



Days Seven

DAYS SEVEN

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To Chuck Anderson

And only those stories we can tell

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Sunday

The Crip

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Letter tell you, it was a really nice Sunday afternoon and I was just sitting there minding my own business. I hardly ever get to go to the park anymore. It just wears me out to walk the six blocks—and I end up with blisters on my stumps. I suppose I could go in the wheelchair, but I hate that thing—the way it makes you feel.

And besides, I need to get the practice of walking in these things. Carrie, my rehab girl, tells me so—I go down to the VA hospital every Monday, Wednesday and Friday. We work on the upper legs. They have a weight room so I can still pump iron. Startin' to get the hang of all this.

Anyway, when I finally get to the park, all I really want is to chill by the river for awhile. And to let Bruno run. So I sit down on this wooden bench and take his leash off since I don't see anyone around. He's such a little shit—I can't believe anyone would write a leash law to protect people from a Chihuahua. Bruno doesn't belong to me, though. He belongs to the wife of a friend in my old unit who got sent to Germany. Couldn't take the dog—at least for now. So now I'm a dog-sitter.

Anyway, this is how it happened: Bruno is checking out some recent deposits from others of his kind when this moppet-headed kid comes up and plops down beside me. He looks like he might be eight years old and has a kite. And he is, like, filthy. I mean his face is dirty. His hands are dirty. His T-shirt and jeans are dirty. And the soles are peeling off his tennis shoes. I eye him through my Ray-Bans and he looks up at me.

"Hi", he says.

"Hi."

And then he just sits there and stares at my prosthetics. "What happened to your legs?"

"They got blown off," I tell him, as I look across the river.

"Wow! I bet that hurt!"

I don't mind kids, but I was kinda hoping he would go fly his kite. I kept my eyes on Bruno. "It hurts now," I said.

"Do you wear shorts so people can see them?"

"No, not really—I wear shorts 'cause it's hot out."

"But they look really cool. Can you walk?"

"How do you think I got here?"

"Oh yeah—can you run?"

"A little bit," I said. "What about you—can you run with that kite?"

"Sure. But there's no wind up here and I don't have anyone to hold the string."

"Well, how about if I hold the string and you take the kite down by the river where the wind can catch it—and then when it goes up you can come back and get the string?"

"Wow, great!" he said, and the little guy jumped up from the park bench and handed me his ball of twine.

I stood up and moved over to a more open area in the park, away from the trees, and fed the line out as my new buddy ran down the incline to the river's edge. The breeze was pretty stiff down there, and once the kite got above the tree line, everything should go okay, I figured.

The Crip

So then the little guy waves to me and I wave back and he lets the kite and the tail go. The kite immediately pops up in the wind and a second later it's high over the oaks and Spanish moss. So I let some more string out and in a few seconds he's back.

"Here ya' go," I say, and hand him the ball of string.

"Thanks!" he says, and then I head back to my bench. Except now it's occupied by this chick. She looks about twenty-five, maybe twenty-seven, not much younger than me. And, man, she is hot! I mean, she's got long blonde hair and an excellent rack and she's just watching me as I head toward her. And then I sit down beside her.

"Cute kid," I say, not looking her in the eye.

"Thanks. That's Andy," she says, as she watched the kid running around trying to keep the kite up.

"So, you know him?"

"He's my son," she says. Both of us are studying him now—not looking at each other, you know?

"I didn't see you before—I thought he was alone."

"No...I was over by the azaleas." She said. I saw her eyeball my legs.

"Got 'em blown off," I says, "in Iraq."

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to stare."

"It's ok, everybody's curious."

"How did it happen?"

"IED...you know, roadside bomb."

"Are you still in the military?"

"Nah, the Army gave me the heave-ho after my last enlistment was up. Okay with me, though. I'd had enough. They gave me a pension. What the hell, I figured."

"So, what do you do now?"

"I have an apartment down the street. Taking some computer courses. And rehab. So, anyway, I'm Paul," I said, and offered my hand.

She shook my hand and smiled. "Hi, I'm Amanda—and thanks for helping Andy with his kite."

"Oh, no problem, he's a cute kid. So, where's 'dad'?" I asked. I could see she wasn't wearing a ring.

She quickly averted her eyes, squinting slightly as the breeze fluttered through her hair, "Oh, he's gone."

"Like, forever?"

"Yeah, like forever."

So I figured she didn't want to talk about it, ya' know? ... Had to be some prick, anyway, to walk away from a gorgeous chick like her and a cute kid like Andy.

So then, she suddenly stands up and says, "Look, I didn't mean to take your spot. I'll go over to that other bench—it's closer to Andy." But she was like staring at my legs. Grossed her out, I figured. Nobody wants to get too close to a freak. Screw her, I figured. "Yeah, sure, go ahead."

So she gets up and goes over to the other bench, but she keeps looking back at me. Some people can't get enough of the crip's missing legs. *Asshole*, I'm thinkin'—*why don't you take a friggin' picture?!*

Next thing I know, the damned kid is back. This time he's holding Bruno. "Your dog got in trouble," he says, as he hands the dog to me.

"Trouble? What kind of trouble?"

"He got his collar caught in the bushes."

"So, where's your kite?"

He turned, shaded his eyes from the sun and pointed to the top of a big ol' oak tree, "up there."

"Well, shit, I mean crap, "I says, not wanting to cuss in front of the little dude. "So where's your dad?"

"He's dead."

"Shit! I mean—really? What happened to him?"

"IDE killed him."

The Crip

"IDE? You mean 'IED"?"

"I guess. It was a bomb, anyway."

"In Iraq?"

Andy was shuffling his feet now and looking at the ground. "Yeah."

And then he looked up at me with these big brown eyes, ya' know, and

says, "My mom is really mad."

"Mad? Why is she mad?"

"Because Daddy died. She said it wasn't fair."

"Yeah," I says, "that's kinda how I feel about my legs. But I ain't mad about it."

"Maybe you can make my mom not be so mad," he said.

"How can I do that?"

"Will you come and talk to her?"

"Oh, sure," I said, "like she wants to talk to a crip like me."

"What's a 'crip'?"

"A cripple. It's somebody who has something missing, I guess. So they're not like other people. People don't want anything to do with them anymore, ya' know?"

"My mom thinks she's a crip too, then."

Well, that didn't make any sense, "She sure as hel...heck doesn't look to me like she has anything missing."

"I think I'm a crip."

Now that one threw me for a loop. "What are you talking about? I don't see anything missing from you either."

"But I don't have a daddy. And Mom says nobody wants anything to do with her now—because of me."

"What are you talking about?"

"I heard her. She was talking to her friends."

"What did she say?"

"She said nobody wanted a girl with a little kid in tow-what's 'tow' mean?"

The Crip

So now I was starting to get pissed off. "Nothin', doesn't matter. So maybe your mom needs to stop feelin' sorry for herself."

"I don't know. Will that make her stop being mad?"

Well, I thought about that for minute. "Yeah, it probably would."

"Will you come and talk to her then?"

Okay, so I figured, what the hell. Somebody needs to show her how to deal. I can do that. And, besides, helluva a good excuse to go talk to her again. "Okay, sure." So I put Bruno on the ground, stood up and started to head over to the other bench. Bruno ran ahead.

Andy came alongside me, reached up and took my hand.

Monday Hank and Little Henry

God, she was beautiful. Her long dark hair floated in the air around her head as she slowly descended toward Hank, horizontally, from above—face to face with him as he lay flat on his back. Close enough for him to catch her scent—but just out of arm's reach.

He was gazing into the sublime abyss of her sea-blue eyes—and he could see her bare breasts in his peripheral vision. He had no need to look. He had seen them many times before. They were youthful, firm, soft. And warm. Always so warm.

Hank could feel himself becoming aroused. That was what she wanted, of course. Ella rarely initiated sex. But when she did, Hank was at her mercy. As he had been since the first days of their marriage.

And then she began to fade into her own blinding white aura. Brighter and brighter. Hank tried to reach for her—to hang on—but her form was growing dimmer by the second.

And then he was back.

Back in bed. And still alive. The morning sun violating his space as it elbowed its way in through the bedroom window like a boorish, uninvited house guest. He had forgotten to close the blinds.

Yes. Still here. Shit. He opened his eyes and watched the slow rotation of the ceiling fan where Ella had been just moments ago. His lips felt dry and he had to pee. Jesus Christ, he always had to pee.

Hank pulled his aching body up to sit on the bedside. Bare feet on the carpet now. He had been up three times in the night. He reached for his cane and with no small effort brought his 87-year-old, lanky, still-tall frame erect. Or as erect as he could get it.

Every night, for what seemed like years now, he would stand and peer out the bedroom window before retiring. It was on the east side of the house and looked out onto a quiet street. He would see young couples and children walking along the sidewalk in the street lights, heading home from some church event, or school event, or whatever. Every night he hoped it would be his last view of that street. And then he would close the blinds and pull himself under the comforter and say goodbye. He always fell instantly asleep.

But last night he had forgotten to close the blinds. And now the Goddam sun was blinding him. He reached out with his free hand and jerked the cord—and he was back, safely in his cave.

Hank knew he was lucky. He could still bathe himself, although it seemed to take an eternity. Standing in the small shower without his cane was always treacherous. He needed one of those handrails installed but would never ask for it. He dried himself with a fresh white towel laid out the night before by his daughter. She was his lifeline. He didn't know how he could make it without her.

Elizabeth came over every day after work before going home to feed Richard, her no-account second husband. She laid out his clean clothes and prepared a meal for him. Sometimes she would stay and chat while he ate. She would tell him of the most recent exploits of twenty- three-year-old Robin, his only granddaughter, who lived nearby with her husband. And who was about to have a baby.

Hank and Little Henry

Or, more often, she would vent about Richard. The old man seemed to absorb her frustrations like a sponge, and then she felt better. But he would hardly hear a word she said. Other times he had dinner with Brian Williams on NBC.

Breakfast was a piece of toast, a large glass of orange juice and his meds. He wondered how many calories he got from his pills. Seems like he ate about a pound of them a day. Gag. More juice. Then he padded back into the bathroom and sprinkled some bicarb into a glass. Swirled a little water and swallowed it. Juice gave him indigestion. He could feel the acid fizzing in his esophagus. Jesus! Burp.

Later, dressed in baggy jeans and a pullover, Hank went out to the sidewalk with his cane to get the paper. As he was about to reach down to pick up the daily, a young boy, late on his way to school, sped past on his bicycle, perilously close. Hank almost lost his balance. *Son of bitch!* The boy never looked back. Hank glared. It wasn't even eight o'clock and already he was angry.

Once he was done with his paper, he turned on the TV. He hated television. Politicians on the news. Where had all the statesmen gone? Where were the patriots? All they wanted was power. And his money—so they could give it to others who would keep them in power. Round and round.

He liked to read—novels and non-fiction. But one can read only so much. And his eyes tired so quickly any more. And sometimes his back ached horribly from sitting in one position for any length of time.

A year ago he began building birdhouses to keep busy. He was deft with hand tools, having been taught how to use them by his father. And he had been a diesel truck mechanic in the Navy. He was good with his hands and instinctively understood mechanical things. Unlike Richard. Richard wouldn't know which end of a hammer to hit a nail with.

Hank flicked off the TV and headed for the garage. As he stepped through the door he found he had forgotten, again, to close the damned garage door the previous evening. And the morning sunlight had found a new way to foist itself upon him, pouring in over the dusty, old car he was no longer allowed to drive. Seemed he couldn't escape it.

With short, sliding steps he made his way over to his workbench where he had a new project almost finished. It was a simple piece. Only about ten inches square with a peaked roof. He had crafted a circular entrance with a small dowel in front and a metal fitting on the bottom to attach to a pole. The paint had dried and it looked pretty good.

He wasn't sure to whom he would give his new creation. Everybody in the family had at least three. They always accepted them happily. Stuck them up all over the place—front yards, back yards, at work. Later he learned that he had been giving the same models to the same people. Oh well. Maybe they could regift. He was a bird-house building machine with no outlets.

Hank made his way back into the house. He fell heavily into his favorite chair and leaned back, winded. His eyes passed over a framed, faded, black-and-white photo on the wall: Ella and him when they were first married. He was in his Navy dress blues—her in a pretty white house dress, standing in the back yard of their first home. He was taller then, nearly six foot three, with thick dark hair bursting from beneath his white sailor's cap, which he wore on the back of his head. She had been gone nearly 20 years now. Hank had never remarried. Plenty of opportunities. He was just too damned particular. Hank stared at the photo for a bit and then felt a tear well up and track down his cheek. Jesus Christ, I cry like a little girl at the drop of a hat, he thought.

Hank hated being old. He hated being treated like an old man and having to behave like an old man. No matter that he was. He was slow to accept his final role in life as that of an old person. He had been active all his life. He and Ella skied every year at Snowshoe Mountain. He had owned a Harley-Davidson motorcycle—a big Electra Glide. Trips to Daytona Beach with Ella on the back. Basketball with his grandsons at his daughter's house. Richard didn't play basketball.

Then, slowly but surely, he couldn't do it any more. He worked out three days a week until he was sixty-eight. Then he had to quit. The run was killing

him. And ruining his hip. Couldn't even drink beer any more without being up all night with indigestion.

And he felt a deep sense of remorse for the burden his infirmity had brought on his family. He had lived too long. He had nothing left to give. He just wanted to die.

Hank had started to nod off in his chair when he heard a commotion at the door.

"Hey! Anybody home!? It's me, Robin!"

Hank's heart fluttered as he snatched his cane to stand up. He no sooner got to his feet when Robin rushed into the room, unceremoniously plopping a large, brown paper bag full of what appeared to be groceries on the huge oaken coffee table, and threw her arms around him.

"What are you doin' Grandpa?" Her face was flushed from activity and beaming with a smile. He could smell the sweet scent of youthful transudation about her as she hugged him. Her belly protruded so far out she had to bend forward to give her grandfather a kiss.

"Robin, what in the world are you doing here, sweetheart? Aren't you supposed to be at work?"

"Yeah, sorta. But I decided to take a couple of days off."

"So, what's in the bag?" said Hank, as he peered over the edge of the brown paper.

"Dinner! Look," she said, pulling out plastic containers, "this for tonight. It's meatloaf. Made it myself this morning. And this one is mashed potatoes and here's the gravy. You can open a can of peas to mix in the potatoes and gravy. Everything can be nuked right in the container."

She now had all the containers lined up on the heavy coffee table and then sat down on the edge of the low table. She averted her eyes momentarily and Hank saw her face blanch.

"Are you all right?"

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"Just a little light-headed—guess I need to slow down," she said, but Hank could see a bead of perspiration forming on her upper lip.

"Here," he said, "get off that coffee table and lie down for a minute."

As Robin moved to the sofa, Hank went into the kitchen to dampen a wash cloth, the crook of his cane across his forearm. When he returned a moment later she had her eyes closed. He eased himself onto the low table next to her and placed the rolled up cloth on her forehead. She didn't speak at first and, for a flicker of a moment, he thought he could see some "Ella" in that beautiful face. "Here, just rest for a minute. Maybe I should call Elizabeth…"

"No, no, I'm okay. I just forget that I'm pregnant sometimes—need to slow down, right, Grandpa?"

"I suppose so," he said, smiling.

She seemed to be better. But before Hank could rise, his granddaughter took his hand. "Grandpa, don't forget—you have to come the hospital when I have my baby, okay? You promised."

Hank had tried to get out of that. There would be plenty of people around. They wouldn't need him. But Robin would have none of it. "Oh yes, I'll be there—if somebody remembers to come and get me."

"Don't worry, Mom will."

Hank had never been a patient in a hospital. But he had spent many an hour in waiting rooms and at the bedsides of others. And he despised them. The smells. The indifferent staff. The six-month-old celebrity magazines. But, most significantly, the sense of powerlessness. Endless waiting for other people to do something. For something to happen.

"Is Kevin back?" asked Hank, referring to her husband, as he took the wash cloth, refolded it, and put it back on her forehead.

"He's coming in this evening from Chicago."

"Aren't they having some serious snow up there?"

"Yeah. But he should make it okay. I'm not worried." She smiled and pushed herself up on the edge of the sofa, catching the wash cloth in one hand.

"I feel better now, Grandpa. And I need to get home. Got stuff to do," she said, as she relocated her center of gravity and rose to her feet.

"Okay, well let me walk out with you."

"Oh no, no, I'm fine," she said. "Here, I'll help you get those containers in the kitchen."

The two of them carried Hank's dinner out to kitchen counter. Robin turned and wrapped her arms around her grandfather and put her head against his chest. "I love you Grandpa." She stood on tiptoes, kissed him on the cheek and in a moment was gone.

Hank took a second look at the containers and then stacked them in the refrigerator. Robin was gone five minutes and he missed her already. It was going to be another long day.

It was two p.m. Reading the last of his newspaper, Hank was startled by the ringing of his cell phone. He saw Elizabeth's number and popped open the cover. "Hi hon."

"Dad! Guess what-Robin's water broke and I'm taking her to the hospital!"

"Is everything ok?"

"Yes. She's fine, and Richard is on his way to pick you up." Pause. "Are you there, Dad? Can you hear me?"

"Uh, yes, that's fine, I'll be ready when he gets here."

"Okay, we'll see you in a bit then."

Hank closed the cover on his phone, stood and put it in the front pocket of his jeans. Minutes later he heard Richard beep his horn, and he made his way out to the drive.

As Hank approached, Richard reached across the seat of the Ford F-150 and pushed the passenger door open for his father-in-law. "Hello, Hank. Can you get in there okay?"

Hank put his cane on the cab floor, grabbed hold of the side panel and grunted and clawed his way into the high seat. Elizabeth would have come around and helped him, he thought.

"Hello, Richard," he said, without making eye contact. He pulled the door shut and began searching for his seat belt. "What about Kevin?"

"Looks like he's not going to make it."

"Robin's going to be unhappy about that," he said. "She wanted him to help in the delivery room."

"Yeah, I know. Not sure what the girls will have to say about that," said Richard as he pulled into traffic.

Hank contemplated this change of events for a moment before speaking. "Maybe you can go in there?"

"Well, I guess I could if she wanted me to. We'll see, I guess." They drove on in silence.

Richard and Elizabeth had been married only three years earlier. And Richard knew he had a hard act to follow—Elizabeth and her first husband, Steven, Robin's father, had split about eighteen months before he met Elizabeth. Steven remarried shortly after the divorce and then tragically died of a heart attack before the first anniversary of his new marriage.

It always seemed to Richard that, somehow, Hank had blamed him for all these events, even though he had never even met Steven. The old man had bonded with Steven and didn't seem to take well to his replacement. Elizabeth told him it would take time. Well, the old fart didn't have much time left, he thought.

"Here, Hank, I'll drop you off at the entrance and go look for a parking space."

Hank slid out of the seat and down to the pavement, grabbed his cane and soft-shoed his way into the reception area. He approached the information desk and asked the attending candy striper for directions.

By the time he had found the elevator and reached the fourth floor, he was searching for a seat to catch his breath. But before he could sit down, Elizabeth popped out of a room and came down the corridor to retrieve him. As the two entered the hospital room, Robin was gasping for air, a patina of perspiration on her forehead. "Oh, Grandpa, c'mere!" she said. Hank leaned over the bed and his granddaughter gave him a strong hug. He was breathing heavily himself but would have died before making her let go.

"Here, Robin, let your grandfather sit down for a minute," said Elizabeth, who mercifully extracted him from Robin's grasp and led him to a chair in the corner of the room.

Hank caught his breath. "Is Kevin going to make it in time?"

"No, I'm afraid not," replied his daughter. "But Richard is going to go in with me."

"Richard?"

"Yes, I spoke with him on his cell a few minutes ago. He's on his way up."

Hank was unsure how he felt about that. He sure as hell didn't want to go into the delivery room, but he couldn't help feeling a little miffed. "Can't you do it on your own?"

"I suppose, but he's going to be there more for me than for Robin."

Richard stuck his head through the partially open the door. "Everybody doing okay in here?" he asked as he entered. He strode over to Robin, "How are ya' honey?"

Before she could respond, she once again began gasping for air. "Oh God, this has <u>got</u> to be it!" she said.

A nurse entered the room, "Hello, dear, we're here to take you down to the delivery room. Are you ready to go?"

"Absolutely! Let's go!"

Another nurse arrived and the two of them transferred Robin to a gurney. Hank, Elizabeth and Richard watched as they trundled down the hallway with Hank's granddaughter and, soon to be born, great-grandson.

Ten minutes later, the trio was standing outside the delivery room waiting for someone to shepherd Elizabeth and Richard inside. Richard reached over, took Hank's elbow, and looked to Elizabeth. "Liz, can you excuse us for a minute? I need to talk with Hank."

"Um, sure, but don't go far. They'll be out to get us in a minute."

Richard escorted Hank to a small, empty waiting room a couple of doors down, put his hands in his pockets and turned to speak to his father-in-law. "Hank, you need to be in there."

Hank was confused, "In where?"

"In the delivery room."

Hank raised his eyebrows. "They don't need me in there. And you'll be there with Elizabeth."

"Hank, I thought you should know that Robin really wanted you to go in. But they won't allow more than two people—and Elizabeth was afraid you would get too tired."

"But, what would I do?"

"Just be there. Elizabeth needs your support, and Robin wants you to be one of the first to see the brand new 'Henry'."

"Henry?"

"Sure. Didn't you know? Robin and Kevin are naming their first son after you."

Hank was stunned. The women had been jawing about names for six months. He didn't know. "But, what about you? Don't you want to see the delivery?"

"Hank, I hope you know that I would do anything for Robin. But she's your granddaughter—your blood. You're the one she needs by her side right now, not me. What d'ya say?"

Hank was shaken—and moved by Richard's thoughtfulness. And he suddenly realized how hurt he was when he thought he had been overlooked. "Yes. I would like that. But what about the girls? Do they know?"

"They will in a few minutes—deal?" he said and offered his hand to Hank.

Hank could feel his eyes welling but forced back the tears. "Thank you, Richard", he said as he took his hand.

Hank and Little Henry

It was finally over. Two-and-a-half brutal hours. Robin was exhausted. Hank was bone-weary and felt a hundred years old. He'd had to sit down fairly early in the game but managed to be on his feet when he needed to be. And then there was a cry. Oohs and ahs. And after a bit, a nurse took the tiny, brand new, and swaddled "Henry" from his mother's bosom and placed him in Hank's arms.

Hank couldn't remember the last time he had held a newborn baby probably Robin. He seemed so warm. He had the musky scent of birth and deep, sea-blue eyes. And in those eyes Hank could see himself, and he could see Ella. And he didn't want to give him back.

Hank couldn't remember being so tired. His back was killing him and it was hours past his normal bedtime. He looked out his bedroom window. There were no strollers now—probably too late, with most everyone home already. He put his hand on the cord for the blinds. And then he thought twice. Better leave them open. He didn't want to oversleep. They were bringing little Henry home tomorrow.

Tuesday Divorce

I married Linda Jo. Yes, that Linda Jo, my high school sweetheart. Okay, my most recent (last) high school sweetheart. She was gorgeous (at least I thought so). Jeez, she was a little wild, though. She was, well, who she was.

We took our vows standing arm in arm next to the pond in the sprawling front lawn of her parents' country home on a warm Sunday evening shortly after my return from boot camp. It was 1966. I was twenty—she was nineteen. Afterwards, we sat together on the porch watching the fish nibble at the tips of the weeping willow branches that dangled in the still water. I don't remember us discussing love much.

It lasted ten months. If I hadn't just enlisted in the military we probably would have simply lived together for a while and eventually come to the conclusion that we had no idea what marriage meant—or cared just yet. We hadn't done our homework. We were young; we each had other fish to fry. Good enough.

A few years later I married Nancy. I was pretty full of myself at the time. I think she felt instinctively that I had potential, though. Some women can tell that in a man (I don't think men are as good at this as women are—intuition?). Unfortunately, I still had a good bit of maturing to do. Opposites may attract, but they don't always stick. We split up three years later.

Then I was rescued. No kidding.

Christy saw me for what I truly was—self-centered and bipolar. In any event, I assumed that whatever *I* wanted in life was all that was important—and was inclined to overlook the fact that *she* had some dreams too. Whoops. Fortunately she was smarter than me. She said "I'll go wherever you go," and then made some really good suggestions about where that might be—she was a good salesperson. I countered with some ideas of how we might actually get there, and a team was born.

And off we went.

There were no secrets between us then. Okay, that's not true. In fact we had a pact: there were certain things in our previous lives that neither of us were particularly proud of, things that didn't need to be rehashed, that each of us would rather forget. We agreed to go forward, not backward. We had a tacit understanding that those youthful indiscretions would never be discussed. It wasn't necessary. We trusted one another. We really did. But I have to admit, I remain curious to this day as to how she had at some point in the past managed to put that one-inch dent in the left front alloy wheel of her Camaro (rumor has it among friends that it had something to do with a railroad track). On the other hand, she'll never know how the hell I managed to, well, never mind...

And so we built houses. We bought cars. We worked during the day and went to college at night. We built careers. We suffered losses. Parents died.

Nephews and nieces were born. We enjoyed successes. We argued. We got mad. We made up. We planted gardens. We made friends. The sex got ordinary—and less frequent. The air conditioner broke. We ran short of money. We ran short of patience. We made a baby.

And then, everything changed.

We stopped going to bars. We started reading Dr. Spock. We made new friends—you know—married people with kids. We didn't have time for booze. We learned how the school system works. We learned how to juggle careers and day care. We learned how to take turns walking a colicky baby all night long. We learned how to let one sleep while the other got ready for work in the morning. We suffered through carpooling when we couldn't afford two cars. We hung wallpaper without ever discussing divorce. We learned how to be a family.

Subconsciously I found enormous comfort in knowing that I could always count on her—even when I was wrong or simply being bull headed. She, too, knew that I would always be standing right behind her: to help her muster the strength to achieve her aspirations, to overcome even the greatest of life's challenges. We came to know that each would look out for the other, no matter what.

We learned that two people can do the business of three. We learned that nature meant for a man and a women to make children. And we figured out that we had a responsibility to make sure our kids had a chance for success in life. We learned that we had responsibilities to one another as well.

And there it was.

We finally got it right. We figured it out. How life is supposed to work, that is.

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And then she died. That really pissed me off.

After only fifteen years together, I had not realized how deeply ingrained she had become in my life until she was gone. Nor had I noticed how, slowly, over time, she had come to influence every decision I made—every day: with her ideas, her desires, her opinions, her beliefs, her dreams. She had become etched forever into my very soul and I hadn't even realized it. The way she did her crossword puzzles in bed. The way she snapped the damned pages of a magazine as she browsed through its contents. The forty pounds of newspapers and magazines piled up in the corner of the living room that she was sure she would eventually get to. The way she cooked with her hand on her hip. Her glorious sense of humor. The way she snored.

I took it all for granted. Until she was gone.

Not long after she died I decided I had had enough of the hickory trees in the back yard. They were terrible. They dropped all sorts of undesirable material in the yard, mostly in the form of twigs and hickory nuts, the latter of which were destroying my lawnmower. But Christy had really liked those blasted trees. It took me three months find the moxie to cut them down. I knew I was right—they needed to go. But I also knew she would have disapproved—there would have been that hand on the hip. But she was gone, now—no one with whom to discuss the pros and cons. It was the first big decision I had to make on my own. I felt guilty for months. And don't ask me about the damned dog.

Looking back, I find that the recipe to a successful relationship is arriving at the understanding that in fact it isn't really about you at all. It's about your spouse. It's about your kids. It's about your extended family. In fact, it's *all* about others, seasoned with a little forgiveness from time to time. And then, what you give is what you receive. That's how it works.

I have had some close calls since the passing of Christy. Some relationships. But it has never been the same. It seems as though there are always unspoken caveats with these new prospective Mrs. Birongs. Lots of baggage—theirs and mine. What about the pre-nup?

It's a lot harder to start over than you might think—trust me on this.

So, what about the next time one or the other in a marriage is having an "...*it's all about me*" attack? "Hey, I've had it with you—get a lawyer!"? What about the kids? Oh, *they'll* be fine – as long as *I'm* happy. Right.

For some of us, though, we have no say in the matter—our partners are just taken away. No vote in the matter. No ifs, ands or buts. And for us it's especially difficult to understand why the others give up so easily. Not even a fight? C'mon.

Wednesday Naming of the First Baby Boomer

A semi-true story

Once upon a Wednesday, which happened to be the very first day (approximately) following the end of WWII, a brave and courageous young American military aviator named Andrew H. Jackson returned in victory to the hallowed soil of his homeland. Immediately upon laying shoe leather to dock, he fell into the beckoning arms of the beautiful and beloved young wife he had left behind two years earlier when he had answered the call, along with countless others, to sail to the shores of far off lands to take up arms in defense of the free world.

And that very evening, thus immediately preceding the *second day* following the end of WWII, young Andrew had taken it upon himself to, unwittingly, provide for the siring of the world's very first "baby boomer" and, coincidentally, his

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later-to-be first born son. In fact he had provided for such siring on three different occasions that very night.

Later in the morning of the second day, and again, in the afternoon, and then again in the early evening of the second day, Andrew felt compelled to provide further ammunition in this respect, thus nailing down with absolute assurance the production of not only son number one, but no less than the onset of the entire "boomer generation," as it would come to be known (Someone had to do it...).

But, as it were, such persistence was unnecessary as, being a Jackson, things "took" on the very first encounter (back there on day one). Hence, the fact that risk-averse, if not particularly well-educated, mothers in the local neighborhood familiar with the Jackson family's history had been known to prohibit their adolescent daughters from even so much as dipping the purple painted toenail of a plump, pink pedal digit into a swimming pool that might be already occupied by a Jackson of the male persuasion.

Exactly nine months later...

The first whine (of many) from an unusually skinny newborn boy echoed gloriously throughout the tiny yellow house on Main Street in the waning hours of an early spring day as son number one was, sure enough, dragged, er, brought, kicking and screaming "out of the oven" (he liked it in there, dammit...). Having been properly swabbed, swaddled, and dutifully anointed with a kiss to the top of his bony little noggin by his adoring mother, he was placed lovingly in his basinet where he proceeded to scream like bloody murder.

For several minutes the new father, with furrowed brow and crossed arms, curiously studied his obstreperous number one as he wailed away, while his wife lay exhausted from the ordeal. (As was the attending physician, who was amazed at the lad's apparent reluctance to enter the world—forceps and other "toolage" had to be engaged as the little bugger was breech and seemed to have somehow managed to plant both feet firmly on either side of the birth canal. "Most unusual" he opined, while mopping his brow.)

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And then, through the ear-splitting din, Andrew recalled with raised voice to his weary wife a common practice in the Army Air Corps: That is, when a radio communication is concluded, or when anything else, for that matter, is considered concluded, the customary response was "Roger and out!" It was at this moment that Andrew unilaterally decided "One is enough!" and dubbed the vociferous little sprout "Roger." The boy's mother was in no condition to argue.

Two weeks later...

At this point, little Roger had begrudgingly resigned himself to the fact that there would be no going back. So he finally shut up. His father, noticing the sudden peace and quiet, reached into the crib and picked up the slobbering little sack of bones. He proceeded to lift him high over his head, thus causing a length of stringy baby drool to slowly gravitate toward the front of his starched, Khaki military shirt. And with the proud smile of a new papa, he said "How'ya doin' Skipper?" And, alas, the nickname stuck like duct tape to toilet paper.

Sixty years later...

Roger continued his lifelong quest to find some way to get back in there—going from woman to woman like a naked hermit crab scrambling for shelter in the form of the castoff dwellings of others, thus leading to a string of broken marriages and uncounted failed relationships.

But, in the meantime, only his friends and family called him "Skip" or, in some cases, even the original "Skipper." This he came to accept, albeit begrudgingly, as one eventually comes to accept a benign birth mole on one's rump.

On the other hand, he found the more frivolous derivation of "Skippy" to be entirely beyond approbation. In fact, as he became older and even more crotchety, his distaste for this particular moniker deepened to the point where he had been known to morph into a variation of the Hulk comic book character anytime someone might be so brazen as to casually refer to him as such. This was especially so in the case of his son-in-law, Jake, who first learned of this

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phenomenon during a family outing at a Chili's franchise restaurant. The old geezer was already irritable from being affectionately encouraged by his adult daughter to quit being an asshole and at least *pretend* to enjoy his dinner. And then, one last "Skippy" from the grinning Jakester, *(the penultimate "Skippy" having been uttered by him only moments earlier)* was the last straw. Thus, another historical family event in the record books for posterity.

Ninety years later...

Roger was finally laid to rest with stick-thin elbows and knees tucked, at last, back into a fetal position in a nondescript funerary container beneath a gray, granite tombstone that to this day states, "RIP Roger Jackson." On the back of the tombstone, in black magic marker, is written "Sweet dreams, *Skippy...*HAH!" signed, "Jake." Mr. Jake would soon learn of the existence of the paranormal.

To be continued...

Thursday Ol' Don

Just got back from running errands. Christmas Eve. The grocery store was packed. But before embarking upon my normal weekend shopping excursion, which I decided to do today since the stores will be closed tomorrow for Christmas, I stopped in at Al's Pizza at the beach for a quick bite.

Devon, the cute twenty-something who is often in charge of the bar on Saturdays, was working the dining room today, but as soon as I entered she greeted me with a big smile and wished me a happy holiday. She and all the other youngsters who work there were wearing Santa hats and elf hats and the like. Everyone seemed to be in an especially good mood.

My order is always the same when I have lunch at Al's: two Yuenglings and a single slice of cheese pizza. One of the things I like about this place is that I can have a *light* lunch (food-wise, anyway), which is hard to do anywhere else, and enjoy a couple of cold ones before I head off to run my errands.

As I approached the bar to take a seat, Tommy, an old coot like me who was perched on his usual roost just left of the service bar, gave me his usual bright hello, but then took my arm and pulled me aside. He told me they had just learned

'Ol Don

that Don died this morning. Don was also a regular. No one knew for sure what had happened, he said, and then opined that he seemed pretty old and was reportedly not in good health.

I must say that I didn't really know Don very well since it seemed he was rarely at the bar when I happened to be there. But they told me that he (like me) always ordered the same beverage every time he came in: which, in his case, was a bottled Budweiser in a tall cup with ice (yew!).

I thanked Tommy for letting me know and then, since it wasn't crowded, I took a seat two places down from him so I would have a little extra room to open the Folio weekly I had picked up on the way in. When I looked up, I was pleased to find that someone had already parked a beer in front of me. I flipped open my paper and was about to read a bit as I waited for my pizza slice.

And then Tommy ordered a Bud in a tall cup with ice and sat it on the bar at the empty seat between us "…in memory of ol' Don" he said. It stayed there for fifteen minutes or so. And then Devon or someone poured it out and threw the cup away. And that was that.

Couldn't stop eyeing that unclaimed beer there between us. I wonder if they will pour a draft of Yuengling for *me* one day?

And that'll be that.

Merry Christmas.

Friday Skip Birong's Musical Story

Look to music like a butterfly to a warm summer day. I was thirteen when first introduced to the machinations of a piano keyboard by Mrs. Olmstead. Mrs. Olmstead was a kind and soft-spoken, elderly woman who had several piano students in Buchanan, the small rural town in southwestern Michigan where I grew up. She was barely five feet tall, slightly stooped from age, and had a tuft of silver-blue hair that crowned her small frame.

In addition to her students in Buchanan, she had others who resided in nearby villages and towns, thus making a circuit every week. When she was in Buchanan she held court on Saturdays in a Sunday school classroom on the second floor of the Methodist Church on Third Street. I would dutifully go to my lessons each weekend where Mrs. Olmstead would greet me with a pleasant hello and a smile, pat the seat of the piano stool for me to sit next to her, and then proceed to put me through the paces.

She taught me technique and scales and tried to teach me to read music. The latter was in vain, I'm afraid. She told my parents that I was a "natural," but solemnly added that I would not practice reading. I pretty much played by ear.

Skip Birong's Musical Story

This is how it worked: She would walk me through a piece by first playing it from the sheet music arrayed in front of us while I listened and watched. Then it would be my turn. Only took a few times and I had it—and I could even do it while looking at the jumble of black dots and lines on the sheet in front of me.

In any event, I was enraptured by this newfound form of self expression. My dad, who was pleased with this development, bought me an old, black upright that we put in the finished basement of our home. I could go down there and bang on that thing all day long without bothering anyone.

And when I reached high school I started hanging out in the music room after classes. I loved being around all the instruments, surrounded by others who took equal pleasure in them. The cacophony generated by avid students tuning their various instruments and rehearsing in their separate practice rooms was a joyous sound, indeed. I knew this is what I wanted to do for a living.

By the time I was eighteen and a senior in high school I was doing pretty well on the keyboard. My penultimate annual recital piece was Malaguena by Albeniz. Incidentally, although this piece is most often thought of as a classic guitar instrumental, it was actually written for piano¹. I played the original score. I was quite good, actually. After my lesson at the church I would often go into the sanctuary where they had a shiny, black, baby grand piano. I would put the lid up, take my place before the yellowing ivory keyboard and play that piece over and over while basking in the warm kaleidoscope of the deep blues and greens of the afternoon sun as it refracted through the stained glass windows. The acoustics were phenomenal—notes ricocheting from the windows and the empty pews that were glossed from years of polishing by serge and cotton trousers and skirts. It was grand. My hands and forearms would be throbbing by the time I left.

I especially remember my *last* recital. Mrs. Olmstead held our recitals annually in the sanctuary of another small church in a nearby village where she also taught. Now, each of her students typically played a solo piece. But since I

¹ Here it is on YouTube: <u>http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zLuPi_rknfk&feature=related</u>

was old enough by then to drive, she wanted me to perform a piano duet with another of her students. Having a driver's license was important since it would be necessary for me to motor down there for rehearsals. But, of course, before the first session, I had to learn my part on my own, which I was happy to do on my big ebony piano in the basement. I don't recall the name of the piece, but, as with most of those Mrs. Olmstead asked me to perform, it was grand and robust. And then it was time to put the two together for the first time.

If my memory serves, the other player was a girl about my age. Mrs. Olmstead said she and I were her two most talented students. So, following introductions, this young lady sat down to her spinet piano and I sat down to mine. And we began the piece. And then, less than five seconds into it, I abruptly stopped playing, put my hands on my thighs and just, well, giggled. My co-pianist stopped as well and all eyes were upon me. But I had simply been so amazed at how fantastic the two pianos sounded together—all those fingers a-flying—I got distracted and lost my place! I was really hooked on this stuff.

But a funny thing happened on the way to college. Actually, it happened just as I was approaching my junior year of high school. My good friend Curt Remington and I decided we wanted to learn to play guitar. And what would you expect? I mean, we were being bombarded with acoustic guitar music on the radio and television from The Kingston Trio, Peter Paul and Mary, The Chad Mitchell Trio, The New Christy Minstrels, The Highwaymen, The Limelighters, The Back Porch Majority and many others.

Of course neither of us owned a guitar, so our first order of business was to get our hands on a couple of instruments—Curt came up with two. I don't recall exactly the guitar he found for himself, but his mom allowed me to use an instrument that had apparently been in her family for a long time. However, I found it to be extremely difficult to play. In fact, the dang strings were nearly a half inch off the fingerboard. So, for anyone who has ever played a guitar, you can imagine the enormous effort that was required to make a tightly drawn, bronze-wrapped, steel string actually come into contact with a metal fret below by pressing with one's fingertip when the two are a half-inch apart—I quickly developed some serious calluses.

Of course, I had no Idea I was trying to finger chords on a Dobro guitar. I had never even *heard* of a Dobro, which I later learned is meant to be played with a metal or glass slide held in the left hand, not with one's fingertips—basically, an acoustic slide guitar. Ignorance is bliss, as my father used to say².

So, one summer afternoon, sitting on the living room floor, Curt and I proceeded to learn a few basic chords from a Kingston Trio songbook we had purchased earlier in the day. We then listened to the Trio's LPs and were soon playing and singing along to a handful of folk songs.

A few weeks later I bought my first actual guitar. I ordered it from the Sears & Roebuck catalog, and I think I paid forty bucks for it. It was really a pretty good instrument. Compared to the Dobro, of course, it was heavenly. So, two years later, after graduation and a summer of odd jobs, off I went to Western Michigan University at Kalamazoo, grasping in one hand my borrowed suitcase, held shut with a belt around it, and, in the other, my Sears & Roebuck guitar, duly protected in its cardboard carrying case. Little did I know that I would assume that traveling configuration on uncountable occasions in the years to come.

I went to college because all my friends were going to college. Simple as that. I had not been a particularly good student in school until the beginning of my senior year, when I realized that if I didn't get my grades up I was going to be the only one in my little clique who would be going to work in the foundry at Clark Equipment Company. So I hunkered down. And by the end of the year I found that I had done well enough to be accepted to Western Michigan University at Kalamazoo.

²Check out this Dobro performance on YouTube. A little finger picking as well. <u>http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tTISMMhlYdU&feature=related</u>.

My first year at WMU was basically a throw-away, at least as far as my learning anything from going to classes. Not unusual for a Frosh, I guess. But during that year I got connected with other guitar enthusiasts from all over the State of Michigan. And, while sitting in the dorm room of one Barry Brown, a phenomenally talented folk guitarist, I learned to execute the Cotten pick.

At the time, finger-picking (as opposed to flat-picking, in case you are not familiar with such things) was the holy grail of fledgling folk guitarists; and the two most common picking patterns were the "Cotten pick," named for Elizabeth "Libba" Cotten, a black folk singer and player of note in the '60s and earlier, and the "Travis pick," so named for Merle Travis, a famous country singer and performer of my father's era.

Once I got the hang of it, I practiced incessantly, much to the annoyance of my roommate, who was actually trying to get through college (my belated apologies to Bill Wright). The long and short of it is that I didn't do too well in my studies that year but, in the earnest desire to avoid conscription into the military, went back for a second round the following year.

While I was bumbling along through my first two years of college, I soon traded in my Sears guitar at a music store in downtown Kalamazoo. Kalamazoo, at the time, was the home of the Gibson Guitar Corporation (they have since moved their operations to Nashville). Gibson, of course, makes some of the finest stringed instruments ever crafted, so naturally I was drawn to that brand located right there in my back yard.

Not unlike another young man I know (and he knows who he is), I managed to piddle away four years' of college money in the first two years of attendance. One of my extravagances was the purchase of a Gibson B25. The B25 was a "concert" size instrument, meaning it was smaller than a standard-sized guitar. But it was beautiful. It was like going from an old Datsun (the precursor to Nissan) to a Cadillac, albeit an entry-level model. And to top it off, it came with my first black, hard-shell carrying case with an interior of soft, orange padding.

Very much a status symbol among my cohorts back in those days. But it wasn't long until I managed to step up to a full-sized Gibson J50.

Although, I don't think I had yet earned the right to be referred to as a "guitarist" during those early years, I did manage to become a better than average guitar player while in college. In any event, by the end of the second year, the university and I came to a mutual understanding that I probably didn't need to return for my junior year.

There was a snag here, though. And that was the Viet Nam war which, in 1966, was still going full bore. Without my college deferment, it was only a matter of time (short, at that) until I would receive my draft papers.

Well, I didn't want to go to Viet Nam. Basically, I wanted to be a musician, but the world was not cooperating.

My father, who was a veteran of World War II, also did not want me to go to Viet Nam. Dad had served in that conflict in the U. S. Army Air Corps, the precursor to the U. S. Air Force, as a B-17 bomber pilot. He was shot down on his fifth mission over Germany and spent the last year of the war in a stalag in Germany. He had a strong aversion to sending his son off to war.

I mention this because I inherited my father's interest in aviation. I had built dozens of model airplanes as a teenager, displaying them hanging from thin, cotton threads above my bed—each one carefully posed in a gentle climb or bank. And I recall as a boy lying on my back in the lush grass of the front lawn on a sunny summer day, hands locked behind my head as I squinted up at the small private planes levitating magically over the countryside, their engines purring softly in the warm summer air. I dearly wanted to see what that was like—to fly amongst the fluffy, cumulous clouds while looking down on my poor, earthbound brethren.

So, anyway, Dad and I figured I should join the U. S. Air Force in order to avoid being drafted into the U. S. Army. There were plenty of Air Force personnel in Viet Nam, of course, but to our knowledge none of them were crawling around in the mud in the middle of the jungle (...my humblest apologies to those airmen who *were* there, in case we were wrong in this assumption. Again, ignorance is bliss). And by enlisting in the military instead of waiting to get drafted, I would also satisfactorily meet my legal as well as moral obligations to perform in the service of my country. The catch was this: a draftee served a two-year hitch—an enlistee had to serve four years. Seemed like a reasonable trade-off under the circumstances.

The decision having been made, one bright and shiny Saturday afternoon in early spring I proceeded to make the dreaded drive over to the U. S. post office in South Bend, Indiana, where I had been told I would find an Air Force recruiter. When I arrived downtown, I parked my father's tan Studebaker on the street right in front of the four-story stone building that housed the post office. I stepped out of the car, closed the door and craned my neck upward, my eyes immediately blinded by sunlight splashing off the windows. I raised my hand to block the rays and squinted at that building for a few moments. I knew that it would be here that I would turn over the next four years of my life to the federal government (who would have known that this was only the beginning). Four years is an eternity to a twenty year-old.

With moist palms I made my way across the wide sidewalk and cautiously tested the brass handle on the front door—subconsciously hoping it would be locked. Nope. So I pulled it open and stepped across the threshold into a foyer. The heavy door clanged shut behind me like the door of a prison cell. I found a list of tenants in a glass window box mounted on the wall just inside, scanned the roll of offices and then turned toward the stairs. As I began to climb, each footstep echoed back, seemingly barking at me to *turn and run*! I held fast and kept climbing. I had to do what I had to do.

Upon reaching the second floor I stopped and peered down the deserted gray, marble corridor. I could see that, sure enough, all the U. S. military branches seemed to be represented right here in South Bend, each with their names stenciled in black on frosted glass windows in the upper halves of dark-stained, oaken doors. I began walking down the corridor, scanning each portal as I passed, the scent of fresh floor wax wafting past me, until finally arriving at the words "U. S. Air Force". But I found the door to be closed and locked. I tapped on the window with my index finger. Getting no response, I tried to see inside by putting put my nose against the glass and my hands cupped to my temples. Dark. No one in there. Fine.

So, I stepped back, put my hands in the pockets of my jeans, turned and walked a few more steps to the next door, which was slightly ajar—"U. S. Coast Guard" announced the window. I peeked inside. Three months later I was in Illinois taking my oath as a Coastie.

Of course, enlisting in the USCG also kept me entirely out of Viet Nam. The Guard had personnel and vessels deployed in the war but, as it turned out, only the most senior officers and enlisted men were shipped out. That was fine with me.

And then it was off to boot camp in Cape May, New Jersey. What an adventure! Two other recruits and I were driven to Chicago by our recruiter. He dropped us off at a Coast Guard aggregating location where we joined about twenty or so others who had arrived from all over the place. It was there that the whole group was sworn in and loaded onto a bus to O'Hare Airport. And then I got to take my first airplane ride—in a commercial jet airliner, no less—heading to Philadelphia. Pan American! Amazing! And then, onto another bus, which eventually delivered us to the Coast Guard Training Center at Cape May.

It was just after dusk on June 6, 1966, when our big, lumbering Greyhound finally arrived at the tall arch that framed the front gate of the training center. Those of us who had nodded off after the flurry of introductions, and after the initial excitement of our adventure had worn down a bit, sat up abruptly as the big bus ground to a crunching halt on the gravel road leading up to the center. Marine sentries in starched khaki uniforms and white gloves briskly saluted us through the gate, at which time my musical career was officially put on the shelf—I had not been allowed to take my guitar with me, or anything else, for that matter, not

even my underwear or hair, each of which I was relieved of shortly following my arrival (the underwear was replaced immediately with government-issue boxers— the hair replaced itself at a slower pace, being subject to weekly trims).

I spent eight weeks (that's eight haircuts) at Cape May, which seemed more like eight months, during which time the only music within earshot came from the Coast Guard Band performing at the weekly graduation ceremonies. And between the routine abuse from our company commander and four-in-themorning reveilles, I watched with great trepidation as the calluses on my fingertips began to fade. Finally, on the last day of my tour in New Jersey, I learned of my first duty assignment: Honolulu, Hawaii. Tough duty, all right.

After a brief leave at home, I found myself on a train en route to San Francisco. A train? The airline employees union was on strike, and it was the only way I could get across the country. But this time I had my guitar with me. Things were looking up.

As I recall, the train took about three days and two nights to travel from Niles, Michigan to San Francisco, with countless station stops along the way. At twenty years of age, I was still too young to be served alcoholic beverages. Nevertheless, I spent most of my waking hours sitting in the bar-car proudly wearing my newly earned, starched white uniform with two stripes on each sleeve and the distinctive, small Coast Guard shield on the cuffs. And we all chatted and "joked and coked" with one another as the United States of America tore past the long, rectangular windows like a never-ending, fast-forward television program. Morning noon and night, clickety-clack, clickety-clack. And I watched as the scenery changed from green pastures to brownish, windblown plains, to the steep climbs and descents through the Rocky Mountains and, finally, down into the sunny vales of California.

I eventually ended up being stationed at the USCG Air Station Barber's Point on the Island of Oahu in Hawaii, about ten miles from Pearl Harbor and about twenty miles from Honolulu. It took a few weeks to get my bearings and adjust to the military lifestyle, but in short order I met up with several other guys who had guitars stashed under their cots. And I seemed to be one of the most advanced guitar players in the group, so now people were drawn to *me* as I had been to Barry Brown. Not bad. Airplanes and music in Hawaii. Things could be worse.

Even better, in those days, the Coast Guard normally rotated its enlisted personnel out to a new duty station every eighteen months. But I soon earned a stripe as an aviation machinist mate, which was a "critical rate" at the time, meaning they didn't have enough aircraft mechanics, and had also earned my air crewman wings. Thus, I was allowed to stay in the islands another year-and-a-half while working on and flying aboard search-and-rescue-configured HC-130Bs by day and carousing the folk music scene by night.

During my three years in Hawaii I continued to hone my guitar skills and found myself involved in a little coffee house that was sponsored by the Holy Nativity Episcopal Church in Aina Haina. The Reverend Bil Aulenbach had been looking for a way to reach out to the younger crowd in his flock and decided that a coffee house, a widely popular venue at that time, was just the ticket.

The coffee house was actually a recreation room at the back of the church at ground level. One wall consisted almost entirely of sliding glass doors that opened onto a small, grassy fenced area. It was perfect. In Hawaii, of course, the Eden-like weather almost always allowed us to open the doors so people could sit either inside on folding chairs around makeshift tables or out on the lawn. It was called the Next Door Coffee House.

In short order, and at Bil's urging, I had pretty much taken over. I scheduled programs, held auditions, and performed solo and with others just about every Saturday evening. Our program typically included a one-hour live radio feed on KNDI, a local radio station, which was a lot of fun. I also taught guitar at the church on Sunday afternoons.

And it was here that I met one of my best friends. Dave Poleski. "Gypsy Dave," as he liked to refer to himself, was in the Navy, a couple of years younger than me, and was also stationed at Barber's Point. (The Coast Guard Air Station

and the Naval Air Station were on opposite sides of the runways). Dave was from Seattle and an excellent guitarist. He was particularly adept at playing instrumental "rags." Although I found these pieces especially challenging, I loved the style. In fact, I learned a couple on my own, and Dave and I would sit out on the grass by the coffee house on Saturday afternoons smoking cigarettes and practicing duets.



From left to right: Hans Bertelsen, Gypsy Dave and Skip Birong

Speaking of cigarettes, I was driving an old British-racing-green, Triumph Spitfire convertible at the time, and Dave and I sometimes rode together from the base to the church on Saturdays. It was about a forty-five minute drive, past Pearl Harbor through Waikiki and then just west of the ancient Diamondhead volcano where the church was located. I recall late one evening when we were heading back to the base with me driving and Dave sitting in the passenger seat. We were on a deserted two-lane road, passing through the fifteen-foot high sugar cane fields on a warm, moonless night when, out of the blue, Dave started screaming "Stop the car!" He absolutely scared the hell out of me. He was in state of

panic, bouncing up and down in his seat and feverishly groping at his crotch as I slammed on the brakes in the middle of the road (there wasn't another car within five miles of us). Turns out he had dropped his burning cigarette between his legs and couldn't get it out of there because he had forgotten that he was wearing a seat belt. What a hoot! By the way, cars didn't come with seat belts back in those days. But being the well-trained air crewman that I was, I became aware of the benefits of these devices and installed a couple sets of discarded aircraft seatbelts in the Spitfire.

I was very fortunate to have met some truly wonderful people during my three years in the Islands, including Vickie Lambert, who I was seeing at the time. I used to call her "Sunshine" given the nature of her personality and beautiful blonde hair. In fact, I wrote a song for her with that title after I finally shipped out.

And then there was Paul Graham, a native of Hawaii, and his friend, Larry Day, who was also in the Navy. These two guys were into wearing Nehru jackets, which were popular with some of the folkies back in the sixties (there's that "Beatles" influence), and performing mostly Peter Paul and Mary songs. Paul was also a fine guitarist and vocalist.

And then there was Ginger Johnson. She was only sixteen or so at the time, but had an absolutely beautiful, delicate voice and a swab of blondish/orange hair that celebrated the top of her tall, skinny body. I often accompanied her on guitar when she performed.

And one other fabulous musician, John Wills, who was an accomplished classical guitarist studying music at the University of Hawaii. John and I were roommates for awhile in a small rented house, as I preferred to have a place in Waikiki rather than live in the barracks at the base. I recall being wakened on a radiant Sunday morning by the sound of John playing arpeggios on his classical guitar in the next room. No one could devise a more beautiful alarm clock.

During my stint in Hawaii Paul had recorded, on reel-to-reel tape, many of the performances of me and those I have mentioned, including our last session together. It was taped in Paul's tiny bedroom at his parents' home with about six of us in there—and a cat, whose purrs were also captured for posterity on Paul's tapes³. After my departure from the islands, the members of this small group kept in touch for awhile but, as things go, eventually lost contact with one another.

When I finally left Hawaii in '69—I rotated out to the U.S. Coast Guard Air Station in Opa Locka, Florida (just north of Miami)—I took along a large cardboard box containing those tapes (I actually had it shipped to my parents' home in Michigan to start with). As the self-appointed "keeper of the tapes," I ended up dragging that carton around with me for decades. It spent most of those years in various attics, garages and storage units of family and friends until the year 2001. I was living in Orlando, Florida at the time and decided it was time to do *something* with them, as they were beginning to deteriorate from age. So, I converted them to digital and copied them onto CDs—at least those that were not yet crumbling to dust. Others did not warrant saving. Trust me.

After spending countless hours digitizing those tapes, I felt strongly that I should share them with my old friends. Thus, I embarked upon a protracted internet search.

Over the ensuing months I was able to locate some of the old gang, and it was fun catching up. And, of course, I sent every one of them a full set of the CDs. But without a doubt the one person with whom I most wished to reconnect was my true friend Gypsy Dave. I made numerous efforts over the years, to no avail. I finally resigned myself to the fact that *he* would have to find *me*.

And he did.

Only a few months before this writing I received a cryptic email from the one named Gypsy Dave: "Eh...you still playing that old Martin?" Needless to say, I was elated, and regular correspondence and telephone calls followed. It took us awhile to catch up, but I am pleased to report that Dave is very much alive and well and residing in the Seattle area with his life partner, Carol. He is the pilot of a big yellow school bus, which he refers to as the "cool" bus, ferrying youngsters

³ Let me know if you would like a copy of that session. <u>rbirong@gmail.com</u>

back and forth between their homes and their place of instruction. He is also a true artist, working in several media, including guitar, for which he continues to compose first-rate instrumentals of the "rag" genre I spoke of earlier. And, alas, a long lost friendship is renewed⁴.



Gypsy Dave Poleski, "Cool" bus pilot, circa 2010.

The Gibson J-50 I acquired while in college served me well until meeting up with Doug Pike, who served with me at Barber's Point, and with whom I frequently played guitar. Doug owned a Martin D-21, which was one of the plainer but excellent dreadnaughts (a reference to the shape of the guitar's body) that were fashionable among many of the big-name stars at the time. In those days, Martin was considered by many to be the "Steinway" of acoustic guitars. So I managed

⁴ Let me know at <u>rbirong@gmail.com</u> if you would like to see or hear some of his excellent work! I'll pass your request on to him.

to talk Doug into swapping instruments with me. I was definitely moving up (this was the very instrument to which Gypsy Dave referred in his initial email message to me and the one I am playing in that earlier photo with him).

In addition to meeting many talented players at the Next Door, I also often encountered others outside of that small group. On one quiet Sunday evening in particular I found myself sitting on the floor of a small kitchenette (another abode which I had at one time rented, in this case just off Waikiki Beach on Ohua Street) with two young women of Polynesian descent who occasionally performed at some of the beach bars. I have long forgotten her name, but one of these two ladies, olive-skinned, chubby and bubbling with personality, was playing a Martin D-35. At the time, there was only one higher model of Martin—the D-45—which is essentially a very dressed-up dreadnaught with gold trim, abalone inlay, gold plated tuners and such. Well, she saw me ogling her instrument (the guitar) and, so let me play it for a bit. It was beautifully crafted: solid spruce top, white binding on the body and ebony fingerboard and, of course, that unique triple split back of Brazilian rosewood⁵. As I began to play, I could feel the instrument vibrating against my chest. I was smitten.

Anyway, after spending three years in Hawaii, I was getting "rock fever." This is a condition unique to those who were born and raised on the mainland and who have spent several years in the islands—one gets the feeling that one needs to go back, maybe just to make sure it is still there.

Since I was getting itchy to leave, Doug, who was a native of Jacksonville, Florida, suggested that I put in for a transfer with him to the air station in Miami. He assured me there would be no snow. So off I went.

But I really wanted to take my Spitfire with me. So I arranged to have the car shipped via a cargo steamer to the mainland and then, about four days later, flew to Long Beach, California to pick it up (had to wait a few days for the ship to make the passage). But when I arrived, I found that the longshoremen were on

⁵ The last Brazilian Rosewood D-35s were constructed in 1969. Newer versions are of the less rare Indian Rosewood.

strike (those pesky unions—got me again) and, even though the ship carrying my car was in port, they refused to unload it. So I waited.



Skip in his Spitfire on Ohua Street in Waikiki. Circa 1967.

I had little money. I had not planned on spending any time lying about in California. And, besides, Long Beach, at least the area near the shipyards, was not a particularly pleasant place to spend one's free time.

Conserving cash was paramount, as I barely had enough for gas and food for the trip. So I rented a room in an old fleabag hotel within walking distance of the port. I took the cheapest room they had: a six-by-eight-foot rectangular room with a single bed, a night stand and a lamp. It also had a frosted glass window in the upper half of the door, a deep sink and drain at one end and a single light bulb hanging on a wire from the ceiling. It obviously had been a mop room before I moved in. As I recall, it cost me four dollars a day.

Since I didn't have any money with which to do anything, and didn't want to be hanging around in the local neighborhood for fear of getting mugged, I bought a handful of used paperback books at a nearby pawnshop and spent most of my time in my room. So, for the next few days I lay on that tiny bed with my feet crossed at the ankles and resting on the rim of the sink while discovering the amazing mind of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

Finally, on the fourth day, I was informed that my package had been delivered. I high-tailed it down to the port under a bright California sun, signed the paperwork and was directed to a vast dirt parking lot filled with hundreds of vehicles. When I found my Spitfire, my heart leaped.

It was filthy, covered with black soot inside and out. I found a rag somewhere, wetted it from a tap outside the office of the parking lot attendant, and mopped up the small car on the inside. Then I plopped into the driver's seat, depressed the clutch and crossed the fingers of my left hand as I turned the key with my right. When that little engine roared to life, I knew I was saved.

While the engine warmed in neutral, I put the top down. Well, actually, I disassembled the convertible top (nothing automatic here) and put it in the trunk with my sea bag, stuck my guitar case in the space behind the two seats and headed east. I never looked back and was out of California in a matter of hours. Good riddance.

I was 23 years of age when I made the trip from Long Beach to Buchanan, Michigan—2,104 miles. And I wanted to see America on the way. I had read Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley*⁶ travelogue and *On the Road*⁷ by Jack Kerouac. So I was determined to be a traveler. Not a tourist, but a traveler. One who actually touched the land and experienced the people who live on it.

Back in those days, one of our most popular television shows was *Route* 66, which involved the adventures and exploits of two young men in a Chevrolet

⁶ It's a great book. <u>http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_sb_ss_i_1_38?url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field-</u>

keywords=travels+with+charley+by+john+steinbeck&sprefix=travels+with+charley+by+john+steinbeck

⁷ A classic. <u>http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_sb_ss_i_1_38?url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field-</u>

keywords=travels+with+charley+by+john+steinbeck&sprefix=travels+with+charley+by+john+steinbeck#/ref=nb_sb_ss_i_1_34?url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field-

keywords=on+the+road+jack+kerouac+hardcover&sprefix=on+the+road+jack+kerouac+hardcove r&rh=n%3A283155%2Ck%3Aon+the+road+jack+kerouac+hardcover

Corvette, traveling one of the most famous east-west roadways in the country at the time. That was for me.

My route chosen, I was ready for some adventure as well. Route 66 had been established on November 11, 1926, the first inter-regional highway link all the way from Los Angeles to Chicago⁸. Route 66 also linked hundreds of predominantly rural towns and cities in the Midwest to Chicago, providing farmers the ability to transport grain, produce and livestock to the vast distribution centers in that city of big shoulders.

Chicago

Hog Butcher to the World, Toolmaker, Stacker of Wheat, Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight Hander, Stormy, husky, brawling, City of the Big Shoulders...

Carl Sandburg

The route spans the deserts of Arizona and New Mexico and Texas, running up through the plains of Oklahoma and Kansas and Missouri and, finally, into Illinois. The route was sometimes referred to as the "Will Rogers Highway" and "Main Street of America."

Sixty-six was one of the major routes of the migrants during the dust bowl of the 1930s and was immortalized in that context in John Steinbeck's "Grapes of Wrath." But, by 1968, when I made my trek, the route was no longer the primary artery it had been in the '30s, with Dwight D. Eisenhower's interstate highway system taking over those duties.

It took me about five days to make the trip. I had no money for motels, so I slept in the car. On my first night I found a neglected gravel road, where I drove for about fifty yards or so, out of sight, and then pulled over to the side. I had put the top back on by then. I draped my right knee over the gear shift lever and slept

⁸ Here's some more info on Route 66. <u>http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U.S. Route 66</u>

under a government issue, scratchy, gray wool Navy blanket. I still have that blanket to this day.

By next morning, I was already through Flagstaff. With the Rocky Mountains in my rear view mirror, I found myself traversing the vast deserts of Arizona. The road was right out of *Forrest Gump*—two lanes, as far as the eye could see in either direction, and nary a soul or car in sight.

Although the weather was reasonably warm during the day, it was bitter cold at night. And, of course, the Spitfire's heater did not work. But the heater *fan* did. So, purely for psychological reasons, I left the fan switch in the "on" position so I could hear it whirring merrily along, as if it were actually producing some warmth—and I wore a T-shirt, long-sleeved flannel shirt, sweatshirt, a faded, army-green military jacket and fur-lined gloves. And on I drove.

Another interesting feature of the Spitfire, which had a four-speed, manual transmission, was that it had no reverse. Or, at least, I could no longer get it to shift *into* reverse. And, on top of that, the gear shift lever tended to pop out of gear. I learned that I could keep the car's fourth gear engaged by looping the leather strap of my spit kit over the gear shift lever and allowing the bag to hang into the back behind the seats. It was heavy enough to keep the thing in gear without my having to hold it with my right hand the whole time.

About two hours before dawn on the second day, too cold to sleep, I came upon a junction of identical, two-lane, paved roads. I had looked at the map some hours earlier, and knew this was coming up. Seemed I remembered I needed to take the left fork.

I made the turn and drove through the dark for over an hour without seeing another vehicle, any building or any other sign of human life. It was just me and the drone of that little four-cylinder engine. Just me and those never-ending, broken, white lines on the pavement ahead, each shocked into view, one after the other, by a momentary splash of headlights, rushing toward me and then flitting past—one, two, three...one hundred, two hundred—to be left behind, lit only by the sparkle of the Milky Way in the waning hours of a crisp, moonless night. And then the first gray, glow of daybreak began to wink into the passenger side of the car—and I realized I was heading due north instead of east. Crap. About the same time I came to this realization, I was making my way around a wide bend in the road. And directly ahead I saw what appeared to be an anomaly in the landscape in the form of a small hillock. It was coming up on my right and was the only break in the largely flat landscape as far as the eye could see. When I reached it I pulled over.

I got out of the car, stretched my legs and made my way over to the hill, moist puffs of fog coming from my mouth from the exertion in the cold, morning air. It was only about thirty feet high at its peak, speckled with the same scrub as the rest of the desert. So I started to climb, dust billowing up and sticking to my cowboy boots and jeans, now moist with the predawn dew.

I reached the top in pretty short order and found a suitable rock to use for a seat on the side facing east. And I watched as the desert awakened right before my eyes.

As the first sliver of shimmering gold bubbled up on the horizon and bled toward me across the floor of the desert, sagebrush standing only a foot tall cast eerie long shadows across the scrub. And then, as if conjured up by the wand of a wizard, the birds started to warble and the insects began screeching, their plaints echoing across the land. I could see things moving. The desert was suddenly alive.

After a bit, shadows shortened and things began to quiet down again. I closed my eyes and soaked up the warmth of the sun, now full, but still low in the east. I could feel the dampness of the night evaporating from my skin. My body temperature rose. I felt quiet. And calm.

After a few moments, I opened my eyes and removed my gloves and jacket. And then I stood and assessed the horizon in every direction. It was just me and the road and the desert. Nothing else. At all. Anywhere. And a shiver went over me. I had never, and have never since, felt so alone. Me and the desert. Alone. No one on planet earth knew where I was.

I made my way back down to the car, executed a tight U-turn and made it back to the junction by mid-morning.

For the duration of the trip, I drove relentlessly, stopping only when I found, day or night, that I could no longer fend off the seduction of sleep or ignore the growling insistence of my stomach.

Breakfasts were always my favorite meal. As with Steinbeck's *Travels with Charlie*, I never had a bad breakfast on the road—stopping at diners, inns and dusty tourist traps that had ancient gasoline pumps out front, each with small balls bobbling inside glass, gasoline-filled bulbs attached proudly to their chests.



Here's one...all cleaned up!

And everybody I met wanted to know where I was from, where I had been and where I was going while they grilled ham and cheese sandwiches for me and made me milk shakes from scratch. Navajos and Hopis, Mexicans and cowboys, they all wanted to know. And they all imagined what it would be like to be me.

As I trekked across Texas and approached the plains states, the scenery slowly began to green up. It was warmer now, and I travelled with the top down. The great grasslands of Middle America waved hello to me in the ceaseless westerly wind, which was at my back like a breaking wave as I surfed on toward the combelt.

Along the way I stopped and read historical road markers where no one had stopped in years. I took short side trips up old dirt roads that were bracketed by rusty, barbed wire with two paths for the tires and tall grasses growing in between. One bright afternoon I stopped to pet the satiny snouts of two roan horses, coaxed to the fence with my offering of fresh, green corn husks. A farmer's wife, her graying hair drawn back in a bun and standing on the porch of an old, two-story house across the road, saw me and waved from the temporary shadow of a passing cumulous cloud. I waved back. I saw columns of tan dust rising slowly into the brilliant azure sky from unseen John Deeres behind tall, deep-green stands of corn.

Passing old farm houses and barns and silos. I noticed that the small farm towns along the way seemed to be evenly separated by about twenty miles: When I was half-way between two, I could see the grain elevators of the last one in my rear view mirror and the tops of the next ahead.

At times, the road ran adjacent to an endless series of telephone poles, slightly atilt left and right, each adorned with a single cross-bar bearing the weight of two wires at the tips that sagged from one tee to the next—from horizon to horizon. All framed by ten-foot barriers of dark green stalks of corn on either side—yellow silk fluttering in the breeze. America's bread basket. The warm air brushed over the pink, sunburned skin of my left elbow and smelled of fresh mown hay.

As I began to drive through Illinois, the human presence increased dramatically. And then I had to veer off the route to pick up the blue highways that would take me the last leg to Buchanan. I spent about two weeks at home, looking up some of my high school friends who had not yet moved on to other things and places. Visited with family for a bit and then got back on the road to Florida.

This time, I travelled south on U. S. Route 31, first through the soy-beaned flatlands of Indiana and on through Indianapolis. And then into the Bluegrass State of Kentucky with its rolling hills and lush farmland and Mammoth Cave. Burma Shave⁹.

And then into Chattanooga, Tennessee, where the landscape suddenly erupts into the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains. In 1968 there were not yet any north-south freeways through these densely-forested peaks and valleys. Just a two-lane road with switchbacks up and down the precipices. Twenty-ton tractortrailers labored up a grade and then roared down the other side past "runaway" truck lanes on the right, which provided steep, uphill landing strips in soft gravel for any of those road monsters that might suffer from failed brakes. All in all, a terrifying spectacle at night from the vantage of my tiny Spitfire.

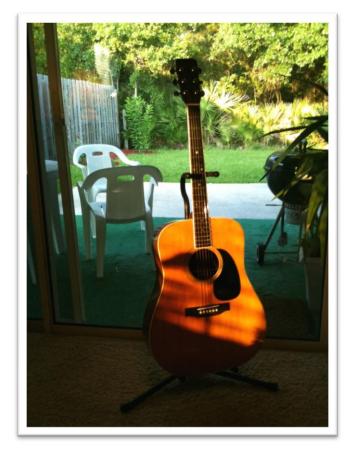
Through the glitter of Atlanta, the shimmering heat of South Georgia and across the St. Mary's River and the swaying grasses of her timeless savannahs. Welcome to Florida. Then, palm trees and another seven or eight hours down I-95 to the Golden Interchange in North Miami.

Doug and I teamed up, as planned, and shortly after my arrival we made our way down to Ace Music. Ace Music was a music store, famous among professional musicians at the time, which had only two locations: one in New York City and this one in Miami. In that huge store, they had something in the neighborhood of *six* Martin D-35s in inventory. I was agog. And then I proceeded to play every single one of them until finally selecting the one I wanted—a 1968 model. It had beautiful, crisp high tones, typical of a Martin, but a stronger than usual bass. Perfect. I put it in lay-a-way and remitted \$25 a week in cash until I paid off the \$250.

⁹What's Burma Shave? <u>http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Burma-Shave</u>

Skip Birong's Musical Story

Then I had to do some customizing: I installed top-of-the-line Grover tuners and a heel peg for a strap. I have since owned other guitars as well, but that Martin has been with me ever since. Today a new D-35 sells for something in the neighborhood of \$2,500 to \$3,000. Imagine that.



My forty year-old Martin

I had about one year left of my tour of duty in the Guard when I arrived in Opa Locka in 1969. Doug, however, had only nine months left on his. It was during this time that he and I decided we would like to team up as traveling musicians once we received our discharge papers, so this timing issue was inconvenient. However, I learned that I could get out of the military as much as three months early if this so-called "early out" was due to the necessity of matriculating at an accredited college or university. So, with some help from Doug, I promptly applied to Jones College in Jacksonville. The college sent me an acceptance letter. I presented it to the powers that be and got my discharge papers about two and one-half months early.

Doug and I packed up the Spitfire and headed north on I-95. We passed through Jacksonville on the way to Michigan, and I waved to Jones College as I went by, thus ending my nearly four-year stint in the military.

Doug and I dubbed ourselves "Wintergreen," which was pretty much a straight steal from two friends of ours who were far more talented than either of us and who called themselves "Bittersweet." This arrangement lasted for only a few months as, once again, the launching of my musical career would be hijacked when we each, tragically, learned that we were going to actually have to find a way to make a living now that we were out of the military. So, no sooner had we begun than we broke up Wintergreen and beat hasty retreats to our respective home towns to regroup.



Here I am (on the left) with Doug (in his "high waders") performing in the gym at Buchanan High School. Check out those tall Kasino speakers.

Four years later, in 1973, my personal life had taken a new and unexpected course (I'll get into that later) and, as a consolation, I found myself presented with the

opportunity to pursue a career in music. That summer, with the aid of a friend, I had connected with Bill Rothe of Artists Corporation of America, a regional booking agency in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and soon found myself performing for actual money at the Holiday Inn in Gaylord, Michigan, a small tourist town just south of the Mackinac Bridge.

For the first time in my life, at the ripe age of twenty-six, I had an unencumbered horizon. It was early autumn and I was staying at a little mom-andpop motel on the outskirts of town. The air was crisp and musky with the tannin smell of the fallen leaves rustling under my footsteps as I walked down a quiet street near the motel. And I knew I was free to pursue my dream—finally.

The first couple of years were tough but exciting. I didn't have enough of a repertoire to fill the grueling five-hours-per-night, six-nights-per-week routine that was required. So I would play through my whole song list at least twice a night, hoping nobody would notice. It was also a physical challenge—standing on a stage for so long and singing sometimes 100 songs over five hours. And then working on new material in my motel room, often for several more hours each day. But I got used to it. In fact, I reveled in it.

My repertoire eventually included my own songs but also covers of the likes of Gordon Lightfoot, Neil Diamond, John Denver, the Eagles, Fleetwood Mac, Carole King, James Taylor, Kenny Loggins, Simon and Garfunkel, Kris Kristofferson, the Beatles, Burt Bacharach, Jim Croce, John Prine, Jimmie Buffet, Woody Guthrie, Patsy Cline, Steve Goodman, Dan Fogelberg and many others as well as cuts from numerous lesser-known artists who I thought had some really excellent material. And for most of those years I played as a soloist—just me and my Martin.

The Holiday Inn at Gaylord had a great crowd. I swear, it was a mutual love fest. I would start each evening at nine p.m., sharp. And, most times when I arrived and went up to the stage, which consisted of a small riser at the back of the room, I would find five or six opened Budweisers resting on my amp. And I didn't even drink beer back then. Everybody was ready to go. One of my favorite places to play during those years included the Longhorn restaurant in Grinnell, Iowa. Grinnell is the home of Grinnell College, a small, private institution that, to this day, liberally seasons that town of ninethousand or so inhabitants with bright, young college kids from all over the country. I performed in the restaurant at floor-level right next to the juke box.

I would play soft, listening music and instrumentals in the early evening so people could enjoy some conversation while they had dinner. But the food service closed at ten o'clock. And then, things would pick up.

It was in Grinnell where I met an unusually talented five-string banjo player. His name was Terry Steele, and he would often sit-in with me and we would play a bunch of bluegrass instrumentals. In fact, that was my first introduction to such music. And all I had to do was try to keep up with him, which was no small trick. Our signature song? *Dueling Banjos*.

Terry was also an avid hunter, and his most prized possessions included a couple of highly trained bird dogs. On one of my visits to Grinnell he wanted to show them off to me and, thus, invited me to go hunting with him. That sounded like fun so I met him at the home of his parents where we headed out into a cornfield behind the house in search of pheasant. It was February or March, and there was about six inches of old and melting, crystallized snow underfoot, partially covering the rows of the brown stubble of discarded corn husks.

But before we set out, Terry handed me a 12-gauge shotgun and a halfdozen shells and said, three times in a row, "Please don't shoot my dogs, please don't shoot my dogs, and please don't shoot my dogs." I gathered that he didn't have much confidence in my targeting skills. I found it interesting, though, that he did not also include instruction not to shoot *him*. In the end, Terry bagged a couple of quail and I shot nothing. But it was a pleasant hike in the snow.

Anyway, there at the Longhorn, the crowd would sometimes get pretty rowdy. I recall one packed, Friday night when two fellows, who happened to be standing right in front of me, one facing me and one with his back to me, started arguing with one another while I was in the middle of a song. And then, the guy facing me shoved the other one. Well, this dude lost his balance and started falling right into me (and my guitar and sound equipment, no less). So, instinctively, I put my foot up on his butt, never missing a beat, and pushed him back into the fray. And he never even knew I had helped him stay in the fight, which was probably fortunate for me.

Grinnell had a two a.m. closing law for liquor sales. So, sometimes, when we were all having a particularly good time, I would quit at two and Tom, the owner, would lock the door with everyone who wanted to stay on the inside. Then we would load up the juke box with quarters and proceed to drink, dance and party to *Heard it Through the Grapevine* until four in the morning.

I met some other really great players as well when I was in Iowa. I was once invited up to Tama by guy who owned a music store there. Tama is due north of Grinnell, which made it particularly isolated—surrounded only by farms. On Sunday nights, though, after supper, fiddle players, banjo and guitar players and stand-up bass players would come down to his store and play bluegrass and country music into the evening. It was right out of Norman Rockwell's Shuffleton's Barber Shop¹⁰.

And then there was the Cattlemen's Mining Company in Kearney, Nebraska, another college town. This place, located pretty much in the middle of nowhere, was a rustic palace. I played in an expansive lounge that was furnished with overstuffed chairs and couches. Between the lounge and the restaurant was a massive, six-foot high, stone fireplace that was open on both the restaurant side and the lounge side. The restaurant featured copper-topped tables that glistened amber in low-light with sparkling, over-sized crystal stemware. The structure was built of huge, rough-hewn wood beams stained a dark mahogany. It was beautiful, rustic and elegant all at the same time.

And, to top that, on the other side of the entryway to the restaurant, was a two-story tall disco lounge with a dance floor about half the size of a basketball court. It had a state-of-the-art sound system where a person could be seated at a

¹⁰Have a look.

http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/images/B000UIJ7T2/ref=dp_image_text_0?ie=UTF8&n=28 4507&s=kitchen

table five feet from the dance floor and carry on a normal conversation; yet, on the dance floor itself the music was so loud it would make your eyes water.

It was here that I met Stan Miller¹¹. Stan had designed the sound system in the disco and was one of the owners of Stanal Sound (not sure who Al was). Stanal Sound, based right there in Kearney, of all places, was, at the time, one of the most famous audio companies in the world. They provided all the equipment, tractor trailers and road crews for live-concert audio production for folks such as Neil Diamond, Linda Ronstadt, Johnny Cash, John Denver, the Eagles and so on, all superstars at the time. Well, one evening in the lounge I was told that Stan was in the audience. Always eager to find opportunities to become rich and famous, I tried to put on an especially good performance that night. Then later, sure enough, at the end of a set, Stan came up to the stage and introduced himself to me. I was in awe.

At the time, I was using some cheapo Kasino speakers that Doug and I had picked up in Jacksonville (note that earlier pic). So Stan, who said some kind words about my talent, asked me if I would mind if he set the mix on my amp. He's kidding, right? Of course!

So Stan fiddled around back there for a few seconds and then returned to his seat. Next, I stepped up to the mic and launched into a song only to hear this tinny, screeching sound coming out of my speakers—which happened to be my voice. Now, one thing we do not do as performers is stop in the middle of a song. Thus, I immediately broke into a cold sweat. But, like the trouper I was, I stuck it out through to the end (although I'm pretty sure I may have skipped a verse or two). Then Stan came back up. He was chuckling; I was in shock.

"You know, you need to get used to having some high frequency in your mix. Here, let me fix it."

He obviously did that on purpose—strange sense of humor, in my opinion. In any event, he fiddled around some more with the dials and once again retreated to his seat. But before jumping into the next piece, I had the good sense to test things a bit to make sure there would be no more surprises. It was still tinny, but

¹¹He's still at it! <u>http://parnelliawards.com/news_miller.php</u>

much better. Nevertheless, Stan had made his point—my my low-rent speakers simply were not up to the task.

After that set, Stan invited me to come down to his warehouse the next day. He took me on a tour through the place, which consisted of a two-story building housing an electronic workshop where equipment was being built and repaired along with tons of sound equipment stacked to the ceiling. That equipment, among other things, included big black speaker cabinets with the names of "Neil Diamond" and "Ronstadt" stenciled in white on the sides. I was sure I had died and gone heaven.

I came back to the warehouse later that week and left with two spanking new Stanal Sound, custom-built speaker cabinets with-top-of-the-line Altec-Lansing speakers along with two portable stands that Stan let me buy at cost. The black, wooden cabinets were fiberglass-coated and identical to those I had seen earlier, except without the travel scars (and the stenciling). They were about thirty inches square, with green, fiberglass front-covers attached with wing nuts that protected the speakers mounted inside from damage when traveling. Those speakers were my pride and joy, and it would be nearly ten years after my last professional gig before I could bring myself to part with them. They barely fit in the back seat of my car.

Speaking of cars, my mode of transportation was a big deal, since, during those seven years, I literally lived out of my vehicle. But before my first-ever road tour (the one where I ended up in Gaylord), I was dirt poor and residing in Jacksonville. And, to make things even more interesting, I was also married and the father of a three year-old toddler—I had been going to college full-time (on the GI Bill¹²) at the University of North Florida while my wife worked for the telephone company. So, when the spring semester ended that year, I had that telephone conversation with Bill Rothe that I mentioned earlier and came to the conclusion that I could make more money playing the guitar for the summer than

¹²My first federal handout—the GI Bill. I would eventually use every nickel of it, too. <u>http://www.gibill.va.gov/gi_bill_info/history.htm</u>

the two of us could make, combined, in Jacksonville, assuming I could find summer employment. So, it was decided that we would both take the summer off and all three of us would go on the road—a summer job, if you will. And a new adventure.

Unfortunately, I was driving an AMC Gremlin at the time¹³. The interior of this car was tiny, so, imagine traveling 24/7 in this vehicle with a wife, a threeyear-old, all our belongings and stage equipment. Jeez—we had stuff sticking out the windows. So, when we reached Michigan we stopped at the home of my parents where my father helped me build what was essentially a big plywood box with a pointy front end. We painted it the same color as the car (blue) and mounted it on luggage racks the roof. Then we hit the road. We looked like a traveling circus—all we needed were red rubber noses.

Traveling with a small child, though, was hard on all of us. Engagements were usually for one or two weeks and then, on Sundays, off we would go to the next motel/hotel in another town in the Midwest. So, in exasperation, we finally threw in the towel. I put my wife and daughter on a plane to her family's home in Miami where they would stay until my intended return at the end of the summer.

However, as it turned out, a breakup shortly ensued and my soon-to-be exwife and daughter stayed in Miami while I stayed on the road, ending up in Gaylord. That was also the end of my second shot at a college degree, by the way.

After the breakup, I bought a brand new Kelly green Pontiac Catalina with a 400-cubic-inch V-8 engine. Lost a wife but got a great car. Oh well, have to look on the bright side.

From then on, if I owned something that would not fit in the car, it didn't go. I traveled with a small suitcase for socks and underwear but left my shirts and trousers on hangers, which I learned to lay across the other stuff in the car's trunk. And it was a big trunk. Also stored in the trunk was a modular stereo set and a Sony, reel-to-reel tape recorder.

¹³This car was something else. Have a look.

http://www.time.com/time/specials/2007/article/0,28804,1658545 1658498 1657865,00.html

The Altec speakers filled up the back seat, and my guitar case fit perfectly between them and the back of the front seat. That was a configuration that lasted until I bought the GMC van, which I'll get to in a minute.

One time, while playing at a Kahler hotel in Minnesota, we had a blizzard on my last Saturday night of the gig. Next morning I woke and went out to pack the car and found it completely encased in snow, although a plow had already passed through the driveway behind it. Fortunately, the storm had cleared and, even though it was brutally cold, the sky was an icy deep blue with nary a cloud in sight.

So, I swept the snow off the hood and windshield and then waded through three feet of powder to get to the driver's door. Well, I managed to get the door open and get inside. But when I turned the key—nothing. Okay, so I got out and popped the hood. I was astonished to find that the engine compartment was packed completely solid with snow. The wind had blown it in from below. In all my years living in Michigan, I had never seen anything like that.

I spent the next hour getting all that snow out of the engine compartment, drying the sparkplugs and clearing the plowed snow immediately behind the car so I could back out. Funny how, once again, the sound of an engine turning over could be so exhilarating.

Cold weather also haunted me on the plains of Nebraska. I recall coming out of the Cattlemen's Mining Company at two in the morning one time and making my way to the Pontiac in a blinding blizzard. I was wearing two coats and a ski mask and was about to freeze to death. And then I found that the door locks had frozen. I had to go *back* to the restaurant, out of the wind, and heat my key up with a cigarette lighter, then trudge back out into the white to try again. It just barely worked. The Naugahyde seats were frozen solid and the engine oil was so thick the starter could barely turn the engine—but there was that wonderful sound again. That was a good car.

Which reminds me of another cold-weather car story that involved not having one. Once when I was at Western I went north of Kalamazoo to Central Michigan University in Mount Pleasant on the last day of the first semester in December. I went up there to play in a band (the Marauders) that night with Curt, who was a student at CMU (I actually played piano that night, since they didn't need another guitar). After we were finished, he and I were going to hitchhike back to Buchanan (hitchhiking was a common practice back in those days, especially among college students). The gig went well, and then we all packed it in and one of Curt's band members dropped us at the edge of town at the freeway ramp.

Well, we had overlooked three important things: First of all, CMU was closed for the holiday; secondly, the City of Mount Pleasant has a very small population when the college students are not there; and, lastly, there was virtually no traffic leaving Mount Pleasant at three o'clock in the morning.

So there we sat. It was a calm night, thank God, and there was a street light at the entrance to the ramp. But the temperature was well below freezing. We saw about one car per hour from 3 a.m. to 6 a.m. We had no shelter. We were freezing to death. We ran up and down the highway and pounded on each other's shoulders to keep the blood flowing. We were several miles from the nearest house. We were close to panic (or at least I was).

Finally, at about six a.m., a car with a couple of guys going ice fishing picked us up and took us to a more populous location where we were able to get a ride the rest of the way. No one said you had to be smart to play the guitar.

I eventually replaced the Pontiac with a GMC van. This vehicle was a lot more practical, but it came with windows all around. That was no good because folks could see all the cool stuff I had in there. Protection of my belongings was always a problem on the road. In fact, I had my car broken into twice during those years, and my hotel room once, along with one aborted attempt (while I was away they beat up the door but couldn't get in). So my girl friend, Christy, who I had met the previous year during a Jacksonville gig, sewed maroon-and-white patterned curtains, which matched the color of the van, and I mounted them inside with curtain rods.

I drove that van for ten years, long after I came off the road. I paid \$5,000 for it new and ten years later sold it to an offshore commercial fisherman from Mayport, Florida, for \$2,000. Now, that's good value.

My travels took me far and wide over the ensuing seven years, from playing in the Holiday Inn lounge in Starke, Florida, where my electronic equipment tended to pick up the local Sherriff's radio calls, sprinkling them through my speakers and songs all night long, to the snowy cliffs of Marquette, Michigan, in the upper peninsula, overlooking the stark, icy-gray waters of the great Lake Superior where I had my first taste of real snow skiing. I drove across the Mackinac bridge, built in 1957 and the longest suspension bridge in the world at the time; I criss-crossed the Mississippi River and once, while in passing, made my way to the base of the Gateway Arch¹⁴ in St. Louis, just so I could say that I touched it. I investigated the bowels of the earth at mammoth cave, discovered all-night basement jazz clubs in Chicago, and was awed by nature's carving of the Dells in Wisconsin and creation of the smooth-stoned beaches on the western shores of Lake Michigan. I performed on the campuses of junior colleges and in the studios of local radio and television stations. I was introduced to the incredible, underground gay scene in Atlanta (what an eye-opener that was.). I had engagements at resort hotels where I wore a tuxedo and enjoyed full audio and professional lighting facilities, and dates at Mr. B's on the ocean at Jacksonville Beach, where I performed in cowboy boots and jeans to a crowd seated in beat-up, second-hand chairs at home-made tables constructed of plywood. I performed in Fort Lauderdale, Miami and Tampa; South Bend, Indiana; Clarksburg, West Virginia; Chicago; Des Moines, Iowa; Chattanooga, Tennessee; Milwaukee; Kittanning, Pennsylvania. I played in La Porte, Indiana back in early spring of '73.

¹⁴Learn about the Arch here. <u>http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gateway_Arch</u>

Skip Birong's Musical Story



A publicity photo

In La Porte I had to pay for my own lodging, so I was staying in a tiny room of a locally-owned (cheap) strip motel. I performed five hours on Saturday night in a bowling alley, trying to be heard over the bar blender (those Hoosiers love their specialty drinks) with a case of strep throat and a fever of 102 degrees—one of the longest nights of my life. After the show I lay awake all night in excruciating pain, gagging on paint fumes in that little dungeon of a room, which had been recently painted. I couldn't open the window because it was freezing outside. On Sunday morning, all the doctors' offices were closed, but I managed to find the local hospital emergency room where I gladly dropped trou' for a shot of penicillin in my bum.

I am pleased to point out that that was the single, solitary time I ever had to perform in a bowling alley. And it came about as the result of a last-minute cancellation for an engagement where one of Bill's agents managed to find me a short-notice fill-in for a cancellation. This would normally be better than sitting out the week for no pay and nowhere to sleep. (I had no actual place of residence during those years. I used my parents' address in Michigan for my mail, which my mother forwarded to me weekly to wherever I happened to be, but claimed legal residency at Doug's address in Jacksonville because Florida did not have a state income tax.) These cancellations would come up from time to time and, in this case, I remember the agent asking me if I wanted to take the gig. I asked him what I might expect there. His reply? "Well, it's better than a kick in the ass." In retrospect, I'm not so sure.

I had one other rather peculiar engagement, also as a fill-in for a cancellation, in a bar located in Streator, Illinois, a little town about 100 miles south of Chicago. This place made the bowling alley seem downright upscale. It had a horseshoe bar with a stage behind it, also horseshoe shaped, with the bar maid operating between the stage and the bar. This place was in such disrepair that the curtains had literally rotted off the windows (I am not exaggerating here), their remains hanging in ragged disarray from the rods, ready to disintegrate to dust at the slightest touch.

The stage floor, at the same height as the bar, was carpeted. However, the carpeting material had become solidly compacted from decades of spilled beer the soles of my shoes made a sucking sound each time I took a step. (And don't ask me about the smell.) Further, the owner lived upstairs with his adult daughter who was the bar maid and who quickly developed a serious crush on me (I will never forget those coy looks and that toothless smile). And she could hit the corrugated garbage can they used for empty beer bottles from twenty feet, which resulted in crashing and smashing every few minutes throughout the night.

In my travels, I met and became friends with George Hamilton, the Hollywood actor, who at one time asked me to be his music director in Las Vegas. (George, who is originally from Memphis, is really a great country singer—a talent of his of which not many are aware. In any event, that gig was out of my pay grade.) I met Gordon Lightfoot in his prime and had beers backstage with Rick Haynes, his bass player. I met Lorne Greene, the actor from the popular TV show *Bonanza*, who got drunk and broke my microphone stand. (He still owes me for that—unfortunately he passed away before paying up). In the wee hours in a hotel room, surrounded by her entourage, Esther Rolle, the famed stage and television actress best known for her roles as Florida Evans in the Emmy winning TV shows *Maude* and *Good Times* back in the 70s, and I shared stories and reverie while sharing the better part of a fifth of Dewar's scotch. I met

Jack Cassidy, the film and TV actor and, notably, the father of the 70s pop singer, David Cassidy. He and I and three others had gone trolling for marlin off the coast of Florida just a few months before his death in an apartment fire in Hollywood. I drifted lazily while reclining in an oversize tire tube with my butt hanging in the icy waters of Ichetucknee Springs in Florida. I canoed and fished in the gatorinfested waters of the Great Okefenokee Swamp. I camped in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina and surf-fished for Pompano in breakers up to my armpits in the Atlantic Ocean. I snorkeled the Hawaiian reefs of the Pacific Ocean and climbed a mountain in the Kolekole Pass, which was one of the routes of the Japanese fighters that attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941. I briefly piloted a twinengine HU-16E Albatross seaplane^{15,16}, wending my way around puffy clouds over the south Pacific as they floated peacefully in a brilliant blue sky. And I wrote about twenty songs.

¹⁵ The pilot, LTJG Bill Rollins, let me sit in for a bit one time on a logistics flight out to French Frigate Shoals.

¹⁶ Here's some stuff on FFS. <u>http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_Frigate_Shoals</u> Also, check out these pics. <u>http://www.google.com/images?q=french+frigate+shoals&rls=com.microsoft:en-us&oe=UTF-8&startIndex=&startPage=1&um=1&ie=UTF-8&source=univ&ei=dA0qTc-</u>

²B4Sclgfct52UAg&sa=X&oi=image result group&ct=title&resnum=2&ved=0CDkQsAQwAQ&biw =1224&bih=587 That's the landing strip we used and where the USCG had a LORAN station back before the days of GPS. It's so short that we sometimes had to use JATO (jet assisted takeoff) to get off our Albatross off the island if the wind wasn't blowing just right.



Here's an Albatross. That's a C-130 way off on the right.

I hated singing at weddings. In fact, when I began performing professionally, I flatly refused to accept such engagements, except in the case of my younger brother's second marriage. John was divorced from his first wife, Marilyn, and had found the new love of his life. Who could say no?

In order to do this I had to take a week off and make my way down to the church in Indiana where the wedding would be held. After the ceremony, I quickly changed out of my powder blue tuxedo and frilly shirt (I was a member of the wedding party) and into my customary performing attire. I had set up my equipment earlier in the adjacent hall where the reception would take place and was ready to start just as everyone began to file out of the sanctuary.

I waited until the groom and his bride, Denise, had made their way into the reception area and then introduced myself for the benefit of those in attendance who didn't know me. I then proceeded to solemnly dedicate my very first song to "My brother John and his wife, Marilyn." And Denise promptly learned why one must have a well-developed sense of humor to marry into the Birong family. Nevertheless, easily one of my greatest embarrassments.

My first experience with professional recording occurred at Criteria Studios in Miami in 1969. Doug and I scraped together enough cash to pay for a thirtyminute recording session at the studio, mostly just for the fun of it and to see what we would sound like on a record (I was terrified that I wouldn't like the way my recorded voice would sound).

Criteria was, and remains today, a world-class recording studio where the likes of Bob Dylan, the Bee Gees, Crosby Stills and Nash, Eric Clapton and many others have recorded albums¹⁷. Doug and I were scheduled to work with an engineer who would record our performance of two of our songs in the same studio that was, at the time, being used by Aretha Franklin. I remember we had to step over all of her band's equipment and the like to find a place where we could get to a couple of microphones.

Once we were finished, the engineer cut a single vinyl copy for us on a special turntable that was used to make demo records back in those days (no digital yet). That was really fun and, as it turned out, I didn't sound so bad after all.

My favorite musicians and entertainers during those years had usually been introduced to me in the form of vinyl LP recordings. Needless to say, I would never feel as if I had passed muster as a professional musician until I had produced an album of my own. There were really only two ways to accomplish this at the time: Either be discovered by a record label (everyone's first choice), or produce the thing yourself (relatively rare at the time—no such thing as a home studio in those days). Lacking the former, I chose the latter.

In 1976 I finally decided to take the plunge. I managed to book some consecutive gigs in Jacksonville so that I could stay in one place long enough to get it done. And, fortunately, over the previous five years or so I had made the acquaintance of many talented players in the area, both professional and amateur, who had agreed to work with me on the project at little or no cost. Most notably, they included Derek Hess, who had been the drummer with the Rossington Collins band, an offshoot of famed Lynard Skynyrd of Jacksonville roots. Others included my old friends Doug Pike and Chuck Anderson, both of whom I had met

¹⁷ The <u>studio's website</u> claims over 300 gold and platinum albums have been produced there over the past forty years.

while in the military, and the Peyton Brothers, an excellent, locally-grown, fourbrother bluegrass group.

My first challenge was to find the capital. My dear friends, Don and Rita Hunnicutt, whom I'd first met while performing in a motel bar in Jacksonville in the early years, came to the rescue. They agreed to loan me \$3,000 for the production, which was a lot of money back then. In the meantime I had discovered the Warehouse Studio, which was owned by Ray Lynn and Tom Markham. Ray and I would be co-producers and Tom would handle the engineering.

One last hurdle was the American Federation of Musicians. Up until then it had been necessary for me to be a member of the AFM because I sometimes performed in union states (I actually got carded one time one in Chicago by a couple of husky, bent-nose guys who did not look at all like musicians). However, Florida is a so-called right-to-work state, where the unions have little clout. The problem was that the local union had minimum pay scales and, furthermore, did not allow members to perform with non-members, thus potentially adding substantial cost to the production since virtually all of the players who had agreed to help me were either non-union or non-professional. So I quit. Temporarily, anyway.

The album cover was created in pen and ink by Terry Barckholtz from the publicity photo you saw a little earlier. Terry, who is the founder and currently president and CEO of the Barckholtz Group in Saginaw, Michigan, was part owner of PDM Design in that same city back in the mid-seventies when I played a really posh restaurant there. He and his partner needed an instrumental sound track for a marketing film they were producing, and I needed an album cover. Thus, my first "trade-out." And the cover ended up being printed in black and white, whereas the original artwork included green and yellow print for the name. Couldn't afford the color print.

Skip Birong's Musical Story



Here's the cover

It took about two months to complete the recordings. All but two of the songs were written by me alone or with Doug, and the first cut of each side was fully produced, including strings and brass. Side A was contemporary, pop-oriented, and side B was country-oriented. I had intended to use the album not only to sell off the "back of the truck," as it was called (they call it a "merch" table nowadays, as in merchandise), in order to earn the money to repay my loan, but also as a demo album for other opportunities which I hoped might come up from time to time. It was the culmination of a lifetime of work—the pinnacle of my career to that point—and I was rightfully proud of the results. I still see those albums for sale on the internet from time to time. Not sure where the sellers get them¹⁸.

The first sign of trouble began to appear in late 1975. I found that I was having difficulty holding key when singing. I was experiencing a sensation on my vocal chords that caused me to constantly clear my throat. This, in turn, caused me to

¹⁸ Drop me an email at <u>rbirong@gmail.com</u> and I will send you some songs.

strain on my vocals. The straining became so frequent that I often found I could barely speak above a whisper for the first few hours the next morning.

I finally went to see an ENT doc who told me I had developed a nodule on my vocal chords, apparently from the straining. He had no idea what was causing the underlying problem. He further informed me that there were only two ways to eliminate the nodule: surgery, which was quite iffy back in those days, or to rest my voice for about thirty days, the latter of which would be the equivalent of going broke—there was no disability insurance.

It was eighteen months before I finally came to accept the fact that I would have to find another career. I could not continue like that. I was causing further damage to my vocal chords, and my performances became living nightmares as I struggled all night just to keep on key. It was no longer fun.

Formulating a plan for my career change, I ended up returning to Jacksonville with Christy, who had gone with me on my last tour in the Midwest. She and I nested in a small apartment complex and formalized our relationship in 1977.

Once again I had managed to find some fairly long term bookings in the city, which allowed me to attend the University of North Florida full-time while I finished my bachelor's degree (on the third try, finally). Upon graduation, I accepted my first real job with a local manufacturing company and, in a fit of "irrational exuberance", to quote Alan Greenspan, matriculated as a graduate student in pursuit of an MBA, working full time during the day and attending college at night. That one took another three years.

Over the ensuing years other interests and demands on my time slowly pushed my youthful, musical ambitions aside—and I am most fortunate to have had my share of success in my subsequent careers.

Now, decades later, not unlike old, retired NFL players, both my Martin and I carry the scars of our earlier exploits: I continue to have recurring problems with my throat, and my knees are giving out—the latter condition no doubt exacerbated by standing, more or less stationary, on risers for thirty hours a week, year after year. And my beloved guitar appears as worn out as me as it rests on a guitar stand in the living room, the finish rubbed completely off the back of the neck from thousands of hours of playing. The black pick guard on the front is worn almost through to the wood from years of contact with no more than the tips of the pinky and ring fingers of my right hand.

But as often as not, I find myself sitting alone on the edge of the coffee table in the living room on any given Friday night while Jack Daniels and I play that old Martin and sing the old songs—and remember.

Saturday Endings and Beginnings

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Frank wasn't doing well. It was Saturday morning and Charles, as he went through his exercise routine, could not get him out of his mind. His friend of forty years had been in town the night before and the two of them had taken a late meal at a small, quiet restaurant downtown.

"I just learned that my doctor, when I was first diagnosed, told Ann that I only had about 24 months," he said over beers. "I've been on and off this chemo for 26 months now, so I've already proven him wrong," he said with firm conviction.

They clinked their glasses.

"And now the doc told me that I get another vacation from the drugs maybe three months this time," he went on. "I've been getting some of that peripheral neuropathy," he said matter-of-factly as the waitress picked up our menus. "You know, the tingling in the fingertips."

Charles got out of the shower and toweled. Twenty minutes later he was on his way to Al's pizza where, on Saturdays, he was inclined to go for a light lunch and

a couple of Budweiser's. Al's was located one block from the Atlantic Ocean, and when Charles stepped from his car he instinctively drew in a deep breath of the warm, salty air.

As he walked through the front door of Al's, he found Mandy behind the bar. Her slender figure was framed by the large plate glass window behind her, which filled the small restaurant with the bright, Florida day. She met Charles with a frosty glass of beer and a smile as soon as he sat down. "Hey, how are ya?" she asked.

Charles could not help but notice the dark bags under Frank's eyes. His hair had thinned and he had gained considerable weight. But, true to his nature, he still flirted with the twenty-something waitress. "You know, if *you* were to pour that beer in my glass instead of me, I know it would taste ten times better," he said.

Charles remembered, fifteen years earlier, tousling the thick, dark hair of his wife Janice as they walked toward the hospital from the parking lot. It was her second go-around with breast cancer—he knew she was going to lose it all again. He remembered she was wearing jeans, white tennis shoes and a pale blue, longsleeved knit top. He remembered every step as they walked hand in hand across the parking lot to the lobby.

"Why so glum?" asked Mandy as she placed the icy brew in front of Charles. "Oh, nothing. Just a little distracted," he said. "What a beautiful day, though!" "Oh, I know!" replied Mandy, as she looked over her shoulder to the window behind her. "I can't believe I'm going to be stuck in here until six." ***

"Ann and I are looking forward to getting this over with so we can move back to Jacksonville," said Frank, as he wiped some foam from his upper lip.

"Charles smiled at his old friend. "Can't wait—I'll help you get moved in," he said.

There was a pregnant pause as both men stared into their mugs. Frank looked up. "You know, if something happens to me, Ann will be fine. We have good insurance," he said." And I've never been more comfortable in my faith."

Frank was a converted Catholic. He made the commitment when he and Ann married, nearly thirty years ago. He had told Charles, "If anything ever happened to Ann I would probably join the priesthood."

Janice made it another twelve months. She had lost all her hair by then and was mostly confined to the hospital bed Charles had rented and set up for her in their bedroom. She flatly refused to go to a hospital. Her sister placed potted flowers of brilliant reds and yellows just outside the sliding glass door that opened onto the deck so she would have a pleasant view. She spent most of those days watching the real estate show on TV, taking copious notes which she intended to use while helping her aging parents sell their home as they prepared for retirement. Eventually she began to sense a tingling in her fingertips and toes—and then began to lose feeling in them altogether. Her oncologist said she had to stop the chemotherapy—it was killing her. She was making plans for her and Charles to go to Holland, Michigan for the tulip festival.

Charles paid his tab and headed out the door. His next destination would normally have been the grocery store. But he stopped on the sidewalk for a moment and turned his face up to the noonday sun. He closed his eyes and basked in the

warmth of the rays. When he dropped his head, his eyes fell on a sign across the street: "Nails by Sharon." Charles needed to trim his nails—and it occurred to him that he had never had a manicure. He started across the street.

Frank was walking with a cane as the two men made their way back to Charles' car. He laboriously inserted himself into the passenger seat. Once settled, the two of them headed back to the hotel. The conversation during the return drive turned to mutual friends and, moments later, Frank once again began the process of extricating his swollen, weary body from the car. A wave of hands and then Frank turned and made his way into the lobby.

Charles drove home in silence, oblivious to the flashing lights and sounds of the city around him. He had met Frank decades ago when the two of them were in the military. Frank was a helicopter air crewmen and mechanic; Charles was a fixed-wing air crewmen and mechanic. They met in south Florida, each in his last year of a four-year hitch. The men had gone their own ways after that. But they would eventually run into one another again several years later in Jacksonville, the hometown of both Frank and Janice. Over the ensuing years the two men stayed in touch, and eventually they and their wives became inseparable friends.

"How much for a manicure?" asked Charles.

"Thirteen dollah," replied a petite, young woman of Asian descent who was seated on a stool at the foot of a raised pedicure chair. She was wearing a surgical mask and latex gloves while cradling the heel of the dripping left foot of the matronly woman seated in front of her. Charles presumed her to be Sharon.

"Okay," responded Charles.

"Okay, go dere...," she said, pointing with a dripping finger to a chubby middle-aged woman seated at one of the stations.

The woman at the station, with Asian-lidded eyes squinting behind a pleasant smile, beckoned him to sit in the chair in front of her, opposite a small, towel-covered table. Charles had no clue what to do next, but his attendant was cheerful and helpful. She took his hands, rested the fingers of one in a bowl of warm, soapy water and began her initial inspection of the other. Charles noticed the pleasantness of her touch and felt his shoulders relax. This seemed to have been a good idea.

Janice had led a stoic battle against the disease, ignoring it when she could, dealing with it when she had to. Those around her had their spirits lifted even in their despair as she displayed her single-mindedness in not letting things get the best of her. *This is how it's done*, she showed them. *This is how one deals with adversity*.

Two weeks after discontinuing her therapy, she succumbed. Charles was there at her bedside, her hand in his. She turned and looked into his eyes one last time, her own dilated to ebony. He watched her chest fall as her last breath emerged from an exhausted body.

Charles eyes had drifted shut as his attendant finished buffing his nails. "...You okay?" she asked in a heavily accented, concerned tone.

Charles opened his eyes. He was a little surprised to hear her words. He had tried to learn her nationality earlier, but the poor woman seemed to know only two or three words of English. He smiled, "Oh, I'm fine, just sleepy, I guess."

She smiled back, seeming to understand the word "sleepy," and proceeded to give Charles a vigorous massage from his fingertips to his shoulders. Charles'

eyes closed once again as he luxuriated in the squeezing and pummeling. He then rose, thanked her with a five-dollar tip and headed for the door.

As he emerged from the relative darkness of the salon, the afternoon sunlight once again splashed across his face causing him to squint while his pupils readjusted. But, more relaxed now, he found himself heading to the shore rather than his car.

As he made his way across the wooden walkway over the dunes and down to the water's edge, Charles was greeted by a relatively calm ocean with only small breakers coming ashore—offering little hope of excitement for the handful of disappointed surfers further out. A pleasant offshore breeze rustled through his hair as he walked out to the edge of the incoming tide. With his hands in the pockets of his Levis he looked to the horizon and wondered what might be going on at that very moment due east of him on the coast of Morocco. Was someone standing there on the beach? Someone looking back at him? Trying to tell him something?

The surf rolled up and over his tennis shoes, wetting the cuffs of his jeans. And he realized it was once again almost time to do new things. To do things differently. To prepare for new arrangements.