, shit.* I thought. *I'm going to jail now for sure.*

"License, please," the cop growled.

I handed it over without a word, and didn't look at him.

He gave it a quick glance, but instead of handing it back to me, he put my license in his pocket. "You just got this yesterday. Are you like stupid or something? You don't even have shoes on, kid. No helmet, either. And what in the name of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were you doing standing up on the seat like that. You got a death wish?"

"I dunno. Seemed like fun, I guess."

I finally met his eyes and saw this burly cop glaring down at me. He reached for his belt and turned off his police radio, as if he didn't want to be bothered with someone trying to call him to go elsewhere. *He's going to kick the shit out of me right here,* I thought.

Instead, he started lecturing me about motorcycle safety, the terrible crashes he had seen in his twenty-five years on the police force, and he really got graphic about the crashes. *The guy's brains were pizza all over the dashboard, that woman was decapitated and we found her head fifty feet away in a bush,* stuff like that.

I sat there for nearly an hour while he reamed my ass up one side, down the other, and then back again for good measure. When he finished, I was completely humbled.

"Don't let me see you out here again without shoes and a helmet. You got that kid?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now take that motorcycle home and don't come back out driving like that. Are we clear?"

“Yes, sir.”

He didn't even give me a ticket, but his hour-long lecture worked. I turned the Honda around and went home with my tail between my legs. After that day, I never drove like a maniac again, at least on a motorcycle. Cars were a different story, of course.

I made a good effort to clean up my act that fall by going back to high school and actually doing the schoolwork. School was boring to me most of the time because I had spent so much time reading encyclopedias when I was younger that I already knew most of the useless crap my teachers tried to drill into me. Even though I was a relatively unknown quantity in the Auburn School District, I decided to run for sophomore class president and the vote ended in a tie. I lost on the re-vote, though. It didn't bother me to end up losing because I had no idea what the job entailed anyway. I had fun standing up there in assembly and promising the class everything but a free trip to the Moon. My main platform had been a proposal to approach the school district and get them to drop all homework, which I said was a useless waste of time. The applause came heavy on that one, even though I'm sure most of the other students knew such a proposal had zero chance of approval by the district. To this day, I still don't believe in homework for anyone in kindergarten through high school. If you want to do homework, sign up for college. That's my opinion. Teachers shouldn't try to extend the schoolday, just as your boss at work wouldn't do unless he paid you overtime. Your teachers don't get paid extra either, for grading homework in their off hours. Studies have shown that no homework in K-12 actually creates better students. Finland, for example, has one of the best educational systems in the world, and pretty much have no homework, and few standardized tests.

Looking back today, I think most kids get into trouble for three reasons. First, they see things other kids have that they cannot have, and they start stealing. Second, because they are bored. Third, because they are just born bad, or come from families who treated them like possessions, or beat the hell out of them for no good reason. My problem was boredom.

Whatever adventures were out there in The World, I wanted to be a part of that and school just got in the way. School was a yawner to me, and since I wasn't on the popularity list anyway, I decided to get the hell out of there and do something else. I wanted to be elsewhere.

Winter was coming soon though, and my brother Larry and I had our duties on the farm to consider. I made a plan to bail that coming spring, in 1971, and run off to California sometime around my seventeenth birthday. I would take a backpack and my Honda and make my way to San Francisco, the place where I spent my early years. It was in the news all the time on television, although the hippie movement had started to fade. I thought perhaps I could catch the last bits of it if I could get there in time. Sounded like fun to me.

My birthday falls on St. Patrick's Day. The day after my birthday, I filled my backpack with clothes, some food, camping gear, a portable radio, and some money I had managed to save over the winter doing odd jobs. So on a Thursday when I was supposed to be at school, I tied my pack to the back of my motorcycle and hit the freeway for San Francisco. It wasn't more than an hour later that I realized my little Honda 175 wasn't built for the major highways. I cut west and worked my way

over to Highway 101 on the coast and by that evening I had reached Astoria, Oregon, just on the other side of the Washington border.

I cruised into the first State Park I found along the highway and rented a campsite. I was completely exhausted from riding that little Honda for nearly two hundred miles that day without a break. I had just enough energy to crawl into my tent and fall asleep.

The next morning, I got dressed and rummaged through my pack for something to eat. About halfway through a Mars bar, I heard a voice outside the tent.

“Robert Blevins?”

I unzipped the tent and poked my head outside. Two Oregon State patrolmen were standing there with their hands on their hips.

“Would you come out of there, please?” One of them said.

I found out that my parents, since I hadn’t bothered to leave them a note about my plans, had reported me as either missing, or a runaway. Back then, you could be arrested and put in front of a juvenile court judge for running away.

The cops were reluctant to arrest me at age seventeen for being a runaway, so they gave me a choice. They would call my parents and tell them I was on my way home, and then I would indeed go home. Either that, or I was going to juvenile hall, they said. I told them I wasn’t running away, just out on a camping trip on my bike. They told me I had to return to Washington and go home anyway. So I packed up my things and headed north back across the Astoria Bridge.

As soon as I reached the other side, a Washington State patrolman who was waiting rolled up behind me and tried to pull me to the side of the road. This time I gunned the engine and flipped a U-turn to race back across the bridge into Oregon. About halfway across, I saw the same two Oregon cops waiting on the other side. I stopped the bike and the Washington State cop raced up behind me and blocked the road.

I put my hands in the air. My trip to San Francisco had only lasted two days.

I was placed in handcuffs and put into the back of the Washington State patrol car. The cop, who stood about six feet four and weighed over two hundred pounds, was nice enough to do two things, though. He pulled the plastic fuel line from the bike and turned the petcock, waiting patiently for all the fuel to drain out, right there on the road. Then he popped the trunk of the car and with some effort, shoved the bike into the trunk. He used a piece of line to tie down the trunk lid. As we drove away, I asked him where we were going.

“The motorcycle goes back to your parents,” he said. “You’re going to juvenile hall in Tacoma.” He shook his head. “You know, that was dumb trying to flee like that. All I was going to do was question you and make sure you were going home. Now look at the trouble you’re in.”

I knew that place in Tacoma, all right. It was called Remann Hall, an old fortress of a place with bad food and chilly cells. Same place they had held me for more than a month during the investigation into the motorcycle thefts.

It figured. I had a feeling the judge wasn’t going to let me off this time. As it turned out, I was right. But none of it stopped me from eventually getting to San Francisco. It only delayed the process a bit longer. The State Police hauled both my motorcycle and myself off to a place in the city of Tacoma called Remann Hall. It was the local juvenile lock-up. I was tossed into a cell with

another guy, and my parents came and picked up the motorcycle. I knew this time I wasn't going to get off easy. I now had to face a juvenile court judge a second time for stealing those sixty-nine motorcycles the year before – so I decided to escape from the lockup and circumvent that process. *Screw 'em*, I thought. *Didn't they get them all back?* Except for when I bypassed the ignition locks on some of them, they weren't even damaged.

End of Excerpt