

Chapter One

I never intended this, of course. Nobody intends to be locked up, facing indictment and almost certain conviction. Nobody intends to have the local radio talk show hosts calling for his life. Nobody intends to have the families of the victims demanding the answer to one question: What happened?

I wish I knew. I wish I could tell you. As my attorney, you gave me paper and pens to write down anything that might help you with my defense. All I know is that I never intended any of this.

Of course, I haven't intended anything for a long time. Nothing that has happened to me has been the result of foresight, planning and hard work. Things just sort of happened, the result of my particular curse, a curse I have not been able to shake, a curse that hangs over me: the curse of good luck. No matter how bad a situation has seemed, how bleak the circumstances, my curse has been to come out of everything untouched, enlarged even for having lived through the crisis.

I've always told my students that it's not what you do wrong that determines your fate, it's how you handle yourself afterwards that matters.

In retrospect, this advice was a license for bad behavior.

In retrospect, this advice was the embodiment of Heinrich Heine's credo: God will forgive me; that's his job.

In retrospect, I am guilty of heresy: let us sin freely so that grace may abound.

There's probably a name for that particular heresy, but I was ordained as a Baptist minister, not a Catholic priest, and Baptists don't really believe in heresy; they believe in local control. If a local Baptist congregation decides that God has called it to increase the grace of this world through rampant sinning, that's between them and their God. It's their business.

I have a hard time staying focused.

Rather, I can focus like a laser beam.

Then something happens.

I obsess on things with a passion and then I get distracted. I apologize in advance for this flaw. I know that as an attorney, you would like a straightforward narrative flow. Unfortunately, I suspect there will be a number of distractions along the way.

I mentioned being cursed with good luck. Considering my circumstances, I should cheer up. After all, maybe my curse is finally lifting.

I mentioned students. For fifteen years I have run alternative schools. When you hear "alternative school," you probably think "granola."

When you hear "alternative school," you probably think "progressive."

When you hear "alternative school," you probably picture a liberal place with students who come from money, live in money and will be buried in money. Those are not my people.

Instead, I run alternative schools for rough-and-tumble kids who don't fit into school and haven't for a long time. Kids with moderate criminal records. Kids who need some guidance and vision to help them turn their lives around. That's what I do. Or did. Supply vision to help kids turn their lives around. Only this time, I turned some of them 360 degrees. And armed them with vision. And shot.

My alternative schools are always off-site from a public high school, so that I can create a culture in my own image. I spent a year as an assistant principal in a regular school, the longest year of my life, and I know that I would hate to have to supervise me.

My last school, Z-SOLAR, is located in a teen center owned by a local church. Z-SOLAR is an acronym for Zdravo School of Life and Reality. "Zdravo" is Serbo-Croatian for "hello." The Hello School of Life and Reality, named for no particular reason except one of the students thought it was funny.

Z-SOLAR is small, with twenty-five students, two teachers and a large hangar-like classroom. More accurately, it now has twenty-two students and no teachers. It also has a small office, with two couches, an easy chair and a telephone.

I mentioned the Baptist church. I was once a minister, ordained to marry and bury, to preach and teach, to frighten and enlighten. I left the ministry for two reasons: I couldn't believe a word I was saying and I was locked up in a psychiatric hospital. The two are related. Now, I only have a nodding acquaintance with God and I don't tell lies. I was locked up in the hospital after bodysurfing down seven flights of stairs in a parking garage.

The secret to stair surfing is to keep your head up and your arms over your head like Superman flying.

The secret to stair surfing is to wish you were dead but lack the energy to kill yourself.

The secret to stair-surfing is to sleep two hours a night, burst into tears for no reason and to carry the constant taste of aspirin in your mouth.

Also, it helps your technique if your wrists are freshly bandaged from where you hacked at them with a set of keys, as if trying to find the ignition in a nightmare car. Drive down the Interstate, listening to a radio talk show about cooking, and scrape your inner wrists, trying to work keys into your forearm and get something started. Just try to feel something. Pain, joy, it doesn't really matter. It never does.

Also, it helps your technique if you have a seven-day growth of facial hair, not because you intend to grow a beard, but because you don't quite trust yourself with a razor in your hand. You could, after all, be an assassin with yourself as the target.

Also, it helps your technique if you are married to a former Miss Teenage New Hampshire, a true believer who only married you because you are a certified Good Man with a fast track to God.

I believe that I was the world champion stair-surfer of my or any other generation, but that's difficult to prove, as stair surfing is not a sanctioned Olympic sport. The psychiatrists may have saved my life, but they took away that particular claim to fame. These days, if I take my medicine, I don't even want to surf down staircases. I take my medicine every day, one hundred milligrams of Zoloft, right after I shave, but before I get into the shower. Being in jail has broken that routine, but I still faithfully take my medicine. I am a good patient.

Somewhere in there, that wife left me. I don't really blame her. Marrying a man as a way to cozy up to God is one thing. Having to actually visit that man in a locked psychiatric ward is another matter altogether.

Being served divorce papers in a locked ward put me in an unstable legal position, to say the least, so I lost all the nothing I had and re-created myself.

I did take good advantage of my time in the hospital, arriving as I did at a conclusion I still hold today: Being crazy is neither good nor bad, it simply is. What matters is the environment. As a Baptist minister, my particular form of craziness didn't work. Wacky, quirky, eccentric, smart-ass Baptist ministers become, fairly quickly, ex-Baptist ministers.

As a director of alternative schools, though, these very same qualities made me memorable, endearing and charming. I am still a maniac, but now I am a functional maniac.

I must admit to a concern that model defendants are not typically described as wacky, quirky, eccentric smart-asses. Sorry about that.

As I said, I have been cursed by good luck. So far.

As I said, I am easily distracted, a veritable sand flea on crack.

Because of this, I keep dozens of index cards on me, so that I can write down the random thoughts that bombard my mind. By the end of each day, I have a dozen or more cards filled with jottings that barely make sense, even to me.

For example: I never wanted to hurt you/I just think cruelty is a virtue.

For example: Marketing plan for imaginary product. Sell virtual product on Internet. Retire to Adelaide

For example: Whatever happened to videodiscs?

For example: What if a psychologist specializing in the treatment of untreatable personality disorders decided that his patients with narcissistic personality disorder were not humans, but actually wraiths or demiurges?

For example: Career leader in wins by a left-handed pitcher less than six feet tall?

For example: The four funniest words in literature? "Shut up," he explained.

For example: Heard the word "inevitable." Is anything "evitable"?

For example: Buy bananas

I even have a leather carrying case for carrying these cards, called an executive jotter, purchased from an ad in the back pages of The New Yorker. The jotter holds a dozen or so three-by-five cards in a burgundy wallet, with four triangle cuts made in the front to hold the card I'm writing on. When I'm done with a card, I flip it over and write on the other side.

But I digress.

As I said, or at least alluded to, very bad things happened. Perhaps the active voice is more honest: What I did led to some very bad things. Even more honest: I did some very bad things. I guess. I just can't remember what was bad. Things just happened. I never intended.

The last intention I can honestly remember was in Germany twenty-five years ago. I was in the Army and I had just quit heroin through a twenty-eight day program based on scream therapy, which involved role-playing and shouting. For four weeks, my fellow addicts and I role-played each other's families, teachers, drill sergeants and friends. Catharsis was the goal. Beginning again with a clean slate. Being born again with a sore throat as a sacrament.

Scream therapy has been clinically discredited as a bunch of hoey, but it worked for me, if not for my co-addicts, three of whom were dead from overdoses within a month of discharge. May they rest in peace.

I stayed clean. I haven't done any drugs in twenty-five years. That is a point of pride for me. Although quitting heroin was a good thing, I never really intended to quit. I just sort of ended up in rehab and it just sort of ended up working.

No, the last intention I can claim came the summer after I quit using. My intention was to become bi-sexual. It was 1978, I was a military journalist, writing a humor column and feature stories for "Stars and Stripes," having started out as an infantryman, a "grunt." All of my closest friends were either gay or bi-sexual, and I intended to join them.

Having gone through a David Bowie, glam-rock phase in high school, I was comfortable with androgyny, even wearing make-up for a brief period. Likewise, I liked the in-your-face 1970s gay attitude. It said, "I'm a man. I'm a bitch. Deal with it." Gay soldiers seemed immeasurably cooler, hipper and closer to reality than most of the straight soldiers, whether blacks from the inner city or white kids from Alabama.

Gay people had chutzpah.

Gay people had pizzazz.

Gay people had the best taste in clothes.

I was going to be gay.

Except I couldn't.

I could fast-dance with a man.

I could flirt with a man.

I could even go home with a man.

I just couldn't touch a man without feeling nauseous. Time after time, I would lead a man on and then bail out at the last minute. Or, actually, the first minute he tried to touch me. I was the worst kind of tease. After that intention, I put away the notion of intending anything and just let things happen.

Although I have a wonderful memory, and can picture almost every room I've ever slept in, I find that I can't remember anything.

For instance: I once tried to figure out how many women I've slept with. I came up with more than fifty faces, bodies and situations, but I can only remember a handful of names.

That girl I lived with the summer after undergraduate school was a blonde from Ohio who loved anal sex and kept the same princess phone she'd been given for her thirteenth birthday. She had a freckle on her butt and made very good strawberry jam that summer. I just can't remember her name.

That college girl who brought fresh-baked apple pie to my cabin, then used a combination of crushed ice and hot herbal tea to demonstrate her

skill at oral pleasure. It was fun. It was pleasurable. It was memorable. Her major was forestry or wildlife management and her ex-boyfriend was from India. I just can't remember her name.

That married girl who worked with me at a collection agency for a couple of months a couple of lifetimes ago liked to have sex in a file closet, talking all the time about the dirty fun of taking my load home inside her, then begging her husband to unwittingly consume it while she writhed on the bed. She smelled nice. She had a caesarean scar from her third child. Her husband was in the National Guard. I just can't remember her name. Or most of the others.

For instance: Although I've been married and divorced three times, I don't remember wanting to get married. I don't remember how I happened to ask them to marry me. I don't remember falling in or out of love. I don't remember exactly what happened to them after we divorced. I do remember their names, though. Another point of pride: Marry me and I'll remember your name.

For instance: The reason I'm writing this is that I'm in jail. While I can remember in vivid detail everything that happened, I don't remember what went wrong or feeling any guilt. I'll tell you the whole story, and maybe you can help me find my guilt. Or, as my attorney, maybe you can help me find my innocence.

Wait. I can tell I'm starting out wrong. Let me begin again.

More formally.

More calmly.